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PÆAN TO PRIAPUS

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II

AN ANTHOLOGY OF MULTI-MEDIA SLASH FICTION

VOLUME TWO

WARNING: THIS ANTHOLOGY CONTAINS SAME SEX, ADULT ORIENTED MATERIAL. IT WILL NOT BE SOLD TO ANYONE UNDER THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN.

Published by:
Oblique Publications
PO Box 43784
Tucson, AZ
USA 85733-3784

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<http://www.oblique-publications.net>

Send SASE or email for information.
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TO OUR READERS

Dear Readers,

Once again Oblique Publications pays homage to the erect male organ. Thirteen stories have been collected here for your enjoyment. And, as with the first volume, the settings are varied: 4 Blake’s 7 tales, 5 Professionals, 1 Sherlock Holmes, 1 Star Trek: the Next Generation, 1 Tarzan, and last (and most definitely least) 1 Blackadder. (Blackadder? Egads!)

Jane Baron’s story is part three of “Fugue” which began in issue one. Sebastian and Caroline Dare have also contributed wonderful stories.

But, truth to tell, P to P II comes primarily from the warped and twisted mind and fingers of M. Fae Glasgow. That wee Kiltie has a brain burning with tales to tell, psyches to be psyched, and deviancy and depravity to be dangled in front of our eyes. She is a storyteller born (bred I leave out, as breeding she has none). Moreover, she is that seeming rarity among writers: someone who can write quickly and to order. She takes constructive criticism well and with editors she trusts, she lets them do their work. She is quick-witted, talented, creative, highly intelligent, blessed of a cutting sarcastic humor, extremely Scottish, and red-headed. Without her, there would be no Oblique Publications and we would all be the poorer for that. As her partner in publishing and as her dear friend, I dedicate this volume to M. Fae Glasgow.

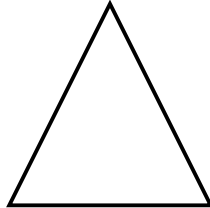
Caroline K. Carbis
Editor

P.S. I mustn’t forget several obligatory matters. As usual LDM provided emotional support as well as several very useful suggestions for P to P II. He is a most reliable man.

As editor I take all responsibility and blame (or credit if there were any) for any mistakes; despite our best efforts, there will be some. And finally, as usual our spelling is ridiculous. But you already knew that...

TRIANGLES

*Hard-edged and sharp-pointed.
Three sides and three angles.
Inflexibility of form but infinite variety of degree and distance.
Triangles of relationships.
Triangles of love and lust.*



We open this section with Jane Baron's "Rhapsody," the third and final chapter of "Fugue," a story set in the Blake's 7 universe. "Fugue" is struggling to be that most stable and symmetrical figure: the equilateral triangle. And from the beginning of the tale, "Nocturne," it has slowly rotated from its base of stability to stand poised on one vertex. Now, in "Rhapsody," the triangle teeters, threatening to crash and splinter before finally settling back to an equality of relationships: aspects of Blake and Avon the vertices, and love the sides which bind them together.

If "Fugue" is an equilateral triangle, the "The King Who Would Be Man" is a scalene one—no two sides are equal. Although this triangle rests on its base, it looks as though the slightest touch will send it toppling. And here, in fact, we have a relationship that was never meant to be...

4 *Take the triangle and spin it 'round on one leg. You have a cone with a solid, anchoring circular base of love extending upwards to its lonely, isolated vertex: the Glaswegian's "Lovers and Madmen: Ravelment."*

The last piece, Sebastian's "Psebulen," is our triangle made solid: the pyramid with its many sides and angles. And what is the truth asks Sebastian? Ah, but that is dependent on your perspective. One triangular facet may show you a future of sweetness and light, another only darkness and despair.

FUGUE JANE BARON

PART THREE: RHAPSODY

Rhapsody: In music, a composition of irregular form and improvisational nature.

An exalted or impassioned utterance.

AVON SHUT HIS EYES, HEARING BLAKE'S WORDS AGAIN. "If your vaunted resentment of me is real; if you really do hate me as much as you say..." And the strangest thing was that he hadn't hated Blake...until now.

Until now. He tried to calm his breath, to regain control, but the emotion was too strong.

Helpless, he stood, feeling it wash over him again and again. Five days since it had happened and the wounds were still raw. Yes, now...he *hated*. Hated himself, hated the situation, but most of all hated the one who had done this to him. Blake.

After all those weeks and months of resistance. Oh, yes, he'd felt the lure of the man from the beginning, and there had been times when nothing would have been easier than to yield. Give in, Blake's eyes seemed to urge. Give it all

to me; let me guide you; let me comfort you. I promise you I will make it sweet. And there had been times when Avon had faltered, but always he had recovered enough to reassert his independence, his pride. Even during their most savage fights, when the attraction played between them like lightning, he had kept his pride.

And now, he'd been betrayed. Had betrayed himself. He had gone to that forbidden bed, succumbed to the promise in those lying eyes. Worst of all, he had yielded not only his body but his will, his intelligence, his self.

And Blake...had let him. Had taken him, used him, glutted himself on Avon's subservience.

Bile rose in Avon's throat, and he choked back a wave of nausea. Blake's bedwarmer. After all this time. And, oh, yes, Blake would have been gentle; and oh, yes, it must have been sweet. *He* must have been sweet, enslaved like that, in thrall to Blake's every whim. What more could anyone want than a lover who existed only to please? Willing mouth and willing ass—and no thought, no soul, no volition.

Lethe had done it. Lethe. He gave a bitter smile at the word. How appropriate. Its namesake was a river in Hades, and if he had not been in hell these past weeks, he'd like to know what hell was. Those who drank the frigid waters of Lethe forgot everything, all their past, and became lost in oblivion, as he had been lost.

But they hadn't had to reflect on what was happening to them.

He *had* wondered, this last month, about the little gaps in his memory. And he'd known, at some level, that the drug was responsible. There were nights he never even recalled undressing or going to bed, but simply awoke in the morning apparently having done so automatically. The uneasiness over what Lethe might or might not be doing to a mind he'd always kept razor-sharp should have given him pause, but, inexplicably, it had had the opposite effect. His urge—overwhelmingly strong—had been *not* to dwell on the worry, to turn away from it. To leave it alone.

There had been other urges, too. As elusive as lines of poetry long forgotten, or snatches of melody which dissolved when he tried to follow them. And now that he thought of it, most seemed related in one way or another to Blake. He had not felt the old need to injure Blake in

quite some time; he had found Blake's idiocies rather less irritating than usual. And the fine edge of tension which was simultaneously the linchpin and the bane of his life had softened.

Leaving him weak, he thought. And how Blake must have enjoyed that weakness. Seeing his opponent not merely subjugated at night but drained on the field of battle the next morning.

The last thought ran cold through him, like swallowed ice. Even with everything he knew now, the darkest mystery of all still lingered. Just what had that...subjugation...involved?

What had Blake done on those long nights when no one was there to see? In that dim room, freed of all restraints, bound to no code of civilized behavior, what had he done? As with a pleasure machine or a sensory stimulator, no fantasy would have seemed too extreme. What had Blake not done...to him...on those long nights?

He knew then what he had to do.

ΔΔΔ Nights were the hardest.

The wall chronometer before him was cerulean and turquoise, the colors of Arfael. Blake didn't need it to remind him. Even though the flutterby plant was long dead, murdered by this alien environment, Arfael was never far from his thoughts. Arfael, where the blue light had played on Avon's hair, where he'd once almost imagined Avon had looked the other way so that Kerr could bring him a flower. He could not repress the memory; neither could he bear it.

Because, for all his grandiloquence, something inside him still believed every word Avon had said. Every accusation, every denouncement. Every...damning... word.

The pain had become a constant background symphony of discord. He could not get away from it. Blake was no stranger to pain, but this emotional torment, this feeling of utter helplessness and shame, was beyond his experience. It seemed as if it *must* stop, but it did not. Sometimes he could immerse himself in work, in routine, and then it dulled for a while, but it sprang back with teeth and claws whenever he saw Avon.

And he *did* see Avon. The man was making no effort to keep out of his way. He spoke briefly when addressed, looking at Blake with eyes as flat and hard as unpolished agate. The un-

Alphan explosion of fury and hatred in Blake's cabin might never have been. These days Avon treated him with vicious indifference, refusing to be enough affected by the 'incident' to run.

Because, of course, that would mean there was something to run from.

Blake tried to make himself hope that the other half of Avon, the part he'd told Avon lay just beneath the surface, was contributing. Was keeping Avon from simply leaving, refusing to let Avon let it go.

If that were true, then he was sorry for Kerr. Trapped like this, unable to reach his lover, unable even to express himself...he would be devastated. Blake could imagine Kerr's desperate hunger, his frustration and need...perhaps even his anger at Avon for jailing him.

There I go again, he thought, gripping one shoulder and wincing. Thinking of Kerr as a separate entity. *Which he is not.* Kerr has no individual existence.

The question was, had he any existence at all?

Or was the most horrifying of all Avon's horrifying indictments true? Had Kerr actually been a mindless creature, an automaton which Blake had endowed with human characteristics? Was it possible that Kerr had only *seemed* to think and feel, when all that time he had been an anencephalic monster?

Blake had seen a baby born like that after the spread of a Federation teratogen. A mutant which could breathe and eat, whose body functioned perfectly, but which had no brain. No cerebral cortex, only a brain stem and fluid-filled emptiness. The parents, turned rebel in their despairing efforts to save the child from discovery, had tried to read human motivations into its limited repertoire of action. But they had been wrong, as time had showed them to their horror. The veneer of humanity had been tragically thin.

Had he done the same with Kerr—with the unconscious Avon? Intent on what he wanted to see, had he twisted mechanical behavior and blind libido into the proof of a new personality?

He had never—quite—been able to tell what Kerr was thinking. Never been able to envisage what the world looked like to Kerr, to take on Kerr's perspective. Now he wondered whether, if he *had* been able to get into Kerr's head, he

would have liked what he saw. Would he have found only emptiness there, emptiness and the instinct to rut?

If so, then all his gentleness, all his fond regard, would have been the greatest farce in the whole of his lifetime. Not even years spent living as the Federation's model citizen could compare to it.

He remembered, suddenly, another piece of Avon invective. "How would *you* like it if your darkest sexual fantasies were carried out on you...without even your conscious consent?"

Your darkest fantasies—did Avon even realize what he'd said? What he'd admitted then?

And only *you*, Avon, would consider being loved and cherished the darkest of sexual fantasies, Blake brooded. Or was it specifically being loved by *me* that made it a nightmare?

The polyphony of pain started up again. Dear heaven, he'd embarked on this adventure so lightly. Now he wondered how he could have ever been so blind.

Nights were the hardest. It had been five days and six nights since he had led Avon into his cabin and confronted him with a small golden vial of Lethe. And still he woke again and again from exhausting dreams, groping into the tumbled covers for the warmth and weight that *had* to be there. Each time, when the full realization hit him, it was like being thrust into free fall, where there was suddenly no up or down, no way to get one's bearings, nothing to hold onto. All *that* from the realization that Kerr was not beside him, that Kerr would never be beside him again.

And all *this*, all this hell, the price of a few weeks of pleasure. The cost of letting himself get involved, not with an ideal or a party, but with an individual, a single person who had come to mean more than any other single person. He had let Kerr in...

...and even now he could not entirely regret it. Despite everything, despite all the pain, those sweet nights together had been worth the price. Unless, of course, that sweetness had been an illusion; unless his imperious, selfless, enigmatic lover had been a figment of his imagination. A cloak of glamour he'd cast around the bare bones of Avon's lust. If that were true, if Kerr had been a phantom, if the fugues had been merely a form of convoluted nocturnal emission...

Then, what? Blake bit off a laugh. How much worse could he feel than he felt already? What more could he do to Avon, or to himself, in punishment?

But if Avon truly hadn't known him...if Avon's subconscious had been indiscriminately reaching out for the nearest warm convexity....If Avon's thoughts had been light-years away...with Anna, with Vila...

The ache did not diminish over time, any more than the joy had done. Given scope, and with cultivation, it got worse.

ΔΔΔ "I said I didn't care about the details." From his bed, Avon stared with half-shut eyes at one blank wall, then, finally, rolled his head toward Orac. His tone was weary. "Well? Can you or can't you?"

I can. However, I am in no way able to guarantee the success, or, indeed, the wisdom of such an experiment. In my opinion the risks—

"Are mine, not yours, and therefore beyond your province. I didn't ask for your opinion." He sat up and reached for the two objects on the desk beside Orac, lip twisting as he studied them. "The...*usual* dose, I presume," he said, and without waiting for an answer uncapped the small vial and drained half the orange liquid it contained. Better to get this over with before he lost his resolve. He remained upright for a minute, fighting off the dizziness deliberately. Then, with fingers less deft than usual, he replaced the vial and fastened one end of the sensory lead to Orac. The other, as he reclined once more, he secured at his temple with an adhesive pad.

"Very well. Begin. Everything I experienced while...in that state. In sequence."

The time to complete such a program would far exceed the available—

"A random sampling, then," he said sharply. Narrow-eyed, he considered the wall, annoyed at himself for having forgotten this obvious detail. "And, Orac"—his voice was thickening but his tone as acerbic as he could manage—"no prejudicial editing. I want to know...exactly what happened. I want...to *see*..."

*You will not 'see,' but feel. I warned you previously that you cannot merely observe these happenings; you must experience them *as* they happened. Your perceptions will necessarily be

limited by your pre-conscious state of mind at the time. If this is not acceptable I must ask you to promptly...*

Oh shut up, Orac, thought Avon, as the dizziness overtook him. I was the last clearly verbalized thought he was to have for a long time. He fell a thousand spacials and

ΔΔΔ *Chill dark and pressure.*

Alone. Alone.

Such cold. Weight outside bearing down on the inner void, crushing him, choking off his breath. He struggles against it, but it is all around him. A lonely candle in a dark abyss, squandering the few brief moments before the coming of the wind. Such a hopeless, desperate flame...and so alone. So lonely. So cold.

Warmth is near.

An amber glow on his skin like sunlight on closed eyelids. It pulls at him like gravity.

Closer. Closer...

Here.

He basks in it, embraced by its corona. Warmth pervades him. Need is assuaged.

Good.

When it withdraws it tears his whole front away with it and the cold rushes in. No! Bring it back! Trap it. Hold it.

There.

Now, stay.

The darkness is lit by banked embers now. The candle flares and then burns steadily, fueled. Warm and secure, he finds it possible to sleep.

ΔΔΔ *Darkcolddarkcolddarkcolddarkcolddark*

Reaching—

There.

Ahh.

Now, stay and be good. Thank you.

Mmmmm...

△△△ ...*This is easy. All one has to do is ask.*

△△△ *The scene shifts again. The darkness is the same; as all darknesses are. But the warmth...is closer tonight. So close already, touching close. No need even to reach.*

The roughness of homespun scratches his cheek, the smell of smoky embers enfolds him. All that warmth and strength and solidity so near. Its bulk a felt presence in the dark. His for the taking.

It is a new concept: to do something with this presence. But perhaps there is some way...to have more of it. To...

He is not sure what he wants of it. But want fills him.

Why not?

8 *Flesh smooth and firm, only slightly yielding under his palm. Coarse cloth grazes the backs of his knuckles as his fingertips stroke along supple curves and planes. Such a wealth to explore, so much of it. And all his. Warmth growing warmer as blood rushes to suffuse the skin. What to do is becoming more clear. The pull toward the softest, most tender parts is irresistible.*

All opposition is met the same way: gently. There is no need for anything but gentleness here. No need for haste. Patience and persistence will win out in the end. Meanwhile, every movement yields a different pleasure.

In his nostrils is a rare and tangy smell like blackberry wine. On his lips, a taste like wild honey warmed in sunlight. It wakens a craving for more. Spurred by long-past memories of satisfaction, he sucks hard just where he is, feeling the heat and pulse of blood as the tender flesh at the neck is pulled into his mouth. It is pleasant, but not what he needs.

He tastes lower down, seeking. A nipple raises itself like a little fist against his tongue. Again, pleasant, but not enough. He moves past ribs, padded, comfortable. Here, a tincture of salt cuts the mellow sweetness, as sweat trickles down

newly heaving sides. When he reaches the soft belly he finds skin that is vulnerable and unprotected, quivering unmistakably at his approach. Springy curls brush his chin, then his forehead, and the smell rises around him, rich and exotic and penetrating.

Yes.

Warmth beats against his cheeks as if radiating from a furnace. He revels in it, appetite voluptuously stirring. The delicate skin of inner thighs shifts against his fingers as he urges them apart, settling himself in place to feast. And here the hottest flesh of all unfolds to him like some slow-blooming tropical flower. The skin is satin-soft encasing the hardness, an almost liquid feeling. He meets it at first with equal softness, so gently, feeling it swell to fill his mouth, to nudge like a little blunt-nosed animal at the back of his throat. At that his hunger is unleashed, a black hole within him, driving him to suck more and more deeply.

Hands steady and guide him, taut with passion, shaky. An alien heartbeat inundates him, overriding his own. Interlocked this way, fitting so perfectly, he is no longer alone in himself. Chimerical, he has fused, merged with his prize. The moaning vibrations caressing the inside of his cheeks and throat may spring from either of them; he cannot tell which.

No more can he tell what is about to happen, but some end is being reached. Some goal is in sight. His body is awash with pleasure. The waves of sensation lift him and the other equally, locked together, riding the storm. Until at last hunger engulfs him utterly; and greedily, noisily, abandoning the last of his restraint, he works to sate it. Inner pressure...heat...tightening...and a culmination. Without warning he is pervaded by the sweetness, drowning in it, both the slick rush of fluid down his throat and the delicious answering surge in his own body.

This is...inexpressible.

Avidly, he feeds on the feeling, unaware of anything but bliss, sucking and drinking in animal enjoyment. When at last it is over and he slowly settles back, his belly is full and tight and the amber glow is inside him.

Warm. He is warm and satiated...and drowsy. The flesh he has released is damp and crumpled, soft again. When drawn up into nameless, cradling arms, he forsakes it without regret, want-

ing now only to sleep. The gentle touches change his mind, show him that there is more prolonged pleasure to be found, and sharper release. Yet nothing is quite as important as the warmth that has filled his core; release is less satisfying than fulfillment. At last he is free from pleasure and need alike and he can rest, ignoring the intrusive hands which stroke his hair, his face. Eventually they subside and leave him alone and peace envelops him.

Thank you.

Mmmmm...

△△△ *The same darkness. Another time.*

Awareness of urgency and of promise emerge simultaneously. The warmth is nowhere near, yet somehow he knows it exists, feels its attraction from far away. It is as if a silver thread of light connects them, guides him to it. He follows the strand without question, through a labyrinth of twisting, meaningless dark. Even as he nears the center of the maze he has no clear picture of what awaits. The warmth has no form or name as yet.

Reaching it, however, joy and recognition flood through him. The presence draws him, bending his path like a star capturing a comet, and he yields and embraces it eagerly, thirsty already.

There is such comfort in this place. Here, with the rhythmic pulse of heartbeat against his cheek, galloping just now with his nearness but normally so slow and steady. Here, where tonight the curls at the nape of the neck are damp, teasing his temple and forehead with moisture, making him shiver. The warm, loamy smell, edged with sweet sharpness, enfolds him. He sighs in pleasure, bringing them both down on the bed.

Presently bare skin meets bare skin, all down his length. Rediscovering the half-wild, honeyed taste is pure delight, but it is nothing compared to what comes next. Soft lips touch his, move gently against them. The pressure is light, but instinctively he obeys it. He feels, almost with fear, this alien, newly-familiar breath in his mouth, first warm and then cool on the inside of his cheeks. And then the delicate probe of tongue tip between his lips, past the barrier of teeth, to press tenderly against his own.

Yes. Oh, yes. Writhing, trying to hold still, he opens himself to it, offering everything. His arms

flying out, lax, his mouth is stopped with kisses, his body defenseless.

Utter trust and assurance. He has no need to defend against this presence...against this man. Only a fool would think otherwise. Of all places, he is safe here.

Is it this knowledge or the mouth moving over him, tasting him everywhere, that makes him tremble? The sensations ripple through him like waves on a still clear pond. He tilts his head back, limbs asprawl as if floating, wanting to open himself even further, to expose himself completely to this force. He wants this strength and power channeled inside him, quickening and completing him.

But just now he is too drenched in pleasure to pursue the need. He is willing—eager—for whatever his lover wants. The soft keening one of them makes is pleasant in his ears. Caress builds on caress until his body is thrumming with tension, until he feels he must discharge it or die.

No height any higher, no brightness so bright. At the peak, his body breaks open and everything within pours out in a shower of gold. At that moment he knows the name of the power, the warmth, the one who has conjured all this wondrous delight from him. It echoes through his mind, touching memories, reverberating somewhere deep inside. He is not surprised to find it already ensconced in the innermost reaches of his psyche, the center of the woven circle, waiting there.

Blake.

The discovery sweetens the physical pleasure to an almost painful level, a transport of spirit that he has never felt before. The rush of joyous gratitude explodes outward, and, dimly, he is amazed at the seemingly inexhaustible source from which it comes, for the flood goes on and on. With it, he is exalted.

In return, he is bathed in the radiance of answering love. It penetrates him, shines through him. Every dark place in his soul is lit up like the sun.

The sweet ebb leaves him breathless, sodden, and incapable of motion. Thought recedes. He is content now just to be, to lie lulled by the sound of his own breath slowing in this strong embrace. Mmmmm...

Sleep teases at the corners of his mind, but he resists it; the first act of his burgeoning con-

sciousness that is not in simple accordance with his own desires. There is another to be considered now. The warmth has a name and needs of its own.

He struggles from the chrysalis of womb-like contentment and reaches out. The intoxicating pleasures of touch and taste are still there. Passive no longer, he sets about creating joy.

For both of them. The tide of sensation is washing gently back. And gradually he becomes aware of something else. Need. A new need in the core of his being, so profound that it shakes him with its intensity. The longing to enfold this lover completely, to be pierced by him, to fuse with him in truth and be one...

It is a corporeal ache, a necessity, as real as the need of a drowning man for air. It must be satisfied.

But it will not be. For the first time he receives frustration at the hands which before have brought him only bliss. He cannot understand it.

Fortunately, his memory is very short.

△△△ The universe is simple, and does not require much contemplation. There is this place, and there is the other place. In this place cold and darkness reign, and everything, when touched, transmits a faint chill through his fingertips. Smells are barren here, surfaces are hard and sterile; nothing allures or gives comfort.

The other place is different. There, a refuge is always waiting. The sheets are inviting, scented with the promise of gratification, and heated by...the warmth. He has forgotten the name again, but that may be as well. There is some danger attached to it not to the warmth itself, but to an intrusive presence in his own blood. Connected somehow with the chill place and with the denial and fear that belong there.

At the height of love, where no cold or evil can touch him, he sometimes remembers the name, but the rest of the time it is better to leave it alone. No matter. He knows the warmth well enough. It is the sun which pours light and love into him unstintingly whenever he cares to lift his face toward it; it is the radiance which sustains him. There is no limit to what he can take from it; he can drink comfort until he is swollen like a berry, and then take more, for the sheer pleasure of the moment when delight becomes insupportable and shatters him. And, afterwards, at his leisure, he

can sleepily suck just for reassurance, until torpor overcomes him.

In response, every cell in his body joins in the chorus of love. The joy he creates is returned to him tenfold, so the only sensible thing to do is to create more joy. His paean to the light is a tangible thing, a composition played on nerves and sinew, a concrete litany of gratitude and praise. And there is no greater reward than seeing his offering accepted, feeling the warmth flare brighter under the persuasion of his caress. His tribute is untutored, spontaneous, but he can make the object of it tremble with rapture. And that, after all, is the only thing which does matter.

△△△ He likes the curls. They smell of his sweat, of brambly fruit on a hot summer day, and they coil so trustingly about searching fingers. No matter how long compressed in a fist, they always spring back. It is amusing to try to make them stay flat, or to wind them, until all the fragrant dampness is gone and they fluff up softly. The texture is good, too, under cheek or chin, and ticklish to sensitive lips.

There are so many things to enjoy about this lover. The voice that is a physical caress, the arms that house power so gently, the wide expanse of torso. Good to tarry here and listen to the sweet thick pulsing of heart, to hear the lungs pumping air. It is an individual rhythm, one that could belong to no one else. Over time, the cadence has become a lullaby.

The hands are also pleasing. Big and expressive, blunt-fingered but capable of delicate manipulation. Craftsman's hands. He likes the calluses on the pads beneath each finger, on the side of the thumb. They are rough, sometimes, and catch on the puckered fragility of a nipple. He likes the laborer's strength of the hands, too: fully extended they can encompass a buttock each. And that is best. No...best is when one of those long blunt fingers is inside him, feeling thick as a little cock for that first moment. Each time, it makes him want more.

Tonight he wants more. Impaled on a finger, he writhes, flushed with joy as it touches secret places deeply buried. Two is closer to what he needs, but still not enough.

Instinct drives him, again, to try to arrange the proper joining, but as always he is thwarted. It is the one thing denied him. Yet he longs for it

so much, to have that radiance at his center, to feel the torrent of love and illumination pouring directly into the marrow of him. To be one with the light. Every encounter is marred by the refusal.

This night is no different. But the rest of it is sweet, the touching and kissing, and, as always, the warmth nurtures and satisfies. Like a white dwarf orbiting a red giant, he siphons strings of energy from his larger companion. Fortunately, the source seems to be illimitable; he cannot drain it, he need not share it, and there is always enough.

△△△ Names are difficult, and most objects he identifies by use. And though at times words are poured out before him, in a voice rough with affection, the words themselves remain incomprehensible, beyond his reach. Still, he likes to be talked to, likes the attention and the lilting sound of it, especially after love. If it becomes bothersome the voice can simply be ignored. And there is one word, one name, that does have meaning. It has been said often enough, and evokes enough sympathetic vibration from the web of his psyche, that he is sure. Kerr. He is Kerr, and he is separate from the darkness, and from the objects around him, and from the presence which warms him. Kerr.

△△△ The darkness tonight is a cowl blanketing his senses, but by now he is perfectly familiar with the way to the other place. Most objects in his path are still veiled, bewildering and uninteresting both. But tonight the sound of voices behind an open door gives him pause, makes him hesitate.

So there are other...presences. Other things with voices, perhaps with names. Curious, he considers exploring them, but decides against it. That which is not-Kerr and not-light is probably unimportant. And a flicker of disquiet inside him says it may be dangerous as well.

So he leaves these inhabitants of the fallow dark, treading carefully to avoid their notice, and continues on his journey. He would pity them if he could understand the concept.

Reaching his destination, he finds more to disturb him. The room is dim and hushed instead of bright and welcoming. There is no greeting. Worst of all, he is lying full-length on the bed, restless

but unresponsive, forehead furrowed, eyes tightly closed. Asleep.

What to do now? He moves between door and bed unhappily, unsure whether to stay or go. Everything is amiss tonight.

Finally, in an attempt to put matters back on course, he undresses, doing what is usually done for him. The routine itself is comforting. Afterward, he bends over the sleeping man; and, when that elicits no reaction, sits down beside him.

Results at last. There is a stirring, and the room brightens as drowsy eyes open. Though the words are unintelligible as usual, the weariness in the voice makes them superfluous.

Just as another's joy can be experienced, so can another's pain. The voice rouses feelings of woe, and the need to...what?

There is sorrow here, and exhaustion, and loneliness. Those can be cured, and he applies the remedy he knows best. As he has so often reached out to the warmth for his own replenishment, he reaches now to replenish. Hold it close and shelter it and all may yet be well.

The tactic succeeds beyond his expectations. Curls brush his jawline; there is a sigh, and then all that strength yields to him, lying pliantly against him. Cloth in contact with his bare skin is not pleasant, but no matter. The breath on his neck comes softly and evenly, the limbs intertwined with his are still. Where there was turbulence there is now peace.

This is how it was in the beginning, before he discovered there were better things to do with the warmth than just cling to it. But now he is the one being clung to; he is strong and powerful himself, and he is giving. The embers which burned only sullenly when he entered the room are rekindled now.

Who would have believed that what eased him would also ease this other? And who else can compare with him? He can feed a star.

The vague worry that troubled him earlier has vanished. He is encompassed by limitless peace, like an ocean which stretches from horizon to horizon around him. In this boundless twilight he floats, content beyond measure, and knowing that it will last for

△△△ Avon sat up.

The noise which had snatched him back to awareness was not the blaring of ships' alarms,

as he'd thought at first, but only Orac's dissonant whir. He was in his own bed, in his own cabin, but for a minute or so after opening his eyes he could see another, more spectral image imprinted over it. A room less brightly lit but somehow rosier—

(the other place)

—and disconcertingly familiar.

The image faded as common objects around him were recognized, given names and meaning. Dreamlike, its memory could not coexist with ordinary awareness.

It faded so completely, in fact, that for several moments he sat there frowning, resisting the urge to blink or rub his eyes, wondering what the hell he was doing on his bunk fully clothed and attached by lead wires to Orac. And in such a state...A second whir and chirp brought the scintillating lights into focus.

The allotted time, Orac commented, after a ridiculous and manifestly unnecessary throat-clearing sound, *is up.*

Ah.

Recollection came back swiftly—but shallowly, at least as far as the last few hours were concerned. He was attached to Orac because he had been driven at last to find out what atrocities Blake had committed in the name of 'a satisfactory relationship.' Strange, but the expected rush of hatred and hostility at that name failed to appear. He was not used to being able to think *Blake* recently without wanting to do murder.

And now...the experiment was completed. Successfully? He tried to order his thoughts to decide.

He had experienced...something. But the experiences were hard to get hold of. They were composed of images: visual, auditory, and tactile; and each slipped away as he tried to pin it down and examine it.

Orac had warned him about his pre-conscious condition during the fugues. Apparently he had perceived and recorded events as sensory impressions—and had not necessarily put those impressions into words. Looking back, he found that although he could recall the feelings and sensations from many encounters, he could not describe, event by event, what had actually happened on any given night. It was not so much a case of inability to remember as of inability to translate the memory into sym-

bols which made sense to him in his present state of mind.

It explained, though, his present state of *body*. The one thing that he did know was that he was sexually aroused to the point of eruption; every individual nerve was inflamed and screaming for release. He started to shift a cock that was agonizingly hard against strangling material, and then flushed and jerked at another throat-clearing sound.

It was only a machine. Nevertheless, he flipped the key out with savage force, cutting off whatever Orac had been about to say with pleasure. The key landed in a far corner and he yanked the lead wire from his temple and dropped it on the plastic casing.

Now. Small wonder he was so stimulated; he had just experienced a week's worth of fornication in a few hours. Active fornication, too. Although the memories were wavering and distant—as if they all belonged to someone else—the feelings were clear. He could not make the visions seem a part of *him*, and he did not wish to, but he had watched them all the same. He had...vicariously participated in them.

He did not remember any atrocities. Perhaps there had been none. Probably Blake had realized that one day he would be caught and all his deeds viewed in the cold light of reason, and so had been cautious. But in any event, Blake's motivations scarcely mattered now. Avon could think of only one thing; all else was secondary. The cold light of reason was being driven out of his head, because, very simply, he needed sex as he needed air.

He was halfway to Blake's room before he realized what he was doing.

The sight of that door, exactly like every other cabin door on the ship, and yet completely and qualitatively different, brought him up short. What the hell was he thinking of? When, in the name of chaos, had he allowed mere lust to drive him into rashness, to govern his judgment and usurp his self-control?

But he could argue himself blue, and the truth would still be the same. Whether or not he wanted to admit it, this desire was past curbing or restraint, and far past sublimation. Nothing else, nothing less, than Blake gasping under him would do. And besides, what he was planning made a brutal sort of sense. He had

satisfied Blake before; now Blake must satisfy him. He needed—he *had* to have—what he had experienced in the visions.

Opening Blake's door revealed the cabin beyond, and for one heartbeat the sense of *déjà vu*, of recognition, almost overwhelmed him. But it disappeared just as quickly as it had come. What he saw then was Blake, fully-dressed and half-rising from his bed, surprise and exhaustion contending for supremacy on his face.

Avon noticed the expressions only incidentally. He wasn't interested in what Blake looked like. He didn't care whether Blake had slept since they were last here together, or why Blake was lying there dressed, or how Blake felt. The top two buttons of Blake's shirt were undone, exposing a smooth V of chest, and the sight sent blood swarming to his groin. In the absence of any *conscious* decision to move he was suddenly using his weight to hold Blake down, while his fingers scrambled unkindly for other, lower fastenings on the shirt.

He was too impatient to work them properly and material tore. And this appeared to be what Blake had been waiting for, seemed to be the trigger needed to release Blake from his dumbfounded paralysis. Blake stopped staring and started struggling.

The fight was silent and unscientific, clumsy, and in deadly earnest. Avon had the advantage of single-mindedness; for whereas possibly Blake was concerned about damaging him, there was still only one thought pounding in his own brain. He would *make* Blake submit. The image of how it all must look to Blake—this feverish man bursting into his room and leaping on him—did occur to Avon for an instant, but was promptly slapped away. He did not want Blake's approval, did not care for Blake's cooperation. He required only Blake's acquiescence.

But he wasn't getting it. Infuriated by the obstinacy, he pulled out of the iron grip that was hindering him to snarl down into his opponent's face.

"Don't play coy with *me*, Blake," he said viciously. "Orac showed me what went on; I've seen it all. You never objected before; why bother now?"

It worked.

He had, apparently, lighted on the one thing that would do the job. Without a word of pro-

test, without another movement, Blake stopped grappling with him and went limp. It was so abrupt that he should have been startled, perhaps, but instead it only spurred him on. He didn't give a damn *why* he'd won. The important thing was that without those big hands impeding him he was free to rip Blake's trousers open and plunge in a hand to grasp the thick, soft cock.

The lack of responsiveness was annoying, insulting actually. Blake, having chosen to submit, was choosing to do nothing else. But Avon had neither the time nor the inclination to remedy that. The awkwardness of the first moment, sitting back to stare at what he had unveiled, considering what he wanted to do with it, vanished almost at once. His own clothes opened under hasty fingers. Then he pushed Blake down flat again, and, slanting an arm across his throat to discourage rebellion, fell on top of him.

The smooth warmth he encountered inspired him to thrust, to see if that would be enough, if that would satisfy the demands of his body. It was good. Good enough that he just kept on doing it, jabbing against Blake's belly, plowing between Blake's thighs, pleasuring himself. The room was as silent as it had been during the fight, the only sounds his own harsh breathing, and Blake's gasps against his forearm, and the slap of flesh on flesh.

Blake himself lay quite still underneath, not giving, but rather as if he had given up. Which made it all the more strange that when Avon shifted the arm to allow him air, Blake began to help him. Not reluctantly, exactly, but haltingly, with something akin to sadness. As if this were some sort of last duty, some concluding task, like shutting the eyes of a corpse.

Nonetheless, it was all Avon needed to send him into the final throes of passion: Blake supporting him, Blake steadying him, Blake moving to his rhythm. He heard his own breath catch as he worked hard to achieve release, and felt his muscles tremble with strain as sweat blurred his vision. And then his tongue locked against the roof of his mouth and he stiffened, feeling the first surge of orgasm.

The pleasure was strong, but over too quickly, and there was a hollowness to it that disturbed him. As the last tremors of climax dwindled, awkwardness returned. In cold blood, it was

almost embarrassing to find himself lying sprawled on Blake's chest, glued to him by sweat and semen, with both of them half-naked.

Slowly, he pushed himself up and clambered off. When he forced himself to look back and meet Blake's gaze he saw that Blake would not—or could not—meet his. Instead, silently, the other man shrugged out of the torn shirt, and, pulling together his trousers, lay back down. His face was drawn and weary.

And for all Avon's heat and ardor, that thick soft cock had remained soft. It had lengthened only at the height of Avon's frenzy and then withered at once as if ashamed of showing even that much of a response.

At the memory, resentment boiled up in Avon, displacing the awkwardness. He forgot he had earlier decided he didn't care for Blake's cooperation. Blake had liked it well enough before; he had no *right* to be indifferent now.

To punish Blake, Avon refused to look at him as he stood and straightened his own clothes. He took his time over it, securing each button precisely, keeping his back to the bed. Despite this display of pride and contempt, a void had opened above his stomach. What he had just done was nothing to be proud of. There was a name for it, and not an attractive one. Not one he'd ever thought to apply in connection to himself, with either man or woman.

But why couldn't Blake have just participated, then? After all his talk of love and satisfaction and relationships, wasn't Avon in his bed what he really wanted? Wasn't that good enough?

Frustration closed Avon's throat, and he felt a sting behind his eyelids of pure anger and unsatisfied need. Because it *hadn't* been good enough, not even for him. This was sex as he remembered, yes; a bit rough, of course, and stripped of the formal preliminaries of flattery and seduction and wooing, but sex within the range of his experience. Yet it had been nothing like the dream.

Those experiences were misty, still hard to define. The pleasure, however, was unclouded and incontrovertible—and *this* had been nothing like it. He had been cheated, betrayed again by Blake. He'd wanted what he'd felt in the visions, and Blake had refused to give it to him. He'd come here for sex, but the sex was not

enough. A random phrase floated back to him. "Not sex," Blake had said, so softly, his eyes on the floor. "That's unfair to us both. I think the—caring—is more important than the physical side..."

Bitter and agitated, he turned to look at Blake...and stopped. New rage swelled up sharply to engulf him, and then, slowly, died.

Blake was asleep.

True sleep, for in fraud he would have turned his face away, and Avon could see it clearly. Could see the black circles under the eyes, the chapped dryness of the lips, the sheen between eyelid and temple.

Déjà vu jarred him again, as it had when he had entered the room, but this time it was much stronger. He knew he had not experienced this situation before. There had been nothing like it even in the dream images. And yet...

He found he was staring into the empty space *between* himself and Blake. He should have realized this wouldn't work: relying on Blake, using Blake to meet his need. Now he was just as frustrated as ever, and Blake—was hurt.

It incensed him that this should matter in the least, that he should care one way or another if the man who had used *him* lived or died. But it did matter. A great disquiet shimmered in him at the sight of that wan face, those hunched shoulders. Even in sleep, Blake looked wretched and restive and...lost.

The dizziness this time was so powerful that he put out a hand automatically to steady himself. It grasped only air, but he stayed that way for a moment, head swimming. He felt as if the floor had lurched beneath him, but as his vision slowly cleared he could see that objects in the room were still balanced, stationary. Not a sudden acceleration, then. Not the luminous penumbra foreshadowing migraine, either—he knew that perilous glitter all too well.

The first deep breath restored his sense of equilibrium, the second dispelled the grayness lingering in his side-eye. This was neither the time nor the place to develop some mysterious strain of vertigo.

The room smelt of sex. Well, that was hardly surprising. But, while the odor should have become less noticeable as time passed and his senses habituated to it, it seemed to be growing stronger, forcing itself on him. And, as if his

perceptions had suddenly been honed to predator-keenness, he almost imagined he could discern two separate scents. His own and that of another. The second hung in the air, heavier and warmer than the first, mellow but with an exotic tang to it. Conjuring up memories of summers outside the Domes, the summers of his childhood, when it had seemed summer would never end. And familiar. So familiar...

No. He hadn't even realized he had closed his eyes, had taken a blind step toward the bed, until he stopped himself. Startled, tingling with adrenaline, he shook his head to clear it, then drew in a long breath of *Liberator's* recycled air. It still smelt of sex, but there was only one scent. And behind that was nothing but flatness, the stale flavor of a cabin that had been closed off too long.

What was happening here?

He should leave now. Leave Blake asleep, alone, and, if his miserable body still insisted on carnal indulgence, seek out some more amenable crewmate. Someone who could keep quiet about it afterward. Even Jenna was preferable to standing in Blake's room working himself into olfactory hallucinations.

The fog hit as he stepped toward the door.

It had been hard enough to move that way in the first place; the air in that direction seemed to assume a treacly thickness, so that he felt a drag on his limbs and a smothering in his chest when facing it. Instinctively, as the gray wave broke over him, he turned back toward the bed, stumbling as if to get out of billowing smoke. His ears were ringing, a disagreeable high-pitched sound. His heart-rate had accelerated, his face was burning, and when he looked down at his hands he saw that they were clenched into fists.

Rage. He felt...seething rage. Except that that wasn't quite right; he wasn't seething, only irritated and thwarted and beginning to be a bit alarmed. But...*someone*...was very, very angry indeed.

And not at Blake.

He stood very still, thinking about that.

When in doubt, experiment. Fall back on the scientific method. So he took one of those compacted fists, absently noting the veins standing out in bas relief on top, and raised it over Blake's sleeping face.

The wave of distress and repudiation from his own chest, from his gut, astounded him. The feelings were aversive in the extreme. He could no more hold the position than he could have held his hand in an open flame; so, jerkily, he yielded to the impulse to open the fist. After which he simply stood for several minutes, examining his outspread fingers, his palm, hanging steady in the air. He had never minded seeing Blake hurt before; he'd always felt dimly that Blake deserved it. In fact, it had been rather deeply gratifying to loosen a few of Blake's teeth with this hand last week. But just now the picture summoned up only nausea, as if he were proposing to hit some wide-eyed child or feeble elder who had wandered into his path. As if he were considering doing a thing that was simply not done.

He saw the truth then. He was under attack. But not by Blake, nor even by those ubiquitous aliens whom he'd accused of directing Blake's actions. He was under attack...by himself.

It felt extremely personal.

And it might have been diverting, it was such an extraordinary situation, except that the feelings were *his*. He felt not at all as if some outside power were feeding extraneous urges and emotions into his brain. On the contrary, it seemed as if an inner door had opened and he had stumbled onto a great pile of disused artifacts, long forgotten but undeniably belonging to him.

He'd stood on the flight deck once in a similar quandary, above the planet Horizon. Had stood there struggling with feelings that were unreasonable, unwanted, inappropriate, and *his*, until a trio of Federation pursuit ships arrived to put him out of his misery. Then he'd calmly slammed the door shut on that uninhabitable room, and got on with business, so happy to be certain of his course that he didn't even care which side had won the interior debate. Nor did he need to justify his actions to an inner censor; he didn't need to *think* at all. And no one could make him.

If pressed, he could always snap, "Why not?" He had become very good at doing things and then snapping "Why not?" afterward.

But just now the feelings—the very personal inappropriate feelings—were threatening something more important than mere survival. They

were swirling like a wrathful ocean around his pride, his sense of self. He would *not* feel kindly toward the man who had used him. Who had degraded him, if not by actual brutalities, then by the simple act of enjoying his body while he was not in it.

Open-eyed, with all his faculties intact, Blake had had every advantage. And that had allowed him to *patronize* Avon. It must have been entertaining for him, to watch Avon's nocturnal antics as if watching a favorite pet. Blake had been at liberty to give or withhold, while Avon had been dependent on his sufferance.

The image of Blake sitting on high, bestowing his gifts of love and pleasure as he saw fit, turned Avon's blood to acid. And it jolted his thoughts back to the present. He had almost forgotten that he was standing over Blake's bed, staring sightlessly down at the figure on it, with one hand still upraised. Although it seemed like hours, it couldn't have been long, for the sweat on Blake's face hadn't dried. He must have been gazing at that dampness for several minutes now without realizing what he was doing.

Of course it was sweat.

Avon rejected utterly the idea that his body could be controlled by any foreign intelligence—even by one which emanated from inside himself. And so it was with a kind of dreamlike fascination that he watched what happened next. Slowly, as if pulled by a wire, and entirely of its own accord, his hand moved down until the back was just brushing Blake's temple, stroking by the corner of Blake's closed eyelid. He only felt the coolness on his knuckles as he lifted them back up into the airflow.

Moisture shimmered faintly when he turned the hand this way and that. From one angle it looked like nothing. From another it emphasized the pores, threw back the light at him.

It would be dry in an instant. He could breathe on it once and dry it now. There was no reason in the known worlds for him to be standing here scrutinizing any of Blake's secretions, appraising his knuckles as if they were dusted with goldspice worth a thousand credits a grain. As if he might discover the mysteries of the universe in a molecule of water.

Very slowly, he brought the back of his hand to his lips.

Oh.

Sweat was salty, too. But sweat did not taste of bitterness, of loss.

Indignation clenched Avon's teeth, stole his breath again. Why didn't you just let it go on, then? he flared silently at the unconscious man before him. Why not just keep your precious 'Kerr?' *You* had the choice; I did not. What excuse could you have to make yourself miserable—

(Lost)

It flickered up over him like a swirl of icy water, not a single sensation, but a full collage of images: sight, sound, and feeling combining to form a concept. An...immersion. It was as if, for that one instant, he had been transported to another place, another time. A place in which he was not himself.

He fought it off and forced a normal breath, trying to ignore the trip-hammer of his heartbeat. He had never been subject to fainting fits—or visions. Such things bordered on insanity.

He was *not* insane.

Laboriously, he reconstructed the thought that had been interrupted. What right had Blake had to make himself miserable, indeed? After all, it was all Blake's own doing. And how dare Blake now lie in pain, how dare Blake agonize over it tonight, when just last week he had so easily—

This time the leaden wave of vertigo was stronger than all the others put together. They had been sea-spray flickering about the edges of his mind; this was a tsunami, drowning him in the taste of salt. A riptide, crashing about his ears and pulling him under instantly, as if to show that it had only been playing with him before, as if to mock his previous victories over it. Drenched and blinded, he went down without even a gasp of protest, and

ΔΔΔ *(Lost. Lost. Cold that turns everything the color of ice, more terrible than the darkness and more lasting. The glacial color of despair. Sight, sound, and touch are crippled by it, muted almost into non-existence.*

The amber glow which once fell on his closed eyelids like sunlight has guttered. Burning a sullen red, like old iron, it gives neither light nor heat. A yellow sun aged prematurely, eking out its last fuel before the fires die for all time. Soon it will be a frozen corpse, a black dwarf, sterile and

utterly insignificant in the vastness of the seas between the stars.

And he—)

ΔΔΔ —had to get *out*. He struggled up from it frantically, fighting with every ounce of his will. This could not be happening. Never in his life had he felt anything like this wrenching of perception, this schism in his own psyche. He was being torn apart as if by the tidal forces above a black hole.

This was no longer a skirting of the borders of madness. Such shattering, such loss of volition, *was* madness. And he was losing to it again already; all his efforts were not enough to keep his head above the surface. He could not see the cabin he knew was around him; he could not sense the ground underneath him. It was far too strong; it was overmastering him and he—

ΔΔΔ (*—is impotent to help.*

It is the worst thing he has ever imagined.

Though vision and hearing are maimed, one sense is still far too sharp. He is awash with the taste of salt. As deadly to a candle flame as to a dying sun, the frigid wave dashes against him, leeching off his warmth as if envious that he should have had it for so long.

Helpless. He is helpless. And utterly bereft. The brightness which has fed him, nurtured him, warmed him, is quenched. And all that he has taken...cannot be given back. Is refused. His desperate love and comfort turned away.

For the first time, he is conscious of his own inadequacy. Bewildered and dazed, he can make no sense out of what is happening. He has never before felt worthlessness, felt...shame. But he feels these things now. All that he can do is not enough. All that he is, is too little.

If only he could understand what is taking place. He has never realized how limited his perceptions are. And the discovery...is beyond endurance.

All he knows clearly is that there is pain, pain, pain, and that he can do nothing to stop it. The universe is filled with pain, and—)

ΔΔΔ **No.**

Avon felt the floor beneath his knees, saw the artificial light of Blake's cabin. Saw, too, the

silver coverlet, the curving bulkhead, a chair. And had names for these things. He was himself.

That had been...that vision had been...

His breath came hard and he saw that one hand was pressed flat, white-knuckled, against the floor. Bright spots danced before his eyes.

Unwilling to test his equilibrium, he remained kneeling where he was. He had enough trouble just to think coherently, like an invalid putting out one slow foot before the other.

He had to get away from this. It was no longer diverting in the least. The force that was dragging him into—that place—was not playing a game with him. It was trying to destroy him.

His intellectual curiosity had vanished, leaving him no scientist, but a man fighting for his life. Fighting for his mind. And, though that mind was working slowly, still in shock, it *was* working. Desperately trying to plan ahead, to find a solution.

The first thing was to get out of here, out of this room which seemed to provoke the madness. Yes. Leave here. Get out and then find some way to make sure the disease did not catch him again

before he was ready. Drugs might work for a while to suppress it. At least long enough to buy him time to think. And then—

—then more drastic measures; whatever was necessary. There was no need to panic. There were ways of dealing with such things. Whatever was inside him was malignant, like a growing cancer—and so, like a cancer, it would have to be excised, be isolated and destroyed.

That was it. He felt himself become a little calmer. He would root it out. Go into his subconscious, find it, and eradicate it completely. He knew it was feasible; he had the technology, had Orac to tap into the latest research. Federation research, of course; because the Federation was always on the leading edge of that field—

He was talking about mindwipe.

The realization stopped him short, brought all his plans to a halt.

It was true.

What the Federation had not done to him, what even they had deemed too risky, he was contemplating doing to himself. He was considering the mutilation of his mind. The dissec-

tion—the dismemberment—of his personality.

He had been thinking of doing that? *He* had? He must be mad already even to have entertained the idea. Easier to simply turn himself into the nearest Bureau of Renormalization and save everyone the trouble.

Very well, then. He tried to quiet the lurching in his stomach, to order his thoughts once more. Memory erasure...was clearly out of the question. He had long ago decided he would rather die than live with that horror.

But there had to be another solution. There had to be. At the very least, no matter what else, he had to get away from here. Not just from the room, but from the ship. The disease had never troubled him before; it was Blake who had wakened it. Perhaps, if he could put enough distance between them, he could lure it to sleep again.

It was possible. Anything was possible. He would do that, he would leave *Liberator*, leave Blake. Escape first; that was all he needed to worry about now, and later—

Later, what?

Again, his plans ground to a halt. Escaping was all very well, but he carried this sickness with him. It was *inside* him. And just how was he planning to escape from himself?

It had already proved it was stronger than he. In another atmosphere it might lie quiet for a while, but wherever he went, it would travel also. Lurking in the shadows. Waiting its chance. If he closed his eyes to that, he was simply tacitly agreeing to its existence. To its eventual victory.

Trapped. He was caught between Scylla and Charybdis. Uprooting the madness meant butchering himself. Ignoring it meant slavery. There was no other alternative, no other choice...

...save death.

Anger fountained through him again, a renewed fury that rose to thrust back the fear. *No*. Not that. He would not allow Blake to destroy him, to make him destroy himself. He would fight this thing any way he could, with any weapon, anywhere...

Anywhere...

Even on its own territory?

The silver bedclothes, the join in the wall above them, faded before his eyes as his mind turned inward to consider. Bravado? Perhaps,

but...why not? He could not excise this part of his mind, and he would not consent to it controlling him. But what if he could control *it*?

The memories locked behind that door inside him were distasteful. Were...extremely unpleasant. But they were not the memories of another person, another personality. They were *his* and he had a right to them. Once he had power over them they would no longer be a threat. Seize them, and he would have his destiny back in his own hands.

That was it, then. He would fight it on its own ground, on its own terms. And win, damn Blake, damn everything. And win.

With the decision made, he felt a sudden grim calm. It was the only choice possible for him. He could not live mad, or mutilated—or sundered. These last days of hating himself for what he could not remember doing had shown him that. He refused to be split into a bloodless intellect and a mindless hedonist by his own conflicting needs.

He wanted himself back.

Now the only question was how to do it.

He needed to open that inner door and let the visions flow out. And then—he needed to lay hold of them, to look at them, to examine them in *his* world. In...the cold light of reason.

So. There would never be a better time or place. He had already crossed the barricade more than once today, albeit most recently against his will. Now he would do it deliberately, with purpose.

He sat back and shut his eyes.

The dampness on his hand. That was as good a starting point as any. It seemed to have triggered these last episodes. He would concentrate on that, and on the images it had evoked. On opening that door...

Unhappiness. That was what came through most clearly. The night of this vision he had been unhappy. And...more than that, he had sensed...the deep unhappiness, the...

(the despair, the white numbing cold, which now bleeds through what once was warmth)

...which had *bled* through what once was warmth. Another's unhappiness.

He drew a long breath, tension easing. Apparently, he *could* tap into this well of memory.

He could crack the door and release something that he could understand.

That night—this night which for some reason he was able to access, had been unpleasant in so many ways. There were other feelings in the word-paintings. He had felt such...confusion...such perturbation...

(a panic which urges him to flee, but there is nowhere to flee in this swirling whiteness, there is nowhere to go that is safe. This place which has always been a haven is now a deathtrap and he is mired in ice and utterly lost)

...and fear. That was it. Ease off, now, and take this slowly. He had been afraid. Yes, but *why?* What images were connected with the fear?

He had been afraid because...

(because the wind is coming, the desolate nothingness that steals all thought, all meaning. Soon, quietly, one by one, the stars will begin to wink out until the sky is left black and silent)

...because he had perceived a sort of death. Yes. Senseless as it sounded, death was what he had been anticipating. And not just his own death. He had envisaged...an...ultimate destruction...

(the final ticks of the clock before the last light is gone and nothing is left but dark relics scattered throughout the enormity of space. Each immeasurably far from the others, doomed to evaporate silently into the void until not even a grain of cold sand is left and there is nothing nothing nothing an infinity of nothing)

Gasping, Avon sat back and opened his eyes.

His throat was dry, he was sweating, and his muscles were trembling more violently than when he had forced himself on Blake. Although the raw material kept coming, translating was surprisingly difficult, surprisingly draining. Not only were the visions themselves aversive, but he was fighting the force that had encoded the memories this way in the first place, that had created the fugue.

His own mind, again. A power within him beyond reckoning. But what he had done, he could undo. He was proving that now.

He took a moment to gather his resources. Then, letting his half-shut eyes lose focus once more, bracing himself, he went back in.

That night...he had been concerned about more than his own loneliness. He had sympathized with...had felt compassion for...

(the last charred embers of the warmth. His own storm of grief has done its part in dousing the fires, and now the end has come. Within his very compass, it goes out. And this is the most horrifying thing he has ever witnessed: the death of a star)

No, this was ridiculous. Beyond credence. Yet there was no doubt about how it had seemed to him. He had felt that...something...was being extinguished. That...

(light and radiant energy have been transformed into rubble. Scorched and shrunken, it will soon be a lump of dark ice, as cold as the wasteland around it. A derelict corpse in an endless abyss. Yet this same star had once poured forth life and vitality, had seemed deathless, had bathed him in luminance)

...that something was lost. And whatever it was, it was of great value. He had been filled with sorrow, and had wished...to comfort, but had felt...

(snowbound, mired fast)

...inadequate.

But why comfort, when the loss was his? Think about that, follow that strand. Because...

(because all life is linked and the universe is one vast interconnection. And the white death feels the loss of summer more keenly than he ever can, for it is the instrument of its own)

Hell.

Avon let out his breath sharply, leaning back in exhaustion—and exasperation. His original sense of triumph had dissipated. For all his effort, this was getting him nowhere. Riddles led only to more riddles.

Oh, he could retrieve the emotions, could even decipher them to a certain extent, but he still

could get no picture of what had actually been occurring. He was not some small forsaken light orbiting a collapsed sun. Entropy had not overtaken the universe.

If he could not wring more sense than this out of the memories he had no hope of making them his. No hope of being whole again.

He *would* be whole again.

Very well, then, he would go back in. But this time he would look for something specific. He already knew that he had been in this room on the night of the vision. But when had the experience occurred? He needed to anchor the memory in time.

Grimly, he let the silver folds of bedclothes blur before him, let the door open and the haze of irrationality and despair surround him. He gave himself to the vapors and let them take him to—

(the last time, of course, the last of everything, the final turning. The night after which all sleep will be dreamless, all memory forgotten.)

That wasn't—

(Lethe.)

Meaning that—

(All life and joy is behind him now and before him the ferryman waits. Time is meaningless for there will be no after. This is the stopping place.)

He understood.

The last night, then. The last evening he had slipped into fugue. Now that he thought of it, there had to be one. He hadn't enquired too closely into Blake's decision to end it, but clearly Blake had made that decision before seeing him that night. And even—

(especially)

—in his primitive state of consciousness he himself had somehow understood what was about to happen.

And had...been deeply distressed by it. Well, he should have deduced that. All this pain and fear, then, all these images of obliteration, came from the thought of...terminating the relationship. There was no other answer.

He was succeeding, at last, in translating this puzzle. He knew where and why—now he would find how. How had he been standing, what facing? He needed to make those muddled perceptions work properly, to use them to sense his own body, instead of fantasizing about winter and dying stars.

A picture brushed the edge of his consciousness, an image which he seized and tried to wrestle into coherency. Standing...he had not been standing. Nor sitting, nor kneeling like this. No, he had been...

(laid out as if for burial and embraced body and soul by the glacial white. The shrouding material cannot keep the frost from burning him everywhere he and the other touch but he makes no effort to get away. Nothing matters anymore, because this is the end of everything and)

...lying on the bed, this bed. Fully-clothed, wrapped in a coverlet, but still shivering. As he shivered now. Because there was more. In this picture he could sense something concrete other than himself. Too excited to go carefully, he scrambled after the image, grasping for it. He had been lying there, very still, and...

(the other, the one who brought life and now brings death and with whom he will go into the darkness uncaring)

Yes! And...

(the one who warmed him, whom he trusted, whose heartbeat lulled him to sleep)

...and...

(the presence which drew him, bending his path like a star capturing a comet, which guided him as if with a silver thread to itself)

...and...

(the one whose arms are rigid with the pain, whose voice in his ears is raw with it)

...he had been lying still, and...

(the man whose name has been a danger but

now all danger is past, the one who was at the center already, who had been waiting, who had always been there but always unknown)

...and...

(Blake.)

Blake. And Blake had been...

(brushing the soft touch of despair on his cheek and neck, the cold kiss of the river of the dead, the essence of oblivion)

...had been crying.

△△△ It was all very simple, in the end. Two perceptions, merging into one. Two disparate images, which together gave depth and meaning. Once you got the knack of it, you could never be confused again.

He saw it all now. Had all the pieces of the puzzle.

He had felt the wetness of tears here, and here. And this was where Blake had been holding him, and this was where Blake's head had lain.

It had frightened him terribly, then, to feel that strong body shaking, to hear the grief in that always-steady voice. And his fear had been doubly great because he'd not been able to comprehend what Blake had been saying. He'd tried so hard, but it was like trying to read in a dream. The symbols could not be marshaled into meaning.

The words had seemed...so important, so momentous, at the time. And yet now, hearing them with other ears, re-shaping the sentences which had defeated him, he found they were nothing remarkable; nothing, even, that he did not already know. Just two phrases, repeated over and over. One was, "I'm sorry." Which he, even in pre-consciousness, had grasped from the beginning. The other he had also known for a long time.

But...what *had* been momentous was the depth of Blake's pain. Not the sorrow of a master losing a favorite pet. There had been no patronization that night. And though Avon, in the fugue state, had been incapable of grasping the truth of the situation, Blake had not seemed

to realize that. Everything Avon had sensed, Blake had been feeling firsthand.

Blake had cared...that much.

Slowly, fighting the cramp in his muscles, Avon rose to stand beside the bed and look down.

Not a star, then. Not...an illimitable source of energy. Just another lonely candle.

Some candles burn brighter than others.

△△△ He turned slightly, to regard the room which for the last hour had seemed such a place of torment.

It looked different now. He'd feared and hated the thing inside him which had caused the fugues, which had sundered him in the first place. But now he could see that it was not a fatal defect, not some nemesis trying to destroy him. On the contrary, it was an extremely adaptive mechanism which had allowed him to survive—to cope—under circumstances which would otherwise have been intolerable.

It had allowed him to take what he needed, at a time when his conscious mind would unquestionably have stopped him. It was as if something inside him had permitted his isolationism to go so far, and then stepped in and calmly said, "Enough." And it had even protected him from the consequences of his actions for as long as possible. Madness it might be, but it was a highly efficient madness, and it had served him well.

And, in the end, it had yielded to him, returning the control it had usurped. He had Kerr's memories now. *His* memories, on his terms. He was no longer a stranger to any part of himself.

And now...he could also understand Kerr's motivations in mounting this evening's assault. Kerr had indeed been angry, as he had sensed. But Kerr had not been trying to destroy him. Because what Kerr had realized that last terrible night was that Kerr himself was not whole, was not...enough. That he was not competent to meet Blake's needs—or his own—in times of great trouble.

For that, he needed Avon.

Gratifying, thought Avon wryly, to know that one is good for *something*.

But the cynicism, the humility, were not meant. Individually, he and Kerr had each been quite successful in their chosen spheres. Together...

Just now he felt he could do anything.

It took such a little motion to turn and look at Blake.

The tell-tale sheen of moisture had evaporated. Blake's face was uniformly pale, now—except for black circles under his eyes as if a smutty thumb had tried to dry his tears. No way to deny it; Blake looked terrible. His skin was chalky and livid, stretched unattractively tight across swollen cheekbones. His hair had dulled to a lifeless olive-drab, lackluster and matted. Blake had not been built to look haggard; it sat on him poorly.

Thoughtfully, Avon turned away.

Reaching into the well of memory was no longer traumatic. It required only tenacity and concentration. What he brought back this time was an image of Blake, before. Blake as he had been on one of those nights, alive with strength and obstinacy and enthralled admiration.

It was a fine point which Avon liked more: Blake's strength or his own ability to conquer it.

With his back to the man on the bed, he began to meticulously undo what he had done earlier. He undressed slowly, folding each separate garment carefully as he removed it, setting it on the desk. His boots went side by side below. Then he crossed to a panel inset by the violet chronometer and adjusted the lights to a beckoning dimness, a cool and restful dusk.

Returning, he stood once more over Blake.

The one thing he could not do any longer was rely on his unconscious mind to rescue him. His destiny was in his own hands now—and he would have to live with the consequences. This was the last moment of choosing, when everything hung in the balance. He looked into Blake's face for some sign.

Blake, oblivious to the drama of the moment, did not so much as flicker an eyelash to influence his fate. He seemed to be deep, deep in a sleep without dreams.

Avon smiled.

Then, very calmly, most deliberately, he leant down to touch Blake's lips with his own.

Blake's mouth tasted of fatigue...and something else. Avon recognized it as he had before: the metallic tang of lost faith, of bitterness. The dross of hope destroyed. Blake's lips were roughened by stress and lack of moisture. Straightening to gaze down into the inert face again,

Avon saw no response, either of promise or discouragement. Blake was obviously reluctant to return to a world without pity.

No matter. He would awaken soon enough. Meanwhile, there was a sort of innocence in being able to kiss him sleeping, an unsullied newness about it. As if the universe were stopped and shining around them, breath held, waiting for something to happen.

He settled himself on the bed next to Blake, one hand on either side of that grand chest, and went on with what he'd begun. The feel of Blake's heat seeping into his forearms conjured up memories, but this time he could grasp their silver insubstantiality long enough to interpret them. He could follow the melody to the end. Blake's warmth was what had attracted him in the first place, yes. And just now he had to fight the temptation to stretch out on Blake's broadness, to rest his naked chest against Blake's and bask there.

Everything in its time.

He tasted Blake's mouth again, meditatively. It was not a kiss. Rather, it was a gentle enfoldment; Blake's lower lip held and cradled for an instant between both of his. He did the same thing again and again, without hurry, roving over Blake's lips, exploring them. The mixture of familiarity and discovery was enticing, intriguing.

Blake's breathing changed sometime in the middle of it. His mouth softened to the soft touch, lips parting slightly, responsively. And when Avon continued, no more quickly or slowly than before, he stirred.

His eyelids fluttered briefly against the dimness, then closed again. Reaching out blindly, his fingers fumbled across Avon's bare flank more by accident than design. If anything, that seemed to lull him farther into sleep-drowned abstraction.

"Kerr?" he murmured.

Avon stopped. He straightened. Looking down on the softly breathing figure, he thought about this. Then he lowered his head again.

"As usual," he said, "you're half right."

Blake's eyes snapped open. Apparently, Kerr talking back was an event too outrageous even to be incorporated into a dream. His harsh breath shattered the twilight peace; his body jerked, muscles tensing. He snatched the hand

away from Avon's unclothed flesh as if it had scalded him.

Avon ignored all this.

With infinite gentleness, without hesitation, he bent down to caress Blake's mouth with his own. To make love to it with his own.

And Blake reached his breaking point. He struck out wildly, flailing at Avon, trying to fend him off. He seemed panicked, unable to cope or to comprehend.

Indulgent yet totally serious, Avon raised one hand: curved, open. He let Blake's flailing fist strike it, and then captured it and held it fast. He gripped hard, increasing the pressure, showing Blake his strength. But, simultaneously, he went on caressing Blake's mouth, poring over it with the softest of kisses, the most velvety touches of half-closed lips.

And, slowly, as Blake faltered under these ministrations, seeming utterly bewildered and frightened, Avon carefully rearranged their hands without bothering to look at them. He reordered the fighters' hold into a less warlike grip, fanning Blake's fingers, slipping them through his own, sorting them until they interlocked like cog and wheel, until their hands rested palm to palm in a lovers' clasp. What he let Blake feel then was the security and inevitability of their entwined fingers. The gentle destiny of their joined hands.

Resistance, he thought, comforting Blake's mouth without pause, is useless.

△△ Gentle dreams...Blake had always thought they were there, just around some inner corner. Or, at least, he had hoped they were, had longed for it, wishing for just a few minutes to lose himself in their embrace, to hold Kerr again. To escape, however briefly, from the wracking dread and desolation of being awake.

But he had never quite been able to reach them. Even asleep he had been awake to the pain, and dreams had been no refuge.

Until now.

He felt the warmth, the nearness, before he felt the first touch. And so tranquillity had already begun to flow into him, to seduce him, before that first glancing contact made him tremble.

So gentle...but then Kerr always had been gentle, especially at the start, as if suddenness

or undue fervor might frighten Blake away. It was easy to weave this tenderness into the tapestry of his dreaming. On one of those early, unearthly nights his incubus-lover might have kissed him like this. Healing the stinging pain where Avon's fist had cut his lip with the softest stroke of tongue-tip, the briefest pressure.

'Where Avon's fist...'—the pang of memory drove Blake deeper into his dream-world. He would *not* give this up, not when Kerr was touching his mouth so sweetly. He would not lose it, he would *not*...

The waking, when it came, was very bad. He had no idea what Avon had said, but suddenly he was blinking in half-darkness, dazed and disoriented...and stricken.

At that instant, looking up into those shadowed brown eyes, all he felt was hatred. Pure and savage hatred for the man who had snatched Kerr away—again. Who had splintered his dreams once too often.

Mixed with the hatred and fury was a gut-wrenching fear. To sleep while another watches is to be vulnerable. He was afraid of Avon, of what Avon might do to him. He had to make Avon stop, to force Avon away, to hurt him. He could not bear to be used again; he would fight with all his strength to prevent it.

The problem was that all his strength didn't seem to be enough. His struggles were feeble, pitiful. Partly to blame was the fact that he still felt drugged with sleep; his limbs seemed heavy and uncoordinated, enabling Avon to hold him down easily. But the other part was that, even while holding him down, Avon was not hurting him. Avon was...loving him. Kissing him almost chastely, but with a thoroughness, an intensity, that liquefied his bones.

And his own body was a traitor. Starved, not for sensation, but for *this* sensation—*this* weight on top of him, *this* smell in his nostrils, *these* fingers clamped on his hand—it was weakening. His palm burned where it had brushed Avon's naked side. His loins ached and tingled, unsought pleasure building there.

It was the pleasure that finished him. Kerr had always known what to do, how to touch him, so that his insides crawled and melted and his head swam.

But this—*wasn't*...

It didn't matter.

He knew Avon could sense it when he stopped fighting. It was different from the first time to-night, when he had simply gone limp, feeling as if his spirit had vacated his body. This was a warmer, headier yielding, an opening. And Avon lost no time in following it up, in prising the crack wider.

But he did it subtly, with finesse. Teasing, touching Blake's tongue tip and then retreating, stroking him through the cloth of his trousers, very lightly, over and over. Until Blake sobbed dryly and opened to him completely: mouth, legs, everything.

It had been so long...six nights in the world, perhaps, but an age in his own mind. And longer because he'd thought it was an age that would never end.

The light, inquisitive fingers were familiar—yet strange. The touch was not Kerr's, but the resemblance raised gooseflesh on his skin. The realization of whose touch it *was*, of just who was exploring him, coaxing him, rousing him this way, sent a discharge of electricity down his nerves, down his vulnerable naked sides. Avon awake. Open-eyed, talking, presumably in his right mind. The thought of being loved...like *this*...by an Avon with speech and reason was terrifying and exhilarating. Exhilarating enough to bring him almost to crisis at once, now, before Avon permitted even an open-mouthed kiss.

He wasn't going to be able to take much more of the teasing anyway. Each tiny, swift touch of tongue-tip, followed by the inevitable retreat, boosted his desire for complete invasion. He was strangely reluctant—afraid, almost—to wrap his arms around this Avon and enclose him, but he needed more all the same. He needed Avon's mouth open to him; Avon's pliant solidity against his beseeching flesh.

Gratitude flowed through him when Avon's fingers trailed up his crotch to the waistband of his trousers. He'd felt so violated, before, at Avon reaching in to take what did not belong to him. So exposed. He felt exposed now, but there was a hypnotic pleasure even in that, in submitting. And Avon was not rough with him; Avon's fingers circled him gently, stroking underneath, cajoling him fully erect. His breath caught in his throat as desire finally overcame disquiet, and he reached with the hand Avon was not holding to cup the back of Avon's neck.

He wasn't sure what he expected; for Avon to pull away, to freeze in censure, to bite. But instead Avon simply held still, fingers brushing him encouragingly, lips moist and parted. As if he were...waiting. And after a time Blake could stand it no longer and he probed into Avon's mouth, swabbing Avon's tongue with his own, taking hesitant possession of it.

They were both breathing hard when he fell back. Avon's fingers were not quite so gentle as they stripped him of his remaining clothing. Strange, but until this moment he had not consciously realized that Avon wore nothing. The sight of that pale, graceful body sharpened his appetite, as always, and when Avon moved toward him he reached out helplessly to touch it, to embrace it, relearning its planes and contours. His hands flowed down Avon's torso and drew in to carefully enshrine the flushed genitals. He felt Avon quiver and then go very still.

He looked up. He'd forgotten, for an instant, with whom he was dealing. But Avon merely remained quiescent for a few heartbeats eyes half-shut; then he let out his breath in a long sigh. That was all. The more telling response was in the warm flesh Blake held so lightly, in the lovely dusky-rose cock which lifted for him. He fondled it as if mesmerized while Avon, eyes still almost closed, painstakingly arranged them for another kiss.

He wanted whatever Avon wanted now. And he tried to demonstrate this, to let Avon's responses be his guide as the kiss stretched out, became deeper, lacing through with fire and mounting urgency before it lapsed into small broken nuzzlings. But he was not in the least ready for what happened next.

Avon disentangled himself punctiliously, almost primly, releasing Blake and sitting back. Blake could not tell what he was feeling. Though there was a faint glow to his skin, he looked thoughtful and remote, as if listening to some inner threnody, or trying to remember a phrase which eluded him.

Blake saw the change, the flicker of heavy lashes, when he got it. And then, with the conviction of utter certainty, Avon turned to the wall beside the bed and slid a finger under the panel to extract the top drawer.

Blake's mouth went dry. His heart, which had been racing, plummeted to thud dully some-

where around his solar plexus. Anything, he'd decided anything Avon wanted...but the sick dismay within him would not be quelled. He sat, mutely, as Avon uncapped the tube and squeezed a small amount of lotion onto his palm.

Blake's body was throwing memories back at him: jolts of blazing agony which clawed up his spine, white-hot torment tearing into him without respite. Lost in that raging, deafening misery, he scarcely noticed what Avon was doing until cool fingers closed around his cock, spreading the lotion on him.

Bewildered and no less horrified than before, he raised his eyes to Avon's, shaking his head. "Avon, no..."

But this was not Kerr, willful but uncommunicative. Avon's eyes narrowed slightly, then dropped to the discarded tube. Still engrossed, intent, he picked it up again.

As he rubbed cream between thumb and forefinger, looking at or through it, the dry woody fragrance wafted to Blake, rising around them. Avon breathed deeply of it, then pulled his head back sharply.

Then he just sat for several minutes, impassive. When he finally glanced across at Blake, his lips twisted wryly.

"A case of the blind leading the blind, wouldn't you say?" he murmured. "Never mind. I may not have had much experience—recently—but I do know how it's done."

Blake was too startled, at first, to speak. Avon...remembered that? He could not summon up any suitable reaction. He felt it must be significant, somehow, but just now, in this roar of confusion, his mind could not begin to grasp the implications. So he stuck to ground he was sure of, and was distantly pleased to hear that his voice was steady.

"No, Avon."

But, again, he was not dealing with Kerr. Avon gave him an odd glance, heat and serenity mingled, and touched the back of his hand.

"It will be all right," he said.

Blake shook his head again. He did not believe that; he remembered all too vividly the indignity, the pain... Wetting his lips, he looked quickly at Avon.

But Avon was not looking at him. And whatever Blake had meant to say was abruptly cut off by a second palmful of cream being applied.

He thought he had not quite cried out. If that was so, Avon clearly meant to remedy it. He stopped eventually when Blake caught his wrist with shaking fingers, hard enough to bruise.

Blake himself wasn't sure if he'd done it to stop Avon or not. He watched wordlessly as his hand was detached and turned, the last of the cream squeezing sluggishly into it.

"Now," said Avon, calm and self-assured, lying back. Blake, left sitting with a clenched fist of scented lubricant and an erection that echoed every beat of his pulse, knew then which of them was going to have his way.

He tried to be careful. When Avon went taut at the first tentative intrusion of a finger he paused, uncertainly. He couldn't think properly anymore; it was as if vast portions of his brain had gone numb, but the strangeness of this, of Avon resisting what had been so familiar to Kerr, was borne in on him.

What Blake felt just then, in defiance of the cumbersome stiffness at his groin, was not eroticism. There was pleasure in touching this body he loved, true enough, but it was a pleasure that woke a slow sustained ache in his heart rather than a swift heat in his cock. Aesthetic rather than physical. Almost the tenderness he'd felt for Kerr, when comforting him in the beginning.

He stroked cream high into Avon's body, making sure Avon could tolerate one finger and then two, fascinated to feel the plush velvet texture so silky with lotion under his touch. He loosened the tight ring of muscle until it parted like butter for him and Avon rocked slightly with his slight movements. And then he stopped.

All the preliminaries he been dispensed with; Avon was curled before him, open, ready for the taking. And Blake could not bring himself to take him. He was afraid, afraid of causing pain, of losing control, of shattering this fragile bubble of harmony which surrounded them.

Finally, it was Avon, still unhurried and reflective, who guided him, drawing Blake into position between his legs, himself placing the flaring cockhead against delicately puckered skin. The gesture, and the range of mute meaning behind it, scythed down the last of Blake's doubts. Gods, how he wanted this. Shaking inwardly, he closed his eyes and applied pressure, feeling the slickness of the little mouth of

muscle, feeling its resistance, and then, incredibly, feeling himself pushing in, his cock nudging inside and opening Avon completely.

And feeling Avon accept him. That was what kept him wonderstruck, spellbound, as inch by inch he gained ground. Avon was allowing this, not simply tolerating it, but welcoming him. They had to work at it together, in increments, Blake restraining the leaping impulse of his own body to give Avon time to accommodate, and still Avon did not change his mind, or protest.

Which made it all the worse when, as the first constriction was passed, Blake felt the sudden spasm as Avon contracted involuntarily. He saw the change in Avon's expression, the flash of raw pain in those dark eyes.

He froze, arrested. Waited without breathing until he saw Avon breathe, until he felt some of the tension in Avon's frame ease. And then waited longer. He was willing to remain like this for as long as it took, or even to withdraw, but after another deliberate, measured breath, Avon again relaxed and urged him forward. Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he groped over for Avon's hand, twining their fingers together as Avon had earlier, gripping hard. His eyes met Avon's and Avon nodded. Then he began again.

It was difficult for both of them. He had to go slowly and wait for Avon's relaxations. But his self-control held, and though Avon's fingers tightened bruisingly at several points, he did not spasm or flinch like that again. When at last it was done, when Blake was fully sheathed, he looked up, blinking away sweat.

What he saw stopped his heart.

There was no discomfort in Avon's face now. Instead, lighting those chiseled features, softening and altering them utterly, was the lush look of hunger assuaged. Of...supreme satisfaction. He himself couldn't pretend to understand it, but no one seeing Avon could doubt Avon's response. Though Avon's body was still, his chest had begun heaving, a rhythm which grew not slower but quicker as tiny shudders rippled through the muscles which clutched Blake.

And while Blake watched, Avon wetted his lips and swallowed, breath coming more and more rapidly as his eyes, only half-open, turned this way and that.

Whatever was happening inside him, whatever they had set loose here, was more power-

ful than either of them had expected. Just the sight of it sent pangs of fear and rapture roiling in Blake's gut. Suddenly, though desperate not to hurt Avon, he could remain passive no longer. Jerkily, his eyes never leaving Avon's face, he pulled his hips back, withdrawing a bare centimeter or two. And then he schooled himself to hang motionless, suspended, and wait for Avon's need to spur Avon on to the next action.

He did not wait long. With another uneven breath, Avon's legs tightened around him, hips lifting to receive him. They both gasped at the sensation, and Avon's face, flushing with the return of gratification, blurred before Blake's eyes. Abdominal muscles rigid, he slowly withdrew again, farther than before, far enough to feel the stinging cold outside of Avon. This time, though, he could not hold back, and before he could stop himself he thrust hard, frantic to bury himself again, to re-experience the heat in Avon's molten center.

Even as glory swarmed through him he made a sound of apology, almost a moan. But the twisted pain, the flinching, the tension he half expected to see never materialized. Instead, Avon's sharp breath was one of pleasure, and his look one of disbelief and revelation.

It was almost too much for Blake, almost enough to send his hips pistoning forward, furrowing into Avon as hard as he had often pumped into the artificial channel of those close-held thighs. The first tug of separation, though, reminded him of how different this was. He was *inside* Avon, gripped glove-tight by clinging muscles, and a hard enough thrust could kill. Not as quickly as a neutron blast, perhaps, but, if untreated, as surely. Avon had accepted him, even knowing that; Avon had admitted him into this most vulnerable and unprotected part of himself. Avon had trusted him...that much.

Again, he let Avon control the speed and vigor of the subsequent penetration, and again Avon arched up to meet him, while impelling him down with arms and legs to hasten it. Even when they were wholly enmeshed, he continued to work himself on Blake's cock, as if seeking deeper union, as if trying to take more of Blake inside him.

There was no deeper union. Blake felt already that he was reaching up to touch some hidden core of Avon's being. Though his only previous

experience had been one of agony, he could imagine, suddenly, how this might be for Avon. How it might be to have that smooth flaring hardness stretching up farther than would have seemed possible, feeling that arrow of invading flesh groping toward his heart. And embracing it eagerly, wishing for it to reach even higher, to fill him utterly. Oh, no wonder, no *wonder*...

Now that he understood better, he could allow his own instincts freer rein. He and Avon controlled the next movements in concert, parting and then surging back together smoothly. Blake found his eyes drifting shut at the luxurious sensation, the breath heaving out of his lungs.

This was...an intimacy almost too great to bear. The urge he had felt for so long, to know Avon completely, to be with him in every way possible, was being fulfilled. Avon was wrapped around his cock—around his *cock*, which just now seemed the essence of himself—absorbing and enfolding him without reserve. Avon's fingers, sweaty and slippery, were tangled with his, writhing in his restraining grasp. His balls rested on the hot dampness of Avon's cloven cheeks, his back muscles rippled against the demanding pressure of Avon's calves. All his consciousness was focused on these places, as if he had existence only where he and Avon conjoined.

He was glad he hadn't known how it would be. If he had, if he'd had any idea, he would never have been able to refuse Kerr. All his principles, all his concerns for Avon's sanctity, would have melted like ice in the summer sun. As Avon was melting around him now, still clinging but growing more and more pliant, making his gliding thrusts even smoother. They had found a rhythm that pleased them both, that transformed this clumsy penetration into an act of grace and ease and delight.

It was their own discovery, and Blake saw a secret, heated smile invade the bliss-drugged face below him. The answering throb he felt caused him to surge, overcome for the moment by the clamoring in his blood—because he had wanted that smile so much, had dreamt of looking up to see it in eyes which knew him, on lips which could speak. Now he could return it, a shared joy at their private rhythm, a smugness at what they two had found.

There was a time, after that, of matchless

content, as they explored together the sweetness and the potency of this act. It should not have been distinct from any other kind of lovemaking, perhaps. Men and women could unite in so many ways; and there was no reason why joining—enfoldment—transfixion—should be qualitatively different from all the others. And yet it was. In the short time since penetrating Avon a whole host of new feelings had blossomed in Blake, so he could scarcely contain them all. Communion, trust, humility, something like reverence...and protectiveness. Protectiveness in such measure as he'd never known before. Gods help the man—or woman—who tried to harm Avon now. The tender fierceness inside Blake demanded that he shield Avon from the rest of the galaxy and champion him against any evil. It wanted to guard and to nurture and to kill anyone who threatened Avon's safety.

All *that* because Avon had welcomed him into his body for a few minutes. He could only guess as to whether Avon was feeling some reciprocal sentiment. He tried to tell himself that his own emotions were uncalled for, that they were inappropriate, some vestige of ancient heterosexual relations, hard-wired into the brain to see that primitive males defended females and their children—and it made not the slightest difference in the worlds. Avon was *his*, now. And anyone caught menacing—or encroaching—was his lawful prey.

Each swell of pleasure only sealed the compact. Their smooth, slow strokes were faltering, becoming irregular as need pressed them more insistently. Spurred on by the craving, he pulled back far and fast, and when Avon clutched and lifted, thrust in fully and much more rapidly than he had yet. It startled them both, the transition from near-complete disengagement to complete impalement, and Blake saw a glimmer of distress once again on Avon's face. But it passed at once, and the appeasement and gratification which followed were unmistakable.

Like that, then. This was how they were going to end it. Hard, but needful, and long anticipated by both of them. He gave Avon another minute to adjust, and then began, yielding to his body's natural longing.

He glimpsed Avon's cock, dark against the pallor of belly and straining above swollen tes-

ticles. The beauty of it hurt him, and he experienced a strange duality, as if it were this organ ensheathing itself and his own flesh receiving it. The abdominal muscles beneath the cock were vibrating with strain, and Blake knew then what Avon must be feeling; the inexorable gathering of pressure that heralded orgasm. He felt it, too, the charge of energy in every fibre of himself. Gasping, he rose up high and sank in deep and then discovered that he wanted only to do it again and again, and that he had almost no control over whether he did or not. It had become a necessity. All he could think was, oh...this. Oh, *this...*

And, thanks be to all the gods, there seemed to be no need for restraint. He had always been careful with Kerr, but Avon was his equal, and met him with equal strength, now. He had found his match.

With that, his mind left him. What happened after was recorded in fragmented impressions, frozen images which would return to illuminate him later. Droplets of his own sweat falling on Avon's face. The harsh sound of his breathing as he fought for control, for a few more seconds of this. Waves of scalding heat coursing through him, and Avon's fingers raised to wipe new wetness from his forehead. Musk drowning both of them, overpowering the cedarwood, and Avon's head arching back suddenly as some ultimate nerve center was broached. Brown hair tossing against disordered silver sheets which glittered and glistened and dazzled the mind, and heavy-lashed eyes tightly closed, not in sleep, but in burgeoning ecstasy.

This was...

Avon's fingers bit into his hand, twisting and dragging on him in a moment of anguished exertion.

...beyond...

And then it happened as he'd imagined it, that first time when Kerr had opened his legs and lifted his knees for him. His eyes clung to Avon's face, thrown back and oblivious in sudden delirium, so he did not see the first tremor and spurt of the dusky cock, but he felt the violent contraction as Avon's muscles snapped shut on him, spasming again and again. But this time the spasms were not of pain; quite the opposite. It was so good that he could do nothing but freeze and quiver, breath sobbing, gazing

stupidly down at the beatific face below. Avon was transformed as always during orgasm, suffused with an inner light and so lost in rapture that Blake felt something outside of his understanding was happening, something Avon alone could comprehend.

Whatever it was, he could not share it. He knew only that Avon arched, and cried his name, and came.

And cried his name.

That was all it took.

It was still resounding in his ears as he withdrew through the contractions and drove in strongly, heedless, for the moment, of what new havoc this might wreak in Avon's transports. He achieved complete penetration and then simply clung on, locking Avon to him feverishly, straining with all his might.

And then the long, slow climax ripped through him, forcing his head back, forcing his seed high into the guarded depths of Avon's body. He knew they both could feel it, him jetting hot into Avon's most secret places, and once again the intimacy, the immediacy of it, was almost too much to bear.

He was filled with such love, as if he were pouring himself out before Avon in offering, worshipping all this beauty and strength and perilous brightness, and wishing, in that instant, only to give himself to it totally. To surrender utterly, to relinquish himself. Loving this man was a danger beyond reckoning, but there had never been any help for it and just now he was filled with a sweetness he thought would kill him.

Stunned, he looked down into eyes which were dazed, blinded by the sword-sharp glory all around them, but seeing nonetheless. He saw himself reflected in those eyes, saw recognition, understanding. Kerr had been lost in such moments of glory, lost in himself, far from Blake and unreachable...but Avon knew him.

And the look on Avon's face—all light and life centered here, in this one instant. Blake felt the same joy swelling inside him, piercing him, flowing through him in a torrent.

Dimly, as if from a great distance, he heard himself cry out, knowing that his body was still taut and trembling, transfixed by perfect pleasure as Avon was transfixed by his flesh. The glory held the two of them equally, penetrating

both, erasing such meaningless concepts as who was surrounded and who was there to surround. Blake had found the heat at last to fuse them into one.

The rapture abated slowly, so that ordinary things, like breathing, became possible.

They'd ended up all of a heap; limbs tangled, muscles collapsing in the aftermath of strain. Blake, curled over Avon like a man crumpled in grief, felt the last shimmering tension, the galvanic current, sigh away. The pleasure still reverberated, and he wanted to kneel there and steep in it, in the echoing throb of blood through sensitive tissue. But Avon's own shudders were subsiding, and Avon's cock lay still among the pearlescent streamers on belly and chest. It was over.

His body protested movement of any kind, and it was difficult to turn and fall to the side, difficult to let go Avon's hand after so long. His own hand shook with the release of tension, pressure-numbed, still printed with Avon's fingers. But it was good to lie still, to feel the myriad delicious settlings in his body, to feel his mind returning, rational thought reasserting itself—
—and then it hit him.

In a silent, searing flash, all that he had been a moment earlier was wiped out. Cold washed over him, as if he'd stepped into vacuum, leaving him gasping for air, stunned. What had just happened here? But that was a stupid question. What had happened was that he'd just fucked Avon.

Gods help him.

The ramifications were more than he could deal with at present. However, at present there was probably only one he really need worry about. And that was getting out of this room alive.

What mad nonsense had he been thinking a few minutes ago? Trembling, he tried to unearth the sentiments to scoff at them. Wild ideas about protecting Avon—*Avon!*—from anything with the poor judgment to menace him. Some notion that being allowed liberties with Avon's anatomy made them eternal lovers. As if his inserting a dangling bit of gut into any of Avon's orifices had spiritual meaning...

Embarrassing even for a peri-orgasmic insight, he decided, hugging the wounded fury close to him, fighting off the shock. And dan-

gerous, dangerous because it left him vulnerable now; it gave Avon the element of surprise in any attack. Except that he wouldn't allow that; he *wouldn't*; he wouldn't be fooled so easily. He knew very well what might happen next.

Because this was not Kerr, not the gentle, generous lover who'd lain so many nights in his arms. This was *Avon*; fickle and unpredictable; dagger-bright, perhaps, but unstable as cryo-explosive nevertheless. As changeable, as cold, as the winds of Instareth. Blake had seen that before, and had promised—had sworn to himself—to remember it. Those chestnut eyes had contemplated without blinking the scene of Instareth's destruction, and afterwards Avon's only regret had been the time and effort wasted there. That supple body had held him down in cold-blooded use, without compunction, just hours ago. Perilous beauty, indeed. This was *not* Kerr, with whom surrender had been a joy, and trust as natural as breathing.

Avon's first movement sent adrenaline flaring down all his nerves, and made him wince as weary muscles tensed. But he was ready. He was ready for anything. As Avon sat up, he braced himself, made sure he was in a position to move quickly if he had to. What all this had been about he had no idea, and the lovely, unreadable face turned silently down to him gave no clue even now. The look of dazzled contentment, of gratification, had vanished, and the eyes under shadowed lashes were dark as a week of moonless nights.

He'd seen them like that before, when he'd realized Avon would go to any lengths to erase the memory of his violation. And how much greater was that violation now? And how much farther would Avon have to go to erase it?

This was not Kerr. He told it to the shaking inside himself, told it again and again because to shut his eyes and lie back now would be more than foolhardy, it might well be fatal. This was not Kerr; it was proud Avon, who had always been out of reach, and of whom Blake had no need...

Lies.

The confusion and tumult in his brain suddenly folded closed and disappeared. The fear and anger he had been clinging to slipped away and vanished.

Because of course it wasn't true.

He felt, emerging from the confusion, as if he'd risen from a deep pool of water, bursting through the surface to take a long breath under the stars. Because, now that he looked, he could not help but see the truth waiting for him. He still didn't understand what had just happened, he couldn't grasp what was taking place tonight. What he *did* know was the answer to the last question Avon had asked him five days ago.

The question that began, "Why?"

And the answer was with him, here, now, in his bed. Why had he ended it? Because he loved Avon; not just Kerr's sweetness, but all the dark things Avon took such care to flaunt before the world and the even darker ones Avon did not flaunt but tried to hide. Because he had always been fascinated by Avon's midnight brightness and knife-edged beauty, and he always would be. If he had not loved Avon, he could not have loved Kerr so much. And he was greedy enough, ambitious enough, to want them both.

There was another truth before him as well. He saw, clearly at last, his own need. And was chastened by it. He'd thought of himself as a hard man, practical, but what had it taken for Kerr to storm his walls? Avon had crooked his finger and Blake's carefully constructed barriers had come crashing down. He'd needed what Avon brought him, not as he'd needed a crew from Vargas, not as something that was his right; but with a quiet, aching desperation, with the heart-deep longing of a child.

He saw that now. And knew he was through fighting.

This was not Kerr bending over him, but Kerr Avon. And whatever Avon wished to do to him would be done. He'd had the one; now it was the other's turn. Even as he thought it, he felt the painful tension bleed out of his sinews, and he gazed up at the unfathomable beauty above him without fear. If the man who looked down were to put a hand to his throat now, Blake did not think he would make a move to oppose him. Avon would kill him...or complete him. At this moment he had no idea which, and it didn't matter. Because if he died here by Avon's hand, it would change nothing. What they were, what they would always be, could not be altered.

He lay back and shut his eyes.

△△ He should have felt cramped and sore,

moving so soon, sitting up so quickly. But at this moment his mind refused to interpret the feelings, the lingering sensations inside him, as unpleasure. No doubt, he'd be sore as hell tomorrow—he felt as if he'd been hollowed out to the gullet—but just now it was only the after-image, the ghost-impression, of Blake's flesh.

He found himself contemplating this idea quite calmly.

It was not, as a matter of fact, anything to get irrational about. He had sought sex beyond the range of his experience—and he had found it. Once, he'd argued that orgasm was orgasm, and it scarcely mattered who—or what—you used to induce it. Well, that barbaric riot of fear and triumph and revelation which had constituted lovemaking with Blake, that glut of tranquillity and feral tenderness, had just proven him wrong. And to deny it would be the mark, not of a cynic, but of a fool.

It wasn't something he'd be persuaded to give up easily.

He'd said Blake's name at the end. Not in recognition, or out of a desire to acknowledge or to share, although he might have had that if he'd been able to think straight. He'd said it as he came, at that precise instant when the glory seared through him and he fell among the stars, for the simple reason that that was the sound orgasm made in him.

He was calm about that, too, considering what it augured for the future.

Not all the doors would open, he thought. He could not be Kerr for Blake. But he could do what Kerr could not.

Granted, it was a terrible thing, love between equals. The most they could ever hope to achieve was a delicate and precarious balance between the thunder of opposing wills. An agreement to stand together and fight each other fairly, rather than wreaking sublimated frustration on an innocent universe, apart. It was not safe; but then nothing worth having was ever safe.

Blake himself still wasn't certain. He could see that; Blake's body language was an open book to him now, and he could read it in Blake's face and sense it in the tenor of Blake's muscles. Or, rather, Blake was certain; Blake was closing his eyes and leaving himself defenseless, now, but he was doing it out of pure intuition, or pure fatalism. Blake didn't understand yet.

Tomorrow, Avon might explain.

Then again, he might not. Anna had always demanded words from him, when he had not had the words to give. Perhaps Blake, who had accepted silence for so long, would not insist on words. Perhaps—he would not need them.

His eye was drawn seemingly at random to a broad blue vein in Blake's throat. He knew the sound of that, the thick sweet murmur as familiar as his own heartbeat under his ear. But he had never seen it, that he could remember, never seen the pulsing of blood beneath skin so fragile that it was nearly transparent.

Against his fingertips it beat strongly, and the more strongly the lighter his touch. He felt the sudden shimmering of tension, although Blake's heart rate did not quicken or falter by one iota, and then he felt that tension wane. Fatalism...or something Avon thought he'd seen in Blake's face not so very long ago. A look he found curiously humbling—curious, because it ought to have produced just the opposite effect. After all, he did love to conquer Blake's strength. And victory had never been more sweet than when he'd tasted it taking Blake's mouth.

But there was another joy to be had, as well. Blake might understand that.

His fingers fanned out against Blake's neck, pale against skin still faintly passion-ruddy, and then they trailed down to rest on the sturdy vault of one shoulder. With his lips he touched the tender throb of pulse, and then he simply held there, just like that, until he felt it leap and tremble, until Blake's heart beat fast and hard for him, a rhythm that infused them both. Until Blake's breath was hitching in sobs and Blake's shaking could only be stilled by his absorbing it. His body on Blake's, steadying, taking his half of the shaking into the whole of himself. Fitting to Blake's every curve and contour as if he had never belonged anywhere else, skin to damp hot skin, every inch.

Slowly, it eased enough that they were a fragile but seaworthy craft in this maelstrom.

He raised his head, lips grazing the cat's-tongue roughness of Blake's jaw, and looked up just in time to see Blake shutting his eyes.

Ah no, you won't, he thought. And put his half-open lips to Blake's.

A taste like wild honey warmed in sunlight. The deep and heady sweetness of hope fulfilled...of hope being fulfilled. Rising in him and becoming sweeter by the second.

Too easy to get drunk on this; not only intoxicated but instantly and incurably addicted, he knew. But there had never been any help for it, and just now, just at this moment, darkness receded and he wanted nothing more than to lose himself here. Within the sweetness memory blossomed, swelling and transforming, becoming...promise. Sensation rippling through him like waves on a still clear pond. The radiance of answering love. Delight insupportable, shattering joy...

Sunlight all around them...

No brightness so bright.

△△△ There was peace here, after all, and the promise of peace to come. So profound that it seemed not an interlude but an absolute. He did not remember the kiss breaking, but now Blake's breath was on his cheek, his own face buried in wet curls.

Blackberry wine...

And summer days that would never end.

Nothing should have disturbed this peace, this harmony. But gradually he became aware of a disturbance. An incipient disquiet which came from within, from the tangled web of his own psyche. A whisper of alertness, of anxiety, which was warning him, telling him it was almost time...

Bewildered, he raised his head toward the far wall, eyes focusing slowly on the chronometer bathed in indigo and rose.

Dawn colors...on Terra, and on Liberator. Night was nearly over and now it was time...it was almost time...

Understanding came so suddenly that he almost laughed. Instead he blinked slowly, letting the clock slip once again out of focus, and turned back to look down on Blake. And smiled.

There was nowhere he had to go.

Blake's eyes were open, meeting his. Neither of them moved or spoke for a long while.

Then, carefully, with utmost deliberation, Avon settled down beside his lover and laid his head on Blake's shoulder.

THE KING WHO WOULD BE MAN

L. A. SCOTIAN

TIREDDNESS HAD TURNED HIS NECK INTO LITTLE MORE THAN KNOTS OF PAIN, SEVERE ENOUGH THAT HE WOULD HAVE GONE TO SEE DR. CRUSHER—WERE IT NOT FOR THE FACT THAT SHE WOULD ALSO NAG HIM TO DO SOMETHING HE QUITE FRANKLY COULD NOT DO. Resting simply wasn't in the cards, not with the *Enterprise* stuck out in the middle of nowhere, suffering from apparently random and demonstrably inexplicable computer failures. How could he rest properly, with his ship in danger from an unknown quantity? And even if the problem were one he could be sure was of no danger to his ship, how could he find respite in the middle of dead space, not so much as an asteroid in sight and the holodeck system completely haywire—dangerously so, as an unfortunate ensign had discovered to her cost.

No, rest and recreation was utterly out of the question. He would simply have a spot of tea and try his own bio-control methods and hopefully avoid yet another lecture from the redoubtable Beverly. He swore that sometimes the woman forgot she was his doctor and not his mother. But he put all that from his mind as the turbolift decanted him scant metres from his door and the promise of a few hours sanctuary. The corridor and the ship were shut out behind him and he doffed his uniform as he walked, balling it up and tossing it into the disposal, boots discarded beside the couch. Absently, he scratched at an itch on the small of his back as he wandered over to the dispenser.

"I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine."

Provocative, distinctive and coming from his bedroom.

"Q!"

"Picard!" was the answer, the alien throwing his arms wide in theatrical delight. "Long time no see. For a human, at any rate. Oh, you poor thing. You look so tired. So wan. So...alone and palely loitering. You should join me."

"What the hell are you doing in my bed, Q?"

"Waiting for you, of course, what else would I be doing in your bed? I wouldn't dream of starting without you, Jean-Luc. It's really no fun on your own, so I've discovered."

Picard stopped at the foot of his bed, snatching up his robe and shrugging it on, tying it with a vicious tug that showed just how much he wished it were a noose he was tightening around Q's neck. "If you're referring to having sex with me, I had best warn you that I'm..."

"Not in the mood? Do you have a headache? I've heard that's what Humans always claim when they're...dysfunctional, shall we say?"

"Yes, I have a headache, yes, I'm not in the mood and no, neither of those reasons is why I'm refusing to have sex with you."

"Then what is it? Am I not pleasing to the eye?"

"Q, I have a ship that is falling apart at the seams, an engineering system that is going berserk and a computer that has turned homicidal. This is not the time for me to banter useless words with you!"

"I couldn't agree more. So why don't you come in to bed with me and we'll use the language of love to communicate instead."

"I have neither the time nor the inclination to waste my energies on your preposterous rubbish. Do whatever you like, just leave me and my ship alone. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a shower to take."

Q's attention never wavered, dark brown eyes never once blinking as Picard turned his back and disappeared off into the shower.

The luxury of real water was working its usual magic, tension easing from him, spine uncurling. Bio-control in full force, imagination in full flight, he was rapidly approaching an acceptable level of sanity for a commanding officer under these more than trying circumstances. Was, that is, until it registered with him that the hands scratching that irritating little itch weren't his own. He didn't even have to turn round to know who it was who had dared—who had been able—to infiltrate his very shower.

"Q! Get out of here. Leave me alone."

"Why, when you could so obviously benefit from my skilled and wondrous hands. Just think, Jean-Luc, hands that have touched the inner souls of stars, touching mortal muscle. Quite an honor."

Picard wrenched the controls, water pattering to a leisurely stop in silent mockery of his fury. “Q, it’s clear you have decided to add toying with human sexuality to your games, no doubt some leftover curiosity from your recent stint as a mere mortal—if indeed you truly were merely mortal and not just tricking us again. But I am not the person, nor is this the time or place to...”

Wherever he was, it wasn’t Kansas. Nor was it the *Enterprise*, nor any time he had ever known. There were hills mantled in purple fading off into misty gray skies, a snake of silver water flowing placidly between banks of graceful trees and bracken. Taupe-colored ducks bobbed and dived, molten flashes of orange disappearing down their gullets for dinner. And the smell...surrounding them, inundating them, aromas and scents that made him a different man, molded not by technology, but by ecology, myriad life and lights weaving a tapestry of exquisite complex simplicity all around him. The air was warm upon him, as he stood naked, up to his calves in succulent grass, and Q was nowhere in sight. Until, that is, the lilac blossoms descended upon him. Reclining, as was his wont, but upon a great tree branch, Q was regarding him with bright-eyed affection.

“Well, you did say that it was neither the time nor the place. So I changed it. A different time,” a flash of light and Q was behind him, close enough that if he remembered to breathe as a human would, Picard would feel it upon his nape, “a different place. So, Jean-Luc...” Q did as he had probably seen others do, in his many unannounced observations of the crew, and wrapped his arms around Picard.

Who wrenched himself away, turning on Q with a vengeance. “My ship is in danger and you want me to waste my time in a dalliance with you?”

“*Your* time, Picard?” Q said, stealing Picard’s own voice to use as a lash, cutting into him. “Your time? *I* created it, so it is *my* time and I shall waste it any way I want to. But coming to know you, that could never be termed a waste. But,” fingersnap, countryside gone in less time that it took to blink, palace of pink marble and golden cushions, blue-skinned servants and heady perfumes instead, “maybe you’ll like this time and place better.”

“Q, take me back to my ship. Now, Q!”

“Tsk, ts, really, Picard, your manners are terrible. Shame on you.” Another click of the fingers, a flash, and they were in an exquisite gazebo, both men clad in Regency costume, summer zephyr whispering through the vase of cream-colored roses bedecking the table. “Tea? Earl Grey, of course, and you must have some of these strawberry tarts. Made with Somerset strawberries and Devon cream.” With a dab and a flutter of his lace handkerchief he kissed his fingertips. “Perfection!”

“As you don’t eat, Q, how could you possibly know whether or not they are ‘perfection?’”

“Oh, don’t be so mean, Jean-Luc. I’m trying to show you a marvelous time and you’re being so...so prissy. Come now, have some tea, have a cake. Lighten up, as Geordi would say.” Picard, stoically silent, leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms across his chest and ignored him. Totally. “So you’re not going to play. You’re just going to sit there, a lumpen mass of disapproval and spoil everything.” He sighed heavily and then a bright idea dawned in his eyes, and they were in an Elizabethan bedroom, reclining—naked, again, Q not being much for subtlety—upon the spread silk coverlet of a heavy wood bed. All around them intricately carved panels of glowing cherry-wood displayed voluptuous images of men and women ‘sporting’ in athletic abandon, body upon body in erotic profusion bedecking every inch. The corner posts stretched upwards, supporting heavy brocade curtains, the darkness and density of the fabric shutting out both the sights and the sounds of the world outside.

Always presuming, of course, that Q had gone to the bother of creating a world outside...

Picard blinked and Q became the very image of an Elizabethan gentleman, skin flawless white from never seeing the unhealthy bite of the sun, beard well-groomed and delicate, hair long and lush. As Picard opened his mouth to deliver a well-deserved flailing, Q leaned over him, trailing his lovelock over the shivering sensitivity of Picard’s abdomen and responsive hardening of his cock, even as Picard’s mind rebelled.

“Aha! See, you do have it in you, Jean-Luc. Or rather,” he leaned lower, hair still caressing skin while his finger suddenly found the entrance to Picard’s body, the very tip of it pressing there with silent promise, “you *will* have.”

Picard slapped him away, storming to knees, trying to fight his way through the hanging strips of brocade fabric...

That turned to brocade bars, layers upon layers of bars, so tightly packed and so thickly layered that he could not see beyond them.

He gave up the struggle with the grace and good sense that was so characteristic of him, turning to his greater strength: words. "Q, you are being absurd if you expect me to respond to you, if you expect me to fritter away my time in a sexual encounter when my ship and my crew are in danger!"

"And you are being a bigger fool, Picard. I," he said, and the bed disappeared, a throne room of sky and marble pilasters and heroic statues dazzling around them in blue and silver and gold, dizzying Picard, "am omnipotent. I manipulate time and space and reality the way you pathetic humans manipulate your breakfasts. We could spend a lifetime together and I could still take you back in time for you to join your fellow rats in their trap."

"So the danger to the ship is serious then?"

"Oh, don't be such a bore, Jean-Luc. You knew it was serious when the holodeck devoured that silly little ensign with her fantasies about dragons. But you've got to admit, being eaten by your own misbegotten fantasy is a really stupid way to die. Dragons don't even *eat*, not in the way you humans mean it, anyway. Stop looking at me like that, Picard. It's just that it's hard for me to feel anything for someone that small and that stupid."

"It's obviously hard for you to feel anything at all, otherwise you would return me to my ship."

The celestial throne room dimmed, flickered, the edges blurring as if Q had forgotten them for a moment. Even the statues wobbled, the soaring heads of them attenuating into a dissolving nothingness, color ebbing and silence slowly falling. It was like being inside the soul as it died...

"You accuse me of feeling nothing?" Q asked in a most peculiar voice, none of his usual banter or contempt or even anger there, only the smallness of a confused child asking why daddy wasn't coming back. "You honestly believe I'm doing this just out of boredom? Out of nothing more than the same callow curiosity Data would show when he discovered that he was fully functional?"

"Send me back to my ship, Q! Satisfy your

infernal curiosity with someone else, someone who's interested. Or create someone, some breathing toy for yourself, for in that way you would at least be assured that you're not ruining someone else's life for them." He walked forward, measured pace, an angel in a fallen Heaven, not even noticing the dreams that shattered into dry powder under his feet, twinkling stars falling through the floor of Q's creation to give some world a meteor shower that would birth a religion. "Let me go!"

The statues fell, tumbling in great lumps that became grey wisps, dissolving into whispers that teased at Picard's hearing. The pillars wept gracefully to the ground, lying there as soldiers after a battle, forgotten, on their bed of infinite space. Picard kept on walking, brown eyes like flint, seeing nothing but Q, taking step after step along the narrow bridge of reality that Q automatically placed before his feet.

"Nothing but curiosity. That's all you see. Endless, selfish curiosity. Forcing you like some reluctant maiden, the poor..."

—and Picard was in a different place, a different time, a different body. He could no longer walk properly, the weight on his chest pulling him forward, the odd cant of his pelvis making him stumble—

"...serving wench. That's all you see this as being, isn't it, Picard?" And the voice was large as a storm now, lighting flashing, chained for the moment, in the depths of Q's eyes. "No feeling. No *feeling*? You corrupted me, Picard. You, who had me on your misbegotten tub of a ship, a mere mortal, full of feelings I didn't even know enough to recognise. I had an excuse, I'd never been cursed with the things before, but you, you'd had a lifetime of them. And what did you do, Jean-Luc? You ignored every cry for help I gave you. I came to you, told you I was going to kill myself, and all you could do was wish me on my way. So much for your pride in human compassion. I do all this for you, bring you here, offer you every dream you could ever have—at no cost to you, Picard, it wouldn't even cost you time. And haven't I always grabbed your chestnuts out of whatever fire you've gotten yourself into? You know perfectly well I'll fix whatever needs fixing when I take you back."

"Get me out of this body, Q."

"Oh, listen to him. I'm pouring my heart out

to him and all he can think about is his paltry little human body.”

“Pour your heart out to me? How can you pour out something that is already empty?”

Even his body disappeared this time. Complete void, where not even the possibility of life existed. He thought not at all, he felt not at all, but somewhere, perhaps some*when*, he was screaming—

—heaviness drowning him, nailing him to the ground, pain, thickness, weight, clumsy, dragging weight... He was in his own body, in a perfectly standard room that could have belonged to any Hilton the Galaxy over.

“Don’t,” a voice whispered in his ear, breath warm on the side of his neck, “make me angry. You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry.”

Discretion being the better part of valor, Picard held his tongue.

“That’s better,” the quicksilver voice said again. “Now, you have a ship that is not very quietly tearing itself into tiny little pieces. Did you know—oh, but you’re just a mortal, you couldn’t possibly know. Then let me show you.”

The bridge—*his* Bridge. Red lights, blue arcs dancing across control panels, a yellow arc leaping from the ship to bleed into the yellow of Worf’s shirt, every spark leaping like synapse to make the body twitch and spasm. Picard stepped closer, running to help and—

—was looking into the pulsing, glowing lump that had been some lieutenant’s face before the food dispenser spewed coolant acid all over her. Picard stretched out his hand and—

—sickbay, blood slickening the floor, from the body that had been burst like an overripe melon when the doors had begun their inexorable closing. Slipping, feet on floor, mind on horror, Picard stumbled forward—

—into his own quarters, flames laughing down the sides of his shower cubicle, a charred and blackened lump clawed into a fused silhouette with the jammed door. He turned and turned again, hearing himself, shouting, shouting—

“You rang, m’lud?” Then hard, unyielding, power implicit in every word. “You see what awaits you, Picard? A virus, planted on your last visit to Central Information 5. They certainly updated your library, didn’t they? Of course, what Star Fleet doesn’t know could fill the voids

between the stars, but the Romulans have this absolutely *wonderful* plan. One that’ll work, too. And like everything you mortals do, it’s quite simple, really. Plant an agent, wait a couple of your puny decades until he’s beyond question, then have him start loading this rude little virus in every Federation ship and Star Base. Wait another couple of years until he’s managed to sleeper it into more than half the Federation’s toys and then, voilà, wake the virus up and sit back and watch while the Federation’s own computers destroy it from within. Elegant, really, in a neanderthal sort of way.”

“All the more reason to get me back to my ship to...”

“To do what, Picard? Didn’t you see yourself? Look, look at this—”

—and it was before the fire had made the charred lump, it was himself, his hair on fire, his eyebrows on fire, the hair on his chest beginning to lick with flames, his skin turning red, blistering, blackening, and all the while himself screaming and screaming and hammering at a door that should not lock and he was dying, felt himself dying, saw himself, dying, dying, dying in the fires of Hell and—

—he was sitting on Grand’mère’s verandah, sipping tea, wearing his favourite royal blue civilian suit, the only remains visible those of baguettes and butter littering the table, crumbs decorating the wrought-iron balustrade for birds to interrupt their singing to feast upon.

“Now do you see, Picard? If I send you back, your decorous body will be so charred there won’t be enough left to make a sandwich. And what I have in mind, Jean-Luc,” a long-fingered hand traced patterns upon Picard’s inner wrist, the pulse quickening under the touch, “is much more entertaining.”

Picard seized a deep breath and held his desperation in check. It was dangerous to cross swords with Q at the best of times, but it was suicidal to show the weakness of incipient despair. “Send me back to my ship before I get trapped in the shower, Q. Send me back with the knowledge to save all those lives.”

“You’re a man of the world, Jean-Luc. You know that nothing’s free.”

“And I’m only too aware of what the price is going to be this time.”

“Don’t look so distressed, Jean-Luc. It’s not

as if this was a fate worse than death and you're hardly a virgin. Not by several battalions."

"What the hell are you talking about? I've never been promiscuous. Although I'm sure you'd prefer it if I had. Just think of all the endless experience I could bring to this tawdry encounter if I had."

And they were lying on a bed, white curtains billowing at open window, the scent of spring upon the air. Everything was whiteness and brightness, bridal white, apart from the splashes of life their skin and hair painted upon the virginal canvas. "So you've decided that saving the Federation is worth satisfying my infernal curiosity. Well," Q said, draping himself across the bed in a cloud of white lawn cotton, "you'd better get on with it. And if you're very, very good, Jean-Luc, I'll take you back before the Romulans can plant the first virus on the first ship."

Picard looked at him with something that was first cousin to disgust.

"You'll have to do better than that, Jean-Luc. At least try not to look like you're going to your own impalement. *That* honor shall be mine, I think. Yes, that's how it shall be. I'll know what it is to have one of these fragile shells of yours pierced by another man. It's very proprietarial with you humans, isn't it, the old animal instinct winning every time."

"Do you want to insult my species or do you want to get on with it?"

Q stared at him for an eon, Picard not breathing, not knowing that Q had taken this time. "Get on with it? Not the way you want, Jean-Luc, not like that." He traced, with perfect delicacy, the line of Picard's lips, slightly parted still from speech, his fingertip barely touching the pearl of teeth. "But it's all you're going to offer, isn't it, you callow fool. I could give you the Universe on a silver platter and you're as bad as Riker. Turning me down, turning your backs on the glory of creation to wallow in the stinking mud of mortality. And by shunning my powers, you make me stand by helpless, watching you die. Every single one of your ugly days robs you of life. Life. I could give you life if you weren't so...provincial. I could always take control of you, implant you with the feelings I want you to have, but I don't even understand how they work in *me* yet. So...the oldest profession to guard one of the newest, trading your body for the soul

of a starship. Come, Jean-Luc, breathe again, for me..."

—and he closed his mouth, blinked and heard Q—

"Kiss me..."

With the look of a man girding his loins—although rather the opposite was true in this case—he closed the distance between them, skin sliding on fabric that looked like finest linen but felt like satin, his lips closing on lips that were even silkier than the ethereal cloth.

He did all the things one should do, technique perfect, mind elsewhere, will-power clamping down upon errant arousal. Even if Q were to take him back before it all happened, it didn't alter for one second that his people were dying while he did this, while he pandered to the desires of an alien who would be God. The morality of it sickened him in geometric alliance with his own incipient attraction to this being.

There was a liquid shimmer in his arms, a sense of malleability and—

—Q was gone, Beverly Crusher in his place. "Is this more to your taste, Picard? Think you could force a little enthusiasm into your performance if I'm in this body instead of the one I usually use?"

Picard drew back, body surging in memorised response to the lush femininity draped all over him, perfume heady as it had always been. "Q, it's bad enough that I have to use *my* body for this bargain, but I refuse to use the bodies of my crew to..."—

—and it was Lydia, she of the wonderful shore leave when first he was given command and was overbrimming with his own self-worth and hormones—

"Oh, don't pretend such moral outrage with me, Picard. You play poker with your crew's bodies every time you give an order. What were you doing when you faced the Ferengi or that dreadfully ugly slimy thing that wanted to eat the delectable Troi's shuttle?"

Gambling with crew lives and—"

—the seductive smile and wayward hair was every inch Tasha Yar. "I was the one who lost that time, Captain." Perfectly manicured hands snaked down his torso, drawing pretty pictures from one nipple to the other, while Q/Yar continued, inexorable in the brutality he called honesty. "Not that I really minded, I knew the risks

when I signed on. And it was still a lot better than anything my home world had in store for me. But sir, it's not really any different. You gambled with my life then, and to be honest, I would've liked it better if you'd just used my body. At least I'd still be alive."

"Stop it, Q," he said, voice dangerously low. "Stop it."

—and Q was back, face grim and shuttered, all the buoyancy gone from it. "Or what, Jean-Luc? You'll stamp your feet? You'll scream and yell? You'll..." he made his face a caricature of shock, "develop a headache and tell me 'not tonight, darling'? I'm quaking in my boots. Well, I would be, if I had any on. Face reality, Picard. Here, *I* am the one holding all the cards. I want you. You want to save the Federation from its own complacency and carelessness. I can give you what you want, if you give me what I want. A simple bargain and..."—

—he was being pressed down into the feather quilt by Riker's bulk and weight, the beard scratching a little as he was kissed, limber tongue plundering him with all the hunger in the Universe. "If you don't want me, if you can't fake a little enthusiasm for me as Q, then I'll give you whatever it takes. Is Riker what you want, Picard? Do you fantasize about being dominated..."

—face down, darkness, only the faint red glow of a glimmerglobe giving him sight, leather banding his wrists and ankles, tying him to a Klingon marriage bed, a cat o' nine tails tossed casually on top of a pile of dildos, his attention glued to the threat/promise, hard, heavy hands pressing down on his buttocks, spreading them, exposing him to wet tongue and the roughness of beard that reddened his cheeks. "...by your first in command? Your immediate subordinate? Is that what you need to get you going, Picard? The sting..."

Leather whistling through the air, snapping into him, feather kiss of pain, the pleasure from it running up his spine. "...of pain, the sweetness of yielding command to someone bigger than you, someone you usually order around? Because if that's what you want..."—

—bound to a bed of midnight black, a panoply of stars for his bedspread, Q crouching over him, face millimetres away, hunger in his brown eyes— "...if that's what arouses you, then I'm

bigger than Riker, and not just in height. I can command Galaxies to obey my every whim, but I'd let you command me. If it's what you want. Think about it, Jean-Luc, in the bedroom, you could have me playing Master, satisfying every single desire, but where everyone else can see us I would be a posturing catamite. Just think, Picard, of how they would marvel at your machismo, that you can have someone as powerful as me—me!—under your thumb. Both Master and Servant, the best of both worlds, *mon Capitain*. And I can give it to you. All of it."

Picard thrust the temptation behind him and faced his incubus, forcing himself to focus on the needs of his ship and not his body. "I'm tired of your puerile games, Q. And although I haven't forgotten, you obviously need to be reminded that there are people suffering and dying while you play with me like a spoiled brat. Why don't you just do whatever it is you need to do, satisfy your curiosity and get me back to my ship!"—

—and he was standing, black fur cloak skimming the granite flagstones of the dank dungeon, black whip with silver stars for tips in his hand, Q, hanging naked and vulnerable from manacles set high on the grim, gray wall, speaking, voice a whispering caress down Picard's spine. "Or if your own submission to me won't give rise to a bit of enthusiasm from you, would *my* submission do? Is that more to your taste? Instead of a break from command, do you crave the intoxication of even more power? Go on, Picard, swing that whip. Feel it bite into my flesh, feel the power of it. Watch it draw my blood to feed you."

The whip clattered to the floor. The wall melted a little until Q could stand comfortably, melted a little more as he simply dissolved through his manacles and turned to face Picard, his own erection in marked contrast to the almost flaccid state of Picard.

Absolute confusion fluttered across Q's face, complete bafflement. "What do you *want*, Jean-Luc?" he asked, shaken, hands open in supplication. "What do you want from me?"

"All I want from you is to be returned to my ship with all the information I need to prevent that whole tragedy from even occurring."

"I can't persuade you with..."—

—and Picard found himself in his own bed,

with Data's cool mouth wrapped around his penis, perfect pressure sucking him. He raised his hands to rabbit-punch Q/Data, then recognized his own position for the extreme vulnerability it was. He settled for grabbing Q/Data by the ears and hauling him off. "Q, I warn you..."

—and it was a wild kaleidoscope: face after face, body after body, members of his crew, sportsmen, sportswomen, celebrities and complete strangers, a cacophony of flesh surrounding him, inundating him with would-be erotica, all repulsing him with their sheer inhumanity. He hurled Miss Universe away from him, her blue skin darkening immediately to magenta where she hit the wall. "Enough of this, Q! If prostitute myself I must, then so be it, but don't you dare try and force me to like it, especially, especially not with the bodies of people who have nothing to do with this unholy bargain of yours."

"You mock me, Picard," the blue beauty queen snarled as her features changed and twisted, color fading, hair contracting, body expanding until it was Q in his more familiar guise once again. "Bargain? I was keeping my side of the bargain, but you! I could have had more enthusiasm from a wooden fish. You don't want me to use anyone else's body, anyone who isn't involved, that is. Don't forget, mon Capitain, you're doing this for your ship, for Star Fleet, for the entire Federation. Billions and billions of people, every one you're going to save directly and every one you're going to save by avoiding the war the Romulans are slaving for. That's what you're forcing yourself to endure my attentions for, my poor little Victorian maiden. And that means that every single one of those bodies *is* involved and I'll use whichever one of them it takes to get some enthusiasm out of you." A cruel smile came over him, the kind of smile he usually reserved for the likes of Guinan, his voice taking on the cadence of a malevolent Puck, all sing-song and spite. "But methinks the lady doth protest to much. Maybe—" and Q was suddenly behind him, making Picard whirl around to keep him in sight— "I hit the proverbial nail on the proverbial head—no pun intended. Maybe—" and Q was hovering over him, Lucifer seconds before he was cast out— "I hit on your secret. Maybe—" the voice came from right behind Picard's shoulder, so close he should have felt Q's body brushing his— "you don't respond to

me not for something so terribly honorable as your high morals and ethics, but maybe—" and Q was standing directly in front of him, staring him in the eye, the very intensity of the gaze forcing Picard to stare back. "Just maybe, it's because you're suffering from a love that dare not speak its name. Is that it, Picard? Got the hots for someone, someone you can't have? By George, I think I've got it. But not someone I've already tempted you with. No, I would've known that, I think. So someone else..." He stalked Picard, coming closer, closer, rampant nudity carried before him like a spear. "Who could it possibly be? What could be so terrible that you couldn't act on it, even in the pseudo-liberality of your infantile culture? Perhaps..."

—and he was on the Bridge, a perfectly normal day, every crewmember at the proper post, working steadily, not one of them paying the slightest bit of attention to the fact that...

Wesley was bent over his command chair, rump in air, uniform down around his knees, begging hoarsely to be taken, used, made into a man... Horrified, Picard looked down at the younger man's flesh, waiting for him, glistening with preparation, Wesley's voice frantic with need. Stared down at himself and saw the greater horror, his cock rising from its bed of curls to tap insistently against his belly. Riker glanced over at him, his attention barely distracted from his report, the light glinting from his Klingon-style warrior sash.

"Shouldn't you take care of him, sir? Either by fucking him or training him to be quieter about it? He's very bad for crew discipline, sir, bothering people, getting them all worked up and no way to do anything about it."

Picard gaped at him, knowing this was just a Q-induced nightmare, but unable to shake himself free. Unable to will his body to stop wanting to feast upon Wesley's willing flesh. No, not Wesley. Q. Remember that: it was Q lying there...

And that added the fillip of innocence to the banquet of lush flesh. Riker—Q's version of Riker—was speaking again, words washing over Picard and he had to put his hand out to catch the words to hear them...

"If you'd prefer, sir, I could fuck him for you, while you watch. Or you could have Worf do it. That," he laughed, just like the real Riker, "would be worth seeing, wouldn't it?"

Picard looked back at Q/Wesley, his hunger growing by leaps and bounds. The best of both worlds, Q had said. This was more like the best of all worlds, a way to have his cake and eat it too. An erotic fantasy, Picard in Wonderland, where he could have anyone he wanted to, in any way. The only limit would be his own imagination. He could have Wesley, time after time, virgin every time. Or Worf. Or Beverly again, without the complications. Or know what it was to mate with an empath. Or to possess any beautiful woman he had ever so much as glimpsed. And the darker desires, the kinds that cannot be explored once and then tucked tidily back into their suitcase if they aren't what your partner wanted after all.

And all of it was his for the taking. Not only free, but with more than adequate recompense—

—and they were standing in a place where there was no place, only time. Time that simply was, with things and people and realities passing, measured on clocks far beyond his comprehension, disorienting him almost beyond thought. Q was before him, stars in his eyes like tears, misery bleeding from him, the bone-deep ache of a pulsar, if pulsars were all the pain of the Universe.

“What do you want, Jean-Luc?” Q pleaded, fading around the edges, colored only by sadness. “What else can I give you? I've offered you all of time and space, I've offered you everyone in the Universe, and you won't take me. What do you *want*? I have nothing else I can give you, Jean-Luc. Nothing. There is nothing more, no more of *me* left to give.”

“No *more* of you?” He shut off the temptation, wrestling it under until it fell to the power of his command, his duty—his honor. But still, he was not such a lying fool that he didn't recognize where the strength to resist had perhaps come from, knowing full well that the result might have been very different if Q had offered him anything more than power and the corruption that goes with it. There was bitterness, a small kernel waiting to grow, in his voice as he thundered his reply at Q. “All those bodies you offered me—tell me, which of them was you? And you claim to have given of yourself? You didn't even *show* me your self. All you offered was sex with no depth and no more pleasure than a...a solitary jerking off has to offer. And

all of it at a price you should have given freely. You didn't want me, Q, you wanted your curiosity satisfied. I've tried to fulfill my side of the bargain, but you were so busy trying to get something we never even discussed...” He managed to find a crumb of pity amongst his own anger and shaken feelings to answer the blind, shivering confusion that haloed Q. “You asked me to have sex with you to save my ship and everyone else. But what you tried to get from me was making love. And when I wouldn't give it, you started your circus performance. It doesn't work that way, Q. I can't give you love when I don't feel it for you, even if that's what you've seen and want to play with.”

Q sat cross-legged on a distant moon, close enough for Picard to be able to see him, but far enough away for his eyes to be shadowed. “So that's your considered opinion. Worf's brain damage is obviously contagious. Something I've seen and covet, like a human child with a toy. That's all it is.”

Abruptly, he was directly in front of Picard again, only the vaguest outlines of human form holding him cohesive. “Think what you want, Picard, but think about this. I was made human, contaminated forever. Think how difficult it is for a non-corporeal being to realize that what he is feeling is physical arousal. And think how agonizing it is to realize that this sick feeling, this feeling of death and decay is actually loneliness, manifest loneliness caused by something he is not supposed to be able to feel. Think, Picard...”—

—and they were whirling through the atoms of time, running backwards in place to undo what had been done and make it so that it had never been—

“...what it is for an immortal to discover...”

—and he was standing, naked, on his own bridge, the crew staring at him, Q's voice reverberating through the very structure of his ship—
“...Love.”

And there was no way that he could even explain it all to himself. His ship, never touched by the virus that no longer existed, sailed on, majestic, through Q's back yard, never once pausing to look over her shoulder for him. As Picard quietly buried it all in a dim, dark musty cellar in his mind, where he hoped he'd never find it again.

LOVERS AND MADMEN: RAVELMENT

GAEL X. ILE

HE'D BEEN WONDERING ABOUT THEM, WONDERING WHAT THE HELL THEY WERE UP TO, A HORRIBLE SUSPICION GNAWING AT HIS GUT.

Mutiny. Rebellion. Abandonment. Call it what you will, it all added up to Avon undermining Blake's leadership, the incessant arguments wormholing the support the others had once given him. Even Jenna's support was less than guaranteed and Cally had needed persuasion for every decision, unless it had been a direct attack under discussion. And as for Vila... Well, it was becoming blatantly obvious that if Avon decided to jump ship—or take it over, which sounded far more likely, knowing Avon—then Vila would be right there at his elbow. Complaining, no doubt, but still with Avon and not Blake. So, sitting there having his midnight snack, sitting there alone in the wonderfully quiet calm of his ship, it occurred to Blake that this was the perfect time to...run a reconnaissance. Not to actually spy on them—he wouldn't call it that—but just a surreptitious visit to find out what was going on behind his back; that would probably do it. At least then he'd know the worst.

Oh so quietly, he crept up towards the flight deck, knowing that Vila would be up there keeping Avon company as usual, even though it wasn't his watch. The two had gradually, over the time they'd all been on the ship together, become closer, one larcenous nature gravitating towards another. Thick as thieves had certainly taken on an entirely new meaning since whatever the hell it was they had got up to on Freedom City. Careful to be as silent as space, Blake reached the adit to the flight deck, keeping to the shadows where he could see without being seen.

But he heard them before he saw them.

Sounds he recognised, sounds he remembered, sounds he had heard coming from his own throat last night fantasizing about Jenna. The bastards weren't plotting insurrection—they were having sex. On the flight deck. In public. And Blake realised he was getting hard just listening to them. He sneaked forward to get a good

look at them.

They were standing right in front of Zen, seemingly oblivious to the fact that an intelligence—albeit artificial—was watching them. Definitely oblivious to the fact that an intelligence—positively human—was also watching them. With bated breath, lest they hear him and stop what they were doing.

Blake had never seen two people kiss with such quiet intensity before, had never seen such depth of feeling displayed by so simple a gesture. It drove it home to him just how emotionally deprived he was and had been, that it took a cold-fish like Avon to show him this much affection.

But then, didn't a cold façade often hide the hottest of natures? Just as Avon's cynicism hid a man willing to risk his life in the attempt to defuse a bomb to save the lives of a planetful of strangers? The way he was cradling Vila's head whilst his mouth caressed Vila's made Blake weak at the knees. It had never occurred to him that it could be this. Never occurred to him that the sniping slagging-off could be smokescreen for this kind of unity.

For this kind of love.

That was what this was, surely, whether the stubborn Kerr Avon would ever admit it or not. Blake had felt love often enough to recognise it when he saw it and what he was looking at now was a veritable work of art. The two of them were pressed together, so closely that Blake couldn't even distinguish where Avon's black leather left off and Vila's beige fabric began. They looked fused together, perfectly matched as they clung to one another, neither one leaning, both supporting. Then they eased apart, far enough for Blake to see Vila's erection tenting the soft cloth of his trousers before Avon's hand came down to fondle and cradle him there.

"If we don't pack it in now, Avon, I won't be able to and you know what's guaranteed to happen then, don't you?"

Avon seemed more interested in what was presently happening under his right hand than

in any threat of a nebulous future.

"I'm serious, Avon. If we don't stop now, we'll end up on that bloody settee again and you know what that means."

"I'll end up with my back out again?" Avon questioned absently, licking a droplet of sweat from Vila's temple.

"Apart from that. Blake'll walk in on us."

"Don't be stupid. Fearless Leader is safely tucked up in bed like the good little boy he is."

"We should be so lucky. He's been having a bit of bother with his insomnia again, you know. And that means he'll be down in the galley having a bite to eat before he goes back to bed."

Now that got Avon's interest. "Are you positive?"

"As positive as you'll try to do me out of my share of the money."

"That serious, then. Well, I suppose that means we shall have to postpone this until Cally comes to relieve me."

"Which is when we get to go down to your cabin and you get to relieve *me*, right?"

"To begin with, anyway." Avon pulled Vila in close against himself, kissing him hard, both hands clasping Vila's buttocks, pressing their bodies closer and closer, until Blake couldn't see how they could possibly still be able to breathe. Judging by the deep, shuddering breaths they both took when the kiss was over, neither had Avon or Vila. The reluctance to part was palpable, their bodies almost adhering as they each stepped back.

"Suppose we should just sit down on the settee, then," Vila said, as if suggesting having his toe-nails pulled out by red-hot pliers.

"In separate rooms would probably be safer," Avon's voice was as wry as his expression.

"Can't help it if you're the fanciablest man I've ever met, can I? Anyway, I'm a Delta and you know we're not supposed to have any will power. I'll leave all that up to you Alpha types."

Blake had to cross the doorway to keep them in sight as they went over to the settee and was so engrossed in not being seen, he lost track of what was being said. When he was safe to look at them again, Avon and Vila were sitting a decorous distance apart, Avon with a look of smouldering sexuality on his face, Vila with a pout of such 'come hither and make me a very happy man' proportions, it would try the patience of a saint. And no-one had ever accused Kerr Avon

of sainthood.

Blake's hand disappeared into his trousers the same instant that Avon's tongue disappeared into Vila's mouth and Vila's hands delved into black leather.

Blake was sure that this time they weren't going to stop and had to stifle his breathing to quiet it when Vila leaned downward, head disappearing down where Blake couldn't see him. It was obvious what he was going to do.

And then Avon, the bastard, stopped him. "Not on the flight deck," he muttered, straining Blake's hearing the same way Blake's cock was straining his trousers.

"Never bothered you before," Vila muttered back, bending down again.

Avon pulled him back up, to the extreme frustration of them all. "But then, I've never had the threat of having Blake walk in on us before, have I?"

"Bother you, would it?"

"Only in that it would be so damned awkward. As for Blake seeing us..." he paused for thought, then grinned suddenly, snatching a kiss from Vila, "with the fantasies you and I have discussed—don't be so bloody stupid, Vila. Even if all he did was watch, I certainly wouldn't complain."

"Would you really like him to join us, Avon?"

Another pause, then the truth coming out amidst the habitual banter. "Honestly? Well, everyone's entitled to one really severe bout of bad taste, so yes, I must confess I would." A second, then Avon asked the question that Blake hadn't dared wish to hear answered. "And you? Do you 'fancy' Blake enough for him to join us occasionally?"

"Blake? With us?" Stalling then, and obviously, a twist of grey dulling his voice, drawing Avon's and Blake's eyes to him, two men joined in the sudden rain of melancholy.

Avon obliged Blake by asking his questions for him. "What's the matter now, idiot?" And it was a wonderment, how Avon could turn an insult into endearment.

"Nothing's the matter. What could be the matter anyway then? You're fed up with me and need a bit of spice, I can understand that. Can see how a man'd need a bit of variety. Could do with an added extra meself."

"A brain, in your case." Avon leaned forward and Blake took a step forward, the need to see

outweighing the risk of discovery. Fingers curved elegantly, Avon was stroking the back of his hand down Vila's cheek, his own face so very close to the thief's, their shadows mingling until Blake couldn't discern their features any longer, nothing to give them away but the indulgence of Avon's voice. "A bit of spice, as you put it, is all it would be. Come on, Vila, can you honestly see me falling head over heels in love with Blake?"

The silence was deafening.

Avon pulled back, pulling away, shutting Vila and the world out. "You're being utterly absurd. Me—and Blake? That's preposterous, Vila."

"Is it?" Blake would never have had the gall to actually ask that, not of Avon. "Why else d'you stay with him, if it's not for that?"

Avon looked at him with genuine astonishment. "Every bounty hunter in the Galaxy is after me for the money the Federation will pay them. Half the crimos in the Galaxy are after me for that same money. The Terra Nostra are after me because of the whole Shadow incident. All the Federation forces are under orders to kill me first, ask questions later. Travis is after my head on a platter and I dread to think just precisely what Servalan has in mind for me. And you ask me why I stay with Blake? I'm caught between a rock and a very hard place, Vila and this ship is my only chance to survive. Now, what was that crap you were spouting about my heart beating only for our illustrious leader?"

Vila just looked at him, shocking Blake, but Avon was patently more accustomed to a brave Vila than anyone else was. Avon looked away. Vila and Blake didn't.

"Oh, all right, I confess to having a soft spot for Blake. Right on top of my head, probably. Or in my bleeding heart."

"So it's just pity, then, is it?" Blake decided to remember how to get Avon to answer questions that Avon would really far rather leave ignored.

"Yes. Absolutely. Nothing more..." Vila was looking at him again. Avon crossed his arms. Vila kept on staring. Avon crossed his legs, the very image of a man under siege.

"Oh, all right, so I've always liked my men burly. Does that answer your bloody question to your satisfaction, Lord Restal?"

"No, but it's the best I'm going to get from you, isn't it? Won't admit it, will you?"

"That implies that there's something to admit, which there isn't."

"Isn't there?"

"No." Even Vila knew better than to try and fight Avon in this mood, that rigid 'no' warning him well away.

"All right. So you fancy Blake a bit, cos of his build and you stay with him cos he's got this great big ship that everyone and his granny knows he's on. Oh, yeh, I believe you, Avon. Implicitly."

They fell into silence then, sitting apart, neither one of them looking at each other, all the warmth and intimacy turned to ashes. And all because of Blake, who was feeling guilt stomping its hobnailed boots into him.

"You didn't answer my question, Vila. How would you feel about inviting Blake to join us occasionally?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Of course you have a choice—who do you think I am? Our fearless leader?"

"Then..."

Blake didn't know what he wanted the response to be. He was tied in knots thinking about himself with two men, with Avon and Vila. But if it meant being the bone of contention—so to speak—that split Avon and Vila up... That price was a higher one than he was willing to pay. Especially if Avon's emotions were as deeply involved as Vila seemed to think.

"I don't really have any choice at all, you know," Vila was saying. "You don't really either, for that matter."

Outrage enlivened Avon's face. "Vila, I pick and choose whom I sleep with and..."

"And Blake needs us. You know it, I know it and I think Blake knows it as well."

"What the hell are you talking about now?"

"I'm talking about the way Blake's been going over the edge, ever since those Aurons or the Federation or whoever it was took his mind over. He's not been himself, has he? It's obvious, isn't it? It's what Orac said, not that I'd usually trust that bucket of bolts as far as I could spit it, but they really buggered his mind up, didn't they? Got him to where he can't trust people, scared to let himself feel anything. Running away from all of us, he is, and look at where he's running to. All this rubbish about Star One. Doesn't make any sense to destroy it, does it? And it's not like

our Blake to not give a flying fuck about killing billions and billions of people, is it?”

Avon was sitting very still now, engrossed in what Vila had to say, wrapped up in it completely. So completely, he didn't hear when Blake took a stumbling step forward, the words ringing in his head again...

Renounce. Deny. Destroy. That which claims to nurture will only betray. Those who offer trust will stab you in the back as soon as you trust them enough to guard you... We can tell you how to make the pain go away. No more pain, no more pain... Destroy...

But Avon's voice was reeling him back in, dragging him out of his nightmare...

“...we help? I can just picture his reaction if I suddenly became as solicitous as his maiden aunt.” Avon grimaced at Vila's grin. “I can just picture *my* reaction if I suddenly started being as sweet as his maiden aunt.”

“That's what I'm getting at, Avon. We don't really have much choice about it, do we? Only language we've got that he'd let us close with is sex. It's the only thing a man like him could accept from the likes of us. I mean, let's face it, Avon, you'll never be a Cally.”

“Why can't we pack him off to Cally?”

“Because he likes her, but he only lets her in as far as he would any other fellow rebel.”

“He's screwing Jenna, why can't that be enough?”

“You've seen the way he treats her, you tell me. And anyway, if I remember correctly, you were very keen on the idea of fucking Blake. Until it turned into something that would be good for him.”

“I had been rather more interested in whether or not it would be good for me, actually. I don't know that I really like this ‘sex as therapy’ proposal of yours. Just because Orac's overhaul of what we laughingly refer to as Blake's brain, I don't see...” A sharp look at Vila, then a sharper question. “And if I were keen at first, you were decidedly reluctant. Why the sudden change of heart? And don't plead altruism, I know you far too well to believe *that*.”

Vila fiddled with the game pieces littering the table, nimble fingers fascinating Avon and Blake equally, almost as obsessively as this conversation was ensnaring Blake.

“Thought it was pathetically obvious myself.

You want Blake and you always get what you want. Doesn't matter what I do, you'll go off with him. So all I can do is come with you and keep my fingers crossed you won't dump me cos you end up preferring him.”

Silken voice, steely warning. “I don't like being manipulated into protestations of affection, Vila. Nor promises that could be impossible to keep.”

“And I fucking know better than to try that crap with you as you bloodywell know. Or bloodywell *should* know. I'm not as stupid as all that, Avon. Know what I've got with you, know where I stand. Not going to push for more.” A fleeting, wry smile, to leaven the leaden atmosphere. “Not unless I wanted you to run a mile, at any rate.”

A long pause, whilst Avon thought and Blake...remembered. Remembered the chill of the operating table under him, remembered as butchers—or doctors, as the Federation so euphemistically called them—cut his brain up and planted things and uprooted other things. And the warnings that came after, voices so persuasive, so convincing, so unlike the uncertainties he was hearing from Avon and Vila. So convincing, the voices telling him to destroy, to remove the threat before it became a threat...

Convincing. As convincing as the voices at his trial, the voices of boys telling tales of abuse and sodomy, of bribery and buggery. As convincing as the voices over the speaker system, telling tales of happy citizenry.

So. *That* was the secret then. Trust not that which is ostentatiously trustworthy, for that is the gauze they use to hide the truth.

“Vila...” Blake was listening just as hard as Vila, devouring Avon's voice and the uncertainty it held. “I doubt if I'll be able to help it, but...I've really no intention of hurting you. Not seriously.”

And the tones of pain were there again, pictures of Vila and Avon kissing and touching bandaging over the seeping wounds, the pain surging up and up, only to be pushed back by that neverending image of Vila being cradled by Avon, kissed by him, the giving of pleasure turning into surcease for Blake, easing the agony, beating the voices from a placid calm to a scream for survival to a whisper of silence...

“Always known that, Avon. But it's just what you said. You can't help it.”

Avon stared at him for a moment, the balance sheet of emotions being examined in his brown eyes. Additions and subtractions, pros and cons, sums done. “This time I can. I’ll find some other burly fellow to dawdle with.”

Vila’s face lit up delightedly even as he slithered along the settee to sit close to Avon, one hand disappearing down to where Blake couldn’t see it, could only see the effects on Avon’s face.

“Can’t.”

“What d’you mean, can’t?”

“Blake still needs us.”

“But you don’t want to...”

“Did I say that?” Outrage mingling with laughter, so close to Avon now he was almost in his lap. “All I said was that I was shitting myself that once you had Blake, you wouldn’t want me any more. But you want me enough to not have Blake so that means I can take a chance with you having Blake and even if I didn’t want to, it doesn’t stop Blake from needing us. And it has to be both of us, you know.”

“Oh, is this another pearl of wisdom from Orac?”

“Nah. From me. Want to see it, Avon, want to see you with Blake. Be so fucking sexy, that would.”

“And would just incidentally keep you where you could watch me in case I should become too enamoured of our beloved leader.”

“What a brilliant idea, Avon! You Alphas, fucking geniuses the lot of you.”

“Why do I feel thoroughly manoeuvred, Vila?”

Because you *have* been, Blake thought. Vila saw which way the wind was blowing and has quietly just taken care of his immediate Galaxy. Perhaps I should persuade him to take up the Cause a little more seriously...

“Speaking of manoeuvring, Avon, how are we going to get Blake into bed with us?”

“How the hell did we manage to come to the conclusion that that’s what Blake needed, Vila?”

“Orac says that he couldn’t undo all the conditioning and that Blake needs to have it proved to him that what the psychomanipulators said was all a pack of lies and that he really can trust people and we don’t have a whole hell of a lot of time before Blake starts going completely bananas so that means we have to really get a move on otherwise he’s going to go round the twist and get us all killed.”

Avon digested this for a moment whilst Blake was busy admiring Vila’s convoluted way of obfuscating the issue. “Where,” Avon finally said with patience loaded and ready to explode, “does having sex with Blake come in to all that?”

“Easy! We don’t have much time, Blake’s always been as randy as a horned toad so the quickest way to get to him is through his libido. So if we fuck him, that’ll show him that people aren’t all that bad. Simple, isn’t it?”

Avon stared at him for several moments, face completely devoid of expression. “I suppose it’s as good an excuse as any. Now, as you’ve come up with this great and glorious excuse of yours, tell me just how you propose to get Blake to agree to your master plan?”

“Oh, that’s dead easy as well.”

“Ah. That usually means that you reap all the benefits and I do all the work. Are you quite sure you and Blake aren’t related to one another?”

“Don’t be disgusting, Avon, that’d be incest!”

“I’m still waiting to hear how you propose to get Blake into bed with us.”

“Simple, really, to a man of my genius. You seduce him.”

“I see. So, you and Orac believe that Blake needs us to fuck him back to sanity and that I’m the one to seduce him. I preferred my version, Vila.”

“So do it for that then, if you want to. You must admit, he is quite fanciable, all those curls and that smooth chest of his. And he’s just the way you like them—big, and in all the right places, too.”

Unfortunately, Blake never did get to hear Avon’s opinion of that—Avon chose that moment to turn around and see him standing there.

“Yes, you’re right, I have been eavesdropping. And from the very start.”

Avon sprang to his feet, irate. “You dared eavesdrop, on a private conversation...”

“You dared sit there and talk about how ‘big’ I am?”

Avon sat back down again, ceding gracefully. “Touché. Well, now...”

And Blake had the uncommon pleasure of seeing Avon lost for words. Vila, however, was suffering from no such handicap. “So what d’you think of our idea then?”

“Our idea?”

“My idea then. Fancy fixing things our way, or would you rather Orac fiddle with you a bit?”

Blake shuddered, not entirely for theatrical effect. “Perish the thought! No, I rather like the idea of being seduced by Avon.”

“You would, wouldn’t you.”

“I don’t see why you’re objecting now, Avon. You seemed quite keen on the idea at the beginning.”

“I’ve decided to change my mind.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” Vila piped up, grabbing Avon by the hand and dragging him to his feet and off towards the steps and Blake. “Blake can seduce you instead. Can’t you, Blake?”

Instead of answering him, Blake quirked a smile and an eyebrow at the thundercloud named Avon. “Quite the novel experience, isn’t it. Being outmanœuvred by an intellectual flea.”

The right word at the right time can avert even the greatest of disasters and Avon’s sense of humour being what it was... Avon yielded with good grace, following behind Vila, allowing Vila to lead, for once.

“I don’t suppose,” he said eventually as they descended upon his cabin, “that it really matters why the hell we’re doing this, does it?”

“Not a bit, I’m afraid,” Blake answered, Vila being too busy with fussing over bed and covers and lotions and towels and getting his clothes off as quickly as possible. “It’s not for any of Vila’s half-baked notions of saving me from myself, I can assure you of that.” Vila’s attention snapped onto him for that. “My breakdown wasn’t the grand production Orac seemed to think it was. That bloody machine always underestimates the human mind. You should know that by now.”

“Now how could it do a thing like that, Blake? You’ve never been underestimated in your life.” And behind Avon’s back, Vila and Blake sniggered at him.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Vila said cheerfully, sprawled on the bed, watching both his Alphas stripping for him. He was looking forward to this, if it kept Avon happy, if it gave Avon enough spice that he’d let Vila stay with him as well. And if it didn’t... well, he’d’ve lost Avon soon enough in that case and he might as well enjoy it to the full first.

Avon and Blake were both standing, naked, at the bedside, neither one of them entirely comfortable with the situation, neither one of them

quite able to maintain the polite Alpha eyes front and up attitude.

“Don’t suppose either of you two’s ever done a ménage before, have you?”

Neither one was willing to answer *that*.

“Not to worry, I have. Lots. Course, didn’t usually have any say in it, didn’t usually get to pick and choose who was going to have me, but still, it’s all the same in the end, isn’t it?”

Neither Alpha moved.

Vila sprawled a little more widely, inviting, inciting, two Alpha cocks rising at the sight of him. “C’m on, Avon,” he said, opening his arms wide, the way he’d done more times than he could remember, “c’m on, love.”

With a glance at Blake, Avon went into Vila’s arms, immediately usurping control, kissing him hard and deep, his beautiful rump all the invitation Blake needed. He stroked the firm flesh, the shock of contact setting his hands on fire and throwing his inhibitions out the proverbial window. He knelt on the floor so that he could touch Avon better, the bunk being far too narrow for three of them. So instead of gathering both men into his arms as he wanted to, instead of having the touch of flesh covering every inch of his skin, Blake settled for kneeling to kiss Avon, his tongue tasting every curve of spinal disc, every valley and plane of muscle. Even, daringly, the shadowed cleft of backside. Avon shuddered and Blake felt it on his tongue and against his lips, felt the shudder ripple all the way down to his cock. The hair on Vila’s legs brushed against him as Vila wrapped himself around Avon, pulling Avon in closer and then the thief’s hands were on Blake, pulling him in to join the magic circle of desire. Face pressed against Avon’s back, he could feel Avon’s heartbeat against his cheek, could feel the life pulse and flow. Could feel that simple warmth melt the lingering chill of the conditioning...

But he was hungry, starving, dying from the need to have more, to feel more, to be more, so he tugged at them, voiceless in his desperation, bringing them down on to the floor with him where they could tangle together in a parity of passion, arms and legs and skin and mouths and hands all touching and feeling and hot and alive, all of it filling him with a tremendous charge of eroticism, his cock so hard it was weeping, a jolt of pleasure running through him as it

bumped against Avon's thigh as they both twisted Vila over on to his stomach. Tacit, the agreement, that they would neither one of them fuck the other, not this first time. Let it be Vila, more than happy to be middle man; let him be the one to receive. They had Vila akimbo on the floor, limbs spread wide, and Avon was licking him, tasting him, whilst Blake kissed him all over: neck, back, thighs, buttocks.

Blake stopped for a moment, hand poised to caress Avon, wanting to, but that unreasonable uncertainty stayed his hand until Vila reached up, grabbing him, using Blake's hand to caress the back of Avon's neck, to feel the satin of hair, the sexual tension in the muscles. Then Blake couldn't get enough, hands and mouth all over Avon in a flurry of excess, setting up a heavenly store of treasure, this knowing of Avon's body. He was nibbling on a pink ear, tonguing a long jaw; then they were mouth to mouth, kissing, oh, how they were kissing and Blake couldn't get his fill of Avon. Wanted him, wanted to kiss him until they were both long dead and beyond. But Avon pulled away, gasping for breath, smiling at him, one hand cupping Blake's nape, the other urging Vila over on to his back to display an erection beautiful in its neediness. One hand still immutable on Blake, Avon pulled him down to join him in tasting Vila, their mouths roving over the silken skin and rigid muscle, their breathing mingling and Vila's sighs the punctuation for everything they did. Avon was sucking Vila deep into his throat and it struck Blake just how practised he was at it, just how much he obviously adored doing this to Vila.

And then Blake wasn't thinking at all, was licking and stroking every fraction of Vila that Avon left exposed. As Avon withdrew to suck on the head, Blake laved the whetted length with his tongue, drowning in the taste of Avon and Vila commingled on this hard cock that was burning him with its heat. Almost of its own will, his right hand reached for Avon, finding his cock. The hardness of it overflowed Blake's palm as Avon thrust up into the tightness of Blake's hand.

And it wasn't enough. Blake needed to have his cock encased in a wonderful tightness, as he was sure Avon had with Vila, and he needed more— "More!"

He heard his own voice fade into silence, until Vila answered him.

"I like a man who knows what he wants and isn't afraid to say it. What d'you want, Blake? C'mon, you can tell me."

"He wants to fuck you, of course, Vila. With an arse like yours on display, what he hell else do you think he'd want?" A slow caress of Vila's cheek, a lingering kiss of his mouth. "Shall I get the lotion?"

A way out, even then, even though Vila had made so much noise about wanting this, too. It made Blake feel quite small to realise how well these two knew each other, and how much they cared, Avon willing to back out of something he wanted, if Vila needed him, too. And Vila willing to risk this turning into more than just casual sex, if that's what Avon wanted. It occurred to Blake that if Avon realised all that, the cynical bastard would probably bugger the whole thing up just on a matter of principle.

"Or you can fuck me," he heard himself saying. "Either of you," he added, clarifying it for himself as well as them. And was rewarded by a singularly nice smile from Avon and a huge grin from Vila.

"You'll excuse me if I don't return your generous offer, but I think I'd rather wait until you've had rather more experience in the fine art of buggery."

"What he means, Blake, is that it's all right for you to practice on me, but Avon's dead bloody tight, no matter what you do to him first, so you'd end up hurting him. And that's not a wise thing to do, you take my word for it."

And there wasn't even an echo of his conditioning as the trigger words were spoken. Not a glimmer, not a glower and Blake felt the weight slough from his shoulders like serpent's skin. "I'll do just that. You said something about lotion?"

"Vila?"

"Over there where I always put it."

Avon brought the lotion over, but rather than handing it to Blake, he set about stroking it inside Vila. *Just letting me know that he's still yours, even if he does want to let someone else fuck him? Oh, I'm not likely to forget what the balance is here, Avon, you're safe enough.* He stroked Avon's back, long, sweeping grazings, feathering down into the cleft between Avon's

buttocks even as Avon's hands were so busy there with Vila. The skin beneath Blake's hands was incredibly smooth, marble-pale, as smooth as the hair on Vila's chest was soft and springy beneath Blake's tongue. He nuzzled a nipple, his hand never ceasing its slow caress of Avon's back and bum, his mouth devouring Vila, licking his chest, belly, down to his cock. Blake hesitated a moment then leant down, opening his mouth to take Vila inside himself, sucking him in, discovering that even if his mind didn't remember doing this, his body certainly did. And loved it. He swooped down, lips pressing into pubic hair, one of Avon's lotioned hands tracing the line where Blake ended and Vila began. Then the hand was stroking Blake as he had stroked Avon, the touch warm and sensual, calming as well as arousing. He moaned, to show Avon how much he was enjoying the touch and Vila bucked in his mouth, Blake's pleasure vibrating through him.

Avon's hands were on him again, but drawing him away this time, persuading him to let Vila go, no matter how reluctantly, no matter how much he wanted to do this until Vila's cum splashed the back of his throat. Avon's mouth was on his, Avon's tongue filling the void left when he'd been forced to give Vila up, Avon's hands all over him, urging him to his feet, rising with him, plastering them together, body to body, cock to cock, skin to skin, heart to heart, until a third heat introduced itself, not coming between them, but compounding them, enlarging them, pleasure building endlessly on pleasure. Vila was moving them, carefully surreptitious, the only one of them anywhere close to still thinking clearly, manoeuvring them as skillfully as he had before. Blake was amused, vaguely, amidst the sweetness of all this hard male sexuality surrounding him, as the Delta ordered the Alphas around without once resorting to anything so mood-breaking as speech. And so it was that he found himself, quite naturally, with his cock pressed against the slickness of Vila's arse, Vila's hands pressed against the wall at arm's length, supporting them both.

He looked down at the curving arch of Vila's arse and remembered Avon's hands on him there, saw Avon's hands reach up once again, one to grasp Blake, making him gasp, guiding him firmly, one to spread Vila's cheeks, open-

ing him up to both Avon and Blake as Avon used Blake to fuck his lover, as Avon joined his lover to another man, put another man in him. Intense, once-familiar heat engulfed Blake and he thrust forward, hard, riding Vila, wrapping his arms around Vila's middle, his chest pressing into Vila's back, shoulder-blades excitingly hard against his nipples, his mouth buried in the side of Vila's neck, tasting heat and sweat and Avon's kisses.

Avon's hands roved all over him, hands parting Blake's buttocks, fingers coming in to the secret darkness there, a single finger pressing into him, pushing past the ring of muscle. Despite it all, there was a flash of fear, of memory barely buried in time before it sent him screaming and he could feel the clammy tension writhe up his spine and...

Avon was kissing him, where he had been kissing Vila, was whispering to him, as he had no doubt often whispered to Vila. "It's all right, don't worry so. I won't force you. It'll wait..."

Then he was gone and Vila was arching up against him, high mewling noises of ecstasy arcing from him, bright and clear. Blake caressed his belly, lower, down to his groin, but instead of a delectably hard cock to fill his hand with its power, he felt instead the gossamer of Avon's hair. Felt the hollow and fill of Avon's cheek as he sucked Vila in, making the circle complete. Blake cradled Avon's head with both his hands, pulling Avon forward every time he thrust hard into Vila, the rhythm drowning their senses in pleasure. He could feel Vila buck once, twice, his stomach muscles rippling with the spasms of his orgasm, then Vila's arse was clutching at him, and he could hear Avon swallow wetly, taking Vila into him as Blake held his head so tightly.

They allowed Vila to collapse to the floor and Blake eased his cock from flaccid flesh to tumble into the tangle of limbs, fastening his mouth to Avon's as they lay on the floor together, Vila sucking Avon's rose-dark cock into his throat, his right hand pumping hard on Blake. And Blake was lost in the kissing. Was lost to that talented, generous mouth as he listened to Vila sucking Avon. Was lost as he felt Vila stroking and squeezing his cock so utterly perfectly. He heard a new noise, Avon, whimpering almost, deep in his throat, the sound breathing into

Blake. Avon's body was suddenly fraught with passion, Avon's hand clasping Vila to him, the other clutching Blake to him to kiss him deeper, deeper, as orgasm shook him, the trembles sending Blake off, his cum bathing Vila's hand and Avon's belly as Avon's cum splashed against the back of Vila's throat.

He couldn't believe it was over. Couldn't believe that after all that, the floor seemed cold, his muscles aching. Couldn't believe that he'd have to get up and leave, for he was the intruder here, he was the interloper, the bit on the side... He was unnecessary, unwanted.

Until he realised that Avon and Vila had been whispering together whilst he had still been floating off on a cloud of afterglow. Avon was crouched over him now and Blake was struck by a consuming hunger to touch the hair on his chest and to lick his nipples and suck his cock and do a million other things he hadn't had a chance to do. And might never get a chance to do. This had been a once off, probably, despite what they had said. Wasn't safe for him to hope for more...

Avon was shifting him, muttering under his breath about taking monolithic heroism too far and couldn't Blake at least *help?*

"Help do what?"

"Get you out of the way so that Vila can get the spare bedding out, that's what."

So he moved, still rather dazed, a happy glow suffusing him as it began to dawn on him that he wasn't going to be thrown out. A pillow appeared under his head, a duvet covered him, then Vila was tucking himself, using Blake's chest for a pillow. Avon lay down beside him, one arm stretching across Blake's smooth chest until it was touching Vila. Blake felt movement against his skin; he looked down and watched as Avon carefully interlocked his fingers with Vila's and rested their joined hands over his heartbeat. He meant to stay awake and talk to them, honestly he did, but sleep dusted his eyes closed and he drifted off to the feel of two warm bodies pressed close to his and the feeling that perhaps destroying Star One might not be quite so devastatingly important...

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,

*Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.*

—Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream—

turned and began to walk on. Vila followed hastily, turning the pretty bracelet round and round on his arm.

At the agreed point of meeting Avon drew the pyramid out of his pocket and examined it.

The spell fell back on Vila: he forgot the bracelet he had been happily fingering and stared and stared. He stepped forward, one hand outstretched. "Can I—"

And as before, Avon easily evaded his grasp. He was looking through the crystal to examine its refracted images, eyes half closed in concentration.

"I wonder if she knew what this is. Probably not, or she would never have sold it for such a price. Or," Avon mused, "for any price at all."

Vila considered the price Avon had paid quite exorbitant: but then again, as Avon said, it did seem a paltry sum for so ravishing an artefact.

"It's beautiful," he said again.

Avon's eyes lifted to his, studied him curiously.

"Don't you know what it is?" he asked distantly.

"It's a glass pyramid."

Avon's disconcerting smile briefly curved his lips. He closed his fingers tight upon it and spirited it away into some inner recess of his jacket.

"Is that what you think."

"Isn't it?" Vila searched Avon's body with sharp thief's eyes, looking for the place of concealment.

At that moment Dayna appeared, big-eyed with indignation, several feet ahead of a grinning Tarrant.

"Let's *go*. This is the most archaic society: everyone we meet assumes I'm *his* bedmate," she said, jerking a glance behind and positively snapping with fury.

Vila groaned in empathy. "Don't tell me. I *know*."

"What have you got there, Avon?" Tarrant spotted the glint as Avon emptied the pouch; and Avon turned his hand so that it was palm upwards. The little glass pyramid sat there, throwing out glinting rays of light which cast strange flickers on the walls. Seeing it, Vila felt again a sharp pang of utter yearning; a pit of loneliness and emptiness yawning wide within himself.

The others gathered round to look, their own purchases temporarily forgotten.

Tarrant's expression was sharp with recognition: there was also a touch of accusatory fear in the way he looked up into Avon's face.

"You shouldn't have brought that thing here. It's dangerous."

"What is it?" Dayna asked.

Cally's eyes didn't leave Avon's face. Avon was looking only at Tarrant: he seemed slightly amused.

"I can control it."

"Control it!" Tarrant exploded. "I don't believe you."

Avon tipped his head a little to one side. Absently, his thumb caressed the smooth glass surface of one triangular plane. The pyramid seemed all shades of soft green now. Avon's eyes narrowed watching it, as he replied to Tarrant.

"Whatever you believe, Tarrant, won't alter the truth."

"But what *is* it?" Dayna asked again, half fascinated and half strangely repelled, but unable to tear her eyes away. She was again ignored.

"You know they're dangerous," Tarrant reiterated. "What's your psi rating, Avon?" The question was uttered as a challenge rather than a quest for knowledge.

Avon's teeth showed in a little, feral smile.

"Point five," he answered. The glitter of his eyes was definitely amused now as he surveyed his questioner.

"Point—" Tarrant was aghast. He stared at Avon as if he had never seen him before. "But that would make you at least an overlord."

"Precisely," Avon said, black eyes lit with gleaming. His fingers snapped shut around the pyramid, shutting off its light.

Vila blinked as if waking up. He edged a little closer to Avon. Tarrant was still staring at him with a mixture of reactions: wariness and distrust seemed most prominent.

"But as it happens," Avon added, "I am not a practitioner." His head turned towards Vila who was so close he was practically touching him. "Hello, Vila," he said with a complete change of tone, almost amiable: "Is it my charm? Or were you, by any chance, thinking about picking my pocket?"

Vila jumped back. For a second, he looked shifty.

"If someone doesn't tell me what's going on," Dayna interrupted, "Then I could get very nasty indeed." She shoved her hand out at Avon. Surprisingly, he relinquished the pyramid to her.

As she took it, she fumbled with it: it dropped from her fingers. Avon leapt for it, but Vila was quicker. With a soft, incoherent cry he had dived at the ground and caught the falling prism. Crouching there, he cradled it to his chest protectively. He was experiencing an intense reaction to this his first sweet toughing of it: its cool weight, the hard cool sharpness of its planed surfaces. He wanted to rape it with contact, roll it over and over against his skin. He wanted to put it into his mouth.

Avon was watching him with curiosity. He dropped to his heels beside Vila, surveying the little thief intently.

"Well now," he murmured, "that's interesting." He extended a hand, plucked the pyramid from Vila's fingers, disregarding the whimper of protest torn from Vila as he was bereft of it.

"It's very interesting," Avon said again, and his eyes travelled over Vila with faintly malicious speculation, "that it should be *you*." He didn't say anything more, yet his statement had seemed vaguely unfinished. He continued to look at Vila.

Dayna flopped loudly into a chair, breaking the spell weaving between Avon's dark eyes and Vila's entranced ones. She examined her fingers curiously.

"I felt as if it gave me an electric shock. I don't like it, Avon. It's evil." She shuddered.

"What *is* it, Avon," Cally asked. "I would like to know."

Avon awoke, dragged his eyes away from Vila and pulled himself gracefully to his feet.

"It isn't evil," he said, answering Dayna. "Nor is it—good." He set the pyramid down on a low table. One side of it looked green, two blue; and the peak shone transparent gold. "It is not one thing or another. It just is."

"Do you mean it's a life form?" Cally asked.

Avon considered. "Not as we conceive 'life' to be."

"Avon's trying to blind you with rhetoric," Tarrant said to the others with a sneer. "He doesn't want to tell you what it is, because he knows you won't like it. Isn't that right, Avon?"

"It's odd," Avon mused silkily, "that you seem

to know so much about me." His gaze locked with Tarrant's and said the opposite. *Never in the lifetime of the Universe*, Avon's mocking black gaze seemed to avow, *will you ever know me or anything about me. Never.*

Tarrant retreated into attack, pointing a stabbing finger at the Voysian artefact on the table.

"That, my friends, is an Enchanter's Lodestone. A nasty little power focus used by black magicians to arrange flashy special effects. Some say," he directed a dark look at Avon, "much worse."

Dayna screwed up her face. "Sounds horrible. Get rid of it, Avon."

"It isn't a lodestone," Avon said. "Its real name is far older than that. Psebulen." He caressed the Psebulen, his thumb resting on the sharp glass tip where all the sides culminated. "They have, it's true, been made use of by entertainers, travelling magicians and the like, but that is not what they *are*. They existed long before those in pursuit of trickery thought to make use of them. This one, in any case," he held it up to the light, "—is pure."

"It must be worth a small fortune," Tarrant said, diverted from his misgivings.

"Perhaps," Avon said unmoved, "but I shan't be putting it up for sale." Again he vanished it into a pocket. Vila's wide, unblinking gaze watched it go.

"That's a pretty bracelet, Vila," Cally said, and he held it out for examination.

But this time he did not forget.

Avon was in the rec-room, pushing around the pieces of a logic puzzle in a manner which looked haphazard but was in fact rigidly patterned. Vila approached him, edging nervously sideways like a crab: he coughed once or twice and generally just hung around until Avon should notice him.

"What is it, Vila," came Avon's voice.

"Nothing," Vila said, agitated and restless: he was practically hopping from foot to foot. "That is, if you've got the time..."

"Oh, I think I can make the time," Avon said, adding as he lifted his eyes to Vila, "for you."

Avon had been behaving very strangely to him for a few days; ever since they had come back from the Voysian market, in fact. The tone he had used to Vila just now was almost—seduc-

tive, his dark eyes lingering on the other man. But Vila was living in another world; he noticed the strangeness in Avon and yet it was nothing to the strangeness in himself.

"The Psebulen," he said all in a rush. "What have you—"

"It's quite safe." Avon waited.

Vila fidgeted. "Well. I was wondering. Could I...?"

"And I thought it was my company you wanted," Avon said, with sweet sarcasm.

"Just let me see it. Just for ten minutes." Vila heard the desperation in his own voice and did not heed it, carrying on, "Five minutes. I'll give you something. Anything you want."

Avon's eyebrow lifted. "Now there's an offer."

"Please, Avon," he pleaded.

But Avon turned him down and he had to go away empty-handed, a sick yearning deep inside for something he had never even dreamed of, although that was soon to change.

There was, of course, another course of action open to him.

Vila thumbed the lock on the door unit with a lightning movement and then just leaned against it for a moment, panting. Presently, when he was sure there was no pursuit, he unclutched his precious handful, bringing it out from where he had been pressing it against his chest.

The pyramid shone clear purple and blue and green to Vila's entranced eyes as he held it up to the light. Trembling with the thrill of possession, he stood there holding it for a very long time.

It couldn't last. He knew that, of course. As he turned it in his hand and admired it glowing all over with a soft green light, the door opened and Avon slipped through.

Vila jumped guiltily. His heart skipped a beat, then resumed, very fast.

"I wish you wouldn't do that, Avon," he complained when he got his breath back. "You scared me."

"You have something of mine, I believe," Avon said.

Slowly Vila extended the heavy little object towards Avon. As Avon took it, the pain of losing it wrenched at him like a physical force. He stared at the dark man in mute despair, but

Avon left without a word: and it did not even penetrate Vila's consciousness that he had stolen something from Avon—*stolen something from Avon*—and been lucky indeed to escape so lightly.

The second time he stole it he had longer.

Sitting cross-legged on his bed with the pyramid set in front of him, he devoured it raptly and intently with his eyes.

Viewed from above it appeared complex, an emerald labyrinth of geometric planes and angles in different shades of green, reflecting endless diamonds and cubes up at him. In contrast, help up to the light it appeared to be clear glass: yet with the magical effect of prismatically edging everything viewed through it with a border of merging colours, soft rainbow fire. Other views and effects weaved their spells on Vila as he turned it different ways; he found it completely absorbing, satisfying to every sense. He thought he'd never tire of touching it, running his fingertips greedily over its glassy smoothness. He brought it to his mouth and touched the sharp point to his tongue, then sucked the cool tip experimentally. Smiling with doped ecstasy, he held it up.

And nearly jumped out of his skin. Dark and hard and unmoving, Avon's face blazed out at him from every planed surface.

"Avon," he got out. "One of these days you're going to scare me into an early death."

"One of these days," Avon returned equably, "I may teach you the difference between your property—and mine." He moved round in front of Vila and retrieved the Psebulen from Vila's unresisting grasp, without looking at it.

"It seems to fascinate you," he said. "Why?"

"I don't know," Vila said, then added: "You know me, Avon. If it's worth stealing, then I steal it."

"Is that all it is?" Avon said, and Vila fancied he saw a hint of disappointment there: "Acquisitiveness for something which is valuable?"

Vila shook his head. "No, it's more than that, I—" He looked away. "I can't explain it. I just can't, Avon. But anyway—" He stopped.

"Anyway?" Avon prompted. He passed the little pyramid from hand to hand, weighing it.

"Anyway," Vila said in a rush, before he could change his mind, "you keep saying it's *yours*."

Well, I don't think it's yours. I don't think anyone could *own* it. And I think you know that too. In any case, if it's so very much yours, why is it me it keeps calling to?"

His eyes met Avon in defiance, head held high. After a moment, Avon smiled.

"Well now, Vila," he said softly. "You see too much for me to keep secrets from you. And that makes you—"

The moment seemed timeless, even precious. Vila could not tear his eyes away from Avon's: they seemed darker and richer and deeper than he had ever seen them before.

"That makes me—?" he managed, short of breath.

"—dangerous," Avon said. "Very, very dangerous."

Then he seemed to come to some sort of a decision. He held out the pyramid.

"All right," he said, as if answering a question.

Vila looked at the Psebulen, then at Avon. He made no move to take it.

"What—?"

Avon smiled at him again. Avon's smiles, Vila thought, were not things of reassurance and comfort. On the contrary, it was when he smiled that it became time to run.

But Vila couldn't run and didn't want to.

"There's only one way," Avon said, "to stop so gifted a thief from taking what he wants." The compliment was graceful and delivered with courtesy. "It's yours. Have it."

Vila stared. "*Avon*—I can't—"

"Why not?" Avon said, and this time he looked genuinely amused, edging in with delicate irony: "No such reticence seems to have troubled you before?"

Heart pounding, he had to step very close to Avon in order to take the pyramid. He was trembling with the impossible joy of ownership; he was also, he realised, for some reason strongly sexually aroused, his nipples brushing sweetly against the soft silk of his shirt as he leaned forward. He shivered violently. His hand touched Avon's as he took possession of the desired Psebulen.

"Thank you. Thank you, Avon, I—"

"There's no need," Avon murmured, eyes fixed intently on Vila, "to thank me." He moved towards the door. Vila's head dropped immediately to examine his treasure. He still could not

grasp the astounding fact: Avon had given him the Psebulen, it was his to keep.

"Remember one thing," Avon said from the door. "You think you want it. But, actually—"

Vila was anxious for Avon to go. "What?"

"—*it wants you*," Avon completed, and this time he did not smile.

"Don't disappear," Avon said to the slinking wraith he discerned ahead of him darting into a recess. His steps unhurried, he followed Vila's path and came across the little thief huddled against a wall.

"Why are you avoiding me?" he asked, eyes direct and hard. Vila looked tired, deep shadows under his eyes; but he essayed a weak smile at Avon.

"I'm not," he tried hopefully.

Avon let that go without comment, much to Vila's relief. "And the Psebulen? Are you looking after it?"

"Oh yes," Vila said. He cast his eyes around, looking anywhere but at Avon's face. "It's very nice." Conscious of inadequacy, "I—I look at it quite a lot," he finished lamely.

Avon was subjecting him to an intense scrutiny. "Is something worrying you?"

Vila jerked as if he'd been punched from behind. He looked up guiltily. "No. Why should there be? I'd better go now, Avon. Cally, er Dayna, sent me to—get something." He tried to slip under Avon's arm but Avon restrained him.

"You're lying to me, Vila."

Yes, he was.

Vila wasn't all right, at all.

It was the dreams: night after night, asleep and yet strangely awake he would tangle himself sweatily in bedding and fight, bravely and persistently, but the ending was always the same.

So too the beginning: as soon, it seemed, as he closed his eyes Avon's were there, staring into his mind's eye, pinning him; orbs like midnight opals growing larger and larger, holding him trapped in the wide dark sweep of them. And then Avon's voice would sound in his ears, magical and musical, melting him down hypnotically so that his senses spun dizzily; and he would look up from the puddled sprawl he had become to see Avon, about to kill him. Avon smiling, cradling a gun to his chest, which he

would slowly raise and aim, so Vila was forced to stare up the black barrel, between Avon's dark, wicked eyes. And as Avon pulled the trigger, white puffs of smoke left the gun and exploded full in his face; and he would wake up with his heart pounding crazily and his skin wet with sweat and his breathing desperate.

Then, the worst thing of all would happen, there in the darkness; the greatest shame and humiliation...

If Avon knew, he would surely kill Vila for real.

Avon was nothing if not secure in his sexual identity; not for him Tarrant's macho swagger or Blake's bullishness; no, Avon had his own style, wrapped in a cloak of leather darkness and brooding; fascinating to women and deliberately repellent to all others.

So Vila lay trembling in the dark, night after night, the bed linen soaked, his groin happily, warmly sticky, still pleasuring itself with little, reminiscent throbbings of bliss: as some shadowy, nightmare Avon plucked sweetly at his soul and sucked the willing life in him away.

None of this, of course, could he tell to Avon.

Avon was looking penetratingly at him, through him, to the very core.

"I think, Vila..."

Vila swallowed, dry-mouthed, and quelled an annoying tremor in his legs; but Avon only smiled at him, amiably enough, and patted him on the shoulder.

"I think you'd better return it to me—don't you?"

"Well, it's like this, Avon," Vila gabbled. "I do and I don't—if you know what I mean."

Because if he relinquished it, he knew the whole black, bitter cycle would spawn itself again.

"I think—"

"Yes?" Avon stepped very close to him, his eyes intense and searching.

"I think you should destroy it." Vila forced the words out with an immense effort of will; his soul curled up, tight and tiny, and mourned with a bleak despair, because he loved the Psebulen even as he knew it had to die.

"Oh Vila..." Avon said in his softest voice, his blackest and sweetest, which had Vila screaming inside with fear. "I expect pagan ignorance from Tarrant. But not you."

"Yes, and you said you could control it," Vila blurted out. "*Then why the hell don't you?*"

"It's odd," Avon mused, still in that strange, rich voice, looking far away, "how fear begins. Superstitious dread of something which is in all of us. Do you know what the Psebulen is, Vila?"

"No," Vila managed, though he was sure it was a witch: a hunched-up blackened crone of evil locked and twisting inside a clear and fragile form of beauty. "What is it?"

Avon stared at him, his eyes huge-pupilled and opaque, reflecting no light at all so that Vila felt all of himself reduced to a torrent of atoms rushing to be absorbed there, in a black hole of nameless horror.

"A mirror," Avon said, and Vila fled from him.

When he next returned to his room the little glass pyramid had gone. Vanished, its presence lifted from his shelf, the pervasive atmosphere it generated gone with it. Vila walked on air. He did a cart-wheel across the room and bounced on the bed, for sheer joy. Normality was restored to him; now he could see, how dark a cloud had shadowed him, weaving wicked thoughts and dreams, unhealthy raptures. He crowed with delight and fell back on the bed, kicking his feet. It was over, it was a nightmare, that was all, and now he had woken up. Zen was on the flight deck and Servalan was after them and somewhere Tarrant argued with Dayna, and everything was *all right*: Alice was back through the mirror, the universe set to its normal scale again after its bizarre and scary tilting.

Lying there, he fell asleep and dreamed of nubile women: his fingers, lying on the coverlet, began to twitch.

A different Hell was waiting for him.

He only had to see Avon these days and something dreadful happened to him. How Tarrant would sneer, Dayna would laugh, if they knew: that every time Avon's dark gaze came to rest on him he saw a terrible, dangerous beauty in his eyes, every time he heard the quiet, clever voice it seemed to him a clarion call of invitation.

"It's not right," he sighed to himself alone in his room, "Vila Restal, you've *never* been that way in your life, never... Not even when you had the chance to make a fortune in the holding cell,

all those blokes who've just realised there's one woman between a hundred men..."

Not even at school, not Vila, not when it had been so easy to pick the lock of the girls' dormitory and slip inside, sure of a welcome from at least *one* of the beds, Marlie for example... Vila's eyes grew soft and misty with remembrance; Vila was nothing if not romantic.

Ah, romance! A pink satin heart with a single rose across it, a whisper of scented flowers at midnight, a secret message penned by quill on parchment, two hands pressing clandestinely, two hearts beating in passionate rhythm. *That* was romance. It was absolutely and finally nothing to do with the lust of one man for the sweat of another: Vila hated, hated these desires in himself, and yet—

And yet.

Here he was, reduced to shivering when Avon so much as passed him in the corridor: unhappily restless when Avon was not there, restless and disturbed when he was; wanting to watch him, feast his starved and hungry eyes on Avon's presence. He wanted to rush to Avon, to be comforted for some nameless sorrow, press his head to Avon's chest and have Avon stroke his hair... And if ever Avon met his eyes, that black enchanter's gaze leaping out from across the room to transfix him and stop time in its tracks, then Vila would become weak with emotion as he returned the look frantically, the pit of his stomach fluttering with mad butterflies.

At such times he would have to, *he simply had to*, duck into the nearest quiet place and masturbate. A joyless experience, as he worked upon himself with swift and frantic fingers to produce the sharp spurts of relief; but necessary for his sanity.

And at night he would lie there, summoning sleep desperately, and then, when sleep eluded him, he tried fantasy: first, pastel dreams of fleshy females bathing nude, cavorting on grass, rosy knees and Reubens curves; and then, in mounting panic, lewd, widely-stretched pornographic images: but nothing worked. Nothing.

So he would give way, in the end, with a sense of Damnation; and let Avon in. His fantasy lover, alluring him with caresses and kisses, setting him afire with the first imaginary touch, right to the glorious finish; he would sleep then, an arm outflung around his pillow; but like some

dangerous, beautiful phoenix it would crest all over again when he awoke.

He blamed the Psebulen. Of course he did. He had been all right before, hadn't he?

In a strange way, he still yearned for it, too: but not, now that possession had burned his fingers, with the passionate need of before. He loved it and he hated it, because he hated what it had done to him, hated the creature he had become, who swooned at another man's glances.

I'll die before I tell you, Avon, he promised himself; you'll never have to know, and I'll never have to live with you knowing; so everything will be all right, won't it?

But the words had a hollow ring, and all that answered him was a frail, mocking echo: *won't it? won't it?*

Dayna entered Avon's cabin and looked at the dark head bent over the desk.

"Just a moment," he said in his cool, cultured voice, and to fill in the time she sauntered to the shelf where the little glass pyramid sat, the one Avon had acquired on Voysi and Vila had taken such a fancy to. She picked it up and held it, determined this time to be sensible. The tingle she had felt before struck through to her skin at the first contact, but she held on; and soon a rich warm feeling spread through he belly like chocolate, or brandy, and she felt a glow of delight soothing away the shock of fear.

"What *is* this thing, Avon?" she asked him in wonder and pleasure. The feelings inside her were building to an embarrassing peak, and with horror she realised—

She set the little pyramid down in a hurry, and her loins slowly abandoned their headlong countdown to a thundering sexual crescendo.

"As I told Vila," Avon answered her without lifting his head from the papers he worked on. "It's a mirror. Perhaps—" he smiled— "a little bit more than that."

"A mirror of *what*," she said round-eyed.

"Your feelings. And," Avon said, "mine, quite possibly."

Dayna prepared to flounce out, offended. "I certainly don't feel like *that* made me feel."

"Don't you?" he said amused, and she remembered once telling him he was beautiful, and teasing his icily sculpted lips with a first and last kiss.

Ah, but she didn't know him, then.

For reasons of his own he had been a courteous guest, who had done what he could for her family, and it was not his fault that Death had shadowed him into the house. No, the other side of Avon had not shown itself so early, though even then she had seen that he was not ordinary. Now, any desire she felt for Avon was overlaid with a little fear, a little wariness that he was not quite sane, perhaps, or not quite as other people; stricter in the limits he imposed on himself than they were, and sometimes, shockingly and unexpectedly, without any limits at all.

She sighed. Avon was a riddle not for her solving; she knew that and accepted it. "Well, whatever it does, or doesn't do to me, Avon, it's Vila I'd be worried about if I were you. He seems to live in a dream these days."

"Or a nightmare," Avon murmured. "What have you brought me?" And her attention was thus skilfully redrawn to the reason for her visit; the new weapon she had shaped in her head and brought to life with her hands and brought here for Avon's approval.

Ardent sexual desire roused into hard, throbbing life every time Avon's scent tugged at his senses wasn't Vila's only newly heightened emotion: he was almost used, by now, to the sharpness of desire, the sweet pains of love.

He was helplessly in love with Avon, and yet he was also *terrified* of Avon.

He had always been wary of the man. Avon's veneer of elite charm was transparent enough to give a glimpse of the perilous darkness shifting within; the most casual acquaintances, meeting Avon for the first time, would feel the slightest of chills, and shiver: as if, somewhere near, a rare doorway to Hell had yawned open, for one brief moment in Time.

But Vila, insouciant, street-smart Vila had always known when to leap back and when to step in; when Avon would be bleakly amused by him and when it would be dangerous so much as to breathe in his presence. Nowadays, since the Psebulen's black fingers had stolen their way into his life, his terror of Avon was unrelenting; a shadow at his shoulder all the time. He could not walk ten yards along a deserted corridor without whipping round nervously to see if Avon

was there, behind him. Stalking him, with a strange look in his eye.

In Avon's presence desire warred with fright and won: out of it, fear stood to the forefront.

Because he knew, beyond reason and beyond doubt, that Avon was his own death.

Vila was asleep. He dreamed...

Avon advanced on his heart with a crystal sword held aloft in his hands; the sword flashed down and pierced him like a point of light passing through darkness. Agony and ecstasy cleaved him with a shattering crash—

Vila woke up.

His eyes searched the room frantically, in dread: nothing. Absolutely nothing. The usual nonsense. He was so annoyed that for once he felt firm, and strong, and determined, and so he threw back the covers and got out of bed, muttering. He was tired, resentful, and just plain furious; fed up with himself, fed up with Avon, fed up with mystical dreams and symbolic swords.

He was going to Sort It Out, and so he set off.

Such ambition is all very well when one is alone; he found himself a little less indignant when he reached Avon's quarters. In fact, he stood for a while, irresolute, outside the door; but as he stood there, it opened.

"Come in, Vila." Avon's voice coiled thinly through the air and encircled him; he was reminded helplessly and irresistibly of the spider and the fly as his feet carried him into Avon's dark territory.

Tarrant was there.

Vila stopped dead.

"All right, I'm just going," Tarrant intoned with that smooth suave nastiness which made Vila hate him. He rose to his feet and fronted Vila, standing just that bit too close, invading his personal space to discomfit him. "You've kept these nocturnal visits to Avon very quiet, Vila. Quite a dark horse, in your way, aren't you?"

Mortified with indignation, Vila opened his mouth to reply. It stayed open as Avon's voice spun a silky line in the gloom:

"Let him without sin... Are you in the mood for casting stones, Tarrant?"

Tarrant flushed darkly. "I was just leaving."

"But you've only just come," Avon murmured. With a delicately arched eyebrow, he watched

Tarrant's stiffly retreating back. When the door shut behind him, he turned his attention to Vila, and smiled, spreading his hands.

"What can I do for you?"

Vila advanced into the abyss.

"Look, Avon..." Avon wore only a thin shirt, and that unbuttoned almost to his waist. A dark vee of hair between his nipples held Vila's attention; he felt fluttery and unsettled, as if Avon was naked. Whatever he had meant to say to Avon, he knew he could not.

"You look upset," Avon said, eyeing him tiltedly.

"Upset!" Vila could barely speak. The little exchange with Tarrant had birthed a thought so horrible that he buried it instantly, but it kept poking up its wormy head and making him squirm. Vila felt thoroughly unbalanced and panicky; he thought he might very well be going to pass out. "I feel like a fencing class," he said through numbed lips, "bits of me keep fainting."

He knew he had gone dramatically white because Avon got up and came towards him, looking at him with dark-eyed concern. He put out one hand to take Vila's wrist, pushing his cuff back with intimate ease, the pad of his thumb delicately probing for the pulse. From the bare skin inside his shirt arose a warm scent, shocking and thrilling.

The awful, terrible thing took place again, as Avon's cool touch burned like fire on his own skin; as Avon held his wrist an electric current surged hotly through Vila and then it was happening, right there and then, the sweet waves of sexual feeling washing him to a swift, fierce climax, engulfing him and rocking him on his feet.

There seemed to be no way of concealing what had happened; Avon was, after all, another man; would not miss the way his loins had shuddered, the moan and the grimace of ecstasy at the sweet swift release. Vila's eyes lifted, hot with horror and shame; he met Avon's look of polite, frozen surprise. Avon dropped his wrist unhurriedly. Vila hoped and prayed and begged for obliteration, but his form stayed as substantial as ever. There was a spreading wet warmth at Vila's groin; he crossed his hands over it.

"Don't look," he pleaded, desperate and pathetic, and Avon turned away from him, walking towards his desk. On it lay a glove which did not look like Avon's. The wormy thought

raised its head again and this time streamed out of him, forming itself into words Vila heard himself give voice to with horror:

"You haven't ever slept with *Tarrant*? Have you? *Avon*?"

Avon gave it due consideration and finally answered, his voice a dark, dense vein of a mysterious story, never to be told.

"Slept—? ...no."

Vila fled the room, a devil dancing at his heels.

"What's the matter, Vila?" Cally asked him gently.

Vila bent a look on her of fierce secrecy. "Don't ask, you don't want to know."

"Why would I ask if I didn't want to know?" Cally's mind worked in literal ways. She smiled at him. Vila nearly melted inside. Cally was so sweet...

Too sweet for the horrible reality of it. He hardened his resolve. "It's personal."

"Perhaps you should talk to Avon about it," she said seriously. "Your low morale will affect all of us if it continues."

Vila nearly choked. "I'm so sorry about that," he said with dignified sarcasm. "Perhaps you'd all be happier if I took a two-minute walk in a one-minute airlock?"

Sarcasm was wasted on Cally. "There's no need to be sorry, Vila. We don't like to see you like this, that's all. Avon wants you to go with him to the surface of Zenith Alpha; perhaps an opportunity may come to talk to him there."

Vila repressed a groan. Zenith Alpha! An ice planet. The fact that rebellions always had to be conducted in dirty gravel-pits or icy blizzard landscapes instead of treasure islands with a tropical climate seemed uncommonly mean of Fate.

He went to put on a thick coat and fur gloves.

Trudging in Avon's footsteps amid chunks of ice along a narrow path on the edge of a glaciated precipice, a biting wind freezing the flesh of his cheeks, Vila felt like nothing so much as Wenceslas' page, but without, he suspected, the cheery optimism. Snowflakes flurried here and there around them; to the left the view was magnificent, a distant sun dazzling off the sheer sheets of crystalline ice which dropped jaggedly down thousands of feet to the bottom of the ice

canyon, cruel white mountain peaks rearing high above them. It was not a user-friendly landscape and Vila did not feel inspired.

“What are we doing here, Avon?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“I don’t really care,” Vila said to himself, gloomily, and then raised his voice defiantly. “I SAID, I DON’T REALLY CARE, ANYWAY. Not going to be many laughs around here, I can just sense it. A laugh a century, I should think that’s the legal maximum in these parts.”

“We didn’t come to be amused,” Avon said. “Does it really not matter to you? Surely it should. Or do you think that responsibility for your life and your well-being rests on my shoulders?”

About to reply, Vila experienced the startling realisation that yes, he did think exactly that. He opened his mouth and closed it again, and caught Avon looking at him.

In white fur his darkness shone with extraordinary beauty, hair and eyes like something exotic in a monastery; Vila could only catch his breath, and stand stock-still, and wait in dread, and hope... Avon moved closer to him, transfixing him like a rock caught in the wide sweeping orbit of the sun. “Is that what you want, Vila?” he murmured, low and quiet. “Do you want to belong to me?”

“Yes!” Vila howled; the sound, a keening screech, was absorbed by the blanketing landscape of snow; silence descended.

Avon took him by the shoulders, fingers shifting inside his gloves to get a better grip, then settling there. Vila watched his face with terror and desire: all those dreams, and now it was really about to happen, summoned by what word or thought or emotion he did not know.

“You want me to do this, don’t you?” Avon said to him, his voice quiet, yet crystal sharp in the clear air. This is me, Vila thought, I’m here, *now*, and that’s Avon, the same Avon I’ve been looking at for years, but never as close as this...

And then Avon kissed him, roughly and moistly; astonished and dazed by the warmth and sweetness of the man’s kiss Vila felt himself melting, beginning to succumb; he’d always been a pushover. He clung to Avon with hands and body and mouth and felt tears spring wetly from his eyes and roll down his cheeks, moved beyond words at Avon’s gentleness and the glory

of being held by him, as he had wanted so much for so long...

His hands went around Avon to hold him tighter, urgently make him welcome: but that was when it all went wrong, the sweet feathers of intoxication falling into ashes, the pleasant hazy dream freezing into a cold and sharp-edged reality. He jumped back from Avon as if he was fatally burned, his fingers still clutching the object he had discovered and drawn from Avon’s pocket. Avon’s eyes sprang open as Vila pulled violently away from him; Vila opened his hand, breathing hard, to see there just what he had expected, the Psebulen.

As his fingers had spirited it from Avon’s clothes, the sharp tip had pierced his palm; one dark-red drop of blood trembled on its cool glass surfaces and rolled, reflecting itself over and over in an explosive poppy-red kaleidoscope. Vila stared at it in an agony of fear and revulsion. He had been *kissing* Avon, any man would be bad enough, but *Avon*; and loving him, no less, as if it was his only reality and all his being. His soul had surged into that kiss, and poured itself out to link with Avon in some unholy ritual, *and it was all the Psebulen’s fault*. He drew back his arm and let fly with a shriek of fear and anguish; and as the Psebulen flew and sparkled in the air it was like casting his very heart away and Avon’s with it; the little glass prism could not hold its arc long and it wheeled over and began a downward plunge. It bounced against the glacial mountainside, and then again, shattering into a thousand diamond sparklets which danced like spun sugar and spangled the crevasse with a little brightness, a twinkle here, and there, as a million glass pinheads mirrored the sun.

The Psebulen was gone.

Avon’s hand, which had risen too late, turned inwards to him and hit Vila, hard, across the face.

Vila cried out once, and then fell silent, because what he had done deserved more than physical pain.

“That was stupid,” Avon said evenly, and terrifyingly. “You now owe me the price of half a galaxy; in what coin are you proposing to pay?”

Vila’s mouth was dry, his throat tight as he tried to swallow, again and again. “It was evil, Avon...”

Avon's voice leapt like a whip. *"It wasn't evil."* He grabbed Vila, thumbs pressing dangerously just above his larynx. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

Desperate to placate him, Vila gabbled, round-eyed, his teeth chattering, "I know, I know you told me. But—it made me feel—strange things. *Wrong* things, Avon." His eyes eloquently pleaded with Avon to understand, that he had done this thing for both their sakes, to save them both from corruption and ridicule: but Avon was cold-eyed, unreachable, rockhard.

"The fact is, you are unable to face the truth. The feelings were your own."

"Avon," Vila begged. "I've never wanted—look, if you have, that's okay, that's fine by me, live and let live, that's what I always say, I'm a tolerant man. But—it's just not for me, always been a ladies' man I have, from the day I was out of nappies and realised I had something women haven't: I've got nothing against it, *honest I haven't*, but I'm just not made that way." His mouth made a foolish, unhappy smile as his words tailed into abject silence; the cant of Avon's dark, bleak gaze burned him, then caressed his face as Avon's lashes fluttered and he said softly:

"Well now. So that's what you believe."

As if he hadn't enough to contend with, the pain of killing the Psebulen was gnawing at Vila like a live animal twisting inside him and mortally wounding his guts. He gazed at Avon sadly, but there was no comfort for him there. Avon's expression was like a graven image etched in stone; he stared coldly at Vila and uttered the command that Vila follow him to the nearby caves where Orac had suggested dynamon crystals might be found.

Vila followed, head well down. The sun had gone in; the glitter that was all that remained of the Psebulen had gone with it.

Back on the *Liberator* Avon marched Vila along the corridors with one hand on his shoulder, the other clutching the handful of crystals they had found. Sunk in misery, and so used to obeying Avon that he went where he was pushed without question, it was not until the door closed behind him that he realised they had come to Avon's quarters. He swung around but Avon had followed him in and was blocking the exit. A

cold drench of sweat and the dry mouth of fear informed Vila that he had, quite possibly, just walked into a trap whose door he had opened himself and that wasn't going to look too good on his obituary, was it? VILA RESTAL—NEVER A DOOR HE COULDN'T OPEN—PITY ABOUT THAT.

He panicked. His heart thudded like a rabbit bounding for cover, he swallowed convulsively, and his arms and legs began to tremble.

Avon looked at him, and it was the Avon of his dreams.

"Avon—no. No, Avon," he pleaded, scrabbling backwards, but of course there was no exit and nowhere to run and his legs wouldn't carry him anyway.

"Yes, Vila," Avon murmured with gleaming eyes, "you want this. Or, if you don't want it, you certainly need it."

He had never before noticed how sharp Avon's teeth were, like a wolf's. "Avon, please let me go..."

"Let you go? Oh no, Vila, I've got a point to make: or have you forgotten? The Psebulen's gone, a priceless, irreplaceable artefact smashed into a million tiny pieces by *your* ignorance and *your* stupidity; you destroyed it for nothing, because nothing, you will find, has changed." He touched Vila, very delicately, running his hand up Vila's arm, bringing his fingers up to stroke Vila's cheek, a desultory caress. "Are you running away, Vila? No, I don't think you are."

"The reason I'm not running," Vila managed between chattering teeth, "is because I'm terrified."

Avon showed his teeth in a smile. "That too, no doubt. But you've no need to be terrified, Vila, I'm not going to hurt you."

Pain though not among Vila's preferred pastimes, was not precisely what he was dreading. Avon was setting on him with an obvious purpose. "I'll do it myself," Vila said, in an agony of fright: he stripped off with wobbly defiance, backed to the bed and sat down on it, naked and glaring.

All Avon removed was his gloves.

He sat down beside Vila and touched him, looking into his eyes all the while. "And you've never done this before?" he murmured. "You're too beautiful, Vila, to waste on women."

“It’s odd I know, but that’s not the way I was brought up to look at it,” Vila said with trembling acidity. Avon coaxed him, quite gently, to lie down, and stroked his thigh, fingers coming to rest there intimately as his lips brushed sweetly up Vila’s arm, shockingly thrilling: it was when his mouth moved on, to caress the delicate skin at throat, cheek and temple, that Vila realised that more than anything in the world—*more than anything*—he wanted Avon to kiss him again.

Whatever Vila might have presupposed of this encounter—Avon pushing him roughly to the bed, perhaps, forcing him onto hand and knees and doing something unmentionable to a part of him Vila preferred left quite alone—it was not gentleness. Avon’s mouth took his hard and possessively and yet there was a tenderness there too, in the Avon broke off every now and then to smile at him, murmur something to him, touch him gently, just as if Avon knew all about his frights and fears and dreads and understood that they were not to be taken lightly.

Caressed and cared for, he was lingering pleasantly in the outer courts of delight when Avon’s hand moved on from petting his belly and touched him more intimately. Vila froze and opened his eyes. Avon considered him for a moment, lips pursed as if in thought. Then he smiled at Vila.

“Well, now. You look as if you’re expecting me to eat you alive.”

What could Vila do? What, indeed, did he *want* to do, but succumb gracefully to Avon’s warm mouth and quicksilver tongue?

No-one could resist this, Vila thought crazily as something wonderful began to happen to him, just no-one: and I never did have any self-control.

The trouble was, even as he gave in and let the pleasure come, the sweet sound of violins swelling poignantly in his mind and his heart thudding a fervent background harmony, the nagging thought persisted that the price for happiness as great as this might just be a little too high...

But it was a glorious night, for all that, the best; Avon quick at picking up whatever he hinted he might desire, Avon a connoisseur with the rarest of tastes and the most skilful of

touches, so that in the end it came to seem to Vila that whatever he had done before, he had been merely playing: this was Passion, this was real life. As Avon kissed him, probed him and stroked him he came to life under Avon’s hands like a sculpture breathed on by a god: and found in Avon’s darkly passionate eyes all the romance he had ever craved.

“I think this is what I wanted, all along...” he said to Avon, lying like a prince in Avon’s arms, Avon’s fingers stroking through his hair. Damned he might be: but damnation was all he had, and he found it sweeter than salvation. He had killed Avon’s Psebulen: but Avon had been proven right, it was not a witch, not an evil force, just a mirror reflecting all things, for now that he had smashed it, still the vision remained. Already he yearned again for Avon’s touch, even for unspeakable things: Avon’s body deep inside his, for example, piercing him sweetly to the core.

“Of course you did,” Avon murmured to him. “You love me; naturally you want to be close to me.”

“I love you,” Vila repeated, half echoing Avon, half in wonder; for of course it seemed so obvious now. He had followed Avon for better, for worse, against all sense and reason, unable to tear himself away and seek a better life elsewhere; because he could not bear to leave Avon. Avon, with his dark eyes and darker secrets, who had come into his life with a sneer and an insult, and stood up to Blake when no-one else dared, and won his way into Vila’s heart.

Oh yes, he loved Avon.

And yet...

In this relationship, there was no question of equality: arrogant Avon calling the tune, Vila the dancer to fall exhausted at his feet.

Vila’s eyes flew open: he thought—of Tarrant. Of Blake. Of Cally, who loved Avon; of Jenna, who never had.

“I do have a choice in all this, don’t I, Avon?” he asked, bravely, unhappily.

“Of course you have a choice,” Avon snapped at him. Fire flew from his eyes and from his fingers touching Vila’s skin lightly, oh so lightly, a current sparked: Vila buried his face in Avon’s chest, so that he wouldn’t have to look into Avon’s eyes. Where once he had seen contempt for Blake’s lone stand, and now he saw Blake’s

own deathwish fanaticism. And there he fell asleep.

The Psebulen had one more dream for him.

Naked, he fled from Avon along black corridors; Avon stalked him with a gun.

As he ran, Vila heard the rush of his own scared breath, the thudding of blood in his ears. Avon's voice, milk-sweet, calling to him with an odd, lilting inflection he had never heard from Avon; at the tenderest moment of love you could not imagine Avon using this honeyed beguilement.

It was a voice which chilled Vila to the core, set a piercing snake of terror moving in his bowels, made him fall to his knees, gibbering inside with horror and fear.

At any moment, Avon was going to discover him. And then the deadly quiet waiting would become too much, and he would unclench his eyelids, to see—

The worst horror of all.

Avon, looking into his hiding place with something dreadful in his eyes.

Just as usual Vila woke up, a cold sweat of sickly fear on his skin, his panicking heart pumping relentlessly and too fast, blood knocking and thrumming in his ears as he gulped for breath; but this time was different, the nightmare had played itself out before its final curtain, and he was not alone. Avon breathed quietly beside him, warm and close, and for a moment Vila exhaled with relief, oh yes, he need not worry any more, he was safe in Avon's arms...

Safe but not free. Like shards of shattered glass caught in a loop of time and reversed, his thoughts flew together and coalesced, reforming into a pattern neat and true and ultimately terrifying.

He stood at a crossroads, that much was clear: deadly and bright as refracted glass two paths veered off in front of him, a different city at the end of each. One beckoned him: for he loved Avon desperately, and Avon wanted him, so that he could grow close to Avon, weave his own gentleness and affection into the warp and the blackness of Avon's personality. Down that way lay a short life chasing rainbows, chased by devils: a fleeting glimpse of happiness here, of success there, but life would take place in a neverending night, following Blake on the road straight down to Hell.

Or there was the other path, which he would take alone. He could turn away from Avon, deny the attraction and drive them apart; keep his distance and his options open, as he had done up to now, always nurturing that little, hopeful dream: a wife, five children, peace, love and comfort in a little house on a green and fertile planet where the sun always shone, in a town which housed the central vault of the world-wide Jewellers' Guild...

And Avon would kill him.

It might be soon or it might not be, but it was written in Fate as surely as creation and the end of time: he was destined to be caught in the backlash of Avon's insanity, stretched out on the stone altar of expedience and sacrificed.

Unless he walked the way Avon desired of him.

Vila lay awake, trembling; and deep in sleep Avon's arm tightened around him, a grip of iron, a cage around his soul and his spirit, a trap about to spring and drop the net.

Avon came suddenly awake, lifted a sleep-tousled head.

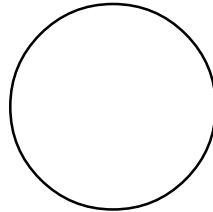
"Vila?"

His voice searched softly, in the dark. I'm here, Avon," Vila said.

For Bill and Ben: good friends.

CIRCLES

*Without beginning. Without end.
Never changing. Ever changing.
Endless cycle. Endless circle.
Circles of love and lust.*



“Lovers and Madmen: Unravelment” is the companion piece to “Ravelment.” But where the latter rests on a circular base of love, this piece is a circle breaking free from love, a circle spiraling away into the depths of madness and damnation.

Next, for a quiet change of pace is Caroline Dare’s “Tarzan and Paul d’Arnot,” a tale of gentle lust and love. What one receives is given back again and so the circle never ends.

Thence on to “Post Scriptum,” a followup story to “The Harbourmaster’s Tale” in volume one of this series. The Glaswegian envisions a slightly murky pool of unacknowledged love yielding to lust and back to love again.

And finally, there is M. Fae Glasgow’s “Sunday, Bloody Sunday.” This emotionally wrenching Professionals tale travels full circle with guilt following upon love following upon guilt following upon love in an endless cycle. You are best warned to have your handkerchiefs immediately to hand.

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LOVERS AND MADMEN: UNRAVELMENT M. FAE GLASGOW

*Lovers and madmen have such seething
brains,*

*Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.*

—Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night’s Dream—

HAPPILY REplete AFTER HIS MIDNIGHT SNACK, BLAKE DECIDED TO TAKE A QUICK TURN AROUND THE FLIGHT DECK BEFORE RETURNING TO HIS OWN BED. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Vila, rather that he knew the thief too well. Safe and sedate though this area of space might be, it still wouldn’t do to let Vila slack off to the point of sleeping whilst he should be monitoring the screens. And considering that Vila had gone sneaking down to Freedom City with Avon today, there wasn’t

even the usual minimal guarantee of sobriety. God only knew what had left Avon and Vila so bloody giddy.

He heard them before he saw them.

Avon, first, not sounding like himself, sounding as if Blake were still asleep and all this was his dream, that secret, scary dream he always hid from himself until all he could remember was that strange version of Avon’s voice. Vila, second, and then the words followed the voices, snaking inside Blake’s brain with every step forward that he took.

Sex. They were talking about sex: Avon, baring secrets to Vila; Avon, telling Vila all the human little details to which none of the others were privy.

No. Not talking about sex. Talking during sex.

Talking sexily to each other, one telling the other what he wanted. What he liked. How it felt.

Light spilled bright and warm on Blake's face, warning him that he had left the night-lit corridors and stood on the precipice of the day-lit flight deck. And there they were: standing together, so close, so terribly close, there, unashamed, unabashed, floodlit on the flight deck with sex coiling around them, serpentine, sinuous, stealing into Blake, who had thought that part of him dead, so dead, long dead.

Alive. And warm, heat rising, bringing the blush of the young man he had been to his cheeks. Heat sinking, bringing the burning blood of his youth to flood his groin and make his cock kiss sweetly at the softness of his clothes. And his eyes were wide and devouring: he was a succubus feeding in the temple of the night upon the passions of others.

They were kissing, if you could call it that, if kissing could be the term applied to this carnal image branding itself forever upon his brain. He was marked, now, as Avon's, just as Vila was surely marked, for Avon was kissing Vila as if both their lives depended upon it, eyes closed, pressed so close to Vila that his eyelashes cast their shadow upon Vila's cheeks as well as his own. Hands, white hands, trembling hands, were cradling Vila's buttocks, caressing, loving. Branding, again. Making Vila belong to him.

Blake could feel every beat of his heart surge through his cock, the pace ever faster, a tumult of blood filling him, making him achingly hard and so desperately hungry.

And Vila's hands, those hands of infinite skill and delicacy, oh, what they were doing! One, strong and sure, was twisting Avon's nipple through the smoothness of black shirt, a wrinkle of roughness rising to display Avon's reaction to such a delectable touch. And the other hand, the right hand, palm pressing so hard and flat against Avon's groin, the heat from without flowing through the fabric to reach the heat within. Then the fingers cupped, and squeezed, and Avon moaned.

Blake bit his tongue to keep his own moan stifled. He remembered being stifled, Before. Remembered them stifling him with the restraints and the gags as the electrodes descended, closer, closer, as Avon was pulling Vila closer, the science devouring Blake as Vila de-

voured Avon. Oh, he remembered, now, faced with this passion, faced with this waking dream that so oft had taken him to the brink of remembering before. Not to the brink, not this time. This time, he was awake and his mind had fuel enough in front of it to fight what the chill of science had done. Science, wielded by hands of callous cruelty, had wiped all this from him, had buried it beneath terrifying layers of the crimes they had mired him with. But this brightness before him was taking the shroud from his mind and giving him back his past.

He had been as passionate as they, once upon a time. He had been as hungry as they, often. And he had loved as much as they did, but only once. And it had been a man. He knew the feel of kissing a man, knew the flaring pleasure heralded by the sharp press of cock into his belly, knew the joys of surrendering to another man's strength. His hand slid lower, lower, still slowed by the conditioning and the rape of his memory. But the two lost in each other in front of him gave him a path to follow, leading him on through the maze, clearing away the debris and the camouflage, until he had sloughed it all as a snake sheds skin which it has outgrown. They were speaking now and as he listened, his hand unbuttoned his waistband, then opened his trousers, slipping inside to touch flesh that he had been conditioned into hating. Words, hoarse and soft and dirty came to him...

"Avon, don't, don't, we can't, not on the flight deck. What if someone finds us?"

"Who?" A pause for another kiss, Vila's arms encircling Avon, the black shirt bunched in his hands, revealing the alabaster of Avon's skin. "After all," a kiss, "Jenna," a lascivious, lingering lick the length of Vila's jaw, "and Cally," small bites and kisses on a white earlobe, turning it pink, "are enjoying their turn at having a well-deserved rest from the tedium of revolutionising the Universe. They're watching that concert production and Blake, of course, went to bed hours ago. So who is there to find us, hmm?"

"What if Blake wakes up? He's been doing that, you know, having funny dreams and then waking up to have a bit of supper. He might come across us."

"Then we shall just have to invite him to come with us then, shan't we?"

Vila eased away, far enough to see Avon

clearly and for Blake to see the need arching out from his groin, trousers tenting. “D’you mean that? That you’d ask Blake in with us?”

Avon sucked on Vila’s neck and Blake felt it upon his own, that vampiric love heating his blood, stoking him, a small flicker of flame to stir his cock. God, to think of Avon asking him to join them, to be part of them, sharing, bodies, heat, warmth, love...

“Why not? He would probably be almost human were we to fuck him into oblivion.” Another pause for kisses, Avon’s hands running up and down Vila’s back, pulling Vila’s tunic up and out of the way, baring skin to Blake’s starving eyes.

Blake thought of those hands, reaching out, to *him*. Welcoming him, bringing him into the circle charmed by Avon’s touch, a magic circle to protect him and give him back the life the Federation had embezzled from him with the false currency of planted memories. *Yes*, the thought leapt into his brain, and with it, the image of them, all three, joined together in sexual synchronicity, here, in the place that had become a home of sorts to him. Avon, reaching out... Blake took his first step forward.

“After all,” Avon said, murmuring the words against Vila’s neck, his lips brushing the skin, “we certainly have enough to go round, haven’t we, and charity does begin at home.”

The phrase thudded into him, unheard voices and unseen faces blossoming suddenly in his mind, the scars the Federation had left ripping open, the festering pus pulsing out. It had taken so little, a time bomb waiting to go off when the right words triggered it. All it took was the phrasing, the framework to hold the meaning in place, culminating in the rebirth of all the poison the puppeteers had left behind when they had stolen his memory. The blow was almost physical, visceral, certainly eviscerating in its emotional impact, all his pleasant hopes and anticipations ambushed by the lessons learned at the hands of the psychomanipulators. The conditioning told him that Avon and Vila were not welcoming him then, oh no, not him. There was no truth in Avon’s tone of indulgent affection, nor in Vila’s willingness to do whatever kept Avon happy. It was none of that cornucopia of love that they were offering. No. It was charity, pity. Everything the butchers had claimed would be his

lot, if he were stupid enough to reach out and trust to the goodness of others. After all, as the puppeteers always said, there was no goodness in others, only pity and contempt and deception.

“After what the Federation did to him,” Avon pounded the final nail into his own coffin, “he should be bloody good at getting screwed.”

And Vila laughed. The bastard laughed, amused by Avon’s wit and Blake’s pain. Black humour be damned—it was only ever funny to those not suffering from it.

Blake felt the passion in him change, metastasise into something different, growing dark, fetid, rank. It growled up his spine, crawling through him, this new memory forming before his eyes to marry into the family of bitter old memories this night had unchained. Hope, then, twisted torturously into the other side of the coin, bringing to him not Pandora’s only gift, but rather every single last one of her curses. And they were all there for Blake to pick and choose from as he stood there, his cock still snubbing sweetly against his trousers, his balls heavy and warm pressed against his thigh. His eyes narrowed as he watched the two men and where once there had been envy of their love, where once there had been longing to share it, now Pandora’s little presents took those places, jealousy and pestilence aimed where they could do the most damage.

For if Avon would offer him pity, then Blake would show him no mercy.

And if Vila would offer him laughter, he would offer back tears.

And if the two of them rubbed his nose in this love of theirs, then he would show them hate.

No one pitied Blake: he’d been victim enough and never again. If there was one thing he’d learned from his ‘treatments’, it was that. Never let anyone wipe his feet on you, no matter what pretty name he gave it. And if Avon thought he knew just how much the Federation had screwed Blake over, then Blake was willing to give the arrogant, condescending bastard a little first-hand experience of the joys of sex, Federation style. If that was what the two of them wanted, if that was the kind of crap they were going to heap upon his head in the name of charity, then Blake would show them just how sweet such charity could be.

To the sounds of soft murmurings, he turned from the light and the heat and walked away, anger bandaging his wounds up so that he himself could never see them.

The vast majority of people, if asked, would reply that the Federation's most powerful weapon was the space fleet. They would, of course, be wrong. It was something far more complex than the mere technology of war. The Federation's greatest weapon in its constant battle to control the masses was that most insidious weapon of all: the human subconscious. And oh, how they had honed that particular weapon in Blake. It ate at him, just as it was supposed to do: distorted and mirrored into darkness away from the brightness of sanity. Only the sewage remained, all the pollution left by the psychomanipulators to corrupt in their absence and it worked so well, long after the 'scientists' had any interest left in the experiment. So Blake huddled the hatred and the fear and the pain to his breast, nursing it as a mother nurses her stillborn babe, unable—unwilling—to cope with reality and feel any more pain, when there had been more than enough already. His mind lay fallow over the sores of his subconscious, allowing wounded fear full rein, reigning over all the good that remained, all the good that could respond to the vivacity of others without the tsunami desire to destroy. To destroy. That was all Blake wanted now, now that he knew what would lie behind any invitation to join that particular dance. His teeth ached with the hunger to rend flesh from flesh, bone from bone, as he thought of Avon and Vila tangled sweatily in their loving—the loving from which their mocking pity had forever excluded him. And like a child with its nose pressed against the rich man's window, the solitary Blake hated them for their unthinking wealth.

And so he lay there in the dark womb of his cabin and plotted death. Not true death, the cessation of the body, no. That was too simple, too clean—too generous. Death of a different sort. Death far harsher than the ending of life. He wanted nothing less than the destruction of what they had. An ending to this comfortable haven Avon had found, an ending to the love that soothed his lonely pain. An ending to Vila's pride-filled happiness at having a man like Avon

care about him. An ending to that obscene joy they had so lasciviously lavished upon each other. Yes. Not Death then, but rather, a fate worse than death...

Every great leader has to have the talent to recognise—and use—other people's strengths and weaknesses and despite what Avon said, Blake was a truly gifted leader. After all, he had managed to get Avon himself to follow, hadn't he? And so, quietly, prosaically, Blake began to dismantle Avon and Vila in his mind, cataloguing them, sifting through the daily minutiae, discarding the interesting but useless and carefully notating the interesting and definitely useful: such as his own instinctive understanding of how to get Vila to betray Avon. In the darkness of his mind, he could hear his own voice again, spurred by the Federation conditioning, fed by his own knowledge.

Avon and Cally have paired off together.

So easy, then, to sway Vila, to find the chink in his particular armour. Which left only the carrot on the end of the stick, the one thing that Vila would never be able to resist.

Why does it always have to be me, that's what I want to know.

The comment they all expected so much that none of them even heard the meaning any more. Control. Vila's endless and unheeded complaints about his lack of control. So. Convince him that Avon was being disloyal, that Avon didn't care as much as Vila hoped—use Vila's own fear of self-delusion against him—then offer him something that Avon steadfastly denied him: power.

And that left Avon, the cipher. Blake tossed the covers aside, getting up, restlessness ambushing him. Rubbing the back of his neck, he paced his room, needing to move, but not needing to run the risk of coming across Avon and Vila indulging themselves. Or, perhaps worse, gentle together in the afterglow. For a moment, the thought of them like that, so vulnerable, so strong when made a unit, gave him pause, gave birth to the question of why he was doing this, why he had to destroy something which had so much goodness to it. He couldn't see the reason for it, suddenly, shockingly, couldn't understand himself, couldn't even begin to comprehend why the hell he would want to destroy not just what Avon and Vila had, but the men themselves.

He slapped the light on full-bright, staring in wide-eyed horror at his cabin, using the sights of familiarity to prove that he was still himself. He collapsed back onto the bed, cradling his pain-burning head in shaken hands, his skin clammy and chilled, fear crawling in his belly like worms in the dead.

What the hell was wrong with him? What the hell was happening to him? To want to rend, dismember, just because he had seen two people he liked—almost in spite of themselves—displaying affection and passion that should have made him envious at worst...where was the sanity in that? They had done nothing—nothing—to deserve that. But he had wanted to destroy, with a hunger that left him weak. They hadn't even tried to exclude him, had offered to bring him in, let him join them...

"No, don't leave that part unaltered. A rebel without people he can trust is nothing more than a maniac. Manipulate the brain here—" and there was a touch on his head, a warm contrast to the low-metallic chill of the operating table under his skin— "and here also. Best to make sure his self-image is so pickled that he'll reject everyone out of hand. No, no, not there. That would just stop him from feeling love. You need to learn how to turn the mind against itself without the patient ever knowing he's been altered. So an incision here, to scar this lobe and then follow up with, oh, let's say three sessions just to make sure. This one is so bloody stubborn, a proper nuisance. Oh, did I tell you that Grace and I are going on holiday to..."

And he lay there, listening to holiday plans and discussions of dinner and the latest sports scores while they played with his mind, re-orchestrating him to respond to certain instruments and to recoil from old familiar feelings that he cherished so well. He set his will to fight them, clenching his jaw even through the relaxation of the anaesthesia, throwing up battlements to protect the treasures of his memories and his feelings. But, like sand through his fingers, he lost his memories, one by one; his emotions were re-woven into a tapestry where he didn't even fully recognise the colours and it mattered not one whit how hard he struggled, for every time he tried to fight his tormentors they were already there, playing with him, toying with him, ripping him to shreds whilst they laughed at and joked about

prosaic events in their lives after they were finished with this boring operation. He could feel every cell the laser snipped, could feel every probe they attached, could feel it all through the cool dreamtime of the drugs they had embalmed him with. His nerves were dead to pain even as they prepared him for the living death that was his sentence, but his intellect was alive and screaming, his soul hoarse with agony as he felt his mind gelded into submission.

And then the psychosurgeons left him and warmth began to seep in through his toes, creeping up his legs, becoming a tide of life, and he found he could move his feet, could flex his knees, could feel a warped and weakened control return. He felt his rebelliousness flutter and struggle to metaphoric feet and then...a hiss, so faint he almost missed it and there were more hands, rougher, less trained, the hands of technicians, which were moving him as if they were the local butcher preparing the Sunday joint of the Outer Rim worlds; hands which were lifting him, arranging him, dressing him, covering his body with wires and conducting nuggets of metal that burned him with their cold. Then the hands again, warm as humanity, cold as cruelty, were positioning him just so, very precisely, exactly and mechanically, with the frightening ease of long practice. Voices, then, or rather, a single voice heard through every cell of his being. It was a voice that he would remember, with its call to renounce. But then the other voice began, the one that lay hidden and coy behind the voice that commanded. The voice that told him the bitter truths about those who proffer trust. The pain-filled truths about those who offer friendship. Words to teach him how to deal with people who offered him those falsehoods. Words to teach him how to react to the lies that people named love.

"NO!" he screamed, the word ricocheting in solitary confinement in his room. "No!" he screamed again, to give it companionship, to fill the room with his noise, with his rebellion, with his refusal to yield. He would not give up being human, for without his humanity he could not lead a Rebellion that would truly succeed. Without his humanity, without compassion, he could not avoid the trap of absolute power corrupting absolutely. Without love, he could not possibly temper his revenge with compassion. And without those goodnesses, he would be nothing more

than what the Federation wanted him to be: the maniacal revolutionary hidden behind the tractable clay figurine they had made him and thus, someone who would find followers, for a time. Until the believers were sickened by the cruelty he would commit.

“Oh, you think you’re so fucking clever,” he said to them, the abusers he could still feel pressing the electrodes into his skin, “doing this to me. If the first level of conditioning fails, why then just plant a control signal in me so that you can whistle and I’ll come running like a well trained dog. And if *that* should fail, why then just slip a fail-safe in there, just to make sure.” He fell to his knees, the heels of his hands pressed painfully hard to his temples, to the spot where the faintest of circular scars still glistened tarnished silver under the skin. “And,” the words seeped from him, muffled, mumbled, his tongue thick and heavy in his dry mouth, “then if I should break free enough from you, or if someone should offer me any kind of caring, then you’ll have me destroy myself, won’t you? Without people, a leader is nothing more than a despot and the masses would overthrow me, that’s what you think, isn’t it, you bastards? But you’re wrong. I know what you’re up to, I know what you’re trying to do to me. I can beat you, I can get you out of my skull. Oh, so clever, you thought you were, didn’t you? Had to be real caring to trigger it, didn’t it? Anything else you could make me distrust, make me think it’s nothing more than lust, the way it is with Jenna. But to leave me so that anyone I needed enough to *want* to see them care for me, oh, that’s what you made my trigger, isn’t it? A built-in self-destruct code for untamed rebels. You couldn’t control me, so you’ll destroy me, will you?”

He lumbered to his feet, blinking heavily, slowly, blindness crawling in from the far corners of the room, stealing his light away from him, darkening his vision until all he could see was a pin-prick of light at the end of a tunnel. And then that was gone, too, and he stumbled, falling, landing clumsily as if terminally drunk. In his mouth, his breath tasted like the stench of a man long dead, his words slurred, and his heartbeat plodded along his veins, its dim thrum filling his ears with the slowness of coma. But still he would not yield, would not become the destroyer they had made of him. Would not.

“Won’t, won’t, won’t won’t won’twon’twon’t...”
Silence. Cold. Still.

Alone.

A breath. Ragged, raw, a saw splintering flesh.
“NOOoo...”

And it was gone.

A husk lay there on the floor where Blake had fallen: solid as a rock and just as alive. Until it moved, crawling, kneeling, stumbling to its feet, reeling a little at the height. A pause. A step. Then there was light returning to the eyes, intelligence to the mind, and the determination to destroy Avon for his pity-filled and pitiful offer and make Vila pay for his reluctance in wanting Blake.

And far far away, deep under the knives and voices of the Federation, a small dying soul cried bitter tears of loneliness.

The man who had once been Roj Blake pressed the door release and walked forth, smile firmly in place over the skullshead grin.

The place to begin, obviously, was with the weaker link.

Avon.

Avon, with his pride to hide his vulnerability, his badge of courage hiding a heart that had an unfortunate talent for bleeding. Blake remembered the conversation after their meeting with Del Grant. Avon had been so fractious, so fragile, so brittle, telling him that Blake wouldn’t understand. But Blake did understand. The blood-lust the Federation had implanted in him gurgled and bubbled, whispering to him that which he needed to compound his understanding. Find the weakness. Remember the bone-aching loneliness that lingered in Avon after his forced reminiscence of Anna, the hovering despair before Vila could soothe it all away for him... Remember Avon, glancing coyly at Blake when told ‘get back to your position’. He had been sullen, so sullen—but enjoying it, submitting to it, doing as he was told.

So.

Weakness then, in the face of emotion and the desire to have all the responsibilities lifted from his shoulders. And guilt, of course, there was always the lever of guilt, the crowbar to pry Avon open, cracking that shell and exposing the soft, sweet flesh ripe for Blake to devour.

“Avon,” he called from the doorway of the rest

room, startling the man engrossed in his reading and his meal.

"I'm rather busy, Blake, can't the Revolution stagger on without me at least until after I've finished dinner?"

"Oh, I'm sure the Revolution can manage perfectly well without you." There was a sharp edge to the glance turned on him. "Until after dinner, that is. Then...well, there's something that you and I need to have a word about."

"Surely you mean that there's something you and I are going to have words over?"

"Must it degenerate into an argument, Avon? Are you really so certain that we can't even manage a civil conversation?"

"When you approach me with all the charm of a cannibal, no, I don't think we can manage a civil conversation. You, in fact, can't even manage a conversation because conversation implies that both parties listen to each other and that is something you would *never* choose to do. After all, if you listened to me, you might actually realise how wrong you are about finding Star One."

Blake leaned comfortably against the door-jamb, blatantly—spuriously—at ease. He cocked his head, nibbled on a finger then smiled at Avon, making the other man decidedly uneasy. "Tell me," Blake said with more than a touch of whimsy to his voice, thereby warning Avon of danger—the more reasonable the tone these days the more unreasonable the words—"how you can be such a vicious bastard here and now when a few hours ago you were so wonderfully...*good* to Vila?"

Avon paled, rivalling chalk. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"What?" Blake said, coloratura with innocence. "How soon we forget. Really, shame on you, Avon, to forget Vila's...charms so quickly. But you," he straightened up, preparing to leave, his movement punctuating his words, "would never forget me so quickly. In fact, Avon, you'd never forget me at all. In my cabin, after dinner. I'll talk to you then."

And he walked away, presenting only his broad back to Avon's incredulous stare.

Vila, next, on his way to his cabin, so a brief detour to the lower hold, where the thief should be lending a hand to Jenna. And yes, judging by the voices, Vila was certainly present. There

seemed to be some dispute, however, as to whether or not he was lending a hand or merely adding insult to injury.

"Vila, can't you do that properly? Look, I've told you till I'm sick of the sound of my own voice, but I'll tell you once more. God, Avon must kill you sometimes."

"Oh, I don't know, he seems to think that Vila's hands can be quite talented," Blake said before Vila could draw breath to speak. "Doesn't he, Vila?" And Blake felt warmth blossom amidst the chill as the innuendo of his words wormed their way under Vila's defences. He could actually see the moment the doubt began, could actually see it take root. Judiciously, he applied fertiliser. "For a Delta, he seems to think you're really quite good...at what you do, doesn't he?"

Jenna glowered at him, not liking this one ounce. Free traders—smugglers, pirates—didn't hold with Federation policy on samesexers or bisexers and she wasn't about to let even Blake start on Vila. "We'll leave that between Vila and Avon, shan't we, Blake," she said, warning, not questioning. And when Blake didn't respond, doing nothing more than stare at Vila, "*Shan't* we, Blake?"

"Oh, absolutely," he said, dropping a benevolent smile on her, "absolutely. Anyway, glad to see everything going so well. I must be off—Avon is apparently coming to my cabin after he's dined. Seems to have something he needs to talk to me about. I'll see you both in the morning then."

And he left, leaving Vila his mire of doubts and Jenna with some dark thoughts indeed. Most of them involving killing Avon if he did what she thought the rotten sod was going to do. And that was nothing to what she would do to Blake...

"You wanted to see me?" Avon's voice carried farther into the room than the light from the corridor did. "Oh, come on, Blake, these amateur dramatics may be precisely your level, but frankly, I'm used to better. What was all that crap in the rest room earlier? Or am I supposed to stand here silhouetted like a target while you take pot-shots at me?"

The door shut behind Avon, so close he felt the movement of air upon his skin. Absolute darkness descended upon him, suffocatingly

warm, the touch of blood. Blake's eyes, already adapted, could see Avon's sharp gasp when the man found he could barely breathe, suddenly stifled by the thick air, a prickle of sweat erupting under leather clothes, and Blake knew how that would be irritating his skin. Blake stood stock still, allowing not a sign from him to disturb the flawless oppression surrounding Avon. He simply waited for Avon to break.

"Blake," Avon snapped, "you really don't need cheap side-show special effects, you are quite tawdry enough already. Why don't you simply show yourself and tell me the ridiculous price you want me to pay to keep you quiet about what you saw on the flight deck?"

Not a word.

"What is it I've to do? Kill Servalan? Or Travis, perhaps you'd prefer him. Ah, no, of course not. Me. You want my head served up to you on a silver platter—suitably seasoned, of course. Well? All right, that's enough. I've no intention of playing your pathetic little games. I shall, unfortunately, see you on the flight deck tomorrow."

The door wouldn't open. Not to voice, not to hand, not to manual override.

Blake spoke, a word as solitary as he felt himself to be.

"Avon."

Seductive as night, it shivered up Avon's spine, stirring atavistic feelings usually kept chained in the dark.

"You're not leaving until I tell you to."

"Really? And what do you base that absurd flight of fancy on?"

Light was born, warm and yellow, soft, glowing, but clear enough.

They both heard Avon's sudden intake of breath, the audible gasp of surprise. And, they both knew, of arousal.

Blake simply stood there, hands on hips, arms akimbo, naked, monumental. He had been exercising, his muscles pumped up, skin warm and moist, cock rising from the curling profusion at his groin.

Avon stared, swallowed once, swallowed again, found his voice. "What the hell's this supposed to be? The great seduction from the great and fearless leader? Is that it? Now that you've discovered I have sex with men as well as women, you've decided to use your manly fig-

ure to keep me chained to your side?" Insolently, he stared at Blake, examining him from the roots of his hair to the tips of his toes, with a contemptuous lingering in the middle. "Sorry," he said, drawing the word out all the better to display his disdain, "but you lack the necessary equipment."

"Seduction, Avon? I wouldn't waste my time on that. I have no intention of catering to *your* desires. The only thing I'm interested in is satisfying myself. So strip. I'm tired of waiting."

"Strip? Just like that, I'm supposed to strip? And then what? On my knees, presumably, to pay homage to my great leader? Hardly." And Avon stood in front of the door, something out of his control behind him, someone out of his control in front of him. The quicksand was rising and he was sinking, with nothing in sight for him to hold on to.

"On your knees, certainly, and for more than just sucking my prick. I'm going to fuck you. In fact, Avon, I'm going to fuck you so hard you won't be able to sit down for a month without remembering me up you. And I'm going to fuck you so hard, you'll come running back for more."

"I don't get fucked." Flat, unequivocal, voice steady to hide the adrenaline rushing through him.

"Oh, I couldn't agree more. No one fucks you, Avon. No one but *me*."

"Really? And don't you think I should have some say in the matter?"

"Quite frankly, no. Now get out of those clothes and onto the bed."

"And if I don't? What then, Blake?"

"I shall simply do what you have been pushing me to do for the past two years. I shall beat you into submission so that you can enjoy it without the guilt you'd feel with Vila. And I can and will beat you, Avon, if you want to go that far. I'm going to have you, I'm going to take what's mine. I'm finally," he took a step forward, leaving the light, his frame limned now by gold, his face utterly out of Avon's sight, "going to take what you have been teasing me with the entire time I've known you. Now, what's it to be, hmm? A little bit of rough stuff, or do you want me to hurt you and then rape you? Well, Kerr? Which do you prefer?"

"I'd prefer you to remember that you have no right to use my first name and..."

Blake nodded and started speaking before Avon could finish. "Beaten into submission it shall be, then. Next time, though, Kerr, don't wear the leather when you come for your session. Cloth tears much better for rape games." And he found himself grinning ferally at the fear and arousal he saw in Avon's eyes. Felt himself harden as he wrenched at Avon's tunic, pulling it half off to pin Avon's arms before the ever-so genteel Alpha had realised what was genuinely, honestly going to happen to him. By the edge of desire in those eyes, it was so wonderfully obvious to Blake that Avon had never actually been raped, had only his fantasies to fuel him and that... He stopped himself, reining himself in. No, no, no. Rape would never do. It needed to be a seduction, albeit rough, needed to be the one thing Avon craved and would never approach Vila for. Yes, slowly, now, he told himself, seduce him with the power of submission. Seduce him with the sweet sting of pain, the kind of thing he could never approach Vila for, Blake thought, ignorant, as Avon surely was not, of what life for a Delta thief in and out of prison had been...

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So give him pain's gentle kiss, bring his darkest fantasies out into the light and praise them, feed them, make them too strong to be shoved back down into the vault in which he stifles them. Seduce and then Avon would be destroyed and his threat with him.

Had they known Blake's plan, the psychomanipulators would have been so tremendously proud of their prodigal son. As it was, no one but Blake himself knew and not even he retained enough of himself to know *why* he was so desperate to do this.

Avon was staring up at him and it pleased Blake to note that despite words of protest, despite claims to the contrary, despite the resolutely recalcitrant expression on his face, Avon had made himself smaller, folding in upon himself, slouching a little, almost as Vila did. He was making himself secondary to Blake, the unspoken language of his body telling Blake to do it, to force him, he was ready, he wanted it...

So Blake stood before him, naked, rampant, powerful, Avon's arms held captive by the supple strength of his own leather jacket while Avon himself was held captive by that long dormant desire to yield, winning Blake's battle for him.

The jacket secured to Blake's liking, Avon's arms neatly pinned at the elbow, holding those lethal hands well out of reach for the time being, Blake began the serious business of seducing Avon. Where else to begin but with that mouth, the one that so often reviled but even more often lured with the sweet bow of lips, with the sharpness of witty words, with the alluring curve of a smile. Blake leaned forward, aware of having to bend, just a fraction, to claim that mouth for his own, breathing against Avon's skin, his tongue painting the artistry of those lips, gently, oh, gently for that was the last thing Avon was expecting and probably the only thing he was completely unprepared to fight. Ah, yes, there it was, the small breath of surprise and the tightly-clamped lips eased, for an instant only, but Blake was waiting and passed through, his tongue entering the other man's body, tasting Avon, tasting the savoury sweetness of him, feeling his warmth and wetness. Smooth, smooth planes of teeth, prehensile tongue, satin of gum. And all of it his, to plunder as he chose for Avon was open under him, breathing with him, meeting him half-way, melting into him, open, open, open...

He almost didn't move in time, the sharp jab of knee catching him painfully on his inner thigh, millimetres from the tender target.

"You little bastard," he said, dangerously mild, one hand coming up to wring Avon's hair, pulling his head back, exposing the gleaming white of throat. His other hand reached down, lower, lower, and he watched the knowledge flare in Avon's eyes, watched as Avon remembered when Blake had blown a ship up, watched as Avon remembered that this was the man who was willing to stand back and let millions die rather than give Avon the last few seconds to defuse the planetary bomb. He watched and grew hard, revelling in this, the power making him drunk.

And when his right hand reached its goal, Avon was just as hard as Blake was. The power had intoxicated him, too, this being at the mercy of someone who would indeed force him into submission, someone who would indeed let the Wagnerian side of his personality out, where Vila wanted only the pretty tunes of light opera. Oh, yes, the rawness of it, the raunch, was intoxicating in its freedom, albeit very different free-

doms for each one of them. Blake heard himself laugh, saw fear flicker once more in Avon's eyes, saw it flare a little higher as Blake squeezed tender flesh harder and harder until pain replaced the fear.

"Stop!"

"No."

"Blake, I told you to stop it."

"And I said no. Come on, Avon, you're no innocent. You know how we play this. Ask nicely and perhaps I won't rip your balls off."

Stubborn silence, but it lasted only an instant as Blake's fingers dug into nerves and tissue. "All right, all right. Please, Blake, let go of me."

"No."

Wide eyes then, wild, too, but wise enough to play Blake's game. "Please, Blake, you're really hurting me."

"And isn't that what this is all about, Kerr?"

Comprehension and a surge of defiance, all of it deflated by one vicious twist of Blake's wrist. "Blake!" Blake eased the pressure, giving Avon a chance to gape in some breath, a chance to get his voice under control.

"Yes, Kerr?" he asked ever so sweetly, one sharp finger probing tender spots through leather that did little to protect. "What is it? Thought of something that I might want to hear from you?"

"Yes, I admit this is what the damned thing is all about, but you're giving me more pain than I want."

"Ah, that's more like it. A bit of honesty never hurts, does it now, Kerr? But you're still not behaving properly. I'm surprised at you. I was sure you knew the etiquette for every situation."

A brief tensing of muscles, counteracted by the threatening grab of Blake's hand. "You're right, of course." A pause, weighted, fulcrum between the past and what would come to pass. A moment, a thought, and then the possibilities were lost forever and the path chosen, for better or worse. Avon added the one word that sealed all their fates. "Sir."

"Now isn't that better, Kerr, old boy? Doesn't that," a deft flick of his hand and the seal was opened, fingers delving in to find hot flesh, "feel much better? Here, let me get at you, let me see you..." Avon glared at him, staring hard as Blake peeled his trousers off, exposing him to the ra-

pacious hunger in Blake's eyes. "Beautiful," Blake whispered, absolutely honestly, One blunt finger stroked the length of Avon's arching cock. "Small wonder Vila's been quite content to stay with you, even if you never let him fuck you. But then," a sharp glance up to meet the equal sharpness that was Avon, "he'd never expect to fuck you, would he? Not a lowly Delta with an Alpha elite, hmm? Tell me, Kerr, has he ever tried it?"

No answer but obduracy. Until Blake traced the edge of his nail up the underside of Avon's cock, stopping at the opening of the slit, the sharpness of his nail threatening the unprotected flesh.

"I asked you a question, Kerr."

"No, of course he's never bloody tried to fuck me."

"Where's 'of course' in that? He is a man, isn't he? He must want to be on top sometimes. Yet you won't let him. Tell me, Kerr, do you make up for it elsewhere? Do you suck him? Or rim him? Is that what you do to take his mind off the fact that you won't let him fuck you? Do you let him feel you lick his asshole? D'you do that for him when you want to fuck him, hmm, Kerr? Is that what you bribe him with?"

This time, the silence was even briefer, the incipient threat not yet removed. "He's never made a move to fuck me, so none of that's ever come up."

"Forgive me if I think you're lying, Kerr. He wants it, I know he does. And you know it, too. You've just never bothered to do anything about it, have you, you selfish little sod?"

"He never wanted to."

A crack echoing through the room, Avon's white face turning red all down the one side, the one side where Blake's hand had crashed into him. "Don't you dare use that tone of voice in here with me! Ever! Do you hear me, Kerr?"

Avon glowered at him, pointed tip of tongue flickering to catch the rill of blood.

Then Blake was there, lapping at the blood, drinking the few droplets into himself, taking Avon within, mingling them, bloodbrothers in the sins of the flesh. And just as Avon was sinking under the onslaught of that laving tongue, teeth bit as if he were nothing more than succulent meat on the table. The pain receded and Blake repeated his question, his fist raised ready

for the strike. “Yes!” the words bled from Avon from the unlanded blow, “Yes!” And then he added, a tripped heartbeat later. “Sir.”

“Good, Kerr, very good. Now that we’ve got you clear on that, let us leave the question of Vila aside for the moment. As you are so fond of telling me, action is what I do best. And talking is something you do far too much of.” Blake picked the bit-gag up from where he had left it in anticipation, fixing it to Avon, dodging kicks and attempted bites every inch of the way. But with his arms trapped behind his back and his heart not exactly in the struggle, Avon was absolutely no match for Blake, collapsing back onto the bed, literally bound and gagged.

“That’s not too tight, is it now?” Blake asked, running a solicitous finger over the gag and down Avon’s throat, his touch seductive and sexy. He was well aware that the see-saw variations in his behaviour were throwing Avon completely off-balance, but that was part of it all, too. He had to do that to Avon, had to remove all control, up to and including his ability to comprehend the situation. Keep him off balance, keep him all asea and this whole thing would work. And then the threat would be gone and Blake would still be whole. Or at least that’s what the voice in his head—the voice he called his conscience—told him.

Avon complied, but still there was that tension there, that edge of disobedience that Blake had to commandeer to his own purposes. He smiled to himself, knowing precisely how to do it and knowing just how much he, at least, was going to enjoy it. Lumped untidily on the bed in front of him, Avon lay tangled in his jacket, trousers lowered to mid-thigh, the black hair of his groin a perfect match for the blackness of his leather—and the blackness of his glower. Avon would ultimately yield, they both knew that, but what it boiled down to was whether or not Blake had what it would take to force Avon’s hand. It all came down to whether or not Blake really could lead.

“You look stupid like that,” Blake said, quite kindly really, given the circumstances. He bent down to haul Avon’s boots and socks off, his hands steady and impersonal, refusing Avon even the dignity of personhood. He was nothing more than a body to be used as Blake saw fit. But not without a fight, no, not yet...

The footwear dispensed with, Blake reached up to pull Avon’s trousers off, not bothering to look Avon in the eye, paying no attention as he wrenched the tight clothes down and off. The sharp kick caught him off guard, all the air whooshing out of him at the strength of the blow. Staggered, he fell to the floor. He grabbed at Avon, catching a flash of white limb as Avon lurched past him, another kick glancing off his jaw, another kick missing entirely as Blake pulled him down, flat on his back on the floor. More aroused than ever, Blake plastered his body over Avon’s, pinning him, his legs scissored around to stop Avon’s vicious flailings, arms pressed down to stop Avon from heaving him off.

“Lovely fight, Kerr, don’t stop. It’s always the better for a good fight first, isn’t it? Oh, yes, feel that,” he whispered close to Avon’s ear, his breath tickling even as his hand grasped Avon’s hardened cock. “You do enjoy a good fight. So I was right after all, about all the fights and arguments on the flight deck. Fuel a lot of fantasies, did I, Kerr? Did you think about me putting you in your place whilst your hand squeezed and stroked and petted your prick, is that what you did? And what about poor little Vila, hmm? What would *he* say if he knew the dirty, nasty little fantasies you like? Run a mile, would he?” Blake’s hand forced its way between thighs pressed virgin-tight together, pushing between lean muscles, hair brushing at him. Then his fingers found a bud of flesh, flesh that would open and spread for him soon. And Avon moaned when his fingertip slid home. “Ah, so you like that, do you? You won’t let a Delta fuck you, but you’d come just with my finger up you. Now there’s an idea, isn’t it, Kerr. I could always fist you, couldn’t I, and there’s not a damned thing you could do about it.”

He was rewarded with a flurry of real fear in Avon’s eyes and a sudden pulse of intense arousal through Avon’s cock. He leaned down again, licking wetly at the gag and the skin that bordered it, his open mouth kissing wetly every available inch of Avon’s face. “But I don’t think I fancy fisting you, Kerr, not today anyway. Too many messy preparations for me and plus,” he rubbed the knuckles of his closed fist against Avon’s arse, making Avon arch with pleasure as the hard nodes pressed with exquisite threat

against his tenderest spot, “I want to fuck you. I want to feel my cock slide into you, I want to split you with my cock. I want to *own* you.”

Avon bucked up against him, trying to rub his cock against Blake, trying to get more sensation and Blake laughed outright. Both his hands came down to Avon’s groin, one grabbing his cock, one pressing on his balls, separating them, feeling their heat on his fingers, their fragility exhilarating. He snatched them up, holding them tight, twisting the ball-sac round and up, until it was almost over Avon’s cock.

And all Avon could do was hiss with the pain and the pleasure, arching his back, flushing as it got better and better, Blake’s knowing hands and knowing smile giving him everything he wanted.

Not that Avon was about to stop struggling, for the struggle was the placebic panacæa he would feed his conscience when it once more knocked on the back of his mind, demanding entry. So he twisted—but carefully, obviously mindful of the hand locked around his balls—and turned his face away from Blake, the defiance such that chastisement was guaranteed. And Blake was never one to disappoint a follower.

“Oh-ho, so that’s the way of it, is it, Kerr old boy?” The hands abandoned him, landing with a flat crack on his ribs, shocking him. Then Blake gripped the edge of Avon’s ubiquitous black shirt and slowly, hands sliding up Avon’s smooth skin in a parody of a caress, ripped the fabric with the lethargic sound of an icefloe breaking away. Avon glared hotly, but Blake simply smiled, revelling in the control, just as Avon was awash in the luxury of this particular defeat. Skin bared beneath his hands and teeth, Blake turned white flesh pink with his touches, sharp bites, slow pinching of fingers, playing Avon for the fine instrument he was under the hands of a master.

Then Blake saw the hunger in those dark eyes, saw the guilt, saw what he had to feed and what he had to starve to make Avon’s conversion complete, to turn Avon completely aside from the pleasant normality of his relationship with Vila. Saw what it would take to turn pleasure to poison for Avon and forever bar him from Vila. Or so Avon would think, anyway...

In a dialect of the more usual language of lovers, Avon brought his knee up in empty threat, egging Blake on, urging him, pushing at him.

And Blake, of course, knew precisely what was required of him, for he had, after all, learned his lessons tremendously well. He grabbed Avon’s hips, turning him over, manhandling him with rough hands around his middle and on his rump. He moved Avon’s body to fit his whim, shoving this thigh here, that knee there, until Avon, gasping, lay on the bed, precisely as Blake wanted him. Avon’s face was twisted sideways into the coverings, allowing him to breath. His nipples were pressed into the covers, black shirt flapping open, jacket taut and tight. Blake licked his lips at the sight of Avon’s muscles that were bunched with tension, so white against all the black. So inviting, so tender...

“I won’t have you hitting me, Kerr,” Blake said, getting up onto the bed behind Avon, not coming too close to those emasculating feet. “No, I won’t tolerate that at all. I’m not even sure whether or not I’ll even put up with you arguing with me in front of the others.” Such a terrible tension burning through Avon at that and Blake knew he really had him now, really had him held captive. A man who wanted to submit as much as Avon did, a man who ran from it as much as Avon did, was a man who feared his ability to keep the submission in the bedroom, a man who feared his own sexuality and the power it had over him. Oh, yes, Blake had him now. Time, he thought, to sow the seeds of doubt that would eventually devour Avon. Time to take away his self-determination.

“But perhaps I’ll let you do that for another little while, hmm, Kerr? Though you’ll have to pay the penalty here and now, won’t you, petal? Oh, yes, you’ll have to take your lumps, as we used to say when I was a boy. And when you were a boy,” he said, lying down on Avon’s back, his own hard cock grinding into the cleft of Avon’s arse, one hand stroking satin flank, “did you take your lumps, Kerr old boy? Did you take it like a man, standing up with the cane slashing you, or did you get it like a boy, bent over and spanked?”

Gagged, there was no answer Avon could possibly give, not that there was one Blake would have listened to. The decision was already made,

had been made when his conditioning had kicked in. Had been made years ago when the psychomanipulator had filled him with that man's self-same desires. Had been made when Avon hadn't fought as viciously as only he was capable.

Blake stared at him, waiting, gauging the anticipation building in Avon, watching patiently until the tiny tremors of arousal began to shiver down Avon's skin, and then, only then, did Blake begin. Palm flat and slightly moist—to sting all the more sweetly—he slapped one beautifully hollowed buttock. A heartbeat, to listen to the muffled gasp that escaped Avon. Then another smack, the sound of it dancing around the room, exciting both the men sculptured on the bed, the light touching them warmly as Blake made Avon's arse warm with his touch. And yet more slaps, spanking into Avon, jolting through him into his cock, surging back up into Blake every time his hand whacked into rich flesh. Hot now, so hot, bright red against his hand, the heat inflaming him, the redness calling to him, demanding more, and more and more. He kept on, the rhythm steady now, arm rising and falling, Avon's gasps rising and falling, sweat beading Blake to drop onto Avon, to mingle with the wetness of his flesh. And still Blake kept on, until the rosy glow had swollen up, all the nerves screaming and sighing, setting Avon alive.

And Blake didn't stop.

Not until his own cock was crying to him, not until his own hunger to possess had surpassed Avon's hunger to be possessed.

Then, and only then, did he stop.

Silence descended, drawing a curtain over them until the loudness of Avon's panting breath, belaboured with an agony of pleasure, brought them out once more. Blake's fingers splayed wide to cover his handiwork, brown hands over reddened skin, slipping smoothly in the glowing heat. Avon was kneeling before him like a dog on heat waiting to be mounted, and he was all Blake's. Not Vila's. Just Blake's, to do with as he pleased until he cast Avon off and eviscerated the risk embodied by this man waiting for him. Belonging to him. Desperate for him, balls drawn up tight, arse red, legs wide. Blake slid his thumbs into the crack of Avon's arse, ruffling through the faintness of hair that was cradled there. There was a smallness of flesh, a

tiny gateway into Avon's body and that was where Blake was going to shove his cock. He looked down at himself, at the largeness that was him then at the smallness that was Avon.

"This is what it all comes down to, isn't it, Kerr? Who gets to fuck whom, who gets to be on top. Do you look at Vila when he's like this, Kerr? Do you look at him, look at how small his arse is and how big your cock is, the way I'm looking at you right this minute? Because you are small, under me like this, with my prick ready to split you in half. Want it, do you?"

Words may have been out of his control, but his body spoke for him, moving restlessly, obviously aroused beyond endurance by Blake's words and strength.

"Want me in you? Do you want me to fuck you, Kerr? Want me up you, the way you shove your cock up Vila?"

Without warning, with nothing more than sweat to ease the invasion, Blake thrust his thumbs home, shoving them inside Avon, spreading Avon wide, exposing him, opening him up. There must have been pain, but that only made Avon groan and Blake grin with feral fire. He pulled his thumbs farther apart until he could see the tender pinkness of Avon's inner body, the intimate recess where Blake was going to put his cock, the inner core where Blake was going to stake his claim. The head of his cock delved into the cleft, barely kissing where his thumbs disappeared into Avon, the flesh stretched wide, Avon murmuring his pleasure, body moving constantly under the stimulation of Blake's hands. And then Blake shifted forward a fraction, his cockhead glistening on Avon's white skin, fitting the valley of flesh to perfection, coming closer, closer, to the mouth that lay wide for him. Then he slid in, feeling his cock pressed by the tightness of Avon's arse and the pressure of his own thumbs where they held Avon. It was glorious, to sink in there, to slide into Avon's inner sanctum and he loved it, loved watching it happen, loved the way it looked, Avon's body taking him inside and holding him so tight, as tight as a mouth sucking him. And so hot! Wonderfully, erotically hot, core temperature, core need and Blake was filling it, Avon writhing under him, muttering muffled by the gag, arms held helpless, completely dependent on Blake to hold him in place. Blake filled

his arms with Avon's solidity, lifting his chest up off the bed, using one arm to hold Avon, the other to brace both of them so that he could thrust deeper, farther, faster, building the sensation, the pleasure of it burning through him, feeling Avon's arse spasm, Avon's cock spilling its seed up and over Blake's arm where it encircled shuddering flesh. And then Avon was limp for a moment, until he started moving again, deliberately clenching and unclenching his arse, milking Blake, pleasuring him, surrendering completely to Blake's desires.

Blake shoved him down onto the bed again, digging into him, ramming his cock up into him, hard as he could, losing himself to everything but the ecstasy of it, Avon under him, around him, Avon's flesh clutching his cock as if his very life depended on it. Then he was dissolving, flowing through his cock and into Avon, life splashing out of him, floating away on pleasure.

Gradually, he realised that he would have to move, would have to free Avon. Would have to face Avon, listen to him, see him, hear him... His plan had never taken him that far, had never dealt with what could be an ugly aftermath. What if he hadn't drowned Avon in Avon's own darker nature? What if Avon wanted to face him? What if Avon could deal with that aspect of himself perfectly well and hadn't acted upon it with Vila for reasons other than the one Blake had deduced?

What if Avon *had* done all this—or more—with Vila?

Still encased in Avon, still lying heavily upon the other man's back, he contemplated the whole situation. Not the kind of subject one would bring up over tea. Not the kind of subject one would find easy to broach. So. Silence him then. Keep him quiet, stop him from engaging in an attack. Keep the encounter under Blake's own control. Don't give Avon a chance to marshal those sharp wits of his, lest he find an argument to negate everything Blake had done. Off balance, that was the secret. Completely off balance, for then Avon wouldn't be able to fully understand and what Avon couldn't understand, Avon couldn't control. So simple, then, really.

He pulled out of Avon, noticing the whimper of Avon's flesh as it was left empty and lonely. Noticed also that Avon was keeping his eyes firmly closed, black lashes casting arcs of bruising

upon pallid cheeks. If Avon would simply continue his charade of sleep, then Blake would need do nothing more. He pulled—very gently, so that Avon could 'sleep' through it if he wanted to—the jacket off, and then the remnants of the shirt, tossing them on the floor in same general direction he vaguely remembered the rest of Avon's clothing going. Next, the gag, his fingers fluttering gossamer soft as he unfastened the leather strip, easing it away.

And Avon opened his eyes to see and his mouth to speak.

Blake lifted his hand again, just as before, just as effectively.

Avon spoke before the hand could fall.

"May I get up now, sir?"

And Blake felt gargantuan, felt himself fill with masculinity at the soft tone and softer words. He had won, completely, utterly and victoriously. Avon's words had proven him right in this, had proven that he knew his crew, that he knew men. That he had been right all the time about the sincerity of Avon's emotions. After all, if he could submit like this, how serious could he be about Vila? And if *that* couldn't be trusted, then any offer of comfort extended to Blake was surely equally spurious. He lowered his hand, very pleased with himself indeed, the conditioning pumping him full of the endorphins that turned all this into pleasure.

"No," he finally remembered to answer, getting to his feet, dressing rapidly, "you may not. I want you to lie there like that, with my cum oozing between your legs, your own cum drying on your belly and think about what you've just done. Think about what you wanted and the kind of man that makes you. In fact, it makes you not much of a man at all, doesn't it, Kerr? I mean to say, Avon, what kind of man is it who lies there naked with another man's cum seeping into his very insides?"

"Think about what kind of man this makes me? More to the point, Blake, is what kind of man this makes *you*." Avon rolled over onto his back, the beginnings of bruises and the drying trail of his own cum shouting out their statements at Blake. "All I did was *allow* myself to be used in a way that...appeals to my sexuality. I added a touch of spice to my sex life, something that I would never do with Vila only because it's something he doesn't want. Used me? Owned

me?” He laughed, harsh and ugly and almost wild with denial. “You were nothing more than a convenient cock to be used the way I wanted it.”

“Oh, really? Then why did you get so caught up in it? If all you’d wanted was a cock with a body attached, you have Vila, or you could use any body on any planet. No, it was the mind you wanted, the will, the one man strong enough to tame you and now you’re too much a coward to face the truth. Admit it, Avon,” he said, leaning down, twisting Avon’s left nipple with painful intensity, “you needed a man who has the power to destroy, the balls to make you kneel and now you’re scared because you let that part of you loose, aren’t you? You want to run off and hide behind Vila and how normal your relationship with him is. You want to use that to prove to yourself that I’m the one here who’s twisted. But Avon, all I did was give you what you’ve been after for years and just never had the courage to find: someone to lead you by the nose and keep you in your place.” Avon came at him, up from the bed, face twisted in rage. Blake stopped him with a far worse weapon than force. He stopped him with the truth, using a single phrase that conjured the truth up to stand between them, an insurmountable barrier between them. “Go back to your position.”

The words and the truth lingered, and in the face of them, Avon subsided onto the bed, lying down, turning away from Blake and the spectre that haunted him. One phrase, one memory to remind him just how much he *had* wanted this and just how much he already allowed Blake to lead him. Willingly, for no-one could control him. Except for Blake, of course.

“Used me, Avon? You’re too busy running along behind me.” And then he was gone, out the door and safe, leaving Avon lying in a pool of cum and light, thinking.

The next step was ridiculously easy. Wait for Vila to come off shift. Follow Vila. Smile when Vila glances nervously over his shoulder. Come closer. Closer. Right up behind him. Smile again. Place your hand—gently now, wouldn’t do to scare him—on Vila’s shoulder, follow him into the thief’s room. And then just stand there, being careful to look unsure and insecure.

“Emm, fancy a drink, Blake?”

Good. Vila was off balance. Always the secret

to control, that was. “A drink? Yes, thank you, I could really do with a good stiff drink.”

“I know just the thing. Guaranteed to take the starch out of anyone and put a backbone into the biggest cowards.” Vila looked at Blake closely. “I’ll make it a large one, I think.”

It was with a malicious kind of amusement that Blake noticed Vila’s hands shaking as the drink was flourished out of nothing, being presented to him with a rather unsure smile. “Thank you,” he said as he took it, savouring a large mouthful, watching Vila all the while. “Vila,” he began, making great display of his own uncertainty, “there’s something I’ve really been meaning to talk to you about...” He paused, artistically, manipulating with the skill only those who have been manipulated by masters can ever achieve.

“Yes?” Vila, ever anxious to please, ever the survivor looking for the angle to keep him safe.

“I’ve been thinking about you.”

“Oh, yeh? All good, I hope.”

“That,” Blake managed a blush, “is precisely what I’d been thinking.”

Vila made a point of not understanding. “I don’t get you, Blake...”

“I have a bit of a confession to make, I’m afraid, Vila,” he said, swirling his drink then looking up at the thief, still blushing slightly, the perfect picture of precociousness. “I...well, there’s really no nice way to put this. Quite frankly, Vila, I heard Avon say my name so I...eavesdropped rather. And well...”

Vila swallowed convulsively, springing into speech. “It was just the way you said, Blake, about it being Avon saying your name. It was all his idea, I mean, I’d never think a thing like that, well, I would, I mean I must, seeing as how Avon and me, we, well, you know, we sort of...well, anyway, what I’m saying is that I didn’t say anything, was all Avon saying everything.”

“Oh.” Flat, disappointed, one furtive glance taking in Vila’s oddly flattered confusion at Blake’s reaction. “I had been hoping that you’d be...willing. To be perfectly honest, it’s been so long the idea really appeals to me, you know, sex without strings as opposed to what it would have to be with Jenna. But,” he nibbled a knuckle, looking anywhere but at Vila, his embarrassment studiously appealing, “I’ve another confession to make.” He looked directly at Vila,

eyes crinkling, making Vila smile in advance. “Avon terrifies me. Or more accurately, I suppose, the thought of having to be good enough in bed for Avon terrifies me. I’ve never been with a man, you see, and I can’t quite picture myself walking up to Avon and saying, take me I’m yours, but please be gentle with me.”

Vila burst out laughing, that particular scenario one he and Avon had considered more than once—and Blake just now had sounded like the faintly lisping and coy Blake Avon had created more than once. “Yeh, I know what you mean. I’d been around a few times, but even I was nervous when Avon came after me. Was terrified,” he confided, lowering his voice and winking, “that I’d do something terrible and he’d say to me—ever so posh, of course—really, Vila, your phallus is supposed to be fully engorged at this stage. But he’s not like that, you know, Blake. He’s really good and he never hurries you. Takes his time, wouldn’t hurt you, does all the right things. It’ll be fine, honest.”

Blake forewent telling Vila just how much he knew about Avon and sex. “Oh, you’re probably right, but still... To tell you the truth, Vila, I’d been hoping that you would take pity on me, show me the ropes, so to speak, so that I could join in with you two without embarrassing myself.”

“You mean, you want it to be just you and me? You want me,” his voice rose close to a squeak, “to be your first fella? Me?” He flopped down onto the bed, staring at Blake. “That’s quite a compliment, that is.”

“Avon said you’d be flattered,” he insinuated the words on the sharp blade of a stiletto, cutting Vila to the quick long before the thief even knew he was being bled. Then to cover the wound, to give it time to fester, Blake started shedding his clothes, hoping that any marks on him would be explained away as his most recent encounters with Federation types. He smiled to himself as Vila’s eyes widened in stunned disbelief, any protest the thief might have made completely drowned by the sight of Blake stripping off in his cabin. Quickly nude, Blake stood himself in front of Vila, leaving Vila nowhere to look but at his naked groin. “Unless this is absurdly different from what I’d get up to with a woman, if memory serves, this works better if we’ve both got our clothes off, Vila.”

“Um, yes...” It didn’t take Vila long to get out of his clothes and Blake found himself wondering if the thief were this quick for Avon. Then, unbidden, the scene that had triggered this whole thing off came into his mind: Avon and Vila kissing on the flight deck, looking for all the world as if they were pouring their souls into each other. He felt the hunger kick in the pit of his stomach again, felt the raging desire begin as Vila bent over to peel back the covers, his naked rump plumply inviting, all round and firm and oh so tempting. Was this, perhaps, part of the reason Avon never let Vila fuck him? Was some of it, at least, the fact that Vila’s arse was far too delectable to ignore? Metaphorically at least, Blake got a grip on himself. He was supposed to be making himself into the crowbar that would prise Avon and Vila apart. There was a reason he was supposed to be doing that, but the buzzing at the back of his mind was distracting him from remembering...something, something important... No matter, it would come to him later, he was used to these temporary memory losses, as if he were a computer that suffered from occasional system crashes. No matter. He would remember, later, he was sure. The only thing that mattered was that he was right to be doing this. He remembered that much, surely...

Vila was looking at him, waiting, lying on the bed, one leg bent, the shadow shading his groin so that all Blake could see was the upper edge of pubic hair fading into indeterminate darkness. And Vila’s smile of invitation was fading into darkness, too, dimming, going out...

“Sorry, Vila,” he murmured as he climbed up on the bed beside Vila, faintly pink still, obviously embarrassed, playing this for all he was worth. “I’m not exactly used to seeing a naked man reclining on a bed waiting for me.”

“It’s all right, Blake,” Vila took his hand, pulling him down until they fitted together snugly. “See? See how nice and easy this is? Nothing to it, really, just like being with a woman in a lot of ways.” Blake grinned at him, one hand sneaking in a quick feel of Vila’s cock. “Well, perhaps not in *that* many ways... Ooh, that’s nice, keep on doing that...”

And it really was so easy, Vila so delightfully uncomplicated, willing and open. So giving, so generous with his mouth and his hands and

his emotions, whispering wonderful things into Blake's ears, doing incredible things with his hands and his tongue and the way his body undulated under Blake... So straightforwardly sexy that Blake found himself in danger of forgetting what he was supposed to be doing to this man. Found that he really had forgotten *why* he had to do this to Vila, remembering only that he had to, that he *must* do it. Had to...

He manoeuvred them so that he was under Vila, twisted until he was on his knees with Vila pressed over him, Vila's hard cock digging into his buttock, Vila's soft tongue swathing shivering lines of pleasure all down the nape of his neck.

"Is this what you fancy then, Blake? Don't have to, can do something a bit less advanced if you'd rather. Nothing you *have* to do with me, just do what feels nice, just do what it takes to get us off..."

"Shut up and fuck me, Vila! Go on, you little prick, fuck me, come on, hard, shove it up me, ram it up me..."

And instead of the blow, there was a tender touch down his back, soothing, calming, arousing in the nicest possible way. "No chance, Blake, not when it's your first time. Best way I know to get hurt is that, forcing a bloke when he's just a beginner. If you want it like that later, once you've been round the merry-go-round a few times, we'll have a go at it, but not just now... Just you relax while I get some cream in you..."

And Blake forgot what it was he was supposed to be doing when that gentle hand stroked him there, stroked him where he had pulled at Avon. Forgot even Avon as the careful fingers left him and Vila's cock filled him sweetly instead. Forgot even who he was as the pleasure radiated from his arse to the tip of his cock and the mountains of his nipples. He moved with Vila, rippling under him, feeling orgasm build too, too quickly, trying to make it go away, trying to make this simple delight last and last, but it was too late, too late, too late... He came, cum pulsing from him in shallow eddies, all that was left in him after he had filled Avon and then he knew what Avon had known, that sudden liquid fire inside as Vila bucked and came, deep inside, so wonderfully deep inside...

He fell forward, only then realising that he had lifted himself up on hands and knees as Vila had fucked him. There was a lingering pres-

ence in him; then it withered and fell from him, a hollowness marking where Vila had been. Blake knelt there, not lying down, not moving, not really thinking. There was something, something... He shook his head, knowing not what he should be remembering, knowing only that he should remember, must remember, something about how good it could be to let people in close to touch his soul, to love him...

And then the pain came back, the headache blinding him, making him deaf and dumb and lost. Vila's hands spoke to him and he heard them as clearly as a tongue utters words: asking him, asking him, are you all right, are you all right, did I hurt you, did I hurt you?

And he was on the table again and they were hurting him, there, inside his head and it was getting worse and worse and he couldn't bear it and he couldn't take it and then they put a big nothing inside his head and the pain stopped hurting and he listened to them when they told him what to do to make the pain go away and not come back and what would make the pain come back if he did things and let people betray him and lie to him about love and trust and true friendship and partnership and he said yes, yes, I'll listen to you I'll make the pain go away...

The other voice was there again and he couldn't quite place where he knew it from, until the present trickled in, country stream over the rocks of the past, washing them away, carrying them far from him until even his mind outstretched couldn't catch them any more and then... Was there something he should be remembering, something from Before, something doctors did to him... But Vila wanted an answer, wanted him to talk and Blake realised what he should be doing, knew he had to destroy it, knew what it was he had to do to make sure that he was right about...everything.

He cemented surety upon his face, one of the truly useful things he had learned from eons watching Avon. "I'm fine, Vila, absolutely fine. That was really quite marvellous, you know. You're very good at it. Had a lot of practice then, have you?"

"Me? Nah, just know what feels great when you're on the receiving end, that's all." His face lit up with pleasure, proud as punch. "D'you really think I'm good? Honestly? You really did enjoy it?"

Blake gave one of his rich chuckles, turning Vila's own innate gentleness into part of his plan to replace the wounds that Vila falling into a power trip should have made. "Oh, enjoy it is the understatement of the century. A man could get addicted to that, you know."

Vila grinned back at him. "Yeh, I do know. Poor Avon, I'm always after him." Sudden doubt clouded his features, seriousness deepening his voice. "It is all right to talk to you about me sleeping with Avon, isn't it? You don't think he'll kill me for it, do you?"

"Don't be silly, Vila. He's already told me all about you, hasn't he, so why can't you talk about him? I mean, now that it's all set up." He pretended to notice Vila's confusion and incipient hurt for the first time, as if he had nothing whatsoever to do with the causing of it in the first place. "It is all set up, isn't it? You and me, sharing Avon? Him having both of us together sometimes, if the fancy takes him?" He portrayed a confusion and incipient hurt of his own. "But he told me that it was all set, that you would understand that after a while, having just one 'hidebound to tradition Delta' for fucking gets a bit boring..."

He didn't let his smile show as the tears showed in Vila's eyes.

"Oh, Vila," he said, all concern and goodness, "I'm so sorry. I thought you knew."

"Oh, I knew all right. Just forgot for a while, that's all. Just forgot..." A brave smile pinned into place then and Blake knew he'd won, knew Vila would never approach Avon to discuss this. Knew that the relationship between Avon and Vila, if not actually over, was so badly strained as to be moribund. And that was important. That meant...he hesitated a second, his mind racing to find the right words to explain it to himself. That meant that Avon and Vila could never be allied against him, could never subvert him to their own ends, could never control him. Nor betray him, as those who proffered caring always would.

"Em, d'you mind if I have a bit of time on my own, Blake? You know, just to get a bit of sleep."

"Of course not," Blake said, tugging the blankets up to cover Vila, shrugging into his own clothes again. "Just don't forget, you're going down to Goth with me later on, all right?"

"Yeh, fine. I'll be ready."

Blake paused on the threshold. "Vila..." Tired eyes looked up at him and he hammered the final nail into the coffin of Vila's belief in Avon's feelings for him. "Don't blame him for it. It's nothing personal, you know that. It's just his upbringing. If you must blame something, blame the Federation for making him that way."

He was pleased to note that Vila didn't even bother to answer him, turning away exactly as Avon had done. Blake whistled to himself as he walked away down the corridor to begin his plans for Goth.

His bed smelled of sex. Smelled of Avon. Smelled of himself, in Avon, and all the feelings and pictures that re-created in his mind. And Vila. He hadn't washed Vila from himself, so Vila was here, too, with Avon, ghosts in a castle, wandering around rattling their hurts like chains.

Blake bolted from his bed, the nasty taste of betrayal in his mouth—and not that of others betraying him, but rather of him taking other people's trust and twisting it into something vile and petty. The shower beckoned with promises of washing him clean of what his hands had done, drawing him into the glaring light of the bathroom, with its unblinking mirror forcing him to face himself.

"It was necessary," he told himself.

Was it? his image asked him back.

"Yes!" His image looked at him with Avon's disbelief. "Yes it was necessary! I don't like it any more than you do, but damn it all, it was bloody necessary. I *had* to do it. If I hadn't done it, they would have had me believing their lies..."

He lowered his head, splashing his face with the coldest water the *Liberator* had to offer. And what was left of his own will wrestled furiously with his conditioning, fighting, fighting, until he felt as if his mind were going round in circles debating questions he hadn't even heard being asked. He was just so horribly weary, enervated, drained, and not just because of the sex. No, that he could handle, and handle well; it was the other, all these questions that were hammering at him, all these memories that seemed to want to be born. But he couldn't quite find them, couldn't quite grip them. He rejected the banshee thoughts and turned the water on full in the shower, letting it sluice him the instant

he stepped under it, water streaming down him, washing everything away to be recycled, used again, altered, changed...

Just like his conditioning.

His own innate decency too strong to be defeated out of hand, the conditioning was being warped, a round peg made to fit a square hole... Conditioning that had been designed to make him reject any kind of nurturing, conditioning that demanded he destroy anything that nurtured, that was what they had cursed him with. And now that curse was going to be spat back at them, intensified a hundredfold. As one small part of him remembered the pain on Vila's face as he had lied to him about Avon, that hundredfold became a thousandfold, until it was all that was left. Destroy, they had said. That would make the hurt go away. Nurturing hurt. Being taken care of led to nothing but hurt. Destroying it would make the hurting stop. Destroy, they had said. Destroy.

Star One nurtured an entire Galaxy.

Star One took care of an entire Universe.

Star One supported the Federation entirely and in its entirety.

So simple, then.

He would destroy.

He would destroy Star One.

He was singing by the time he stepped from the shower.

All of it finally came together, all the strands twisting into enough rope for the Federation to hang itself—and Blake. The man would self-destruct—that part entirely according to plan. But it would not be the gradual disintegration they had designed, oh no: being the kind who merely followed orders, the kind who waited for others to give them permission to destroy, the psychomanipulators had not recognised Blake's fatal danger to them.

Blake was going to go out.

Blake was going to go out not with the snivelling little whimper they had envisioned, but in a blaze of glory.

Blake was going to take the Universe with him, for the only comfort they had left him was to prove that he had been right all along.

And they had twisted him enough that people no longer mattered to him, so that the loss of life was no loss at all. For now he was simply following the orders they had implanted in him. And it really wasn't his fault that he could no longer remember what the difference between right and wrong was...

Was it?

TARZAN AND PAUL D'ARNOT

CAROLINE DARE

(Note: This story is based on the original characters by Edgar Rice Burroughs.)

PAUL D'ARNOT WAS THE FIRST WHITE MAN, AND THE BRAVEST, I EVER MET. I didn't realize just how brave until much later, after I'd entered civilization and observed the ways of men. Then I saw that most were not at all like my proud little French navy lieutenant; that many were deceitful, greedy, ignorant, and cowardly. But that was later, and even then I had Paul's example to remind me that some men could rise above their circumstances and deal honestly and generously with their fellows.

I'm not sure which was my first glimpse of Paul, for he was only one of several soldiers who followed the Porter expedition in penetrating my jungle safehold. I remember spying on them through the tree canopy, fascinated by their strangeness, recognizing they were similar to me, yet also alien beyond understanding. Jane Porter held my interest particularly, and I made myself her invisible guardian, driving away the more savage jungle creatures that might have harmed her.

I was dreaming of her in fact, when native drums and dance cries roused me from my sleep, calling me to see what the fuss was about. Though I disliked and kept aloof from the nearby tribe, I watched them frequently, determined to keep them from encroaching on my ape band's territory. So I knew where to go, even without their thunderous drumming to guide me. Outside their village I ascended high into an ancient tree, stretching out on my belly along a sturdy bough to study the proceedings below.

The tribe was gathered round a captive, a slightly built man who'd been stripped and tied to a post. Warriors circled around him, jabbing his flesh with sharp spears as the women chanted and danced. I'd witnessed such scenes before, and knew what would come next. The prisoner's extremities would be cut away bit by bit, prolonging his dying until only a writhing shrieking torso was left to be thrown into a bonfire. The ceremony sickened me, but I'd never

interfered, unwilling to challenge the tribesmen so long as they stayed clear of my territory.

The prisoner stood straightly erect, head lifted in defiant attitude. He was bleeding from many shallow wounds, and his naked skin was filthy with mud and blood combined. He bore the stabs of their spears in silence, which seemed to infuriate the tribe. I wondered at it, for previous captives had always screamed piteously until too hoarse to utter further sound. A lance pierced the man's side, but he only squeezed his eyes shut, shuddering silently.

And then the women lit the bonfire, coaxing it to grow high. The flames lit up the prisoner's face, and for the first time I saw white skin through the streaks of grime.

So many thoughts raced through me at that! He was not one of them, not truly their own to deal with as they chose. He had to be from Jane Porter's group, the only whites I'd ever seen. And I had set myself the task of protecting them, of serving her. Why, the tribe must have invaded my territory just to capture this man! Rage swept through me, fed further by my desire to prove my loyalty to Jane.

I swung from the tree, dropping down on a warrior who'd seized the prisoner's ear, about to cut it off. The tribesman turned on me in panic, and I caught him up easily, slamming him back down to the earth with enough force to render him unconscious. The rest of the tribe took my warning to heart, fleeing into the surrounding jungle for shelter.

In no time I was left alone with the injured captive. I turned to face him and our eyes locked. A premonitory thrill shot through me as I advanced on him. His gaze never wavered, though I could tell he was astonished at my sudden appearance.

He was not such a little man really, but I am very large, and I towered over him. He spoke some question in an unknown tongue, his eyes searching my face as if he might read the answer there. I took my knife up and his frame went rigid, as if he were prepared to receive a death blow. Pressing my palm to his chest reas-

suringly, I cut him free from the post to which he'd been lashed. He stumbled as the ropes gave way, too weakened by his ordeal to stand without their aid. He could not tear his eyes away from mine. "*Mon Dieu,*" he whispered, touching my face with shaking fingers. Then his body went quite limp as he slipped from consciousness.

He would have fallen but I caught him, raising his battered form in my arms to stride from that place of death. None tried to stop me.

I took the man to a quiet area far from the tribal village. Settling the fellow on a nest of ferns within the hollow crotch of a massive tree, I broke leafy boughs from younger trees and leaned the branches against the trunk to form a covered shelter for him. He never stirred, head lolled back as I'd first placed him each time I checked.

Remembering plants which had proved useful whenever I'd been scratched or bruised, I gathered several and mashed their leaves into poultices. But the man was so begrimed I could not see all his hurts to treat them. So I left the pulped leaves aside and fetched gourds from nearby trees, filling them at the river.

He awoke as I began to clean him, starting groggily, then staring up at me with the same amazed acceptance he'd shown before. I held his wrist, lifting his arm up to run wet moss along it, sponging away the dried blood and dirt. He let me wash him without protest, only shaking his head now and again and murmuring lyrical phrases in a soft alien tongue.

Despite his simple state, unclothed and unable to communicate with me, I found him fascinating beyond description. He was so new, so strange to my experience, yet always our similarities called to me, prickling uncomfortably at my sense of self and identity. He was a stranger who was more like me than all the creatures I'd grown up with. I examined his body in minute detail as I dabbed it clean, noting how the brown skin of his face and hands paled over his arms, legs, and chest, and lightened to creamy whiteness across his loins and haunches. His hair was very short and very soft. The outer ends were bleached a pale honey color by the sun, but they darkened toward the roots, and that darker undercoat matched the shade of his body hair. Earthy brown, it swept down his chest,

curling about tan nipples and thickening to coarse black curls below his belly.

He started again when I lifted his penis to sponge up between his legs. I supposed the cold water had discomfited him, and I pressed him to lie back, patting him reassuringly. Warily he did so, head crooked forward to watch my hands as I worked. His penis interested me, for where the crown of mine was protected with a supple fold of skin, his was uncovered, exposing the plum-shaped head even when flaccid. I ran my thumb along the thin white scar ringing it, wondering at first if the tribesman had cut it, but saw the wound was an ancient one, well-healed. The stranger gave a strangled gasp at my fingering, the first outcry I'd heard from him.

Contrite, thinking I'd hurt an old injury, I let go of him and backed away. But he smiled at me suddenly, a warm expression of goodwill and gratitude. I tried to smile back, managing only a clumsy approximation as I'd never practiced such a facial gesture before. But I knew the friendliness behind the symbol, having seen the natives smile so at their children and comrades. The man pointed to his other arm questioningly. It was still smeared with grime, and I took that to be an invitation to finish my task. Soaking another handful of moss in the water gourd, I continued my work.

The man settled quietly as I finished washing him, exhaustion clearly gaining an upper hand. Yet always his eyes followed me, alert and intent. Once I had cleaned all his myriad cuts and wounds, I began the careful task of binding the leaf poultices to them with long strips of tough jungle grass. He bit at his lips from time to time, yet no pained cry ever called out to stop me. I was beginning to suspect he was more seriously hurt than I'd first assumed, and was keeping silent not from lack of pain but from some personal taboo. I worked gently therefore, feeling such kinship to the stranger that I desired to do my best on his behalf.

He beckoned for the water gourd when I'd finished, and drank thirstily as I supported his head and held the container to his lips. I offered him fruit too, but he shook his head and soon lapsed into a fitful sleep.

For five days as he slowly recovered I guarded him from predators, leaving his side only to fetch us food and water. At first he tossed with fever

and refused to eat. Concerned by his hollow cheeks and pallid features, I grew insistent, only to have him vomit up the food I forced on him. Bit by bit though he kept more down, no longer fighting me when I made him eat. His fever broke on the fourth night, only to leave him shivering in the cool of the jungle night. He was not used to nakedness, and tried to burrow beneath the mat of ferns on which he lay. I stretched alongside him, gathering him in my arms to keep him warm during the chill of night. My larger body easily covered his, and he relaxed in my hold, seeming to take comfort from the heat and security it offered. We slept thus from that night onward.

On the fifth day my friend, no longer a stranger, began speaking again. He was still weak and needed assistance to move, but his wounds had all scabbed over cleanly, and his bruised swollen features began to subside, revealing a face and form quite sturdy and attractive.

We began exchanging words for objects we could point to, but though I mimicked his sounds with ease, he stumbled and stammered his way through mine. He could manage few of the dozens of grunts, chirps, and guttural calls which made up the jungle languages. I laughed at his futile attempts, and eventually he abandoned the effort, concentrating instead on teaching me to speak his tongue. Propped up against the overgrown tree roots, he indicated plants, animals, and other objects around us, patiently coaching me in their new names.

One question he asked repeatedly, pressing his fingertips to my cheek, forehead, chest, or shoulder. I tried supplying him with the jungle terms for those parts of the body, tapping the corresponding places on him, but he would shake his head and kept repeating his question.

"Comment appelez-vous?"

I finally gave up answering, returning his searching gaze with baffled silence. He frowned, a frustrated crease furrowing his brows. Then he tapped his breastbone, intoning, *"Je m'appelle Paul d'Arnot."*

I echoed the phrase, tapping my own breastbone. He grabbed my hand and struck it against his chest. *"Non, non! Moi! Je m'appelle Paul d'Arnot."* Now pressing my hand back to my chest, he questioned urgently, *"Et vous?"*

The meaning broke upon me. Nodding my

understanding, I answered, "Tarzan. I am Tarzan of the apes."

Delight took him. He clasped my hand in both of his, squeezing it tightly. "Tarzan," he repeated in that soft accent of his. *"Merci, Tarzan. Mon gratitude. Les benedictions de Paul d'Arnot sur vous."*

More solemnly he sat up straighter, pulling my arm to bring my face close his. He pressed his lips ceremoniously to each of my cheekbones in turn, and said firmly, *"Mon frère."*

Thus began the friendship which has lasted to this day. Having declared me his brother, Paul would settle for nothing less than unearthing the mystery of my birth, and restoring to me that heritage which I had lost when, a six-month-old orphan, I'd been adopted by a band of jungle apes.

None of this happened quickly, of course. When Paul had regained sufficient strength to be moved, I told him I would carry him to the campsite of the Porter expedition. Paul questioned my stamina, worrying that I could not bear his weight all that distance.

"Mais oui," I laughed, flexing my arms to show him how strong they were. I had carried him nearly that far from the tribal village, but he had no memory of that journey. Paul laughed too, probably at my pronunciation, and readily consented to the move. In truth, I was as eager to find his people as he was, for now I would earn Jane's gratitude by returning her safari's navigator. Fascinating as Paul's company had been, it had only whetted my appetite for further encounters with the foreign female.

But such was not to be, at least not then. We discovered the campsite abandoned, the riverboat gone. I was as devastated as Paul, for I was sure I had lost my chance to ever see Jane again. Poor Paul, I left him alone there all day as I struck off into the jungle to vent my fury at being cheated so.

My conscience prickled at me eventually, reminding me there was another to think of, one who, however brave and self-reliant, was still injured and dependent on me. And another thought dawned on me. Where Jane had gone, Paul could follow. And where Paul led, I too could follow. Jane had left. Very well, I would go to her.

My heart decided, I returned to the aban-

done campsite. It took little persuasion to get Paul to agree to the plan. He was doubtful we could manage the overland trek to the nearest trading port, which he estimated could take a month or more on foot, but as the alternative was for him to live out his life in my jungle habitat, he was willing to attempt the journey.

Clothed once more in a uniform left behind at the camp and salvaging what other items he could from the site, Paul slapped my shoulder and gamely cried for us to march onward.

I learned so much during our time on that journey. Paul did what he could to prepare me for the cities of men, but much of what he described was beyond my comprehension then. Still, he drilled me in manners and customs so that none could call me barbarian and deny my right to join civilization.

The concept of civilization overwhelmed me at times. It seemed there were so many rules, so many customs that I would never remember them all. But Paul persisted with my lessons as we made our way slowly along the river to the coast, and I learned much that would prove valuable later on.

84 Being French, Paul took particular interest in culinary matters, and reformed my eating habits (which he proclaimed disgusting), until I knew down to the dessert fork how to politely consume my way through the most elegant banquet. Not that we had such niceties as forks, or finger bowls, or napkins, but Paul improvised with sticks and leaves, coaching me so that I would not be caught unprepared when we reached his country.

That began our first quarrel, actually. Not the etiquette lessons, which I found baffling but accepted as a social necessity, but his presumption that I would accompany him back to his home in France. I did not know where France was, nor did I care. I wanted to go where Jane was, and Paul had once mentioned casually that she'd likely gone to America with her father. Paul was not interested in going to America; it was all that I could think of.

We argued about it for three days, before Paul threw up his hands in exasperation and gave in. He was piqued though, and I think hurt that I did not wish to join him in his homeland. When I realized that he felt slighted by my decision, I tried to explain the compulsion I felt to find Jane.

"Ah, *une jolie femme*," he smiled knowingly. He seemed mollified then and commented it was very French of me to abandon all for a pretty face.

The issue decided, Paul abruptly switched to a new language, English, which he claimed was the only one understood in America. It was difficult to learn, especially as the sentence construction was so different from French, and I groaned that I had ever been taught the latter. Why, I demanded of my companion, had he confused me with another language so unsuited to my purposes?

"But I taught you the best first," Paul exclaimed. "If I had known you planned to keep low company such as Americans, I would not have bothered. But there it is, you can converse with the most intelligent and cultured of people where ever you go. And now you will know English too, to speak to the others."

That night, for the first time since I had sheltered him, Paul made his bed of grasses apart from mine; not far, but separate enough that we did not touch. I did not think anything of it at first. I had curled up with Paul all these nights just as I'd done for years with members of my ape band, but I'd frequently pushed the apes away too, wishing for room to sprawl out on hot summer nights.

But this was not summer, it was autumn, and the night air was crisp. And Paul did not fling his arms out or toss about, but huddled in a tight ball, tucking his hands up in his armpits. I regarded him curiously, but went to sleep on my own mat without comment.

A faint rustling noise awakened me very early in the morning. Coming instantly alert, I opened my eyes but remained motionless, trying to identify the noise. It came from beside me, and I slowly tilted my head over to witness Paul fumbling with his trouser buttons and rubbing at his crotch. He worked silently, but for the soft rasp of skin stroking skin.

"That always feels so good," I remarked. "I do that too, but not in the morning. It makes you want to go back to sleep."

Paul froze. "*Pardonnez-moi*," he whispered. "I did not mean to disturb you."

I rolled over once, bringing me to his side, and propped myself on raised elbows to peer over his hip. "Let me see?"

Paul's face reddened, but he pulled his hands away from his crotch, letting me view the semi-erect cock which he'd pulled through the trousers' opening. Cock was the informal term for penis, he'd explained earlier. Again I noted the absence of a protective fold of skin on his.

"Was it a battle injury?" I asked, pointing. Paul had told me of the bloody conflicts in which he'd earned his lieutenantcy.

He looked surprised, as if he'd expected some other question than that; then he smiled. "No, my friend, it was cut when I was a baby. It is the sign of a covenant between my people and God."

It seemed to me a very stern covenant. "Did it hurt?"

"Fortunately, I do not remember."

"And all your people do this?"

"All of the men, yes."

"Don't the women have a way to make a sign?"

Paul shook his head, looking thoughtful. "I suppose it is because women do not need to show proof. They are better at keeping promises than men."

I smiled happily, thinking of Jane. "If I ask Jane Porter to promise me something, then I can trust her?"

Paul shrugged. "I suppose so. She was always very polite to me. I imagine she is a lady of her word."

"Do you think she would agree to be my mate?" The thought had become an obsession, the reason I would pursue Jane all the way to America.

Paul sighed as if the idea troubled him somehow. "I don't know," he admitted. "Perhaps. You are very handsome, my friend. Many out there would be happy to make love with you."

"Make love? You can feel love, but can you make it?"

Paul grinned, his eyes regarding me slyly. "Oh yes, *mon ami*, the French know how to make love expertly. They taught the world."

"Show me!" I demanded excitedly.

He laughed and shook his head. "It is not something for display, not real lovemaking. It is something you can only learn by doing." His eyes twinkled at me, amused by some private knowledge.

"Then teach me," I persisted.

Paul waved his hand dismissively. "You do

not know what you are asking. I should not have teased you. Forget I spoke."

I studied him speculatively. "You know how civilized men mate—make love—with civilized women, *n'est-ce pas?* I wish to know this. I do not want to repulse Jane. Show me how to make love as civilized men do."

Paul closed his eyes, wincing slightly as if from a sudden pain. "You do not know what you are asking," he repeated softly.

"It is no greater favor than the help I have given you," I insisted stubbornly.

Paul's eyes opened to gaze up at me with such sadness and longing I was taken aback.

"Tarzan, *mon brave, mon enfant*, I can not take advantage of such innocence. I have desired you from the first instant you touched me, but I can not be so selfish. You are a normal man inside. You love Jane and that is understandable. I am not such a man, I do not desire women. There are others like this, and we make love among ourselves. I will not lead you into such things where you do not belong."

Paul's words were oblique, hinting at mysterious secrets. "You mate with other men?" I asked, to make sure I had understood.

"Oui."

"Am I not another man?" I couldn't understand the difficulty. It seemed ideal.

Paul's eyes flickered over my body. "You are perfection. You are what other men dream to be."

"And you wish to mate—make love—with me?"

Paul fell silent. I was not willing to let it die. "If I want you to teach me how civilized men make love, and you wish to do this to me, then we are in agreement. Why do you argue?"

"Because it would not be right," Paul whispered.

"Why not?" I was getting frustrated.

"You do not understand what you are asking."

That third repetition galled me. We were going in circles. I took hold of Paul and pulled him to his feet, and began to strip him of his uniform. "I don't care," I told him when he protested. "I want to know. If you won't explain, I'll try for myself."

Paul shuddered as my hands moved over his body. He threw his arms around me and clung tightly for a moment. "I am only a man," he de-

clared with trembling voice. "I can not fight the gods." He pulled back to aid me in removing his garments.

Now, as I focused on the thought of mating another at last, I found my cock hardening of its own accord. When I'd stripped the last piece of cloth from Paul, I pushed him down and pulled his buttocks back to position him as I'd seen the female apes presenting themselves for mounting.

Paul laughed and slipped around in my hold, not struggling but still blocking my intentions. "Not so suddenly, Monsieur Tarzan, it is always better to prolong the process. Remember this when you are with Jane; women cherish the lover who takes his time."

I nodded and released Paul, squatting beside him to listen to his instructions.

"Gently too, my friend," he said, taking my hand and lightly kissing it. "You are very big, and so fantastically strong. You must take care."

He ran his hand along my shoulders and trailed delicate fingers down my chest. It tickled, yet left a trail of tingling sensation. I repeated the motion on Paul's chest. His other hand caressed my cheek, and I touched his in return.

Then his finger circled the head of my cock, a slow silky brush which set my heart suddenly beating harder. His hand curled around the organ, bringing a rush of heat to it. He guided my hand to a similar grip on his, and I followed his example as he began a slow stroking motion. It was very difficult to concentrate properly, for his caresses had me enormously excited, and all I longed to do was thrust rapidly to completion.

Paul restrained me however, continuing his slow steady caresses until I growled with frustrated desire. I took myself in hand, abandoning Paul's loins, and began the rapid pumping I'd practiced so many years alone. Paul sighed.

"We must teach you patience. One thing at a time, though. Allow me."

He bent over my lap, and pulling my hands away, opened his mouth wide to swallow me in. I was astonished by the marvellous sensation his warm mouth imparted. Softer than moss, his wet tongue cradled the head of my organ, nudging it further back toward his throat to lick and tickle down along my shaft. Instinctively I

caught hold of his head, holding him to me as I thrust into that slippery sucking haven. I must have come near to choking Paul, but he never protested, only speeded his licking motions in time to my thrusts. I soared to climax, spurting that cloudy fluid which was only emitted at such times. Even as I relished the pulsing waves of pleasure which accompanied the emission, I regretted ending the new experience so soon. Now I understood Paul's admonition to proceed slowly, for it seemed a shame to finish before learning all the new ways of mating Paul knew.

My navy lieutenant did not seem greatly concerned, however. He swallowed all that I poured forth in his mouth, licking me quite clean, and then kissing me on my mouth, that I might taste my own fluids. I had sampled the stuff before, out of curiosity, and found it salty as blood, but not so sweet. Now, receiving it off of Paul's tongue, there was a mellow flavor to it, a quite pleasant tang enhanced by the taste of his own mouth. We kissed and let our tongues explore each other's mouths for several minutes, as I gradually recovered from my climax. Paul saw to it that I did not fall asleep as was my usual wont, stroking my body gently and playing with my flaccid organ until it stirred once more.

"*Eh bon,*" he commended me. "Now we start again. Now you will not be in so great a hurry to finish I think."

He stretched out on his back, arms raised above his head, legs parted, a picture of striking vulnerability. No animal exposes its tender belly and sex organs to any but its mother or a trusted mate, and I felt a rush of tenderness that Paul should feel so safe with me.

He gestured for me to touch his nipples and I did so. rolling them under thumb until they hardened to raised nubs for me to suckle. This Paul encouraged me to do, assuring me that Jane would delight in such attentions. I practiced diligently, eager to learn, and fascinated by the responsiveness of his body. A flush stole over Paul's chest and shoulders, and he sighed and stretched as I worked over him. His own cock had hardened long since, and he urged my hands over it, clasping them in his own to guide me in stroking him. He seemed to like a much slower rhythm than I used on myself, pulling upward then squeezing over the head and circling a finger along the slitted tip before

rubbing back down to the base and starting the outward pull again.

All this I knew would be impossible to do to Jane, but I paid careful attention anyway, for it occurred to me that I might teach her to do the same to me. I lowered my mouth and swallowed him within, startling him at the suddenness. He seemed pleased by my initiative, but also nervous to be in my mouth. "Keep your teeth covered, do not let them scrape," he cautioned me. "That's right, that is very good. Ah! *Ça c'est merveilleux!* Do not stop!"

I suckled at the thickened staff diligently, rolling my tongue over it as Paul had done to mine, but then choked suddenly as he thrust deeper. I spat him out, coughing heavily.

Pardonne-moi," he apologized contritely. "To swallow a man is a skill which requires practice. I show you later. Here, I will make it up to you. Lie down, let me touch your ass."

This caused momentary confusion, as Paul had previously taught me that 'ass' meant an uncouth person. The Kaiser of Germany was the one he most often used in conjunction with this term.

"La fesse," Paul explained at my hesitation. That word I knew from our earliest language lesson, when he'd labelled all the body parts for me *La fesse*. Ass. I added it to my vocabulary for civilization. It was years before I realized that was not the polite translation, but it made no difference then. I knew he was going to do something delightful to my bottom, and eagerly rolled onto my stomach, chin propped on the back of my arm and legs outstretched. With a flutter down in my belly I felt his hands spread my ass wide open, and his fingers gently stroked the tender flesh between. It sent a little thrill through me, but that was as nothing to his next action. I felt warm breath on me, then a shock of pleasure as his tongue flicked at the hidden spot. He nuzzled closer, licking the tight ring of flesh and prodding at it with blunt slender fingers. He had such fine hands, his fingers long and aristocratic, and I shivered to think of them prying me open. He kept licking and toying with me until I was well excited and the muscle guarding my anus well relaxed; then a delicate finger pushed within. I tightened at once, giving myself a twinge of pain that the finger itself had not.

"Easy," Paul soothed. "Push outward." I did, and paradoxically it allowed him to push his finger in further without resistance from me. Another finger slid alongside the first, and Paul began to stretch at the opening. It all felt very strange, a little uncomfortable, but terribly exciting. Had I not so recently orgasmed I would have been fully hard again at the feel of it. As it was, my cock seemed to seriously consider rejoining the game.

"Now you are ready to take me in you," Paul declared, easing his hand away. "It may hurt a little at first, but I know you are brave. If you can not bear it, tell me, but if you can wait there will be great reward for you."

I was not afraid, knowing Paul would never do anything to cause me injury. And pain was something I'd learned to master long ago.

"I am ready," I told him in voice not so calm as I might have wished. It was not fearful anticipation which made it quaver, but an aching yearning inside. I did not know what I needed to fulfill the desire, but guessed that Paul did, and that he would see it well taken care of.

He turned me onto my back and raised my legs high, having me wrap them around his waist. Wetting his cock thoroughly with saliva, he guided it to my anus and began a steady pressure. I felt him stretch me wider and wider until the head slid past and there was a slight easing as my opening snuggled around the narrower underside of it. My rectum felt a slight burning sensation at being stretched so, but the pressure of his flesh within me was both soothing and stimulating.

Paul stopped once the head was inserted, and asked if I was all right. I told him it felt peculiar, but not unpleasant, and wondered what it felt like to him.

A blissful expression stole over him. "It is fantastic. You are hot and tight, a perfect delight."

Hot and tight did not sound a very comfortable place to put one's cock, but Paul assured me I would understand the pleasure when I tried it on him next. He wasted no further effort on conversation, clenching his thighs and pushing deeper into me. I clenched my own legs about his waist, drawing him closer as I bore the bulky intrusion within. I could not feel the exact texture, the skin-to-skin contact that my mouth had, but there was an overwhelming sensation

of fullness and pressure and heat. Paul braced his hands alongside me and gave an angled thrust, burying himself fully and touching some phenomenally sensitive spot within me. My cock hardened at once and I cried out at the unexpected surge of pleasure that touch had given me.

"Again," I begged, clasping my hands to his hips to guide him. Paul needed no urging, and began moving gently, rocking his hips as he thrust his cock through my hungry body. I think Paul intended to go slowly, to prolong our enjoyment, but again my instinctive arousal took over.

I held him tighter with my legs, thrusting up in faster rhythm, unable to get enough of the wondrous new sensation. My muscles clenched tight at each withdrawal, revelling in the sliding rub over them, then eased to allow him all the way back in, smacking up against my haunches and stabbing at that point of sensitivity within me. Paul's face reddened and his eyes squeezed shut as he speeded his thrusts, pumping rapidly now and breathing in short moaning bursts.

He strained deeply then, sunk fully in me but pressing his pelvis hard to my ass and quivering it in tiny circles. He was gasping something, a stream of guttural provincial French which I could not follow. His body stiffened and then jerked in a series of rapid spasms and then I felt warm wetness seeping through me. Paul gave a shuddering sigh and pumped slowly a few last times, stiffened with shivers another moment, then lowered himself to lie full upon me in relaxed satisfaction. I tried to renew the thrusting motions but he stilled me, kissing my mouth deeply, and drawing himself out of me.

"Perfection," he sighed happily. "You are perfection."

I let him nuzzle my face a minute, but soon pressed him to continue the instruction. "You said I would try it with you next," I reminded him. I was most desirous to continue, for his actions had readied me to mate again. My cock was almost painfully swollen, throbbing for release.

Paul nodded drowsily, and rolled off me onto his back. I positioned him as he had done to me, and carefully licked and stretched his little passage to receive me. I worried a bit about the difference in our sizes, but Paul assured me he

was wonderfully relaxed and if I proceeded slowly he would adjust eventually. That worried me even more, for despite my best intentions I was not sure I could restrain the animal urges which overtook me when my excitement peaked. But Paul was gazing at me with sleepy alluring eyes, arms outstretched to welcome me to him. And my cock throbbed hungrily, desperately wanting to feel his flesh enfold and caress it.

I knelt between Paul's legs and slid my moistened forefinger into him. He wriggled as I probed at him to test the elasticity and resistance of the passage. Deep inside I felt the bump of a buried hardness, and Paul gasped when I pressed at it. I did not have to ask if I'd hurt him, for his face shone with pleasure and he rocked his hips up as if to ask for more. Again I pressed at the node. Again he gave a quick gasp of indrawn breath, and bit at his lip to contain it. Encouraged, I hooked my finger on the tight outer ring of guarding muscle and drew downward as I pressed my cockhead forward. The ring widened, parting to allow me entry within. Paul groaned and thrashed his head as I pushed on, but when I paused he panted and ordered me not to stop. The pressure on my cockhead was considerable, but it felt slick and exciting, and I continued the penetration, determined to bury the length of my hard staff within his yielding body. Paul groaned again, but now I could detect pleasure in his cry, and it spurred me on.

"So big..." he moaned as I sank deeper within him. "Ah, how you fill me. You reach up to my heart."

The buttery softness of his inner passage embraced me, hot and tight as he'd described, and so achingly good around me that I thrust hard the last inch, wanting only to feel him surround my entire length. Paul squirmed in my arms, his legs folded around my waist to lock me to him, and his hands clutching restlessly at my arms.

I took his reaction as permission to begin thrusting, and rocked back slightly to push in again. This brought an appreciative moan from my friend, and I began pumping myself back and forth with increasing force. Almost as exciting as the slick squeeze along my cock was the abandon with which Paul responded. His

face perspired freely and he panted as if he'd run a great distance, his hips writhing to meet my thrusts with solid jolts of contact. My cock seemed to swell to even greater dimensions as I felt again that surge of tenderness toward my vulnerable companion. The feeling washed over me, drenching me in a burst of love and affection for this man who shared such intimacy and trust with me. Now I understood the concept of making love.

I was thrusting very hard now, driving the breath from Paul's lungs with each downward shove, panting along with him as if I too could not get enough air. It seemed all I could concentrate on, the warm tight wonderful sheath squeezing over my cock, the frantic urge to move, to rub harder and harder and burn with fire, and laced all through it the knee-weakening surrender to love.

I had orgasmed once already, and that gave me the respite I needed to prolong my current efforts. Time dissolved as we writhed together, my hard driving thrusts unremitting, Paul's moans merging with the other sensations as I stabbed through him ever more forcefully. I felt a surge of heat rush through my loins and knew the moment was on me. Bracing my hands on Paul's bunched shoulders, I drove myself into him as far as I could reach, threw back my head and howled my release. The ejaculation streamed from me deep into his body, making the passage even slicker. It pulsed for several seconds as I remained frozen in place, my muscles straining to lock me inside the soft body below. I felt Paul's hands rubbing frantically between our bodies, then he splashed warm stickiness across my chest and stomach.

I lay on Paul, careful not to crush him with my weight, too sapped of energy to move further. He made no great effort to move either, letting his legs slip back to the ground and cov-

ering my hand with his as his eyes fluttered closed. I could hear his harsh breathing calm, and felt the racing thump of our hearts gradually slow.

I pulled my softened organ from him, and he gave a little sigh as his anus coiled shut behind its retreating bulk. He looked so appealingly sleepy and open that I kissed him again, letting my tongue mingle with his a moment; then I rolled back and pulled him around to be cradled in my arms. He acceded readily, resting his head on my shoulder and letting me wrap myself around him. The arousal had gone, leaving me more aware than ever of the melting tenderness he inspired in me.

"I will go with you to France," I whispered to him, unable now to bear the idea of ever parting company.

He shook his head and slowly stroked the arm I'd wrapped around him. "No, I do not want you to."

I felt stricken. "Why? I love you, Paul."

"You love being in love. It is all new and exciting, *non?* I am happy I have pleased you so. But I said I could not take advantage of your innocence, and I will not. What of Jane? Do you no longer wish to find her?"

I was troubled, for I did indeed want to find her, yet I did not want to part with my dearest friend. I didn't answer.

"So. Then you go to America. I will provide you money and letters of introduction when we reach the port. You find Jane and tell her what you need to say. Then, after you have been with her, if you still want to return to me you may."

He was a wise man, Paul d'Arnot. Once Jane and I were united we remained together from that day forth. But Paul is our dearest friend, and we remain in contact. I never slept with him again, but I always thank him in my heart for teaching me how to make love—and how to feel love.

being used in reference to himself. It was...he hesitated, sorting and discarding until he found the proper term...unnerving. To think of someone loving him made him...vulnerable. Without so much as a word being spoken, but by their very existence, Watson's feelings demanded some kind of response. They certainly cast a net of responsibility out to catch him, whether Watson had ever intended such to be the case. But then, the strong-box had been securely locked and the damning pages carefully concealed amongst a tightly rolled scroll of boring and unimportant documents, a faded blue ribbon holding everything together. Clearly, those words had never been meant for reading by anyone other than Watson himself.

It was, unfortunately, all too easy to reconstruct the scene: Watson coming in here in Holmes' absence to unlock that box with the only key—or so Watson believed—and to then sit in his favourite chair and re-read the precious words. To re-read, and wrestle, once more, with the demons of conscience and religion and the faith of a friend. Holmes didn't need to look at the pages again; the meaning and the feelings were too poignant and pointed to be readily forgotten. He knew, intimately, the companionship of such feelings, loneliness and he friends of long standing. He knew, even, the distress of thinking thoughts unworthy of either a gentleman or a friend, levelling them at a man for whom one professed affection. After all, it was something he had done himself.

With a wriggle of embarrassing clarity, he could remember that scene within the dreaming spires when he had made his declaration, the horror bursting upon his friend's face, the denouement to the Chancellor that was followed rapidly by his being sent down. Not an experience that an honourable man would choose to repeat, not if he were intelligent and capable of learning from the past's mistakes. So it was that he had put all that behind himself, taking to heart one path the teachings of the ancient Greeks taught, concentrating all his energies on the intellect and casting Eros out to the outer darkness where it could not harm him any further. It had worked, and well, until this night, when he had read that damned dream of Watson's.

Watson. Lying mere yards away, within the

sound of a voice, were Holmes to decide to call for him. Sound asleep he would be, white linen tucked up under his chin, the fabric of his night-shirt ruched up under his body, for in slumber, Watson was as untidy as he was in waking. There was no doubt, after the revelations of those pages, that Holmes would be welcomed were he to approach the figure that was lying safe in Morpheus' embrace. Indeed, there was no doubt that such an approach was one for which Watson longed and which he would have actively sought, had the price of it not been so high.

Holmes strode to the mantelpiece, roughly filling his pipe, lighting it from a spill made bright by the fire. He settled himself in his chair, one hand idly tracing the brocaded patterns, the minute ridges of thread interspersed with the silken valleys of cloth. Smoke wreathed around his head, clouding his face but not his mind. That organ was as sharp as the abattoir's knife and twice as quick. He marshalled his thoughts, setting them out in ranks and defensive squares, wheeling and about-facing them this way and that, allowing the unpredictability of the Light Horse to reave in and throw everything into disorder, as emotion cast everything into disarray. Even as he watched the bloody slaughter of logic, he knew it for an old and familiar scene, one he had lived through more times than he had ever cared to concede. There had been his friend at Varsity, the Right Honourable William Grace Featherstonehaw. There had been the detective who had taught him so very much of what was to become his own trade. Then there was Watson. Oh, it was the lowest form of cowardice to pretend that he had cast Eros out of his life—lust was an art-form to be indulged with the proper style and vigour. But that was precisely it, in a way. There were ways of indulging the darker passions that were 'bad form', unsuitable for a gentleman, even if that gentleman were one of the unspeakable few. He had, he confessed to the smoke coiling greyly round him, been as guilty of conforming to the strictures of society as a black-draped widow. All the right things done, at the right time. All the right things said, in the right way. All the form followed, to the letter. Victorian to the core, he was, sitting there with the fire crackling, a pantry overflowing, and the poor huddled at the corner waiting

for the hope of a day's work privy cleaning in one of the grand houses. Deceitful as all the others of his class, he admitted himself to being, for although he had not restricted himself from enjoying sex, he had swaddled it in polite and respectable lies. His own voice mocked him, sneering.

Love is a disease that blunts the mind and makes men stupid.

The body is nothing more than a tool to be used and discarded.

The mind is everything...

How perfectly he had played the rôle of æsthete, how absolutely perfectly. The stage was obviously his milieu, not real life. All his claims to have left Eros behind were as true as the ninies who covered the legs of pianos, lest the purity of the mind be diseased by the lust inspired by the mere thought of legs, albeit on a piece of furniture. Such protestations of Christian purity, and all to hide minds filthier than the Thames. And no better was he. All his brave talk, that had so convinced Watson that the great Sherlock Holmes was a misanthrope. A misogynist, yes, that he would concede, and gladly, but hardly a misanthrope. In fact, he was entirely too fond of men.

So where, then, logic asked quite reasonably, did the problem lie? If he confessed to being fond of Watson—he did, he replied, yielding the point quickly—then why not simply take the sheaf of papers in to Watson's room and ease the loneliness of both his friend and himself?

But that was hardly the problem. No, the problem was how each of them chose to express that which society and law required remain hidden. Watson, with visions of dockland pubs far better than any Holmes had ever seen, his imaginings of the depths of degradation to which Holmes had sunk... Those things were laughable, when compared to the realities of Holmes' indulgences. A gentleman Watson definitely was, but provincial to a fault. How shocked he would be, to discover the private rooms of the Diogenes Club! Or the even more discreetly private club to which Holmes himself belonged and attended, carefully, very carefully, shrouded from any one who might see him.

What would the very, very nice Doctor Watson do, he a man of the Hippocratic oath, if confronted by a lover who was excessively fond of

pain? For Holmes knew his vices well, knew them by the list he had already worked his way down, beginning at the top with all the usual and common divertissements men of his sort indulged, and slowly lowering himself past those mundane activities with their small pleasures to the more complex patterns of sexuality which he himself found to be so...fascinating. To plumb the depths of one's soul, that was what aroused him, the engaging of the mind as well as the body. To use pain as one's path, to follow the map left by flagellation all the way to the discovery of self and pleasure...that was Holmes' delight. All the rest left him cold, now, in his maturity. True, in his Varsity days, he had been moved to passion and ecstasy by the touch of his friend William, but he had seen so much and lived so much more since then, he honestly did not believe he could return to such banality.

Not even for Watson? He re-filled his pipe, settling back into his chair, the room invisible through the fugue of smoke that cocooned him. For Watson... How much of a sacrifice would it be, to indulge the simple fantasies of a delightfully simple man? At least his papers showed that he went beyond the usual, so perhaps, there were paths there that they could explore together? Perhaps Watson had depths to himself that he did not even know existed, had never dared allow himself to suspect? The possibility was intriguing, all the more so for the taboo involved. He had promised himself that he would never do a single thing to hurt Watson again, after the dear man had fainted upon Holmes' 'return from the dead', when they had solved the Mystery of the Empty House. It had been sweet, to be free to caress the beloved face, unseen and unnoted.

For a moment, the smoke ceased to billow from his pipe, as he examined a word anew. Beloved. An interesting word, an interesting way of seeing Watson. Beloved. More than chronicler, more than comrade in arms, far more than 'my dear friend and colleague'. Beloved. He rather liked the sound of it in his mind and tried to envision himself actually speaking it, but he stumbled upon that picture. No, protestations of affection were beyond him and if it were something Watson were expecting... But no, the papers had been quite clear on that. Watson believed himself unappreciated and merely toler-

ated, with no hopes of affection, never mind words of devotion.

But still, he came back to the differences in how they chose to find their pleasures. Watson imagined feeble fleshpots, whilst Holmes threw himself into them, heart and soul, drowning himself in enough hedonism so that he could maintain his æstheticism for another period of time. Such a contrast of worlds, such a conflict of desires.

Unless he were willing to shrink his sphere of pleasures a little and Watson were willing to expand his horizons a little... The rewards could be quite stunning: freedom from the constraints of the specialised club and the lifestyle he was forced to maintain outside those walls. To have such pleasure by his side, available whenever the mood took him, whenever his choice was ennui or sex or his cocaine solution... Yes, that was a choice he could live with. It was also one that he could persuade his Watson into taking. And were persuasion to fail, seduction would surely succeed. And if even that did not have the desired effect, why, then he would simply resort to corruption. It was, after all, terribly promising that one so sheltered as Watson—despite his protestations to the contrary, for it is one thing to see the top of a mountain, quite another to actually experience spelunking in its echoing black caverns—should envision the graphic detail of his fantasy, and better yet, set it in an establishment run by thugs and that most emasculating of thoughts for a man like Watson, a man dressed as a woman. If those were his thoughts at this early stage... Oh, yes, there was certainly hope yet.

Meticulously, he banked the fire, ensuring that there would be no spills to burn them in their beds during the night and then he gathered up both the proper candle and the sheaf of papers. Watson was, of course, sound asleep, in a bed unpromisingly narrow, but then, even that could be turned to advantage with the use of a little imagination. Holmes lit the tallow candle he had brought with him, watching the sleeping face revealed to him, the blue eyes closed, the usually smooth cheeks greying with stubble. He smoothed the back of his hand along the roughness of skin, smiling to himself as Watson stirred and his lips formed Holmes' name. He took the papers, stroking them down

to the neck of Watson's nightshirt, the ribbon dangling into the chest hairs nesting warmly under the white linen. Still only the slightest, sleepy stirring. He doffed his clothes, sliding into the confines of the bed, clutching Watson in his arms as the other started awake, stiff with shock.

The closed eyes had opened and, dangling from a violinist's beautiful hand, faded ribbon swaying gently, the damning papers hove into view. Holmes could hear and feel the convulsive swallow and he pressed up closely against the ripe body. He placed the papers carefully on the pillow and brought his now free hand down to hush the words that surely would soon begin otherwise. He traced the line of lips, enjoying the brush of thick moustache on his skin, just as he savoured the morpheus-flavoured skin at the nape of Watson's neck. He allowed no speech, unwilling to allow ill-considered words to break their compact of silence and stop the flow of arousal. His lithe body undulated along the solidity of Watson's, the linen night-shirt creeping up higher and higher, until he could feel the tantalising kiss of buttocks on his abdomen. He moved down a little, so that he could clarify, expand the feeling, groaning as his prick rubbed against the softly curving underside of buttock.

Watson had finally stirred from his shock, frantically shoving his bed shirt up until the crook of his underarms frustrated him. He contented himself then with the delight of Holmes' naked flesh pressed against him from shoulder to knee, and most especially in the hardness that was snubly ploughing between his cheeks. Hands moist, he reached around behind, shoving bedclothes and eiderdown out of the way, until he could feel the play of Holmes muscles on the flat of his palms, the hollowing and rounding of every thrust Holmes made as he rubbed his prick against Watson. But he was in dire need himself, rolling onto his back so that Holmes was leaning over him, making himself deliberately passive, inviting Holmes to take possession of his prick now and his body soon.

Silent as a dream, Holmes picked up the cravat that had been discarded on the bedside table, trailing the end over Watson's throat, where it had been this evening, keeping the chill out of his dressing-gown's warmth. He dappled in

across Watson's face, brief butterfly touches, and Watson showed himself more knowledgeable than Holmes had hoped, for he opened his mouth and took the end of the cravat into himself.

It was but the work of a moment to tie it as a gag, control of Watson's speech, and with it, desires, passing over to Holmes, who was stroking the soft waves of brown hair to cover the neat knot of fabric. Holmes caressed him, using soft and pleasing touches to magic the night-shirt up and out of the way, so that Watson lay, completely unsullied, in the light of the tallow candle, with only the white mark of Holmes' possession of him to dress his body.

Lingeringly, his dark eyes aglow with candle-light and the dancing fire of passion, Holmes licked and suckled his way over Watson, with extra kisses for responsive nipples, the small hard nubs of flesh pressing up anxiously onto his tongue. He could feel the drum-roll speed of Watson's heart, could feel the heat rising from Watson's groin to bathe his own. He hadn't touched there, not yet, and he was tauntingly slow in his progress down the lush body. Such a plenitude of muscle and hair, in such placid contrast to his own whippet leanness. He nuzzled luxurious chest hair, following the arrowing dart down to quivering belly, tongue dallying in belly button, before going lower, to flirt with febrile flesh. Watson was erect, almost painfully so, a rosy-redness standing up straight and proud at the merest whisper of Holmes' fingers. Finally, he gripped the manhood in his palm, closing his fingers around it, smiling with his whole being as Watson arched, helpless with arousal, up into him. Truly, he was literally in the palm of Holmes' hand, his to do with as he pleased, all control relinquished to him. Holmes took great joy in that: the absolute trust given him with nothing asked for in return. And finding that, he found it was not so difficult, after all, to give a little in return.

He left Watson for a moment, returning with the belt from his tartan dressing-gown, turning Watson onto his side, fastening his hands behind his back. So now, all responsibility was completely abrogated to Holmes. No matter what they did, there could be no guilt for Watson, for Holmes had taken the luxury and burden of control away from him in its entirety. Watson had no say, had no recourse, and thus, could

have no stick with which to beat himself, no sins with which he had to face his God. Holmes would take all that upon himself, as he had taken so many other transgressions and impieties.

Hands firm and decisive, he moved Watson as he wanted him to be: lying on his right side, face to the wall, left leg raised to expose him to Holmes' sight. The white skin pinked satisfyingly under the stamp of his hand, the sound of the slap cracking perfectly through the room. With every blow of his hand, Holmes watched the shiver of buttocks and the jut of prick and the peaking of nipples. Watson's whole body was alive to Holmes' touch, enlivening under it, the harder the blow the sweeter the pleasure.

Then Holmes moved away and Watson was left displayed on his side that way, while Holmes used his candle to light the wall sconces and the candle that always remained at bedside in its silver holder. Kneeling on the bed again, straddling Watson so that he could be seen, the light from the candles playing over his skin like music, he leant down, close to Watson, until they were almost breathing each other's air, and then he blew out the candle he had brought, his fingers testing the warmth of the tallow, his lips smiling as everything proved to be just the way it should be. He had always preferred the soft slickness of tallow candle to the messy stickiness of grease or ointment; had always loved watching the white length of it being pushed into a body.

Moving now, his lithe thighs brushing against the heavier muscles of Watson's, he splayed his hands over the bounteous buttocks, spreading the cheeks, the candle held in his right hand pressing into flesh. He rolled it over the skin, leaving lustrous satin behind, until it dipped into the valley between the buttocks. One long finger probed for the door that was there, found it, pressed home, the muscle as strong as iron, weakening only slowly for him, then giving way suddenly as Watson relaxed and yielded completely.

The tallow candle was eased in, coating the thick muscle with sliding smoothness, preparing the way for Holmes to enter. His groin pulsed, prick jumping, with the sure and certain knowledge that no-one had been allowed this intimacy before, that no-one had been trusted this well before. He pulled the candle free, his fingers diving in to make sure that Watson was well

readied, then he curved his body around Watson, convexity to concavity. The blind head of his penis searched its way, rigid and irrefutable, until it found the puckered mouth and pushed in in a single, long thrust. He felt the shock of it ripple through Watson, making them both tremble and then all the control he had taken was lost to him as he thrust, awash and helpless in his own pleasure. His hands were lonely, so he filled them with Watson's flesh, squeezing and moulding. His mouth was empty, so he filled that also with Watson, with his taste and the sweetness of his skin. Sweat broke out in a sudden rain all over him, his skin flushing red and his breathing ragged. He needed to be in deeper, be more a part of Watson, needed more, racing ever faster for more pleasure, *more*. Then there was a moment, an eternity, of exquisite perfection, when his entire body was all in tune, a single note of ecstasy.

Slowly, it faded down: to mere pleasure and to the dwindling of his body where it was joined

to Watson and to the shrinking of Watson where he held him still in the palm of his hand. Holmes nestled in closer, hands burrowing between them to undo the slip knot he'd tied around Watson, teeth undoing the simple fisherman's knot he'd caught the cravat into. He stayed where he was then, tongue lazily licking up the sweat beading Watson's nape and shoulders, his left hand idly rubbing the fruit of Watson's loins into the still-trembling belly. He even found the energy to smile when Watson picked up the discarded belt and lifted it to his lips and kissed it. Ah, yes, there were definitely possibilities here for companionship that would fill Homes' every need.

Neither one of them bothered with the candles, falling asleep in the amber glow. One white candle lay discarded on the bedside rug beside a sheaf of papers, a faded blue ribbon draped over both, as the heavy covers were draped over the slumbering whiteness of two close-pressed bodies.

SUNDAY, BLOODY SUNDAY

M. FAE GLASGOW

SOLILOQUY

THE RAINBOW LAY TRAPPED ON THE STREET, WHERE THE ICE-LOLLIES HAD MELTED, COLOURS RUNNING TOGETHER TO STAIN THE GRIMNESS OF CONCRETE INTO THE HOPE OF CHILDHOOD, ALL THE UNNATURAL GLORIES OF CHILDREN'S ICE-LOLLIES, ARCING INTO GLORY, THE RED THE BRIGHTEST OF ALL. It would be difficult, later, to explain why this stream had looked like a rainbow, very difficult, once it had all dried and the red had turned to brown, as blood must do. There was the bell-ring of children's laughter and a touch on his shoulder, making him jump as if the wing of an angel had dipped in to taste his soul. But it wasn't one of the children come back already, it was only Doyle, and the screaming joy of children in distant ignorance of what had happened on the Green.

"Not supposed to be like this," he heard the words as they came, lumpen and cold, from his lips. Like the children had been, when the ambulancemen had carried them away. Lumpen and cold, all limp and heavier than they had any cause to be. Red hair, streaming, like ribbons, or blood...a ribbon of blood, flowing forever, great streams of it, children's blood, the blood of innocents, the dark heart-blood that had pulsed out of Doyle to lie on the carpet, waiting for Bodie to find it after the ambulancemen had taken Doyle away, lumpen and cold and heavier than he had any cause to be...

His body was shaken as much as his mind, but the tangible reason for his body's tremors was still there. Doyle. Not lumpen or cold, but warm and alive and shaking him as much as Doyle's own hand was shaking with the horror of it all. The children, red hair streaming, shoelace undone, hanging from under the red ambulance blanket, the brown lace on the boy's black shoe, typical kid, couldn't be bothered to make sure his laces matched. Probably never even noticed, probably never bothered to make sure his underwear was clean. There were a thousand, a million, a thousand million mothers' voices in his head, all saying the same thing;

a thousand, a million, a thousand million fingers all being wagged: make sure your underwear's clean, you never know when you'll get in an accident.

Red blood, fading to brown, red hair, brown shoelace. Life, fading to death. The little girl hadn't known that he was the one who had been driving. She'd tried to smile at him. Sweet little girl, very politely brought up, apologising for getting her Mivvi all over him. Hadn't known it wasn't her ice-lolly that was making him all sticky. Hadn't known it was her blood, red of a different sort from her hair. And eyes grey and serene, the calm only the innocent can know. Those innocent of the knowledge of death. Those who don't see it coming. Those who ask him to tell Mummy it wasn't her fault she got her new Easter frock all torn.

He wasn't sure now if Doyle was still shaking him. Didn't much matter. The ambulances were leaving now, no need for lights or sirens, not for this one. Only the first one had needed lights, only that one. One with lights, two without, one ripping Sunday afternoon to shreds with its noise, two ripping his soul to shreds with their horrible silence.

It wasn't as if it was the first time he'd killed. No, the first time had made him laugh with the joy of still being alive, of surviving. This...

The rainbow was losing its nice clear arcs, wobbling and wiggling into a messy aurora, the red browning, congealing. Lumpen and cold. Like the children. All of them, even the ones still alive and screeching with fun in the playground, two streets over. They were dead, too, just that their bodies hadn't stopped yet, hadn't started to rot, red blood turning brown. Everyone died, and those children would stop their playing soon, to lie down and die in the street or in the bath or in a fire. They'd all die.

Pity he hadn't hurried up and jumped the queue.

It was Doyle shaking him, but it was hard to tell who was the more shaken. No life-red here, Doyle was grey of skin, and hair. Even his eyes

had died down to grey, like a cat's eyes after it's dead and the maggots start their living. Cowley too, all grey, from his suit to his lips, all the colour gone. In fact, now that he looked around, all the world was grey, even the smells of the grass and the sounds of the children. All grey. Everything, all of it, the entire Universe, a nice, comfortable, dead grey where he didn't have to feel anything at all. All grey...

Apart from the trapped rainbow, weeping at his feet. Colours blurring, fading, all turning to the brown of dead blood, melting, running...

Tears down his cheeks, running in runnels of grief. The rainbow wasn't running anywhere, it was only his tears. Useless, wasted tears. Like him.

He'd have to tell Mummy that it wasn't Her fault she had torn her new Easter frock. He'd say, "Mummy, it wasn't her fault. She was using her pocket-money to buy a Mivvi from the ice-cream van when this lunatic came round the corner too fast. He missed her, but the next lunatic didn't. So you see, it really wasn't her fault she tore her new Easter frock. She wasn't being naughty, just being a good little girl, her hair all red like ribbons..."

Her blood was all over him. He could smell it. Could feel it chilling his skin with the caress of Death. Could feel it seep into him, her blood coming in to his. Her blood, all brown and sepulchral, mixing with his which was redder and heavier than it had any cause to be, weighing him down, until he was as leaden as the sounds of children screaming in pain. Until he was a dead-weight, as the other children had been, the ones who had cried not at all, breathed not at all. He couldn't open his eyes, for if he opened his eyes he would see the empty spaces where the little bodies had lain, twisted and warped, as if he'd picked bundles of rags up and tossed them back down. He wasn't even sure how many there had been. One ambulance, screaming like the brown-haired boy, so that meant at least one, possibly two still...all right. But two ambulances, offensively silent, oh, god, that meant he could have killed four of them. He knew about the boy with the black shoes, brown laces dragging the ground as his hand had, when the ambulancemen had picked him up to take him away in the quiet of the ambulance. And the little girl, the little girl...

She hadn't felt any pain, he didn't think, but it was so hard to remember. Just her eyes, so clear, so bright, and her voice, filled with the smallness of the child's world, all her concerns on what would Mummy say. What would Mummy say, when he told her about her little girl's blood streaming as red as her hair, as red as her ribbons...

Would she scream? Or would the agony be too much and would she just sit there silent, as he had, when her daughter had died in his arms because he had...

Or would she moan and weep, crying for 'my baby, my baby, my baby' and then come at him, fingernails drawn like weapons to rake the eyes from his body. To rip out the eyes that had seen her little girl die. If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out.

He had seen a little girl die, because he had killed her.

If thine hand offend thee, cut it off.

It had been his hand on the wheel of the car, his hands steering, his hands that had swerved to miss the lamp-post and made the car skid and turn and tyres squealing and shrieking, just like the children, just like the children, Christ, the kids he hadn't even seen until it was too late and the car was hitting them, thud, thud, thud, thud, and all the screaming and shrieking and the ice-cream van had crunched when he'd hit it, setting the music off again.

And then there wasn't enough noise. There had been too many children in the queue to make so little noise. They should have been loud enough to drown out the van's obscenely cheerful tune. The ice-cream woman had shut it off, and then it was even quieter, until the sirens had started. He'd heard them coming, whilst he sat there, holding that little girl, knowing, knowing, knowing that she wasn't going to live long enough for them to get her to hospital. Knowing that he'd...

He'd kill the bastards he'd been chasing. Wasn't his fault he'd been taking that bloody blind corner too fast. The Council should be shot, building cul-de-sacs and roundabouts and blind corners like that, where there were going to be kids waiting to buy cones and wafers and Mivvis. Where there'd be children standing on the kerb, looking both ways, 'better a moment on the kerb than a month in hospital' oh christ,

why couldn't she have ended up in hospital for a month? He could've visited her then, bought her a new Easter frock so that her mum wouldn't be cross with her. He could have bought her the prettiest dress any little girl ever had, and he could have found one just like the one she'd been wearing, all bright poppies on a white dress, pink and red, red ribbons, red blood, streaming, streaming...

He was still kneeling on the pavement, looking at where the rainbow was bleeding off, running down into the gutter, ice-lolly sticks lying there like bones. And the orange of the rainbow was bright and sunny, and the indigo of the rainbow was rich and strong.

And the red was turning brown...

The church bells were ringing and peeling Easter Evensong when the discreet white car arrived to take Bodie away.

An inch from his face, the scarlet blossom sent out its pungent aroma. He was so close, each grain of bright yellow pollen stood out on the stamens, and the veins of black had individual cells, all interlocking, bleeding into the red of the petal. Behind it, the leaves were glossy, dark, the same hue that back in England, the town and county set called hunter's green.

He was a hunter, or was supposed to be. Had been, and had done it very well. He'd found the guerrillas, run them to ground, had brought Krivas to the lair. And with the mindlessness of the hunter, he had given no thought to what would happen once the hunted were found. It didn't bother him that the guerrillas would be killed—he was a mercenary, he was here to kill. But it had never crossed his mind that vengeance would be taken, nor that the decision would be made to burn the pestilence out. Or cut it down, or shoot it...

He shifted his gaze, turning, moving farther into the grove. He didn't give a shit what the others would say to him, after. And if they wanted to fight him over it, christ, he'd give them a fight. The anger banked in his belly, making his stomach churn, but not even the storm directed at the rest of his unit could lessen the loathing fury directed at himself. He should be in that village, he should be stopping them... Cold rationality asked the question: how? If he went back to that village, weapon drawn, shouting about humanity

and right and wrong, they'd laugh at him. And then they'd kill him, one more body to add to the pile, one white face amongst the black. It wouldn't change a thing, apart from cutting his own life abruptly short. There was nothing for it but to stand here, amidst the Eden of flowers and listen to the flat cracks of guns being shot, the sharp crackle of huts being burnt—and the full, roaring screams of the men as they died; the thin, high shrieks of the women; the thready, reedy cries of the children. It was that which was getting to him. He was inured to the deaths of men, the need to survive reducing everything to a nice, simple 'us' and 'them' and he'd been hardened to the rape and abuse of the women, even coming to the point of having a woman of his own. But this frightened, uncomprehending crying of the children, god, that was really getting to him, running up and down his spine, claws unsheathed to scrape on the bones beneath. He stared and stared and stared at the plants around him, his haven from the killing. He didn't care what Krivas said, he wasn't going to go in there and do anything so dirty as killing women and children and old men. Wouldn't do it, couldn't do it. The heat was sitting on his shoulders, swinging its heels to thump into his chest with every rank breath he dragged in, and a new certainty was born in him.

He was getting out. He was going to take his woman and go, get away from that mad bastard and hook up with some unit where at least the men were half-sane and the leaders not sadistic child killers. Nothing worse than a man who could kill children, and he wouldn't be part of what Krivas' band was doing. He shouldered his weapon and started back to camp, to gather his woman and his belongings and head for the Coast. And each methodical step took him a little farther into the red and green glory and farther out of range of the whimpering of children. Even after his ears couldn't hear them, his mind could. Oh, yes, he was getting out, and god help Krivas if he came after them...

He was clammy and rancid with sweat when the overgrown tangle of trees cleared from before his eyes and he found himself in the plastic comfort of the hospital. A woman was sitting in front of him, but it wasn't his woman. She was dead, clutching the spill of purple-grey intestines, while Krivas laughed and the others held

him in place, making him watch, watch, watch as the life seeped out of her along with her screams... Doyle hadn't been like that when he was dying, though, had he? No, that bastard had gone quiet and pale, drifting off into the ticking and clicking of machines, where Bodie couldn't get to him, couldn't bring him back. He'd had to watch as Doyle died, too. Spent too much time watching people die...

"Bodie?" she was saying. "Bodie?" Stupid cow, did she think he didn't know his own name or something?

"You have to bring this out in the open, you must talk about it, face it and put it in perspective."

He stared at her, incredulous, blue eyes holding very little of the reason most men had. "Perspective?" and his voice was as rusty as an old knife left in the ground. "Perspective? I killed four kids and I let them kill the whole village and I couldn't save her and then the bastard just lay in that bed dying on me and not loving me and you tell me to get it into perspective?"

The shriek died down, Bodie sinking with it onto the chair again.

"You didn't mean to kill the children, Bodie. No-one could have avoided hitting them..."

A sudden burst of rationality scythed through him. "Is that what the Inquest said?"

He'd caught her on that one, barbed wire of his voice snagging at her skin. "You paused too long, Kate—" so that was her name, that's right, CI5, one of Cowley's finest, and Doyle who hadn't died, only wanted to and didn't want Bodie loving him—"gave yourself away. I could've missed them, couldn't I, 'cept I made a mistake, a stupid fuckin' mistake an' she died, and got blood all over her ribbons..."

He knew he was crying, but the luxury of self-respect was long gone and he couldn't bring himself to care that he was snivelling, face wet, nose running. She handed him the box of hankies, silent, letting him get some of the agony out.

"Yes, you could have avoided hitting them..."

"Dead fucking right I could. Those soddin' bastards managed to miss the kids when they went round that fuckin' corner too fast, so why couldn't I, eh? Could have missed them, could have missed them, but then I'd've killed Ray, and I couldn't, could I? Couldn't watch him in a

hospital bed dyin' again, could I? Couldn't kill Ray, so I killed the kids instead. An' too much of a coward to face Krivas, so I'm as guilty as the rest of them for that village..."

A patina of professional quiet covered Kate Ross, not one atom of her own feelings showing on her face. For all she constantly put them in their places, she had a soft spot for both Bodie and Doyle, waiting until they were gone before she allowed herself a wry chuckle at their antics. This afternoon she was finding herself hard-put to keep her smooth armour in place, a spiralling urge to help growing stronger. It was, she knew from her own analysis, her almost compulsive mothering instinct, the thing that had driven her into a career of giving psychiatric care. Obvious, also, to anyone who understood the human mind, why she went in for care of the likes of Bodie, for they drew her, addictively, these men who seemed never to have known any kind of home. She sat there, tapping a newly-sharpened pencil on the pad of her thumb, reminding herself of her own humanities so that she wouldn't allow them to spill all over Bodie. It would never do for her own personal affections to influence the treatment of a patient, so she simply waited.

The silence had soothed him, giving him a small retreat. There was a bird fluttering outside the window, singing and singing, telling the story of all the centuries of all the other little chaffinches that had lived before it. Bodie could almost make out the words, and that disturbed him not at all: preferable, in fact, to some of the weird and not-so-wonderful things that meandered through his mind, taking an occasional bite, chewing him up and spitting him out again. Yes, the lack of human speech was soothing, and if he listened for just another second or two, he'd be able to make out what the chaffinch was chattering on about. Then the stupid bitch spoiled it all: she spoke.

"Why have you refused to see Doyle?"

"Because I'm a raving fucking loony, that's why, and Ray's a bit funny about nutcases. Hates loonybins, hates loonies. So even if I wanted to see him, he wouldn't want to see me, would he? I mean, stands to reason, dunnit? What a bloody stupid question, that. An' if you're the best Britain has to offer, small wonder half the security forces are barmy."

She didn't display a quiver of reaction, simply going on, voice ever so reasonable—reasonable enough to provoke a man like Bodie into shouting out the truth. "How do you feel about Doyle after the accident?"

"Fan-fucking-tastic, how d'you expect me to feel? Look, Ross, he's me partner. I watch his back, he watches mine. This time, some brats got in the way, that's all. An' I don't see why you lot are making such a song and dance out of all this anyway."

"You had a complete nervous breakdown, Bodie, including a catatonic fit. So running the 'brats' over affected you a bit more than that last statement would have me believe. Are you angry with Doyle because of what you had to do to—watch his back?"

"I've got nothing to be angry at Doyle for, have I? He didn't ask me to swerve the way I did, so what's it got to do with him?"

They were going backwards, some of Bodie's old protective shell coming back to hide him from the things he had to face. A different tack, then. "You and Doyle are very close, aren't you?"

"Used to be at any rate."

"Used to be? Why do you say that?"

A great, gusting sigh, the expression of a man speaking to a retarded two-year-old, tattered forbearance held up like a badge of courage. "Told you already, didn't I? Ray hates loonies. You say I've gone bananas, so that means Ray won't want to come within a hundred miles of me."

"And if I tell you he's been asking permission to see you?"

No answer to that.

"And if I also tell you that's he's rung up every single day?"

Still no answer, but there was a response, a faint, shielded light in bruised blue eyes.

"And if I tell you that he defied Mr. Cowley's orders and came out here when he was supposed to be on stand-by?"

He looked at her, sharp as a knife.

"It took me telling him that it wouldn't be good for you to see him to get him to leave." She didn't realise that there was a glimmer of amusement on her face as she spoke. "When I got there, he had half a dozen orderlies and three doctors held at bay, demanding to see you. I think he actually made old Dr. Cameron wet himself..."

She got what she wanted: a sparkle of humour from Bodie.

"Sounds like our Raymond Doyle, whom we all know and love so well."

"Do you?"

The slam of his barriers was almost audible and definitely visible. "Do I what?"

"Love him."

He burst to his feet, whipping over to the window, standing still a second, pacing over to the French doors, rushing back to the window where the chaffinch had poured out its song. Tension bunched along his back, the tendons of his neck standing out in stark relief, light, shadow, light. The shallow panting of panic barely lifted his chest, but made it flutter, like the bird he had almost understood. He rubbed his hand over his face, wiping away only he knew what, then turned to face her, anger and defiance and misery holding equal sway over his expression.

"Yes."

As flat and as clipped as if it were only a response to a question in court. Which perhaps it was. Doyle may have been infamous for his guilt-trips, but only because Bodie gathered all his guilts far inside and hoarded them, a miser with his bitter treasure, Midas poisoning everything he touched.

"Does he know?"

"You really are a stupid bint, aren't you? Oh, yeh, I can just see it now. 'Hello, Ray, how you doin', mate? By the way, I'm in love with you. Hope you love me..." and the dam broke as the last word splintered from him "...too."

She sat on the urge to shelter him from the pain: he needed to suffer this, else all that would happen in the future would be another funeral, this time with Bodie buried alive. "And does he?"

He struggled with his emotions, wrestling them, eventually, under control, face blotched and flushed, the fine whiteness corrupted by redness. "No." Flatter than when he had said 'yes', far deader, far softer.

"You seem very sure of that. Why, Bodie? What's Doyle done that you're so positive?"

"Tried..." he gulped in some air, a screwed-up hankie rubbed roughly across his nose, until he looked for all the world like a schoolboy trapped in the body of a man. "Tried, one night. Made a pass at him..."

The bird was back on the window-sill, war-

bling louder than their heartbeats, the silence between the humans vast.

“What did he do, Bodie, when you made the pass at him?”

An abrupt straightening of his spine, shoulders squaring off as if for a fight. “What’s me and Doyle got to do with me fallin’ apart after killing them kids then?”

“Are you going to pretend that you didn’t swerve that car to protect Doyle? Are you going to pretend that you weren’t so concentrated on Doyle that you didn’t even see the children until it was too late?”

It was less painful to answer the earlier question than deal with whys and wherefores of the accident: the loss of hope was so much more manageable than infanticide. He was, after all, very used to it. “He...he looked at me as if I’d grown an extra head, laughed himself silly then got worried sick when he realised I was serious.”

“So he rejected you out of hand?”

“Oh, yeh, no chance of changing his mind, neither.”

“Was he cruel about it?”

“Not by his standards, no.”

There was finality in that answer, and a warning. She was pushing, getting close to losing him again. She backed off, just a little. “Would you call yourself bisexual or gay, Bodie?”

“You’re the fucking psychiatrist, why don’t you earn your keep and you tell me.”

Her reaction was mild, voice very soothing. “I’d have to say bisexual, although you form more emotional ties with men than you do with women—just look at the groups where you’ve chosen to spend your adult life. Tell me, what do you think upset Doyle more—the fact that it was a man making a pass at him, or that it was you doing it?”

She saw the murder knotting in his hands, knuckles standing out white. Surreptitiously, she moved her hand until the panic button was within easy reach.

“You should know that an’ all, shouldn’t you, you’ve spent enough time harpin’ on at him, askin’ him questions his girlfriends would be embarrassed to ask. But seein’ as how you’re so fucking curious, I’ll tell you, shall I? Be worth it, if I can you out of my sight quicker. All he was worried about was that it was going to ruin our fuckin’ partnership. Rich, innit? I come a

poor second behind a fuckin’ job that he’s always moanin’ about, threatenin’ to drop...”

“But he wasn’t hostile, was he?”

“Look, what is this? D’you get bored when it’s not all talk about sex and perversion, is that it?”

“And would you consider it a perversion, having sex with Doyle?”

He gave her a very straight, painfully sane look. “You’re not going to let me out of this bloody office till I give you what you want to hear, are you? All right, all right, I’ll give you your jollies an’ I’m not going to do anything you’ll regret, so you keep your trigger finger to yourself, you won’t be needin’ that bloody button of yours. You know damn-well I wouldn’t think there was anything perverse, but poor little innocent Doyle would. I think it scared him, having to see me like that. So I pretended it was only ‘cause I was plastered and all it was was me fancying the nearest body. Didn’t tell him the rest, wasn’t any point, was there? If he didn’t want to have to think about me fancyin’ him, he wasn’t going to want me being in love with him, was he? So I laughed it off, camped it up and ran off home to wank in private. Happy?”

“Were you?”

She thought he might hit her after all.

But all he did was lower his eyes, seemingly addicted to the endless movements of his fingers shredding white tissue into damp, heavy snow. “Don’t be so fucking stupid. Never been so miserable in my life. And yeh, I know you know all sorts of interesting bits and pieces about that.”

“So he knew you wanted him, but he turned you down? Did you forgive him for that?”

“I ran those kids over for him, didn’t I?” The words came out of him in full spate, sent him in to full retreat, until he could completely deny the terror he had just spoken.

“I thought you said you didn’t see them until it was too late?”

“Didn’t see them... Heard Ray shouting and yelling at me first, I was too busy trying to avoid the fucking telephone pole to see where we were goin’...”

She gave him a minute, then a second, and a third, waiting until his face was calm, waiting until he had won the battle with his guilt and horror, turning the questioning back around to what needed to be faced.

“Did you forgive him for turning you down?”
 “Not much else to do, was there? Most he’s ever done is a bit of fiddling behind the bicycle shed with the other boys or having a quick look when they were seeing who could pee highest up the wall. Shouldn’t’ve hoped he’d do anything but turn me down flat.”

“And tell me, Bodie,” she said, finally asking the question that this particular session was all about, “can you forgive him for making you kill those children? Four children dead, Bodie, and another maimed for life. Have you forgiven him for that?”

He did hit her then, a single vicious backhand that sent her flying, blood spraying from her nose, splashing across the whiteness of wall like a Japanese print, chair crashing to the floor, her body thudding into the ground.

It took four orderlies to restrain him long enough for the sedative to reach his brain and donate him four hours of blessed oblivion...

Hankie still clutched to her nose, breathing through her mouth against the bloody stuffiness of her nose, Kate Ross sat at her desk, the light from the angle-poise reflecting in the night-mirror of the window. Her pen made not the slightest noise as she wrote, only the faint shuffling of her hand across the paper disturbing the silence. Her notes were even more disturbing, full of dire truths of a dreary future, if they couldn’t find some way to give Bodie Doyle back, lest he lose the one relationship he had left and was lost to the same madness that had buried Shotgun Tommy. Cowley wouldn’t like either the weeks she would need for Bodie’s therapy, nor the gamble they’d have to take at the end of that time. To lose Bodie would be a disaster for CI5, but she had few doubts about how Cowley would feel when she told him what it might cost to save him.

COLLOQUY

DOYLE STOOD ON THE BROAD STAIRS OF THE HOSPITAL, KICKING IDLY AT THE FIRST LEAVES OF THE EARLY AUTUMN, CAR KEYS IN HAND, AN EXPRESSION OF PROFOUND TRUCULENCE ON HIS FACE. Not a word had he spoken, and Bodie couldn’t find any words to say. He hadn’t let Doyle in to see him, not once, demanding that Murphy or Lucas or McCabe or Sue or Betty or the janitor, anyone but Doyle, be the one to talk to him about the inquiry into the

‘incident’. Not Doyle. Not Doyle who’d been in the car with him. Not Doyle who’d seen him kill children. Not Doyle, with his bleeding heart who would look at him with either pity or loathing.

Not Doyle, whom he was learning not to hate for having made him love enough to kill children, albeit by accident.

But Doyle it was who was standing there when the fledgling again faced the world, sanity grasped too tightly by hands that were afraid of losing their grip once more. And Doyle, bless him, had looked with neither pity nor hate, just relief, ushering Bodie into his car, a different colour, make, nationality from ‘the’ car. Not a word, which was balm itself. Just that quietness back at his side, a silence he hadn’t even noticed he’d missed. It brought it home to him just how unsure he was of re-entering the world, with all its pressures and stresses and tests for his sanity.

London was beginning to rear around them, drowning out the greens and freshness of Sussex, filling in the sky, roaring with life before Doyle spoke the first word between them.

“Curry or something from the chippy?”

Bodie glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, noting the loose grip on the steering wheel, the same casually untidy pose that Doyle never seemed quite able to get rid of. “Supermarket, I think. Have to get milk and stuff in, anything left from,” the pause was barely perceptible and Bodie was quite proud of himself for that, “then, it’ll walk out the fridge on its own legs.”

“Nah, cleaned your fridge out ages ago. Thought it was about time I put that bloody hazardous waste training to some use.” He slowed, made a great to-do about turning the corner, ostentatiously concentrating on something else, as if to declare that anything his mouth might say was nothing to do with him. His mouth opened and let his belly rumble. “You don’t have to stay on your own if you don’t fancy it, you know. Could always come and kip with me, for a bit. Until you got used to having to shift for yourself again after the room service at that country club they called a hospital.”

The recoil was almost physical, the figurative sign-of-the-cross hovering in the air between them, warding off something that was both temptation and the path to ruination. “I’d get under your feet. Cowley’s not letting me back

on the job until Ross sounds the all-clear. And with the way I..." he grabbed the reins again, jettisoned what had been on the tip of his tongue to say, "got her knickers in a twist, that'll be the day after doomsday."

"Look, if I'd been bothered about you getting under my feet, I wouldn't've bloody asked you, would I? Come on, Bodie, it's been two months since anyone stood still long enough to listen to me—none of the other blokes are as stupid as you are. And I've got shelves wanting put up and a bike needing parts. What with us being so short-handed and Cowley after my blood, I haven't had much time for that sort of thing. You can make yourself useful, then even if you do get under me feet, I won't mind. Go on, it'll be fine."

"No."

"What d'you mean, 'no'?"

"Just what I said. No."

"What the fuck for?"

Silence, intense, uncomfortable and shamed.

Doyle listened to what Bodie wasn't saying, thought over what was in the reports he'd pinched a look at—conveniently careless of Cowley to leave them lying on his desk and then be fifteen minutes late for Doyle's latest dressing-down. Kate Ross' words had been startling in their bluntness, less than unexpected in their content. And Doyle listened, too, to what his own conscience had been saying to him, all those questions that his own better nature had demanded he answer, all the things he'd had a tumult of time to think about. "You worried about making another pass at me, next time you're one over the eight?"

Bodie squirmed, not enjoying it actually being out in the open. "Leave it out, mate," he muttered, attention enthralled with the boring blank warehouse walls they were passing. "I've had my weekly session of psycho-torture."

"Wasn't going to analyse you. Just wanted to know if that's what's the matter."

Another silence, a quick breath, then the words rushing out helter-skelter. "An' what if it is? Look, Ray, after what...happened, I can do without bollocksing up our partnership, okay?" But the anger that had begun its autumnal fading in the weeks in hospital seemed ever farther away, now that he was sitting beside him. With the familiar smell of Doyle enveloping him, it

was hard to remember the resentment, harder to feel the hate. The ugliness was receding, driven back in a slow minuet by the simplicity of loving, but the caution and the shame were still flourishing greedily. "So why don't you let it go, drop me off at the shops and I'll give you a ring in the week."

"Nah. If that's all it is, then you're staying with me, sunshine. They've given you those little pink tablets to take, right, which means you can't have any booze, so you can't get drunk. Problem solved. Which takes us back to, curry or chippy?"

"I'm not fucking staying with you, Doyle, so stop the car. If you won't listen to me, I'll get out and walk!"

After a minute, Doyle stopped the car, but not to let him go. He parked in front of the Chinese restaurant round the corner from his house, opening Bodie's door for him, bowing him out. "Since you didn't want the other, we'll have a chinkie. I'll even," he wagged his eyebrows, "let you have pineapple fritter for afters." The humour died a death between them, Bodie's expression an all too well-remembered stubborn insubordination. "Okay, okay, if you won't listen to sense..." He stared at him for a moment, obviously weighing what needed to be said with what ought to be said. Leaning forward, giving them some semblance of privacy despite the bustle of the street, he spoke very quietly. "Truth of the matter is, mate, the doctors only let you out on the condition that you'd be staying with me. An' that means if you don't stay with me, you'll be back in hospital so quick you'll think you're on the Magic bloody Roundabout. Got a choice, Bodie. Me or the doctors. An' at least I'm not going to come after you with the fucking rubber enema hose, so come on, off your arse, I want you in there," a tug towards the Chinese take-away, "with me."

That took the wind out of Bodie's sails, left him drifting in an emotional Sargasso. He bowed his head, the shame of being too dangerous to be let out on his own eroding him. Bodie was, quite frankly, not up to a scene, so he got up off his arse and followed where Doyle led: it was easier than fighting and sometimes, still, he was so terribly tired. It seemed longer since last he'd been here, but that was only the distortion of the past couple of months telescoping the rest

of his life far, far away from him. When he was succumbing to it all, it was as if there was only present, future and Accident, and all his reality centred on every horror he'd ever seen or done. Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome, the doctors had called it when they thought him too far gone to hear them, nodding wisely and comparing his experiences to Vietnam. The voices faded and it was Doyle talking to him again, gabbing on as if there hadn't been so much as a day since they'd been together. Somewhere, deep inside him, a slow anger began to burn, so much squirrelled away down there to fuel it, all sorts of lovely hot-burning resentments and fears and angers, every single thing Doyle had ever done to him, the roller-coaster instability of mood the doctors had so sagely predicted. And his churning anger was beginning with Doyle pretending that the Accident had never happened and was ending with the prick-tease wearing those bloody jeans that made Bodie want to weep with the need to hold him and touch him. *Christ, Doyle can be a proper idiot*, Bodie thought quietly behind his blank eyes as they collected food and drove back to Doyle's flat, going through all the little daily routines he thought forgotten, but his body remembered perfectly well. *Anyone'd think I'd just had one quick passing fancy for him and copped one feel too many. Just goes to show what a cretin he is, don't it? And look at him, dishing food up as if nothing had happened, as if he hadn't thrown temptation in my face like bloody Eve setting poor Adam up. Wiggling his bum when he walks, bending over, looking at me all the time. The prat's got no idea that it's more than a quick shag I'm after.*

"Bodie? You all right, mate?"

"As well as can be expected. But if you're looking for scintillating conversation, you've got the wrong bloke. I don't feel over much like entertaining you, so after supper, I'm off home."

"No you're bloody not, Bodie, not after what Cowley threatened me with if I didn't make you listen to those wallys at the hospital. You're staying with me until you're back on your feet." A mouthful of curried prawn was chewed with viciousness, Doyle's flinty eyes never once leaving Bodie's face. And none of it disguising the pity and the sympathy, all of it making Bodie's blood hotter than the food. "And don't you get shirty with me, mate. I'll put up with a helluva lot from

you, but I'm nobody's whipping boy, you got that? You want to take it out on someone, you go batter Lady Fate. Was her fault, not mine."

And Doyle could feel the barrier rise between them, could almost see it in the abrupt stiffness of Bodie's face, the tension in his movements.

"Don't," Doyle said, more gently this time, remembering what the doctors had been thumping into him for the past two weeks. "Shouldn't have been so sharp with you, but the meaning's the same. Wallowing in guilt or taking it out on other people is just a cop-out, Bodie, and yeh, I am speaking from experience. You whack me when I get out of line, I'll do the same for you, emotional breakdown or not. Don't think I'm going to mollycoddle you, which means I'm not going to let you run to ground on your own, where you can pull the wool over your eyes and end up not dealing with any of it, just the way you 'coped' with Africa and Northern Ireland. You're going to have to start living, Bodie, whether you bloodywell like it or not. So shut up and eat your supper before it gets cold."

A pause, the future hanging in the balance, the fulcrum nothing more than the mood of the moment. There was a smell tickling at the back of Bodie's mind and he took the time to give it name: blood, all tangled up with the sickly sweet ices and Doyle's after-shave and the salt smell of his own tears blending into the stench of the blood, an endless circle of salt and sweet, the smell of bittersweet comfort. If he let himself drift, let the misery come out, he'd be able to feel what it was like, all over again, to have Doyle holding him so tight like that. But if he did that, he'd slip again, the way he had that week in the hospital, when it had all gone wrong and he'd started going away again... And if he bottled it all up, went it alone like a man...it would only be a matter of time before he ended up as mad as Shotgun Tommy or just plain cuckoo. But he would end up breaking, if he didn't learn to bend. And he'd be damned if he'd let himself be that weak again. So the long haul it was...

"Thought you weren't going to mollycoddle me?"

Doyle grinned at him, inordinately pleased with the once-typical Bodie response. "I should've known you'd be stupid enough to believe me."

"It'd be better to have someone around part of the time, I suppose."

"You suppose? Course it'd be better. It's all settled, so shut up, you stupid sod. You're staying and that's that. Now will you bloodywell finish that? I spent good money for that and I don't want it wasted."

"Yes, molly."

"You're a prat, Bodie, you *do* know that, don't you?"

Quicksilver change and the brightness of the instant was gone again, miring back into the sludge of depression, the miasma of emotion bubbling up. "That's one way of describing me, at any rate, isn't it? And don't start, Ray, I'm not wallowing in it," he bit out, the anger showing. "But I did it and pretending I didn't isn't going to change a blind thing. And you sitting there prattling on like Mary Fucking Poppins isn't going to help, neither!" A burst of movement and he was on his feet, coiled spring exploding into motion, heading for the door and outside and somewhere where there wasn't someone who knew what he'd done.

"Bodie! Hang on a minute, hold your horses." Doyle leaned on the door, slamming it shut in front of Bodie's face, stopping the escape with scant seconds to spare. His weight held the door shut, just as the weight of weariness on Bodie's shoulders stopped that one from even trying to fight him. All the arguments died on Doyle's tongue, all the words useless in the face of Bodie's depressed deafness, the endless pendulum swing of his moods marking their toll on his face. "C'mon, you look done in. Get yourself into bed." Not a muscle moved. "Go on with you. Face it, mate, if you're going to argue with me, you'll need all the sleep you can get."

Bodie could taste the longing to rest on Doyle, to simply ignore the past, to let him take the strain, just for a minute, let him rest the way sleep never did. But if he did that, he'd need more, then more and before he knew it, Doyle'd be skittering away from him like a newborn foal. Like the last time...

"Bodie? C'mon, mate, get your head down before you fall down and I do my back in lifting you back up."

Half-listening to the words, Bodie trundled back along the hall, hesitating at the bedroom door, waiting for a prod. "Yeh, you can have me

bed. Hope you appreciate all this, for I'll be expecting a tip at the end of the week."

And then Bodie was alone, in Doyle's bedroom, touching his bed, picking up his dressing-gown and breathing in the scent of clean Doyle. For the first time in his life, it wasn't even just lust, far more than it had ever been, even for Marikka. For once, he needed the affection to paper over the cracks the Accident had left, to fill in all the spaces, just as he craved the feel of Doyle under him, or over him, beside him, wherever. He dug his tablets out of his pocket, swallowing the prescribed combination with a grimace of self-hate. Slowly, he stripped, crawling under the bedclothes with the terry-cloth held close, caught between his legs, where it could rub with almost subconscious comfort. *Next best thing*, he thought, drifting off on the pink-pill cloud into Morpheus, *next best thing...*

And then he was so lovely and warm, Ray wrapped all around him, murmuring to him, stroking his hair, telling him it'd be all right, all right, and Ray felt so lovely, all soft crinkly hair and snub nipples, the whisper of skin rubbing against Bodie and he could feel himself getting hard against Ray and the dream wasn't ending, he wasn't waking up...

"Shit, Ray!" he croaked, pulling away, fuzzy round the edges but aware enough to know that Ray would kill him for coming on to him.

"Shh, 's all right, Bodie, I don't mind."

The drugs were enough to slow him for a few minutes, but he was used to fighting his way through them to escape the nightmares that were always lying in wait with their smells of Africa and Ireland and melting ice-lollies and blood like ribbons. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"It's all right, you can do it. You need that, Bodie, needed it for a long time now, haven't you, mate? Well, won't stop you this time. Go on, Bodie, come back here and do what you were doing. Take what you need, I can give it, don't mind..."

The sudden glare of light cast a pall on brittle reality. "Don't mind? Oh, thanks a lot, mate. I don't believe it. I don't fucking believe it! Pity?" the word was spat out, venom to sting as he had been stung. "Pity? Is that it? Oh, don't worry, Bodie, it's all right, Bodie. Take what you need, Bodie." The mimicry was vicious, an ugly cari-

capture of a fairy. “You been reading Barbara Cartland or something? You’re going to lie there and think about England and I’m supposed to be grateful, is that it? Is that your pathetic little plan? Oh, pity the poor poof, the silly little thing’s lost some of his marbles, let’s kiss it better? And you get to play martyr. You bastard, Doyle. This is real life, you know, and I don’t want pity from you.”

This was not how it was supposed to be and Doyle’s wary confusion showed on his face. “What the fuck is *this* all about? Look, Bodie, I’m willing to let you have sex with me. I’m even willing to let you fuck me, so don’t you go getting on your high horse with me. We both know you’ve been after me since the word go. Well now I’m offering.”

“Because you feel sorry for me? Sacrificing yourself to my unnatural desires out of friendship? Or is it,” he leaned down, all the pent-up fury at his helplessness pouring out to scald Doyle, “that you fancy a walk on the wild side, and what better way than with poor old Bodie. He’d never hurt you, he’d never blab, he’d let you have a go and then let you drop him like a ton of bricks. If you think that, then you’re more of a fuckin’ prat than I thought you were and you’re wrong, Ray, dead bloody wrong. I don’t want your pity and if you want to experiment, then go out and buy a plastic doll or a fucking dildo, but leave me out of it. I can’t take it, Ray, not from you, not now.”

He launched himself from the bed, trying to run, kicking off the bedclothes that clung to him like the arms of the drowned at sea, stumbling into the hallway, bashing against the wall in the dark, hot tears burning, his voice cracking and hoarse as he cursed Doyle and cursed his own weakness. He was at the door, freedom only a pane of glass away, but Doyle was there before him, refusing to let go, hands digging into Bodie’s arms, his chest, anywhere he could get a grip on the struggling man.

“Bodie! Bodie! Stop it, you stupid sod, pack it in before I have to hurt you!”

“You and whose army?” Childhood defiance, childhood’s tears, man’s strength pinning another man against the wall, arm across his throat, a breath away from the temptingly crushable larynx.

“All right,” Doyle’s distorted voice wheezed, “give it a by before you hurt me.”

“Give me one good reason why I should.”

“Cowley’d murder you for leaving him even more short-handed than he already is. And you owe me, mate, at least enough to hear me out.”

“No I don’t. I’m going, Ray, and nothing you’ve got to say is going to stop me.”

“Not even if I tell you it wasn’t all pity?”

“What, overcome by lust, were you? Or did you realise you loved me so much, you were willing to let me screw you, is that it?”

“Something like that, yeh.”

“So,” and now the voice was the rumbling, purring threat of a hungry panther, the eyes fixated upon the pulse beating wild and heady in Doyle’s throat, “you’re willing to let me screw you. Kiss it all better, would you?”

And as the catalyst of venting his anger and resentment at Doyle worked its way through him, coherency tiptoed in, holding realisation by the hand: realisation that long-fingered hands were touching him, down there, not tentative at all, determined, forceful, taking the fire out of him, drawing all the heat down to his balls, everything text-book correct like a well-drilled lesson and Bodie was too scarred to dare risk the loving, not while the wounds were still so bitterly fresh. The cold water rationality doused his ardour even as it inflamed his temper. “What is this, old home week? Your country needs you—fuck a psychopath?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, hands snapping forward to grab Doyle’s hair, forcing him down, lower, forcing Doyle’s face into his groin, rubbing his cock against the faint rasp of unshaven cheek. “Well, kiss it better then, Ray,” he whispered, voice an abominable distortion of love, “kiss it all better...” He pressed his hips forward, so that the instant Doyle opened his mouth to speak, Bodie had shoved his cock into virgin mouth, holding Doyle’s head hard against his belly, using the hot wetness of mouth to make himself hard, growing until he filled Doyle and began to thrust into the back of his throat. “Oh, yeh, Ray,” he crooned, “kiss it all better, make poor little Bodie feel all right.”

He could feel the gag reflex bump against his cock, could hear Doyle straining to breathe. Could feel the tears, the horrible, weak tears, covering his own face with rills of misery. Doyle had cried for him once, when he’d been stabbed. *Oh, fuck, Ray, why couldn’t you fall in love with*

me? Why'd it have to go and be like this? He pulled free, grabbing Doyle, hauling him up, crushing him close, stifling his own few tears, refusing to give in to them any more. "Sorry, Ray," he said, stroking curls over and over and over again, taking the spring out of them, "don't want it like that. Don't want to rape you, not going to do that. Go away, Ray, before I hurt you. Get away from me..." He shoved Doyle back, knocking him to the floor, only then registering that both of them were naked. He stumbled past Doyle, avoiding the lunging arm by luck more than skill, making it to the sanctuary of the bedroom. Chair hugging the door handle, he bought himself enough time to cover himself with clothing and cover his turmoil with his chosen mask, the one he'd brought home with him from school one day and never lost since. He'd learned young to keep the hurt inside, to not let it show—better, not let it touch you—when someone you loved deceived you or abandoned you. Each girl who became his 'aunty' for a week or a month or a year became simply one more lesson to be learned, all of them teaching him something new, some of it quite useful—such as shutting someone out when the loving started hurting too much. His face was utterly calm as he walked out into the corridor, completely impassive as he passed Doyle. Hand on the front-door handle, Doyle's words halted him.

"I'm serious, Bodie. You walk out of here, and they'll have you back in that hospital so quick your feet won't touch the ground. An' it'll be that bit longer before they take the chance of lettin' you out again next time."

"Always supposin' they catch me."

A decidedly threatening tone of voice, that, warning Doyle that what little of their friendship hadn't been sullied by this whole mess was at risk, that the whole thing was about to blow up in their faces.

Which it would have done, were it not for Doyle knowing him well enough; were it not for Doyle caring enough. "D'you think I'm goin' to let you go through this on your own, mate? Guard each other's back, that's what we do, an' last time you did that, look what happened to you. It's my turn to guard *your* back, Bodie. An' I need to do it, only way I c'n face my share of what happened Easter Sunday. C'mon, Bodie, why's it different this time? After the things

Cowley's put us through, after everything this soddin' job's thrown at us... Yeh, you're going to be leanin' on me for a bit, but who was it who held me head when I was sick, that first time I killed someone, eh? An' who was it who put up with me being a right bastard over the whole crap with Anne? Or what about all the times I can't face what we have to do to keep this fucking country 'smelling ever so faintly of roses'? Fair and fair about, Bodie. 'Bout time I had my turn, in't it?"

Oh, were it only so simple, but Bodie could see no farther than the lack of real passion that left him feeling betrayed.

"Your turn? For what, the big sacrifice? No one told you that lyin' back and thinkin' of England went out with Victoria, have they?"

Doyle shuffled a bit, stuffing his hands into his pockets; Bodie suddenly realised that Doyle was clad and he had a fleeting thought of how Doyle had looked naked, of how he must have looked, rifling through the cupboards to find his motorcycle overalls, of how he would have looked pouring himself into the fabric.

"Yeh, well, sorry 'bout that. Didn't mean it to come across as a mercy fuck, did I? But I don't know why you're making such a to-do about it, Bodie. I've killed for you, and you for me—" he could have bitten his tongue out at that, seeing Bodie's wince at what could be seen as a nasty reminder of the accident—"so what's the fuss about me sleeping with you? I mean, it's not as if we hate each other, is it?"

Bodie turned away from him then, facing Doyle with his back, but even that far more expressive than either one of them really wanted it to be. Callous though he was capable of being, not even Doyle would ever want to bring this much agony to someone.

"That's the problem, innit?" he finally said to the blankness of Bodie's shirt. "If you hated me, or even just liked me, it'd be all right, wouldn't it? Look, Bodie..."

"I don't want your fuckin' pity!"

"Not offering it, am I? Jesus, Bodie, you're making this difficult. Look, I admit it, I'm not in love with you, but that's never stopped either one of us from fucking someone, has it?"

"Yeh, but you're forgetting something, aren't you, sunshine? You're not interested in men, never have been, according to you."

“First time for everything, in’t there? An’ you know what they say: given the right circumstances, almost anyone’s capable of having a homosexual fling. So if just sufferin’ from terminal randiness can do it, why shouldn’t lovin’ someone?”

That got Bodie to turn round, to face him straight on. “You sayin’ you love me?”

“Sounded like it to me.”

“But?”

Doyle grimaced, giving him a glance of wry humour. “Thought you’d hear the ‘but’ even if I didn’t say it. It’s not the same for me as it is for you, Bodie. No point in beatin’ around the bush: I’m not so blind I can’t see that you’re in love with me. But I can’t say the same thing back to you. Won’t lie to you, Bodie.” He couldn’t leave it like that, not with that dreadfully painful blankness on Bodie’s face. “But who knows, maybe one day it’ll come to me being in love with you.”

“And in the mean time?”

Doyle shrugged and Bodie felt some of the chill leave him, felt some of the colour creep back into the world. There hadn’t been a trace of pity on that face, nor in the gesture, just typical Doyle awkward-grace, when all the words have been said and he didn’t know how to say them better. Doyle was handing it to him, offering himself out of the closeness that had kept them together even after Bodie’d confessed his less than platonic wantings. Doyle was giving him control, on a silver platter, tacitly saying how much he trusted Bodie, proving how much he loved, even if the passion weren’t there, even if the physical were only hedonism wrapped with friendship.

“In the mean time?” Doyle was muttering, shrugging again, scuffing his bare toes on the carpet. “Whatever you want, as long as you don’t try to take me for a mug. If you want us to take the next step, go on to sleeping together, well, to be honest, I’ve been doin’ a lot of thinking since you dropped that bombshell on me, mate. Not half as uninterested as I said I was. Was going to say something, but didn’t know how...”

It was one thing too many. Perhaps it was true, all of it, but it was just too neat, too pat, to ring true, not when you considered that this was the walking maze, Ray Doyle, talking. And Doyle had said ‘fling’, just a pathetic ‘fling’, when he

needed... Some of the anger was crawling back in through the soles of his feet, writhing up into him, taking a stranglehold on him, making him want to get Ray Doyle back for everything he’d ever done and some of the things he hadn’t. The hurt of it all, all the tangled elements were meshing to form enough rope for him to hang himself. Or Doyle. When he started feeling like this, all hell tended to break out, as Kate Ross could testify. The palms of his hands were beginning to itch, as suspicion began its pirouetting across his shoulders, tension not far behind. Too pat, too neat and tidy, too, too easy. Not like Doyle at all—not like *them* at all. And too soon, far too soon, everything still laid bare, like bloodless corpses at the mortuary waiting to rise and haunt him. It wasn’t romance they were courting, it was disaster. And the desire to hurt where he had been hurt was rising with his blood... “No,” he said, and was surprised by the scratchy 78 sound of his voice. “No, never work, not right now. Can’t trust myself, Ray an’ I can’t trust you. Not yet. Not till I know you mean it for yourself and not just because Ross says that’s what I need. ’S in me files, in’t it, needing you to be here. Cowley show them to you, did he? Cowley *order* you to do this as well?”

“Don’t be any more fucking stupid than you have to be, Bodie. Wouldn’t do this for just pity and I bloodywell wouldn’t do it because Cowley told me. Christ, can’t you see? I’ve risked my neck for you, haven’t I? Been in some horrible situations for you. Been hurt for you, even copped a bullet for you once. So why shouldn’t I share a bit of pleasure, with you, eh? What’s so fucking strange about that?”

“All that crap over supper, for one. I can’t drink, so I can stay because if I’m not drunk, I’d never dare make a pass at you? Come off it, Ray, you had no intentions of letting me screw you.”

Doyle leaned away from him, propping himself up against the wall, hands belatedly, embarrassedly, coming to cover his rampant erection while it slowly faded. “I honestly didn’t know, Bodie. I’d thought about it, been thinking about it since you’d tried it on with me, but I wasn’t sure. Wasn’t sure how far I could go, was I? I mean, all cats are grey in the dark, and I’ve had my share of blow jobs from fellas, but you’d want more than that. You’d need more

than that and I wasn't sure I could do it. Then I sat in the sitting room with you asleep in my bed and thought, really thought, what it'd be like without you. Didn't much like what I came up with, did I?"

"So you decided to give me a mercy fuck, is that it? Charmed, I'm sure."

"It's not that, not really. You need me, Bodie, and I feel a right wally admitting it, but I need you, too, even if it is in a different way. Don't you get it, you great berk? If you were a woman, there'd be no question, I'd've married you ages ago. Only thing stopping me was you being a bloke. Never had a proper relationship with a bloke..."

"Just furtive blow jobs in the cottages. Tell me, Ray, did you arrest the blokes before or after they sucked you off?"

A blur of motion and Bodie had Doyle's fist captured in both of his capable hands. "Already told you, Bodie, I'll take a lot from you, but I'm not going to be your whipping boy."

"Take a lot from me, would you? You mean things like a blow job, or a hand job. Or perhaps you'd like me to switch the outside light out and just get down on my knees so you can fuck me. As you said, *mate*, all cats are grey in the dark, so it really wouldn't matter if it was me or not, so you don't need to see me. Oh, sorry, I do apologise. I forgot. You *need* the light off so you can bring yourself to have sex with me."

"For Christ's sake, Bodie, what's wrong with you? I'm trying to give you what you've been wanting and..."

"Why?" The single cold word cut through all the heat with the ease of a garrote.

Doyle shrugged, the filtered glow from outside dancing on his muscles. "You're me mate."

"I'm a child killer, *mate*. You were with me, you saw what happened. It was exactly as the Inquiry said, wasn't it? I took the corner too fast, didn't see the kids, cos I was too busy trying to save your fucking neck. Too busy swerving so your side of the car wouldn't end up wrapped round the lamp-post. So," he swallowed, hard, the pain and resentment forming a massive, suffocating lump in his throat, "so I hit them. Ran them over, looked like dozens of them, all in their Easter best and I hit them. Hit them. I KILLED those kids, Ray!" he

screamed, lights in other houses blossoming as the sound faded.

"I know, I know. Knew why you'd swerved like that an' all. But we neither one of us can bring them back, can we? Can't do a fucking thing, Bodie, no matter how badly we want to. D'you think I'm happy, knowing I'm alive at the expense of those kids? How d'you think I felt when I went and told their mums and dads what had happened? How d'you think I felt standing there, holding the drawer open for them to identify the bodies of their kids, eh, Bodie? You're not the only one hurt in this, mate, we all got it. CI5's up the creek, Cowley running off to meetings with every Minister in the government, all the agents going through retraining after hours. You've had it worst, but we've all been through the mill with this one as well. And all I'm trying to do is give you what you need. After what you did for me, it's the least I can do. Bodie, don't look at me like that. I started all that stuff in bed because I hated seeing you hurting like that. An' because I'm a selfish bastard and don't want to have to give you up."

"Even if it means turning queer? You expect me to..."

"Shut up, Bodie! Anyone'd think I was offering to rip your toe-nails out with hot pliers, not sleep with you. Come on, I'm not *that* bad. Look, we've both had more'n our share of luck, haven't we? Cept yours ran out, but could have been me behind the wheel. Could've been me that ended up off on holiday with the men in the white coats. Could've been you standing here trying to persuade me to fuck you... Nah, I'm not stupid enough to argue 'bout something like that."

"Plus, I'm bi, so I wouldn't have to convince you I'd suddenly started singing soprano, would I?"

"You can't just turn gay overnight, Bodie, and any rate, that's not what I'm talking about, is it? I've told you already, I've let blokes do me before, and if you stop to think about it, that means I must've fancied a few, right? So what's so strange 'bout taking it one step farther and having it off with someone that's a bit more important to me than some bloke in a pub?"

"Just exactly what are you offering me, Ray?"

Doyle's expression was very clear and glinting with the honed edge of honesty. "Sex to go

with the friendship. Someone you can come to when your bird's dumped you for standing her up again. Someone who'll come to you..."

"When his bird stands him up. Not exactly wedding bells, is it?"

"Be lying to you if I promised you that. Listen, Bodie, can't change everything all at once. Who knows what'll happen a few years down the line? For all we know, we could be living together, or you could've found someone else and tossed me out the window. But I've always preferred birds and I don't think I can give all that up, not just right off the bat."

"But you're willing to let us sort of slide up on to the next step, is that it? No ties, no chain-you to me apron strings? Just a bit of sex, now and then, when one of us needs it?"

Doyle's eyes were still brutally honest, but there was pain in there to soften the sting, enough pain to balance out the bitter coating on the sugar pill. "It might not be all you want, but as I said to you already, I'd be lying to you if I said it was somethin' else on offer."

It was like the shock of the sea after the heat of the sand, the way that broke over him. The bracing chill brought him back to clarity, a respite from the chaos he had been since the Accident. There was too little of him left to withstand even the hint of pity or the hint of Doyle's sacrifice. If he let it, if he yielded to this siren of sympathy, if he took what was on offer, it would corrode him—and them. It was too soon, with all the excess of helpless anger still clogging him.

"Well, pardon me for not falling at your feet, Doyle." He caught Doyle's expression just before the shutters slammed shut. "Ray..." he said in an agony of gentleness, tossed by the earthquake of emotions. "Ray... We can't fix this all in a day. It's not as if this is something I can just stick a plaster on, you said that yourself."

It was Doyle's turn to retreat, to learn the lesson of the willow. "So you want me to back off, then?"

Nothing, just a mod, and an abyss of exhaustion swallowing Bodie whole, worn out by the dizzying spin of his emotions.

"Still have to stay here, you know. Cowley really would have my guts for garters if I let you loose on an unsuspecting world. And I'd be really pissed off if you expected me to let you go through this without me at your back, mate."

Bodie simply nodded again, leaving it at that, desperate for sleep, for rest, for time...

Despite all that needed yet to be said, there was nothing they could say, not right now. And it was awkward between them, more than it had ever been, even in the very beginning.

It was, not surprisingly, Doyle who finally broke the silence, broke the unspeaking stare of their eyes as they searched each other for the right way to handle this. "Well. Be off to bed now. 'Night, Bodie."

No answer followed him down the hall, but at least there was no spite to spike his spine. Only a hollow ache waiting to be filled, when the murk of tangled feelings had cleared a little.

It was a beginning, of sorts...

In the end, it took the slow ticking of the clock and the reweaving of old bonds and a few more truths coming out. Such as the night they went to the pub with some of the lads and Bodie, turning round, grinning from scoring double top on the darts board, had caught Doyle. He knew that priapic look from old and it was with a pang of severely contained jealousy that he turned to see who the lucky girl was. And saw Murphy instead. He flicked a glance at the unknowing Doyle, then back again, following the line of vision as he would a bullet's trajectory. The only thing in Doyle's field of fire was a very masculine body, one that was of the same overall type as his own. So all the talk and all the uncovered awareness had wormed into Doyle, making him genuinely aware of that part of himself, the part that would make a new future unfold between them. And if Doyle could look at *Murph* that way... He looked back at Doyle, to encounter greeny-grey eyes staring back at him, the beginnings of desire in their depth.

He believed it, then. It might not be in love, but, christ, he'd settle for a bit of genuine lust and a hefty dollop of friendship.

He lost the next three games, not to mention an absolute packet, his mind filled with thoughts of Doyle, of all the good and bad that came with that particular package. Thought of what he'd turned down, and why. Thought of what he'd done, and why. And amidst the beer and the camaraderie and the bawdy songs, he faced—truly faced, not merely paid lip-service to—the one thing he'd held against Doyle, for the one

thing which he'd spent seven months paving a path of forgiveness—for both of them.

He'd do it all again.

For Doyle, to keep Doyle alive and at his side, he'd swerve that car again, even knowing what the price would be. He'd be willing to do that, just for the selfish need to have Doyle beside him and to not be left alone. He stared into his beer, absently watching the head go flat, all the bubbles and fizz fading. Just like his resentment, and his anger, the very last threads of it finally unravelling. Useless to lay that all at Doyle's doorstep, when it wasn't his fault. No-one had made Bodie love him that much, no-one had asked him to. It had just happened, and no doubt Fate was somewhere, laughing like a drain, mocking the poor, feeble mortals and all their agonising over her little tricks.

When he looked up at the world again, it was Doyle, not the world, who was looking back. But then, now that he faced it, Doyle *was* the world to him, with all the dependence and need that meant. And all the culpability...

"You all right?"

A very small question, but, oh, how large an answer. The worst of himself finally faced, the path flagged by the months of slow healing, he looked at what he'd done in his life, with his life. It took seconds, rather like drowning. Not drowning, but waving, the old adage came to mind. Not drowning but waving... Bodie grinned at him, a true hell-for-leather Bodie grin. "Yeh. Yeh, Ray, I think I am at that."

He got a funny look for that one, but Doyle let it pass, as he had let so much pass, with the perceptible flexing of his patience. Nothing more was said, someone stood another round, another joke turned the air blue. But they were aware of each other, they two were, even amidst the blind amity and the clamour around them of good-fellow-well-met desperation to have a good time. Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow you may die...

"Had a saying for everything, didn't he?"

"You what?"

Bodie realised that it had been a long time since he and Doyle hadn't needed speech. "Shakespeare. He's got a quote for everything, hasn't he? I mean, eat drink and be merry. Much ado about nothing. To be or not to be... Been

thinking, Ray. Remember that thing you told me was up to me when we did it?"

Not even a moment's hesitation, Bodie was pleased to note, finding Doyle's instant comprehension reassuring where he knew he still needed a mountain of reassurances. "What about it?"

"No time like the present, is there?"

The shock of it exploded in Doyle's eyes, the pupils dilating widely, the mouth slackening open for a moment. Bodie liked that, too, liked the way there was honest desire there for him. He could allow himself to see it, could dare to take the chance now that he knew what he'd been punishing them both for. Now that he could finally get rid of the guilt that had been nagging him for recognition, before he could lay the children and all his disinterred past to rest.

They weren't even all the way through the door before Bodie gave in, let the half-suffocated love rip through him. Doyle was hot against him, all gasping breath and rippling muscle. He felt the resistance, the same reaction he'd feared, the reaction he'd expected the night Doyle had made his offer. Doyle was pushing against him, but he didn't loosen his grip, kept on holding, tugging at him, struggling to bring him closer, to bridge the gulf.

"Jesus, Bodie, let me breathe!"

Bodie moved back, giving him scant space to breathe, holding back, trying not to let the newly buried problems resurrect themselves. It still wasn't everything he needed or wanted, but there was, at least, the promise of a future yet unborn. And it was better than nothing, and god, how he had hurt inside, for so long, as if someone had peeled him inside out. All of that was still somewhere in him, so he brought Doyle closer again, heat to warm the remembered chill. He touched Ray, one fingertip to a small brown nipple nested in warm hair, and then he was lost again, grabbing Ray desperately, holding him tightly to keep all the guilt and horror forever at bay. His hands were exploring Ray's back, carefully, oh so carefully as he tried to keep this as nothing more than him rutting against a friend who understood. But then realisation snaked its way in amidst the surfeit of sensation: realisation that Ray was reacting to him with the same fire, that the reasons behind it didn't matter at all. Pity, if it were that,

felt the same as passion and there was still the love of friendship spilling over them. And for the moment, that was enough.

It was enough that he finally had Ray, finally had him plastered all down his front, close enough that he could feel the catapult beat of their hearts, the passing rush of their breathing. He had Ray... It sang through him, soaring, masking the ache of what he'd done, the course of time winding through him. But none of that was even worth noticing, not when he could hear Ray gasping at the pleasure of Bodie's hand on his cock. He needed to give, needed to pour out all the bound-up feelings, so he slowly went to his knees, kissing Ray's chest all the way down, tongue rapturous in all the luxuriant hair, eyes closed as he laved his way down to where the hair became thicker and coarser and curly. The musk filled him, the intoxicating aroma exciting him as he moulded his hands to the rich curve of Doyle's rump, firm flesh warm to his touch, muscle fluttering, briefly, involuntarily, in perfect synchronicity with the lambent lick of his tongue the length of Doyle's cock. He flicked at the foreskin, slitting his eyes so that he could watch, could actually measure Ray's response to him, could see as the heavy skin was stretched thinner over the sensitivity of nerves, the cock growing, lengthening, peeping out from its warm cowl to seek Bodie's tongue. When it was there, bumping at his chin, blindly seeking his mouth, Bodie kissed it, not passionately, for a second allowing himself the sheer luxury of openly loving Ray Doyle.

So he knelt there, kissing him the only way he would be allowed to, for he'd had enough straight trade—in Africa, off-base in the Services, even on the docks as a kid—to know the limits. Oh, he could suck, he could use his hands, might even have those compliments returned. Would be fucked, too, although he very much doubted that Ray would follow through on the offer to let Bodie fuck him. Wasn't the way of straight trade, not when it was more than just two basically straight blokes making do with what was available. Everything changed when one of them was gay, or bi like Bodie, and it changed even more when one of them was in love. So there'd be no kisses, there'd be no open declaration of their relationship, but at least he had this, had Ray in his mouth, so

frantic for sex that the hedonistic Doyle didn't even care that they were in the hallway, draught under the door, the mat rough under Bodie's knees, making enough noise that the neighbours were probably wondering what the hell they were up to.

He sat back on his haunches, to catch his breath but lost it instead. He'd never been able to see Ray in all his glory before, and by christ, the man was beautiful, all lean planes and arcing lines, the shadow of hair and the lustrous gleam of sweat-sleeked skin. Groaning deep in his throat, he swooped forward, swallowing Ray whole, taking all of him in. Hands tangled in his hair, hands that were trembling in their arousal, hands that were begging him to swallow deeper. Bodie filled his hands to overflowing with the lushness of Doyle's arse, the muscles hollowing as Bodie's cheeks hollowed as he sucked Ray hard and harder, tongue playing with the pattern of veins and the slickness of skin sliding over rigid flesh.

He could finish Ray like this, his mate shoved up against the wall, but this might be the only time he'd have this, and he'd be damned if he was going to let an opportunity like this slip through his fingers. And there was still a dripping icicle of doubt in him, that made him fear what would never happen if they were to stop now. He knew that if they did everything tonight, then there'd be nothing to hold Ray back, nothing to make him say 'I don't know if I want to go that far' and if there was nothing like that to keep Ray from letting him do this again...

But overriding all his rationalisations, crushing them like so many eggshells, was the gnawing emptiness he felt, the desire to be filled, to take Ray in, to master and be mastered. The cock in his mouth was tensile with oncoming orgasm, so he withdrew his mouth, teeth catching with a fine delicacy on the underside of Doyle's cock, bringing him back from the brink. He didn't dare give either one of them time to catch hold of far-flung senses, so he manoeuvred and twisted them until Doyle landed on top of him with a whoof of breathlessness, pinning Bodie to the floor, his legs spread wide and limber, arse open under the fumbling head of Doyle's cock. Bodie spat on his hand, stretching down between them for wetted fingers to loosen his arse for fucking.

Over him, Doyle was staring at him, eyes wide and wild, mouth agape, face and chest flushed. He was speaking, not that he was making much sense, words dripping from him like sweat. And Bodie drank it up, drank it all up, swam and dived and gambolled in the unexpected largesse of Doyle's sexuality, gorging himself on this feast before the feared famine. He was ready now and arched up, Doyle's cock slicking its path between his cheeks. He reached down again, holding Doyle, guiding him, centring him until there was a radiance of pain and a heavy hotness piercing him. There was more and more filling him, until he was sure he'd burst with pleasure, overflow with this feeling of Ray inside him.

Doyle began thrusting, awkwardly at first, then suddenly finding the differences, making the adjustments for fucking a man, moving his hips slightly differently, slowing his strokes at first until he could feel the supple shift of Bodie's response, both of them moving in perfect counterpoint, Doyle never once taking his eyes from Bodie. Doyle was fucking him hard now, plunging into him, balls slapping against Bodie's arse, his belly rubbing against Bodie's balls, his cock thrusting against Bodie's prostate. Doyle could see it in Bodie's face, could feel it in the tightening of Bodie's body, that he was about to come. Doyle fucked him harder, moving faster, racing along with Bodie, every thrust of his body echoed by a yielding of Bodie's, the two sensations so closely intertwined he couldn't tell them apart. He felt the spasm begin deep inside Bodie, felt his body echo him, felt the cum burst from him, felt the cum hurtle from Bodie to splatter his belly.

And Bodie could think not at all, could only feel, feel Doyle inside him, his body hugging Ray, holding him tighter than a fist, milking him, drawing him deeper, cum splash in him, wet slickness for the last few strokes until Ray collapsed on top of him.

There was a canopy of light coming in from outside, lying sleepily against the ceiling and the far wall, all the world grey... The caustic depression began to bubble, sluggishly, like volcanic mud, sucking him down again. He pushed at it, but it would yield not a single cell of his being, fed by the guilt of the price he had paid for this happiness of his. He lay there, in Doyle's front hall, draught scratching his left flank, star-

ing up at the dead grey of the pre-dawn world, remembering a little girl and how bright her hair had been, with its flutter of ribbons. And how bright her blood had been...

He felt movement, the warm heaviness of Doyle shifting against him. "Bodie?"

He couldn't find the energy to answer, the greyness too hungry to spare any of him for speech.

"Bodie? You awake?"

Perhaps it was his breathing pattern that gave him away.

"Don't know about you, mate, but I'm fucking freezing here. C'mon, back into bed before we both catch double pneumonia."

He suffered himself to be cajoled along the darkened hall to the bedroom, flopped silently into bed, the desolation of Ray leaving adding itself mockingly to the grimness of the accident. Both inevitable, in their way, one his luck running out in the worst possible way, the other...well, Ray had made it plain. Just some friendly sex. The bedside lamp would be turned out and then Ray would leave him alone. All the words of love as dead as...that which he couldn't think about right now, not with Ray on the verge of leaving him, despite it all...

But then Ray was coming in beside him, cold feet chilling on Bodie's shin. He opened his eyes, and Ray stopped abruptly. "Glad you finally listened to sense, mate," he was saying to Bodie's astonished ears, making everything easy and right between, beginning the long work of building a life despite such acid foundations. "That was magic, that was." There was the faintest flutter of fingertips on his backside, then Doyle was talking to him again. "Did I do it right? Didn't hurt you did I?"

"No," he said, drinking in the reddish gleam of Ray's hair, the green glint of his eyes, shutting out the grey, the last burst of misery fading like sleet under the brightness that was Ray Doyle. "Didn't hurt me at all, sunshine. Sorry about being such a bastard to you, it's just..."

"It's just you try any of that crap with me again and I'll brain you, Bodie."

Doyle twisted and stretched, switching the light out, giving Bodie one last sight of the lean muscles of his body, then all was dark, and warm. *Half a loaf is better than none*, his dad had forever been saying, but for once Bodie

found himself agreeing. There were no promises of fidelity, not even of the right kind of *in* love, but they had friendship and love, of a sort. And now sex as well. He could bear that. Yeh, he could bear that. Especially since it offered him that most precious commodity...hope.

ELEGY

THE CLANGING AND BANGING AND BOINGING OF CHURCH BELLS KICKED HIM AWAKE, SO THAT HE FOUGHT AND WON A BATTLE WITH THE BEDCLOTHES, FINALLY EMERGING, VICTORIOUS, FLUSHED AND FOUL TEMPERED.

“Ought to be had up for disturbing the peace, that lot ought. Day of rest! I’ll day of fucking rest them. I mean, how’s a man supposed to rest with that bloody lot...”

The silence underlying the clamour deafened him. Church bells, ringing as if the world were going to end tomorrow. Or to tell the world that Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia... He could never think of the words of that old hymn without singing them, childhood memories rising bright as the foil on his chocolate Easter egg. He sat up, scrubbing at his eyes, waiting until the stiffness of his joints eased, staring out of the window at the sliver of sunlight that spilled through the curtains.

There’d be an Easter egg, he knew, waiting on the kitchen table for him, a huge one, in an ostentatious display box, covered with glittering foil, chocolates stuffed inside the egg and a big card tucked under the box. And the card, as it did each and every year, would read, “Still love you. Thanks for giving me hope. B.” He’d not open the egg, of course, not for a while. Not until late, once the sun had died on this day of the Son’s rising, not until the moon had leached the light and colour out of everything and all the world seemed dead.

He crawled out of bed, to wander, disconsolate, into the kitchen to stare at his lover’s token to him. But he didn’t look for Bodie. Not today, not on Easter Sunday. His Bodie wouldn’t be in their house now, wouldn’t have been for hours. By now, he’d be at the second of the little graves, placing a beautiful Easter egg there, as he did every single year on every single one of those guilty, pain-filled secrets, until he reached the last.

Ray knew he should be used to it, after all these years, but the day always ambushed him,

unforgettable as a mere date never could be. Numbers can be mislaid, holidays can be arranged to distract the mind, but Easter Sunday peeled from every church steeple, haunting them both. Guilt stirred in his belly, melancholy with it, and he turned from the gaudy Easter egg, turning away from the memories that never seemed to die. Doyle filled the kettle, plugged it in, picked the paper up from the mat, brought the milk in, started the day. He’d be able to fill it up with all the usual Sunday things, all the things he and Bodie had grown into the habit of doing since they’d got out of the rat race. But it would be different. It was always different on Easter Sunday. The kettle clicked off unnoticed, as Ray Doyle stood staring out his kitchen window at daffodils nodding and dancing in the breeze, a tumbled garden full of flowers, but not one of them red. Bodie hated red flowers. Doyle gave up all attempts to shut the past out and watched next door’s cat find a patch of sunlight and begin to wash itself with placid contentment, while the memory of children dying turned the day of Resurrection to ashes that stoppered his mouth. And then he started remembering the hollow ache of Bodie crying...

Bodie always started with the graves of the children he’d never even seen, either before or after he’d run them down, crouching down on the lush greenness of grass, crocuses erupting with colour, freesia inundating the air with the heady sweetness of their scent. With steady hands, he put the Easter basket on the faintly mounded earth, nestling it in the too-long grass, the brightly wrapped eggs a rainbow of colour. He would sit, for a time, amidst the graves of the old and the sick, contemplating the graves of the young, until it was time to move on, to the next one.

Derek’s grave had been neglected, since last he’d been here, and as always, it made him wonder. The brown laces in the black shoes—now it seemed less the typical child and more the uncaring parents. Perhaps Derek’s mum loved him as little as Bodie’s had loved him, and that made it all the worse, somehow, touching an echo inside him, as if it were the grave of his own childhood, himself lying in there, unmourned. Far, far away, on the other side of the church grounds, the tinny tinkle weaved its way through the air, calling the children to come

running with their pocket money and celebrate Easter with an ice or a cornet. He closed his eyes at that, hearing the screams he'd caused mingled with the high-pitched laughter of today's children. His head was still bowed as the sun passed the zenith and as an old woman hobbled past, a small bouquet of spring flowers clutched in withered hand, he placed the gift on the grass, purples and blues and orange rioting against the green. He got to his feet then, watching her as she had watched him, both of them leaving tokens on the graves no one else remembered. He left her there, to the solitary quiet, and began the last, and hardest, duty of his Easter Sunday.

The last place. It was there that he'd linger longest, kneeling, aware of every single one of the ravages time had wrought on him, glad of them, paying the penance for cutting such little lives so short. His back was beginning to give, his knees aching, the old wound in his shoulder gnawing away at the bone. He liked that, enjoyed the pain, for it gave him a focus other than the guilt inside. He could still remember her, as if time had not passed a single day. So worried about what Mummy would say about her dress, so worried that she was getting him all sticky from her ice-lolly; so trusting in the arms of the man she didn't know had killed her. His fingers fidgeted with the basket they held, this one full of every colour of the world. And this one included the colour of blood, before it spills away into brown... He couldn't keep his hands still, stroking the wicker as he had stroked the far smoother ripples of her long hair,

with its ribbons all tangled. He sat there, letting the age of his body stiffen, letting the old, old grief and guilt have its day. As he did, every year; as he would do, every year. Very, very steady, he brushed the tiny limb of lichen that was trying to steal onto his little girl's headstone, his fingertips dipping into the gores that made her name, and her dates, the years so horribly close together. He shifted, sitting cross-legged now, one palm buried in the grass of her grave, the other still clenched on the glittering pile of the basket. All around him, there was a banquet of colour, spring flowers turning the world into a rainbow of life, like the basket he always, always brought her: reds and blues and yellows, a splash of orange, a spray of pink, the scents of roses and honeysuckle, grass and the faint acrid smell of the city that lay just over the wall. Very still, he sat there, amidst the lively colours of spring and the granite slabs of the dead, until the day began to fade.

Then, when the sky turned red with sunset, he very gently placed the egg-filled basket with its bouquet of red ribbons that bled, streaming, streaming, and he sat there yet, watching, waiting until the moon stole all the colour and turned the red to grey.

When all the life had been leached, when the grave was nothing more than a place for the dead, a place for those who were well beyond the pains of life, he rose stiffly to his feet, and began the slow journey home, where life and colour and kisses were waiting for him, all bought and paid for.

CYLINDERS

*From two to three dimensions: the circle made solid.
Hardness. Expansion. Maleness.
Cylinders of love and lust.*



With a cylinder so easily made a symbol for a phallus, this last major section cannot help but focus on lust primarily, with love thrown in almost as an afterthought. All four stories come from the pen of the Glaswegian and all four are Professionals tales. Not a Professionals fan? Oh, do not depart! Let this section educate you. We begin with “Not Fit For Family Viewing,” a Pros primer for the unenlightened. Have a giggle finding all the British euphemisms for that most important of activities. Carefully note the terminal randiness of the protagonists and their extended confinement in an enclosed space. The result, of course, is what is expected...plus the Glaswegian’s usual slight twist.

Move next to the humorous “Sticky Wickets.” This is the first in a series of stories with sports themes. “Sticky Wickets” bases the Pros relationship on a foundation of lust and also gives an answer to a question many have asked. What question? Well, read the tale...

Lust also figures mightily into “On Heat”—both title and inspiration stolen from Sebastian’s story of the same name. “On Heat” asks if lust can be deliberately turned into love.

The final story is both funny and serious. “Nor the Leopard His Spots” explores the truth of Doyle’s basic nature in a most unexpected setting...

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NOT FIT FOR FAMILY VIEWING EMMA SCOT

The old woman stood back in the shadows, unwilling to risk being seen or heard. The despair she saw on the smaller man’s face tore at her heart and she wondered if the wetness glistening in the half-light was only the rain.

WITH UNWARRANTED VICIOUSNESS, BODIE SWITCHED THE TELEVISION OFF, THE BLACK AND WHITE PICTURE FADING INTO A SMALL WHITE DOT AT THE CENTRE OF THE SCREEN, BEFORE THE OLD WOMAN COULD REVEAL HERSELF TO THE HUSBAND AND SON WHO THOUGHT HER KILLED IN FRANCE. “Christ, if I have to sit through another bloody ‘Film for a Sunday Afternoon’, I’ll fucking-well *scream.*”

“Should try reading, then, shouldn’t you?”

“Oh, that’s smart, that is. Read what? *Old Radio Times? The Sunday Supplement? Toad of Toad’s Hall?*”

“There’s a Sartre over on the top shelf.” Very mild, that tone of voice, and that was enough to warn off even the most unwary. But Bodie considered himself exempt from his partner’s temper and anyway, when he was in high dudgeon, not even Cowley himself could hold him in check.

“Sartre? Sartre!” he yelled, the volume satisfyingly loud even to his own ears. “You expect me to read some poncey Frenchman who

couldn't even tell if a tree was real or not? Give me a break, Ray. I'm not that desperate yet."

Silence, disturbed only by the sound of a gently turned page and Bodie's angry breathing. He stomped over to the window, to check the approaches yet again. "Bloody ridiculous, not even letting us go outside. 'Murphy and Jax will cover the perimeter'," he sneered in a lethally good impersonation of his employer, the *rs* rolled to perfection. "I mean to say, what bloody good are we doing cooped up in here like a pair of broody hens, pretending to be some fucking diplomats who are five hundred miles away in some bloody Scottish castle coming up with some stupid treaty that no-one's going to pay a blind bit of attention to anyway? Eh? Tell me that."

Not a word. Unusual this, it more commonly Ray Doyle who gave verbal vent to frustration and fury, this understanding, sympathetic silence as positively out of character for him as Bodie's tantrum. But then, for the past few months, this had all been part of the strategies jousting between them.

Bodie pivoted on his heel, catching sight of his partner, turning on him before he himself gave way to the banked sexuality that was gnawing at him. "And look at you, lying on the sofa like a bag of bloody potatoes, reading some stupid book on some bloody stupid religion. Anyone'd think you had what you wanted."

"And what is it you want that's got you so worked up then, eh?"

It was Bodie's turn to be silent, beating a full retreat. He knew perfectly well that Doyle already had the answer to that, was just waiting for him to admit to it. Well, he wouldn't. Could manage perfectly well without.

"Well, Bodie? What is it you need, mate?"

And Doyle's breath was warm on the back of his neck, frissoning down his spine. His cock twitched in sympathy, engorging itself on blood, filling out, lengthening despite his will. He'd been half-hard with frustration for what felt like days now and even this bare touch of breath on skin was getting him going. But he wasn't going to give in. He could wait, could go and have a cold shower, could lock himself in the loo and have a good wank, he didn't need to give in.

It wasn't like he was queer and couldn't resist Doyle's manly charms, was it? Nothing more than randiness and blue balls, that's all

it was, that's what was making his stupid body respond.

Just like all the other times, eh, Willie?

He wasn't even going to think about *that*. He wasn't even going to think about what Doyle had in mind. Wasn't going to yield to temptation. He wasn't gay, wasn't a fucking poofter, it was only when he'd had one too many and not enough female companionship that he ever succumbed to the temptation-on-legs that was his partner. And he wasn't going to do it today. Just feeling twitchy, which was to be expected, really, when a man'd been without a bit of the other for over a week. Not to mention locked up with a geezer who seemed to think there was nothing wrong with two blokes just tumbling into bed for a bit of the how's your father with each other.

Not that they always got as far as the bed, mind you. After some oppos, the adrenaline still erupting through them, it'd been nothing more than a quick shag up against a wall, trousers shoved down around knees and shirts up under armpits, mouths and goolies glued together. But that, he assured himself, was a perfectly natural reaction for two hot-blooded young men who'd just stared death straight in the face as if they were Clint Eastwood in some bloody spaghetti western. Was nothing more to it—wasn't as if they were shirt-lifters, was it?

He was, of course, ignoring the times when it was more than a frantic knee-trembler. And he was, of course, most especially ignoring the times when the aftermath to the sex had been cuddles and kisses in a lovely warm bed that smelled of both of them.

Doyle was still standing right behind him, close enough for his breath to be stirring the hairs on the back of Bodie's neck.

Must nip in to the scalper and have a haircut, Bodie thought to himself, trying to take his mind off the way the moistness of breath was making the small waviness at his nape coil into curls. Trying even more to ignore the way Doyle's groin was snuggling into his bum, fitting him like hand in glove.

And that was another thing he wasn't going to think about. At all. Ever.

"C'mon, mate," the voice was more Doyle's usual self, all sex and aggro, "don't be such a wally. We're both dying for it, so cummon, while

it's Lucas and McCabe out there, before Smurph and Jax get back from Town and put two and two together and make a video nasty of us having a leg over. C'mon, we're both walking cross-legged, and where's the harm in a bit of the greens, eh? Let's go to bed."

Stoic, Bodie withstood the temptation. Stiff upper lip and all that. Pity that there were other bits of him just as bloody stiff as well, wasn't it? But he could do it, he could resist. Wasn't as if he was a poof, was it? Then Doyle went and did it. The flat wetness of his tongue laved from the nape of Bodie's neck to the lobe of his ear; then the pointed tip darted inside, cool breath trembling behind.

Bodie heard himself groan. He swayed, a little, but it was enough to plaster his back to Doyle's front. Then busy hands were on his front, pulling his shirt out of the way, palming his nipples into mountainous peaks of pleasure, rippling across the plains of his belly to dig into the valley of his groin. He heard his zip come undone, the racket devastatingly loud over the sound of their breath, but he drowned it all out with his groan as knowing fingers eased him free of Y-fronts and cords, strong grip pulling foreskin back, narrow fingertip teasing the cleft of his cockhead.

"Still just saying no, then, are we?" the wicked whisper murmured in his left ear. "Or have you seen sense and finally started thinking with your balls?"

Bodie didn't even bother attempting words, turning round to grab Doyle, his mouth raging with passion against Doyle, kissing him breathless. But not, fortunately, witless.

"Well, c'mon on then, if you're coming," he sniggered. "Can't be having a crotch ripper right in the window for every terrorist in the world to see, can we though? Bed, Bodie."

So Bodie took Doyle off to bed, retaining enough semblance of control to wait until they were in the bedroom before ripping the seductive little bugger's clothes off him. Bodie picked him up bodily and threw him onto the bed, the flowers of the counterpane flouncing under him as the massive bed bounced.

"You look like a fucking satyr in a woodland, lying on that bedspread like that," he said, shedding his own clothes all higgledy-piggledy onto the Persian carpet. "All you need is horns."

"Already got one," came the instant rejoinder, complete with filthy chuckle. "Going to blow it for me?"

One knee on the bed, Bodie paused before clambering in. "Nah. 'M gonna fuck you."

The very motes of dust in the air stopped dancing, making the sunlight look still as a fairytale. Bodie and Doyle stared at each other, frozen by the intent. Fucking. It was the one thing they hadn't actually done yet. The one thing that would make it impossible for either of them to pretend that this was nothing more than casual sex when there was nothing else available. If they did it, they'd never be able to claim it was just a way of having company for your right hand—would they? Would never be able to think of it as nothing more than a sophisticated wank. So they both held their breaths, as the possibilities and pitfalls rode Clydesdales through their minds.

And then Doyle grinned, and the decision was made, so easy and smooth, the way their friendship had finally become. "Better get some cream, then, mate, 'cos if you think I'm goin' to let that big prick of yours up my delicate arse with nothing more than a bit of spit to make it easy, then you've got another think coming. Well, go on, then. Don't stand there catching fish. Saw some Vaseline in the loo last night. Should do the trick nicely."

It certainly did. Much, much later, sweaty and sticky and as pleased as punch with himself, Bodie lay grinning on top of the much-abused counterpane, absently rubbing the excess of Vaseline into an already glistening arse. His other hand was tangled in curls, fingertips tracing idly every nuance of Doyle's skull, getting to know him top to bottom. There were occasional, sleepy kisses pressed into his collarbone from Doyle's parted lips, and every time he felt that sweetness, he'd turn his head slightly to drop a kiss of his own amongst the twist of Doyle's curls.

The afternoon sun gradually faded into the rosy bloom of dusk, and they still lay there, Doyle drowsing, Bodie holding him close. His thoughts turned to his earlier anxieties, and he pondered them whilst he soothed Doyle's aching back with long, affectionate swaths of his hand.

Nothing wrong with lying here like this, was there?

Wasn't as if he was queer or anything.

Was it?

STICKY WICKETS

M. FAE GLASGOW

WHAT A LOAD OF SHITE, HE THOUGHT TO HIMSELF, SMILING PLEASANTLY AT THE VICAR'S WIFE—OR WAS IT HIS MOTHER—AS SHE NATTERED ON ABOUT SOME MINDLESS INANITY OF APSES AND NAVES AND FONTS AND BRASS RUBBINGS. The only kind of rubbings he was interested in was the sort of thing to make the poor shrinking violet fall over in a dead faint. Or haul him out into the bushes: he'd met a few voracious religious fanatics in his day, and they usually left him limper than a wash-rag and red-rum. Not to mention clawed to bits, the 'missionary' the position of choice, for obvious reasons. He was sitting there nodding politely, thinking what she would look like out of her floral chiffon frock, when he realised what he was doing and took a good look at her.

Christ, but he must be getting desperate if he could even begin to consider fancying a woman of 50 who had lost the battles with both gravity and flab. Actually stopping to think about the lily-white flesh, miles and miles of it, made his stomach turn. Especially when he considered the conversation that would go with it, the monologue now turned to poor old Mrs. Symington's operation and Mr. Percival's boils.

It would take more than the patience of Job to get him through an entire afternoon of this without screaming. Or handing his notice in to Cowley. If this were an example of the civilisation and society he was risking his life to protect, he was going to become a dustman, first thing in the morning. Always supposing he lived that long without dying from boredom. With pleasant smile and gritted teeth, he managed to extricate himself from the blunt-fingered clutches of the vicar's wife—or mother, or mental nurse—and meandered over to one of the white lawn chairs, settling himself down in a far from refined pose, one foot resting on the other knee, hands behind his head, shirt half-unbuttoned. Eyes narrowed against the dappling sun, he gave all his attention to the cricket match.

And almost suffered instantaneous death at the hands of terminal boredom. If the frowzy woman in the floral frock had been dire, then the cricket was positively numbing. For start-

ers, he hadn't the faintest idea of what the hell was going on—truth be told, he couldn't even tell the teams apart. Why couldn't they wear nice distinctive strips like football players, instead of all waddling around looking like a family of albino penguins with pokers up their bums?

He'd always hated cricket, right from when BBC would show nothing but endless hours of poncey men standing around looking as if they were trying to remember where they had left their brains. And if you turned on the wireless, it had been even worse: it might be incredibly boring to watch a bunch of great wallys playing a game of fancy rounders, but it was torture to *listen* to someone painstakingly describing every non-event.

Christ, but he was bored.

He considered leaving, sloping off down the local pub for a few drinks until this stupid farce was over, but knowing his luck, Bodie would notice, and that wasn't about to help the putative partnership, was it? And that partnership needed all the help it could get. They'd taken an instant and intense dislike to each other, or, as Bodie put it: love at first sight. They took one look at each other and both decided they'd just love to commit murder. Total, absolute and pointed antipathy, which left them between a rock—they couldn't stand the sight of each other—and a hard place, which was, of course, Cowley. The old bastard. Wouldn't accept hating each other as an excuse for not working together 14 hours a day. Wouldn't accept hating each other for blowing the other's brains out—not that they conceded that the other one had two grey cells to rub together.

So here he was, stuck with a partner, no matter what, and trying stubbornly to find some way of getting on with him. Which is why he was stuck in the sticks, watching a game he loathed, listening to mindless morons waffling on about a load of old codswallop.

Fucking fantastic way to spend a soddin' Bank Holiday Monday off.

The glower that went with that thought made

an old dear go all of a dither, her hands fluttering to her throat. He smiled at her, which only made matters worse. Disgusted with the whole afternoon, he gave up on the people and concentrated on the surroundings. He had to admit, he'd been in worse places, thousands of them. It would have been lovely here, if you could have got rid of the people and the stupid game. Trees, all around the smooth grass where grown men were playing glorified rounders; tiny forests of flowers hugging the boles of the ancient oaks and elms and...and... He'd run right out of tree names, not even sure he'd got those two right. Never been much one for the countryside, city born and bred; give him two minutes away from the bustle and danger of city life, and he'd be bored out of his skull.

Just like now. In fact, *exactly* like now. To the point where, if something didn't happen to enliven this dusty remnant of the Raj, he was going to take his gun out and see how many stuffed shirts he could get without reloading.

Only joking, he told his conscience. But it'd be fun though, a hell of a lot more fun than sitting listening to some plummy-voiced chinless wonder rabbiting on about his 'vitaly major job in the City'. Vitaly major, he sneered. The only vital major he knew was Cowley. Who was going to kill both him and that idiot partner of his if they didn't start building some kind of rapport soon. And if Cowley didn't get them, then some nasty little bandito would.

Just his bloody luck.

He stretched as best he could in the hideously uncomfortable chair, casting around desperately for something—anything!—to keep him awake and/or sane.

There was sweet F. A. Wonderful, oh, absolutely fucking wonderful. There wasn't even a single bird worth watching, everything here either too old, too young or animal. Or, he thought, casting a disparaging eye over two weedy matrons, one vacuous, the other positively dense, they were vegetable or mineral. Or, looking over at some once-upon-a-time military type lying agape in his chair, they were simply dead as the proverbial doornail.

It couldn't possibly get worse, he thought, until one of the too-young birds starting fluttering her eyelashes at him. She was at the spotty age, the kind that looked as if they'd burst

if you gave them a squeeze. He darted his attention away, trying to find some half-way (or even quarter or eighth way) decent female to look at.

Even less luck than before, one of the matriarchs looking suspiciously like the newly departed.

He stifled a huge yawn, almost dislocating his jaw in the process, and gave up on the female gender, turning his mind to the male sex.

There wasn't much of that about, either. All the spectators seemed either to be veterans of the war—the Boer War, that is. Or Bore War, if you had the misfortune to speak to them—or more of the chinless wonders who all looked as if they should be called Cyril or Cedric or Dickie.

Now there was a thought. He went back to watching, or rather, *started* watching the action on the field—or was it pitch? He never could remember—ignoring the faces and concentrating on the crotches.

There weren't any. Those bloody sports cups they were all wearing hid every bit of interest and the baggy trousers revealed not a single decent bum or nice pair of legs.

Bugger it, he thought, viciously. Not that he looked like having much chance of that, though. He sighed, heartfelt and irritated, glowering around him as if he could have the game rained out by sheer bad-will alone. A movement—my god, something was actually happening out on the pitch or field or whatever—caught his attention out of the corner of his eye and he realised it was the great lump of an ex-soldier he'd been landed with. A great lump who appeared considerably less lumpen now that he was out of that stupid, pretentious bloody blazer and into a pair of white trousers and thin white shirt that was open, rather nicely, half way to his waist. The shirt was restless, moving with the slight breeze, in syncopated time with the sougning tree branches. Not that Doyle was paying the slightest bit of attention to idyllically rustic scenery. Oh, no, not him, he was far too clever by half to waste his time on a bit of wood when he had something far more interestingly male to watch.

The artist in Doyle wasn't dead yet, and he admired the picture Bodie made, striding across the green to take up position—Doyle assumed Bodie knew why, for he certainly didn't—over

to the side by the spreading oak. Whatever the reason for the move, Doyle heartily approved, making himself comfortable, all the better to watch Bodie. All in white, he seemed taller, bigger, more the heroic figure Doyle had always fancied. Long, clean lines, powerful shoulders, and a lovely firm, curving bum. Doyle stared at the muscular rump, enjoying the way the sun shone off Bodie's whites, accentuating the positive and making him itch to see if Bodie's rear would fill his hands to overflowing. Bodie stretched, took off at a run, caught the ball, and threw it back to some bloke who was standing behind the wickets.

"Howzat!"

Christ, that much noise for one piddling little ball, even if it were Bodie who'd thrown it. Now Bodie had come back to where Doyle could see him, and from this angle, the breeze was man's best friend. With every minor gust, Bodie's shirt billowed, revealing the slight curve of chest, the pale, hairless skin, even, Doyle noticed happily, the pink circle of a tiny nipple, just waiting to have his mouth fasten on it...

And it didn't bear mentioning what he wanted to do once he got rid of the groin-guard, either, although sucking did rather spring to mind for that as well. His eyes slitted again, not from the sun, but from the heat spreading from his crotch all the way out to the tips of his toes and the ends of fingers, which were anxiously fidgeting with the desire to touch that sweet pink nipple that kept on winking at him, every time the wind blew. The heat reached all the way up his back, the hair on his nape tingling at the mouth-watering thought of getting Bodie out of all that virginal white and into...absolutely nothing else, apart, of course, from a nice big bed.

He had to stretch his legs out and shove his hands in his pocket, before he was betrayed by either the bulge in his trousers or the roving of his hands. Although he realised he might be a bit late: he was getting some funny looks from the old bat peering at him over her bifocals and the walking pimple was looking disgustingly flushed and damp.

Hurriedly, he went back to gazing at Bodie, who was beginning to look more appealing as a partner with every passing minute. Although perhaps Cowley had had a different kind of partnership in mind... Mind made hazy by the sex

suffusing his body, Doyle was willing to consider Cowley being as lusty as he himself was and that perhaps the Old Man was prone to sitting in his office, speculating on his operatives. The way Doyle was...

Tongue dampening his lips, he was cataloguing every muscle in Bodie's body, thinking of how each and every sinew would strain when Bodie fucked him—or he fucked Bodie. There was only one aspect of him rigid when it came to sex, and that had nothing whatsoever to do with his attitude. Yeh, he thought with a sigh and a ripple of his hips, it'd be nice to be fucked by Bodie. Speaking of Bodie... That worthy was walking away from where he'd been standing, going over towards the stumps and bails and wickets (although Doyle couldn't be bothered dredging his memory over which one was which), finally stopping in front of the pile of bits of precariously balanced wood. He had a heavy brown cricket ball in his hand, and Doyle noted it absently, mind more on the strong curve of bicep and the almost architectural beauty of the columns of Bodie's neck. No, he wasn't paying much attention to the ball—it being part of the dullest game on the face of the earth—at all. Not until Bodie began to get it ready for throwing by polishing it in the traditional way.

That was when Doyle remembered why, even though he hated cricket, he never once missed a test match on telly when he could avoid it, at least not since he'd discovered what all his important little dangly bits were for when they weren't dangling any more. And certainly not since he'd discovered the West Indians either, for that matter.

Bodie held the ball firmly in his right hand, rubbing, oh so slowly, from hip-bone to crotch, hip to balls, a dark line growing where the ball had been pressed. Doyle had something growing in his groin, and it had nothing to do with transferred muck from the ground, either. He was getting decidedly uncomfortable, in a rather delectable way, sitting here in full view, watching Bodie.

He liked that, sitting here amidst the prim and proper locals, getting turned on something fierce, his prick straining against the inside seam of his jeans. Well, it was certainly livening things up from his point of view, a distinct improvement on being bored out of his skull. Although

he was in considerable danger of being thrilled to bits... This was turning into a rather pleasant way to spend a lazy Bank Holiday Monday afternoon, sprawled on a lawn chair, cock hard, eyes dreamy as he watched the man Cowley had joined him to, in sickness and in health, for better, for worse...

Staring at Bodie as he was, he saw the moment when Bodie realised that his randy toad of a partner was all dressed up and raring to go. Watched, amused, as Bodie gave him a look of barely tolerant disgust. He almost laughed when Bodie looked around to see who was getting Doyle so worked up and came up with—the same thing Doyle had, not a half-way decent bird in sight. Doyle sat and waited for the wheels to turn, as Bodie added two and two together and came up with a totally unexpected four.

It was written all over his face: Doyle, fancying a bloke?

Then: which one?

Doyle chuckled when he saw the answer to *that* dawn all over Bodie's blushing face. Laughed out loud when Bodie threw a quick glance at Doyle's crotch, then his own, with its leering line down to his balls.

But the laughter faded fast enough when Bodie stared back, a wicked light of amusement leavening those dark blue eyes. And then the show began...

Bodie did everything he possibly could to get Doyle going, and Doyle co-operated as best he could, succumbing to temptation without so much as a token fight. Nice to find out that your partner is as bisexual and uninhibited as you are yourself. Or just as randy, he really didn't care which. As long as Bodie didn't stop...

Doyle carefully crossed his legs, the gesture of defeat eliciting a broad grin from a perky Bodie, who made the 'one up to me' sign with an expression notable for its nauseating smugness. Doyle stopped watching the face with its intriguingly rosy flush and concentrated on even more interesting bits: all those muscles and all that smooth skin and all that lovely movement. He let himself drift on a wonderful cloud of sexual heat, busy little mind plotting what his busy little hands would do as soon as his rapidly more appealing partner let him. He actually glanced at one of the other men, noticing

the way his hands gripped the handle of the cricket bat, which gave him all sorts of interesting ideas on a hundred and one new uses for the cricket bat handle, which was long and thin and quite perfectly sized... He went back to watching the way the sun kissed Bodie, turning his skin faintly pink and making his hair shine with heretofore unseen waviness; started paying attention to the lovely smile and the twinkle in the eyes that promised both wit and lasciviousness. Funny how much you could start to like a person, once you realised they were as sexy as you and just as willing. And Bodie was obviously willing, or so every single fluid movement telegraphed to the impatient Doyle. He slid down in his seat, sinking into daydreams of a nature that would make the vicar blush and his wife drag Doyle into the bushes—or was it the other way round? He hadn't seen the vicar yet, perhaps that wouldn't be too bad. Not as good as his delectable partner, but not bad either.

He was almost licking his lips at the way the fair skin had flushed in beautiful contrast to the gaping whiteness of shirt, when he realised the skin, shirt and entire body were coming closer.

"Lo, mate," he said, mouth like cotton wool, he'd been panting so heavily. "Ave a good game, did you?"

Bodie planted himself in front of Doyle as if he were the Colossus straddling the Straits. All Doyle could think of was Bodie straddling him... Bodie, it seemed, was waiting for an answer, not that Doyle had heard the question. Under the circumstances, there really was only one reasonable response. "Yes," he said, "absolutely." He hoped he had agreed to something wonderfully naughty and nasty and really quite sweaty. He liked clean sweat on a man, especially if that sweat had been worked up over Doyle's body. There was something else he could say, he supposed, so he said it, eyes devouring the pout of Bodie's lips. "Who won?"

"I did," Bodie muttered, not meaning the cricket score, as some old duffer came up and pounded him on the back.

"Well done, well done, my boy. Quite a score, it's a long time since I saw a century scored on this green..."

Doyle had tuned the old fart out at the mere mention of 'score'. He knew what kind of score

he had in mind, and the only connection to cricket was the fine upstanding wickets, sticky, if possible.

They were all after the poor sod. Scoring a century was obviously an accomplishment of mammoth proportions around here—rather like the arousal that was threatening even the hefty double-stitching of Doyle’s new denims. The stupid biddy in the floral frock—or one of the fluttering females, there seemed to be hordes of them all of a sudden—was hanging from Bodie’s arm, gushing great gouts of platitudes at him, all of it punctuated by girlish giggles and the flirtatious fluttering of eyelashes.

What a way for the vicar’s mother to behave, Doyle thought in disgust, ought to be ashamed of herself, behaving like that at a perfectly respectable cricket match. He was, naturally, completely ignoring the fact that he had basically raped Bodie with his eyes and that the front of his trousers had a bulge the size of the Eiffel Tower in it. Much to the delight of the pimply girl and Methuselah’s granny.

Hordes of females, did he say? Attila the Hun would have been thrilled to have this many troupes. Doyle looked around them again. Well, perhaps not. Although it would have kept the army on the move if they’d been camp-followers.

Doyle wouldn’t have minded being a camp follower at this point. Or a butch leader. He wasn’t fussy, just randy. And Bodie smelled wonderful, the clean masculinity cutting through the cling of lavender and eau de Cologne and the faint whiff of fertiliser. Doyle stared at him, never taking his eyes off him, not even when the rest of the players started off for the brand new clubhouse and Bodie was left in a sea of elderly admirers, each and every one of them insisting on congratulating him personally, in detail and at great length.

If he had thought it was Attila’s hordes before, now it was the Vandals at the gates of Rome, with poor Bodie surrounded on all sides and inundated with the flood of well-wishers. Doyle didn’t see what all the fuss was about, but then, he hadn’t been watching the match, had he? A sharp elbow, delivered by someone’s lace and attar of roses great-grandmother, took his breath away, so he retired, with ill grace, to his lawn chair. There wasn’t much for him to see, just

lumpy bodies in crimplene and tweed, but once in a while, the boulders would shift and he’d catch a glimpse of rounded rump or bared chest.

He sighed, happily. With everyone—including Miss Pimple—thoroughly engrossed in Bodie, he could thoroughly enjoy his own engrossment, albeit rather less demurely than they. He had just got as far as having his face buried in Bodie’s crotch, Bodie’s prick buried down his throat, Bodie’s finger shoved up his bum, when he realised a decrepit old stick was harrumphing something at him. And staring, rather pointedly, at where Doyle’s hands were.

Not to mention what they were doing.

It didn’t take much to produce a guilty startle, nor even a blush. Wasn’t every day he found himself wanking on the cricket grounds in full view. Getting to his feet, jacket draped casually to hide a multitude of sins, he slowly followed the gradually diminishing group that still hovered around Bodie like a cloud of midges.

Pain in the fucking arse, he thought. Why can’t they just bugger off and let me get my hands on him? Or me mouth—just think, rimming that lovely arse...

They must have been developing that telepathy Cowley had been going on about: Bodie turned round at that very instant and gave a deliberate and very provocative wiggle of his backside. Doyle nearly fell over his own tongue, but managed to contain himself, just barely: his zip was beginning to show the strain.

Abruptly, there was a flurry of flapping arms, as if a lion had been let loose in the flamingo enclosure and all the simperers were lolloping and limping and striding off towards the front of the club house.

“What’d you say to them?” Doyle asked, rightly suspicious.

Bodie grinned at him, glanced around, palmed the backside that had been driving him to distraction. “Nothing much—just that tea was almost over...”

“And it would never do for them to miss their cream tea, would it? Aren’t you going over as well? Not like you to miss...”

There was a very firm, very experienced hand cupping his crotch, and Bodie had moved in so close, he could smell the aphrodisiac of clean sweat. “Not going to miss my cream tea, am I? Going to have a quick shower and then you and

me'll be off back up to Town and you can give me my cream tea then, can't you?"

If I can wait that long, Doyle thought, concentrating fiercely on not kissing Bodie in public then ripping his clothes off and raping him. Except, it couldn't be rape—Bodie was far too willing for that. By the time he had his urges de-urged, Bodie was disappearing round the corner of the brick building, contrasting nicely, pretty as a picture amidst the red of the building and the lush green of the countryside. Doyle almost tripped over his own feet, he was in such a rush not to lose sight of his dessert.

They met a couple of men on their way out, and judging by the way they greeted Bodie, they must have been on his team, not that Doyle had noticed at the time. And all he noticed now was that they were delaying Bodie's shower and therefore their return to the privacy of someone's flat and the luxury of someone's bed. He rather fancied Bodie's bed, with its fur bedspread. Be nice to lie back on that while Bodie sucked him off. Or fucked him. Yeh, he thought, all dreamy, face down on that bed, me cock in all that fur and Bodie up me and...

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Speaking of Bodie, where the hell was he? Doyle glanced around, paying attention to his surroundings, noting that the building had all the latest mod-cons, despite the primly grim Victorian exterior. The place smelled faintly of new putty and paint, and he heard a sneeze—obviously Bodie with his bloody allergies—coming faintly down the corridor. He followed Bodie's nose, until the beginnings of the unavoidable changing-room aroma wafted his way. The place was peopled with nothing more than Bodie's clothes slung on a hook and one lost jockstrap, lying abandoned under the bench. The windows were suitably high and frosted, letting the light stream in but keeping all would-be voyeurs out. And through the open doorway, he could hear water running and Bodie singing. Sort of... Sounded more like strangling the nearest be-draggled cat, but if love is blind, then lust is deaf. Doyle sat on the bench, intending to wait for Bodie, willing his body into being a good little prick and telling it to behave itself until they got back to London. His prick throbbed mutinously, reminding him that it was over an hour in the car back to London, and that was if they managed to avoid the holiday hordes coming back

from their day-trip to the coast. At least an hour, more if one of the morons had an accident, which was likely, considering what a car load of sticky, screaming brats can do to a normally quite sane driver. At least an hour, with Bodie sitting inches away from him... With Bodie sitting the length of his prick away...

That did it.

He'd never stripped so quickly in his life before, clothes dumped on the muddy floor with gay abandon and not a single thought to how he would look once he put them back on. Starkers, he stalked into the shower, the white tiles ticklingly cold on the soles of his feet, but the sight of Bodie under the shower-head was more than enough compensation. Almost as white as the tiles he was, something the Old Masters would have painted with lush brush strokes and draped in rich velvets. Doyle preferred him draped in nothing more than the cascade of water and the startlingly black hair that curled at his groin.

And as for his prick... Doyle's mouth began watering in anticipation. Such a gorgeous sight, the site so rosy and big. Lovely. Bodie had obviously been thinking about going back to London, too, for his cock was turgid and heavy, rising out from his body, foreskin only half-covering the coyly-peeping head. Doyle was across the floor so fast, Bodie didn't see him coming until there was a hot mouth on his prick and he was the one almost coming.

Doyle was in heaven, even if his knees were going to give him gyp for days after this. But it was worth it, to have the delectable bulk of Bodie's cock filling his mouth, going deep into his throat. Much though he liked women, much though he enjoyed them, a good hard cock would always be his first love. And Jesus, but he could get to love this. Bodie's hands were tangling with the streaming water in his curls, the water calm, Bodie's hands almost convulsive. Doyle leaned into the heavier body, his own hands running up and down Bodie's legs, loving the feel of the water-slicked hair, the slippery satin of skin. He felt the cock in his mouth shift angle, realised that Bodie had moved, spreading his legs to brace them against the treachery of both slippery tile and trembling passion. And that gave Doyle a very good idea indeed. He scrabbled around on the tiles, and found the bar of soap,

gone all squishy. One finger dug into it, then was lifted, unerringly, towards Bodie's backside. He heard Bodie groan with pleasure as he pressed his finger in, he himself nicely surprised by the ease of entry. It would make life so much easier if Bodie had been on the merry-go-round as often as he himself had been. Make it much easier, indeed.

So much for having to wait before they got down to the heavy stuff then. With reluctance, and a good hard suck, he pulled away from Bodie's prick, kissing the tip again, running his tongue under the foreskin when the temptation proved irresistible. Still on his knees, he looked up the length of Bodie's body, stopping when he met Bodie's eyes. He flexed the finger that was up Bodie's arse, watching the effect darken Bodie's eyes.

"M gonna fuck you," he said, quite calmly, only the bobbing of his cock betraying him. "M gonna fuck you rigid an' then I'm gonna make you cum like it's goin' out of fashion. Gonna bugger you, mate, into next week."

"Promises, promises," Bodie muttered, undulating slightly, fucking himself on Doyle's finger.

"Oh, yeh, it's a promise all right. You're gonna love it, Bodie, you're gonna scream when you cum an' you're gonna beg me for more an' then you're gonna fuck me, right?"

"You gonna just sit there flapping your gums at me, Ray, or 're you goin' to keep your side of the deal? C'mon, my little Ray of sunshine, prove you're more than just hot air. C'mon, sunshine, fuck me. Yeh," a luxurious sigh, as Doyle withdrew his finger then pressed two back in again, "yeh, tha's it. Fuck me, sunshine, get on with it, I'm ready, c'n take you any day of the week, with one hand tied behind my back..."

Now there really was a thought. But there was nothing handy and he was as desperate as Bodie to just get on with it. He wanted Bodie up against the wall, wanted him spreadeagled, but the combination of dangerously wet tiles and the difference in their height would make that too awkward for this time. Plus, it would require too much control, too much thought, and that was well beyond him by now. Sucking an open-mouthed path up Bodie's body, he manoeuvred them until he had Bodie in a satisfyingly appropriate position: flat on his back on

the floor. He spared a moment to check that this, due to present surroundings, was the best way, even if it would wreak havoc with Bodie's back tomorrow. Ah well, they could always tell Cowley it had been the cricket bat that had done that.

There was yet another thought: he'd have to remember to pinch one of the cricket bats and take it home, for when they were feeling a bit adventurous. But right now, he had Bodie under him, spread wide, red cock arching big and hungry up over the whiteness of belly, black hair glistening with diamond drops of the water that was showering down beside them. He fumbled, found the soap, glad it was Imperial Leather and not carbolic. A satisfyingly hefty dollop on his finger, and he watched, fascinated, aroused almost beyond control, as his fingers were swallowed up by Bodie's body. They were both breathless now, Bodie flushed, a darker V of red where his shirt had been open out on the Green all afternoon. Doyle leaned forward to lick it, tracing the muted shift of colour with the wetting lave of his tongue. Bodie tasted wonderful, a faint hint of salt where he hadn't had a chance to wash before Doyle had interrupted him.

The muscle around his fingers was dilated now, breathing in rhythm with Bodie's lungs, pulling at him. Doyle didn't even notice the protesting of his sore knees as he knelt up, positioning the dark claret of his prick against the utter whiteness of Bodie's arse. He leaned forward, his cock sliding in easily, the flesh stretching before his eyes and before his hardness to suck him in. He groaned, heard Bodie groan, and neither one of them was feeling any pain. Bodie was squirming under him, legs thrashing, until Doyle grabbed them, putting them over his own shoulders, bending Bodie double beneath him. They were so close now, so very close. Bodie was unexpectedly supple for a man so big, and all Doyle had to do was lean down a little more and they'd be able to kiss... If Bodie didn't reject it, if Bodie didn't turn away. Doyle hesitated, unwilling to risk the rejection, unwilling to push Bodie in case he made him feel threatened. For if Bodie felt threatened, not only might this never be repeated, even if it were, it would probably never be allowed to go beyond casual fucking.

And Doyle wasn't the least bit surprised to realise that he really wouldn't mind getting very, very serious about this man. His hips thrust slowly, Bodie pushing up to meet him, to make sure that he was in as deep as he could go. But it wasn't enough. His mouth was too empty, bereft of sensation and he wanted to fill it. He moved forward, wishing he knew Bodie better, wishing he could take the chance, deciding to settle instead for the taste of his skin.

Then Bodie kissed him. Hard, open-mouthed, devouringly, tongue rasping against his, all the passion between them flowing in an endless circuit and suddenly, it was too much, his control completely gone. His hips jabbed forward, plunging him into Bodie's body, as Bodie's tongue thrust into his mouth, Bodie's arms locked tight around them. He was moaning, the sound delving into Bodie's mouth to become a part of him, bringing them closer. He could feel his balls quiver, drawn up tightly, barely brushing against Bodie's arse now. There was a burst of hotness against his belly and chest, Bodie shuddering into sudden stillness beneath him, mouth falling slack with the nirvana of release. Doyle held himself equally still, even though his body was screaming at him, holding himself on the very edge of orgasm, until every nerve was alive and every muscle tingling. Then, only when Bodie had come back down to earth and was looking straight into his eyes, did he begin to move again, short, sharp thrusts, pumping into Bodie, fucking him hard.

Everything was focussed on the pleasure, shivering through him, rippling across his skin and then he came, pouring himself into Bodie's depths. All the starch went out of him and he collapsed, heavily, onto Bodie, moving only when Bodie shifted him around so that they were lying side by side and Bodie was no longer tied in knots.

He was going to say something, when they both heard something that made their blood run colder than the long-forgotten water.

A man's voice, the colonel from Bodie's old mob, making noises about tea being over and why the hell hadn't Bodie come.

They weren't about to tell him, were they?

Bodie hastily jumped back under the shower, yelping when the coldness of the water hit him.

"What're you doin' that for, if it's so bloody cold?" Doyle asked, stumbling none too steadily to his feet.

Bodie looked down at himself, at his cock that still hadn't gone back down to its usual flaccid state and at the cum and soap that clung to him. "Cos me wicket's all sticky, that's why." He grimaced as the soap made its presence felt in other, also sticky, parts of his body. "An' that's not the only bit that's sticky neither. Christ, but it was worth it, wasn't it, sunshine?"

He was never going to be able to hear that particular nick-name without realising precisely where Bodie had coined it—and he refused to be held responsible for what would happen when he remembered precisely what they had been doing at the time.

"Shove over, I've got a sticky wicket of me own to wash, mate." Not that he spent much time over it, which was hardly surprising considering the water was turning him blue and there was a colonel who was going to risk getting all wet any second now, if Bodie didn't show his face.

Not to mention all the rest of him that was on luscious display.

Rinsed off first, by simple dint of shoving Bodie out of the way, Doyle wandered nonchalant as Maurice Chevalier into the changing room, giving a cheeky 'd'you always hang around men's changing rooms?' look at the taken-aback colonel, ostentatiously turning his back to hide his charms.

It went downhill from there, until Bodie had bundled him into the car, Doyle still shouting insults, Bodie still shouting apologetic excuses, all of which involved some mysterious blow to the head.

"Haven't had that yet," Doyle muttered, taking the wind out of Bodie's sails, stopping the argument before it could get started.

"You what?" Bodie squawked, less than refined.

"Said, I haven't had that yet." Choosing to interpret the look of shock on Bodie's face as ignorance rather than rank disbelief that someone could be saying such things whilst driving past the local church with the car windows rolled all the way down and all the passers-by turning to stare at them, Doyle elucidated, one part of his busy little brain paint-



ing pictures of them sucking each other off. “You haven’t given me head yet. But you will, won’t you?”

“Oh, I’ll give it to you all right, mate, just as soon as we get back to London.”

“Yeh, you will.” Doyle granted him a dream-

ily sexy smile, full of more than eastern promise, contemplating what a nice way this was to build a truly spectacular partnership.. “Yeh, you definitely will, won’t you...” a pause of precisely the right length, then he grinned, reminding them both, “sunshine.”

ON HEAT

M. FAE GLASGOW

HE COULD FEEL HIS SEX STIRRING, INFUSING EVERY CELL OF HIS BODY, THE VERY BREATH SOUGHING THROUGH HIS LUNGS CHARGED AND SEARING WITH THE HUNGER OF HIS COCK. It was deliberate, this allowing the carnal beauty of his body to rule his mind, as deliberate as Nature's putting an animal on heat could never be, and that conscious decision was all that separated him from the rutting of beasts. Even the way he walked along the street, hips lilted in fleshly poetry as he neatly sidestepped the puddles that glistened in the reflected glory of shop windows, all that was conscious and measured, his attraction doled out by generous measure to any and all who cared to look.

And he chose to make them all look, and stare, and hunger. There was famine in his wake, and that made him smile, the smile itself fueling that lean attraction of his even more, until even the old women clustered beside the Walls' Ice Cream sandwich-sign left off the resettling of their water-wing breasts and tutting gossip to yearn as youth and virility passed them by. He knew it, felt it in his bones, nestling in with purring passion beside his own growing hunger. The fire licked at his belly, as his tongue licked at his dry lips, wetting them, whetting his appetite, ensnaring every passer-by in his trap. He set himself to loose even more of his sexuality, deliberately, indiscriminately, casting wide his net to trawl in every fish in the sea. And he did: not only women gazing after him with wistful lustiness, not only men staring at him with bare-knuckled envy, but now even the hostility of the men mutated into the desire to own, to possess, to sink their flesh into his and take him. He caught sight of himself in the butcher's window, his body framed by trays of meat and hanging beefs, himself a pillar of flesh in the middle. His steps halted, as he, too, was caught in his own web, then was freed by the rueful grin on his own face, wry humour rising as he laughed at his own all-unconscious honesty of turning himself into the proverbial beefcake, or side of beef, or nothing more than meat... But then he thought of being eaten, and by whom, and the flame fanned a little higher,

another coal catching fire atop the embers he had already piled with such care, one atop the other, one balanced on the other, one setting the other to burn. As he wanted to do, tonight. As he needed to do...

The remnants of his smile washed over a muffled figure, shoulders bowed by the weight of the laden string bags clenched by white-fingered hands in the drizzling dusk. The figure's voice had been muttering past the fake fur of its parka hood, muted words about having to do his mum's shopping when he should have been home getting ready for his big night suddenly dying off, extinct. Doyle passed on, all unseeing, never knowing that the teenager's life had been thrown into utter chaos by the chance of his passing, never caring that his unleashed appeal had evicted all thoughts of a young man's girlfriend from his thoughts, the lure of the back row of the local flea pit expunged. Doyle himself simply walked on, the jeans dampened and darkened by the rain making a young man's throat go dry, the taut vibrancy of Doyle's hair making fingers itch to touch as the thought of straight blonde hair had done only moments before. Another conquest, left unclaimed.

Doyle didn't regret leaving his car at home tonight—November dank it might be, but there was a primal charge in stalking black streets with their pagan flares of electric light and the crowds hurrying home. All those people for him to practice on, all that hunger for him to feed from, to take inside and use it to make himself even sexier.

His cock was hard now, chafing at the seam of his jeans, where he'd deliberately left underwear behind to free himself to rub with every long step he took. As he stretched his legs out, he could feel his cock cling, briefly, to the moist flesh of his thigh, could feel the damp heaviness of his jeans trap him, his foreskin slipping back, deliciously, that last fraction, every move an added bonus. Just like the stares he was getting, and the whistles, and the heads, turning, mouths agape or grinning, all drawn in by his sheer sexuality.

By Christ, if it worked on strangers, then it had better bloodywell work on someone who knew him best. His grin dimmed to a small, devastating smile, as he thought of the person that all this raw sex was in aid of.

Bodie. Bodie, of the wandering hands and lascivious eyes; Bodie of the pinching fingers and caressing palms; Bodie, who would cop a feel because that's all he thought he could get away with. Well, that was one man who was in for quite an education tonight. Because Doyle was going to have him, tonight. For the first time, he was going to let Bodie know that his little moves were not unwelcome. Shite, be honest. He was going to seduce the bugger and then fuck him into next week. Repeatedly. Even if Doyle himself came hard and fast, as his body was already beginning to beg him, he knew he'd be good for at least another two times. More, if Bodie could get him desperate enough, and judging by what he'd seen over the past three years... Oh, tonight was going to be good. Hard, raw sex, with none of the niceties you had to use when dealing with those of delicate sensibilities. Just him and Bodie and fucking. For he wasn't about to settle for a nice cosy handjob, nor an easy spot of frottage. No, he wanted it all. Wanted to get inside Bodie, wanted to stake his claim, fuck him, be fucked...

One hand slipped in below the hem of his short jacket to adjust his cock as best he could. He was wearing Bodie's favourite jeans, the ones that always tempted him so much that he didn't dare actually touch, but which always made Bodie hard just watching Doyle in them. And Doyle, trained observer that he was, had noticed. Not quite what Her Majesty's Government or the Metropolitan Police Force had had in mind for all those hours of training, but as far as Doyle was concerned, it was the most use any of it had ever been. After all, this time his observation wasn't going to net him some petty criminal or seedy terrorist; this time, oh, this time, it was going to net him Bodie, land him hook, line and sinker. Get Bodie into his bed—or rather, get Doyle into Bodie's bed. No matter. He was going to have Bodie tonight. And they both knew it.

The corner of the street was turned, revealing the terrace house that Bodie had landed himself this quarter, bright light sheening from

one bay window, the rest of the house in blank darkness. A shadow, moving restlessly, dimmed across the curtains, passing from view, passing back into sight, disappearing once more.

So Bodie was pacing then, hopefully as hot as he was, remembering that last little encounter on the stairs this afternoon. Thank Christ for lifts that took forever.

A hand on his bum, as usual, usually ignored. But today, he'd turned round, caught Bodie in the act, caught the aching smile of desire on Bodie's face. Finally dared come out and say what he'd been wanting to say.

"One of these days, I'm going to take you up on that, mate." A pause, a heartbeat to let the words sink in to Bodie's thick skull. Then—"You doin' anything tonight then?"

And the stunned surprise, the delight superseding the shock, the hand sliding down to caress him, briefly, promisingly, between his legs, fingertips touching the base of his balls.

"Am now, right?"

And it had been that simple. That quick, that easy. But scary for all that, the fear hovering just out of reach, where he could sense it, but not grab it long enough to wring its neck. Which is why he'd had two glasses of Dutch courage before he'd left his house, a shower, two shaves and a half an hour's walk, stoking his own arousal the entire way, boosting his confidence and his ego with the approving lust of strangers. All that, to beard the lion in his den and change things between them. Oh, not much, not really, just taking friendship the next step forward, he told himself, just taking it to the logical conclusion of all the camping around they'd always indulged in. Nothing heavy, nothing too difficult. Just sex...

He leaned heavily on the door bell, thumb bending backwards, even that reminding him of sex, and how Bodie's back would arch in the moment of glory, of how Bodie would lean back, if he were to sit astride Doyle, with Ray inside him... By the time the tinny voice came over the intercom, he was having to think holy thoughts to keep his body under some kind of control, but even that faint control began to fade, as he raced up the stairs, the ripple of thigh muscle and the pull of denim conspiring against him. There was a figure visible, distorted by frosted glass, through the upper half of the door where

some light still reached from the brightness of the sitting-room: Bodie's shape, burly, strong, wonderfully masculine, recognisable under any circumstances. Then the door was opened to him and he laughed, not his usual earthy chuckle, but a nervous snicker, betraying his own insecurities, as Bodie's sartorial elegance betrayed his.

"Right pair we are, mate," he said, shoving past, making his own way to the living-room, familiar with the setting if not the details of the upcoming activity. "All done up to the nines, like a pair of tarts on a Saturday night. Expecting company, were you?"

"Nah, had company last night for the match. Expecting a date tonight." A silence, short, shaky. "I am, aren't I?"

Framed by the doorway, Doyle turned his cheekiest grin loose on him, fully aware of the rampant sexuality blazoning from him. "Oh, yeh, definitely. And if you play your cards right, you might even get lucky tonight."

Bodie came up behind him, warmth touching him before he had time to grab a drink for a courageous prop. "Home-made spaghetti bolognese, straight from Gino's, salad, the best plonk Safeway had on offer and to top it all off, a cake from Sally's Bakery."

Provocative to a fault, Doyle looked at him over his shoulder, turning until they were almost kissing. As he pulled himself free, tantalising Bodie with a good look at his bum, he said, "What? Cake? Chock full of cream, is it?" And the wicked glance at Bodie's groin spoke an entire encyclopædia.

"Ray..." almost groaning, too much held in for too long to be able to bear the taunting. "Ray, Ray, for God's sake, don't be such a fucking pricktease."

Another grin. "Who said I was being a pricktease? Feed me, and you just might be what I'll have for afters, mate. Spaghetti, is it then? You mean," he went on, going into the kitchen, rescuing the tinfoil tins from the oven, shoving everything onto the old tray Bodie kept propped behind the sink taps, stopping the flow of words with the tip of his tongue in the corner of his mouth, concentrating for the moment on delivering the food to the dinette without dropping the lot and without losing the cutting edge of his sensual appeal. He took a deep breath, sit-

ting down with the slither of denim on leatherette, "You mean, something long and meaty that I get to suck to me heart's content?"

It was then that dinner went out the window as Bodie grabbed him, hauling him up from the chair, arms going round him, mouth opening against his, tongue plunging into his mouth, tasting him. Hands were on his groin, struggling with his zip, hands sliding into his jeans, bringing him out into the air, cupping him, cradling him as if he were the most precious thing in the world, inarticulate moans coming from Bodie to fill Doyle's mouth.

"Oh, Christ, Ray, I never thought you'd let me, not like this, oh, fuck, mate, I've needed you too long, can't take it slow, got to love you..."

Doyle gave himself up to the hedonism of relinquishing himself to Bodie, luxuriating in the masculinity encircling him and holding him so close and tight and strong. He let his sexuality flow out to his fingertips, enflaming every inch of Bodie that they touched, even through the protection of cloth. His own hands were very steady as he unbuttoned buttons and unzipped zips, baring skin to the chill of air and the sear of hot breath, his lips cold from the weather outside, his tongue warm and wet and laving, great swaths of wetness tingling across Bodie's naked white chest, pink nipples straining up to meet his tongue, to claim a caress for themselves. Smiling, he suckled on Bodie, feeding on the feel of flesh in his mouth and the sound of passion in his ears. And the hands covering him, hands trembling with the violence of desire, skin sussurating against his, fingertips trailing delicately down his spine, made him tremble in his turn. Oh, this was wonderful, he found himself thinking, too busy to bother with speech, knowing that Bodie understood it all without the need for anything so mundane as words. Pure, unadulterated sex, uninhibited hedonism, the promise of lust consummated in a wild and sweaty tangle between sheets that would have a faintly lingering scent of Bodie to add to the headiness of musk that was washing over him now. He tried to lower his head, to suck his way down Bodie's belly to the cock that was standing taut and straight from the gaping fold of navy blue trousers, but even as he moved, shaking hands gripped his shoulders, stemming him.

“No, not a quick knee trembler against the back of the chair. In the bedroom, c’mon, Ray, come to bed with me...”

His eyes languorous and half-closed, he allowed himself to be led, Bodie’s big hand holding his, tugging him on when he would have stopped to taste the sheen of sweat that was trickling down the hollow of Bodie’s spine and the dimple of the scar on his shoulder-blade. He pulled them to a stop, swift hands doffing clothes, laying Bodie completely naked to his sight, a symphony of whites and blacks, exquisite contrast in the porcelain skin and curving muscle, black curls at his groin and darkening cock lying against a belly the colour of a pink-tinted white rose. And Bodie was staring at him, a child at the sweet shop window, waiting for mummy to clip him around the lug’ole and drag him off home without so much as a taste. “C’mon, c’mon, Ray, don’t stop, keep going, don’t stop to think, just do it, mate...”

The huskiness made him smile, elated him that he’d been able to get super-cool Bodie so worked up that his voice wasn’t working properly. His own probably didn’t bear examining, but he’d never been one for chatting during sex, saving all that for the romantic seduction over dinner or the sweet nothings whispered lovingly after. Not that he was going to need either one of those routines, not tonight, and that was part of the beauty of it. He didn’t have to be anything else than in rut tonight, on heat, burning to fuck and be fucked, no holds barred, no questions asked, no strings attached.

In the bedroom now, the small bedside light switched on, enough to see by, not enough to destroy the mood of unfettered male sexuality. Bodie was in front of him, bending over to pull the duvet down out of the way, the movement exposing him, showing the heavy swing of balls almost hidden by the shadow of his body, revealing the budding muscle. Doyle wanted to fuck that arse, wanted desperately to plunge into it, feel the tightness around him, Bodie arching under him... He pressed the knuckles of his hand against the delicate flesh, shivering as he remembered how that particular caress felt, the firmness of the touch, the bigness of a hand rubbing with such sweet...

And Bodie was whirling round, grabbing him, kissing him frantically, sucking Doyle’s tongue

into his mouth, toppling them both onto the bed, Bodie’s legs coming up and around him, scissoring, holding him as tightly as the hugging arms did.

Then Bodie stopped kissing him long enough for them both to catch their breath from where it had been cast to the four corners of the world. And speak. Saying words that it took Doyle a minute to hear.

Words that it took him longer to comprehend.

Words that he didn’t want to hear, not from Bodie, not when this was supposed to be nothing but nice, hard, uncomplicated sex. Oh, Christ, Bodie was in love with him. Was saying words he’d be embarrassed about the next morning if he’d said them to some bird. Words Doyle could never imagine hearing himself say, but, a fragment of rational mind muttered, words that he should have expected Bodie to know, and perhaps, say. After all, Bodie was the one who loved poetry, Bodie was the one who could quote everyone from Brecht to Wordsworth and back again...

“Oh, Christ,” he muttered, and something in the tone warned Bodie, froze him, made him suddenly chill under Doyle’s hands. Utterly still, he lay, for a second or two, the shock rippling through him under the skin, where Doyle couldn’t feel it, where it couldn’t betray him. Doyle heard a deep, deep breath, more a sigh, were he to be honest, then a single, soft kiss on his lips, and then Bodie was speaking again, but the words of love were gone, ruthlessly ripped apart by the gutter words guaranteed to inflame, guaranteed to wipe away any memory of the other revealing things he’d said. And if not wipe the memory away, then apologise for it, to say, tacitly by other words, that he’d never let his feelings get in the way again. Doyle let Bodie kiss him, let the dirty words work their magic, let his body run riot under Bodie’s command, while his mind warped off on a tangent, eyes bright and open, seeing the way Bodie wouldn’t look at him, seeing the smallest mark of what could be called sweat gleaming on Bodie’s face. But Doyle was being honest now, and to a fault.

If it wasn’t tears, then it was only because Bodie didn’t cry, not because the pain wasn’t enough. So.

Bodie was in love with him.

And Doyle's body was busy flying off the handle with the pleasure Bodie was giving him, better than anything he'd ever had before. So not just sex for Bodie and the best sex for him that he'd ever had. That had to be worth running the risk of having someone in love with him. Of having his partner, his colleague in love with him. Of losing a friend to a lover.

Wasn't it? But he was still being honest.

So the truth stared him straight in the eye, in the form of a Mickey Mouse alarm clock he'd bought to make his partner smile, one particularly foul day. And Bodie had smiled, not because of the clock, but because it was Ray who'd bought it for him to cheer him up. And that was no different from the way he'd felt that last time in the hospital, when Bodie'd brought him a Biggles book to keep his upper lip stiff after the appendectomy. Small things, really, stupid things, the kind of thing you do when you're so sure of your place with someone you need give no thought at all to how it makes you look.

And he'd never had that with anyone before, had he? Never had this mind-rippling passion either, not in his entire life. Never had this overspilling of warmth inside him, all that emotion, all that...

He was still being honest. So, not just loving the way he'd known he loved his friend. Not just an excess of camaraderie. Not just matey lust. He was as bad as Bodie, just a bit behind him. The same possibility was there, right in front of him, waiting with the patience of years to be acknowledged, welcomed, acted upon. He could fall in love with this man in a way he'd never dared before in his life. Someone he could—and did—trust, someone he could depend on never to walk out on him, someone he could believe would never stop loving him. Even if Bodie were to stop being in love with him, they had enough years of friendship that the amity would never die, enough years of simply loving as one would a brother or comrade that there would always be closeness, would always be a path together. The rest of his life. If he chose it. If he gave Bodie his due, if he gave Bodie what he owed him. All those times of Bodie saving his life, stepping between him and a fist or a knife or a bullet or—fate worse than death—Cowley himself. Years of giving, of taking the abuse of Doyle's bitter conscience that no-one else could lance

clean for him. Years of helping, of listening, of giving. What he owed Bodie... His body, if nothing else. A sacrifice, of a sort, a talisman to buy the future. He could fall in love with Bodie, could fuse the loving with the passion and then be in love the way Bodie deserved. But he had to be convincing, in the meantime, until he'd caught up with his good intentions and could look Bodie straight in the eye and tell him he was in love with him. So. Lies for now, until the truth came home to roost. He could do it. He had to do it, for he owed Bodie his life time and time over. Oh, what he owed him, and Bodie, all unknowing, was calling in the debt. In love. One day, he'd be able to do that, one day he honestly would be in love with Bodie, but for now, amity and lust would just have to do...

"Oh, Christ," he muttered again, and this time, Bodie stopped completely, holding very still indeed.

"Don't look so worried, mate," he whispered, finding his voice, although it was as husky as Bodie's. "Just discovered something. I'm as bad as you are, 'cept I don't have the gift of the gab the way you do."

It dawned, slowly, on Bodie, and Doyle watched as the knowledge seeped in to him. "Yeh?" And then there was nothing he could say, not daring to repeat the insane things he'd already poured out once this evening.

"Yeh." Long pause, whilst their bodies slid against each other in the absence of their minds, skin still whispering its pleasure. Then, quickly, before they turned maudlin, before this could turn awkward, before he could betray the current truth instead of convince Bodie of a truth that was yet to be, his hand was darting down to hold Bodie's cock, squeezing. "You're rock hard. So does that mean I'll have to kiss the Blarney stone, then?" And while Bodie's smile was still just beginning, he slithered the length of sturdy torso, mouth open and nibbling, lowering himself until he was kissing, dancing kisses, all over Bodie's cock.

The hissed intake of breath, the torrent of words and obscene endearments were his reward, refuelling the heated self-lust he'd been simmering with every step on his way here. Achingly hard, his own cock jutted out from his body, the blood-gorged flesh blindly searching for flesh to bury itself in. As if hearing it, Bodie

twisted until he could reach, the softness of palm caressing and the callus where his gun rested rubbing with a tantalising edge of roughness, the contrast of sensation rubbing over him, encircling the ridges of pulsing veins.

Bodie was whispering still, his verbosity an umbrella to shade them. Legs were spreading under Doyle, offering, and he rose up, taking his weight on his elbows, mouth relinquishing Bodie with a last nipping kiss, the shiver of it running through Bodie, slowing him down, bringing him down from the peak, making him wait for the pleasure. Hands were pushing at him and it took a time before he was willing to give up possession of Bodie's body, but he yielded, flopping onto his back, cock breathing against the flatness of his body, eyes veiled as he watched Bodie scabble in the bedside table drawer, a small glass bottle finally appearing. He grinned when he saw it—trust Bodie to nip over to Soho and buy a bottle of flavoured lubricant. No revolting Vaseline for him. The small brown bottle was proffered him by hands that, frankly, shook, but he smiled.

“Nah. Want to see you do it, mate. Want to see you get yourself ready for me, get yourself all open and wide for me to fuck you.” His voice dropped to a seductive crawl down Bodie's spine. “Let me watch you, Bodie. Let me see...”

Flushed pink with a mixture of passion and embarrassment, Bodie flustered around for a minute, trying to find a way to do it without looking both stupid and unattractive, whilst his mind seemed to be busy gibbering to itself that Ray loved him, that his Ray was in love with him, that Doyle was finally his. Still fumbling with the bottle, he was drawn down into another kiss, Doyle's slender fingers magicking the lubricant out of Bodie's own clumsy hand.

“Didn't mean to make it awkward for you, sunshine,” was whispered to him, “just thought it'd be dead sexy to see you stick your fingers up your bum with me watchin' and waiting to take you. Let me get you ready, you c'n do yourself for me next time...”

And he could feel that promise singing through Bodie, knew then that he'd never be able to regret today's lies. Not when it made Bodie this happy. His fingers were as busy as his mind, uncapping the bottle, pouring a small oasis into the palm of his hand, fingers pad-

dling in the fragrance. Then he got up onto his knees, Bodie automatically rolling over for him, legs spreading wide. Carefully, Doyle poured a little of the oil, warmed by his own body heat, into the cleft of Bodie's luscious buttocks, watching, entranced, as the rivulets disappeared, a glistening glow marking their passage. His fingers followed, and Bodie quivered, groaning, when those fingers finally started the slow slide into his body: one finger, up to the knuckle, twisting smoothly, then another joined in, straightening, going deeper. Inside Bodie, they scissored open, splayed as wide as Bodie's legs, trapping the prostate between them, oscillating now, firm pressure making Bodie mutter guttural pleasure. The muscle that had snapped shut around his fingers was looser now, expanding and contracting with the rhythm of Bodie's enjoyment and the clenching and unclenching of his rear end.

“You ready, mate?” Doyle asked, pausing, his own cock weeping with frustration.

“Fuck, yeh. C'mon, Ray, get it in me. Right in me. Been too long since anyone fucked me. Want you.” He was pushing up now, hollowing his spine so that Doyle's hands slipped from his backside to the small of his back, pulling Ray in closer between his legs. Doyle began to nudge his way in, could tell when a wave of pain hit Bodie and knew, too, when the pain had passed on to an aftermath of gut-liquifying pleasure.

Doyle knelt forward, easing his path in ever deeper, the redness of his cock being devoured by the whiteness of Bodie's arse, until the auburn curls at his groin were pressed flat against oil-soft skin. The ring of muscle held him tight, moist flesh caressed him, but there was nothing against the head of his cock save the untrammelled depths of Bodie's body, nothing at all between him and Bodie's heart. His hips bucked forward, jamming him in deeper, the need to fuck commingled with the need to touch Bodie all the way up to his heart. His sweat was dripping from him, dropping onto Bodie, mixing with the glistening wetness on his back. He could barely hear what Bodie was saying, but the meaning was beyond doubt.

Bodie loved him, beyond all else. And what Doyle was doing was making him ecstatic. It was enough. Joined with his own friendship and love, Bodie's joy was enough. The pleasure took

control of him then, moving his body as it would, bringing him closer to the peak. He reached round, hand grasping Bodie's cock, pumping it in echo of the way his own body was pumping inside him. Kept on doing it, as Bodie's voice trembled off into inchoate moanings and the pungent odour of cum exploded into the room as Bodie spent himself into Doyle's hand.

He slowed his movements then, taking a bit more time, giving Bodie a chance to relish the feel of him inside the sanctum of his body, giving Bodie time to engrave it upon his memory. Doyle wanted this to be special, wanted this to be something never forgotten: the first time they had made love, even if it had started as nothing more than him going on heat, a tom-cat strutting along the street on his way to mate. He allowed the pleasure in him to build, allowed the sweetness to gather in his balls, howled as it became too much for him to contain and he came, streaming inside Bodie, his own cum making the channel slippery wet.

He opened his eyes to a vista of white skin, fine pored and delicate as a woman's, the soft skin of a man who's lived in the tropics and never dared the sun. Experimentally, he licked it, tasted his own sweat and the difference that was Bodie's, and his hand smoothed along the still sensitized flesh.

"Lovely," he whispered, barely enough breath even for that. "Absolutely fan-fucking-tastic."

"Love you, Ray."

"Yeh, know you do. Your taste's as good as mine."

And although hadn't actually said it, he knew Bodie would take that as a mutual declaration of love, sentimentality not exactly something either one of them was known for.

"And you're almost as heavy as I am. Shove

over, will you—" and he was moved and turned and cradled "—and let me hold you. Love you, mate, always wanted to tell you, just couldn't think of how. Then when you made it dead bloody obvious this afternoon that you were going to be coming over here tonight to go to bed with me, couldn't believe my luck. Never thought you'd be willing to take the chance to have it off with your partner. God, used to kill me watching you with the birds, and I used to want to do murder when I saw you pick a bloke up. Glad you finally wanted to chance it. Glad you love me."

He closed his eyes, letting Bodie think he was drifting off to the sound of voice and the feel of kisses, but once the time had passed and the heartbeat under his ear had slowed into sleep, he opened his eyes again, staring at the clock he'd bought to cheer his best mate up.

Fidelity and commitment. He hadn't thought of that. All he'd been concerned about this afternoon was a good hard shag, then Bodie'd dropped his bombshell. No birds, no other fellas, that was how Bodie needed it to be. No real surprise there, if he'd given it a moment's thought; he knew how bloody possessive Bodie was about his girlfriends. Should've seen it coming, just as he should have seen Bodie falling for him long before it happened. Would have, if he'd bothered to stop and think about it. But he'd committed himself now, good and proper and there was nothing he could do about it. Plus, it was only a matter of time before the combination of loving his partner and fancying him would turn into being in love with him and wanting to forsake all others, for richer and poorer, sickness and health...

It was only a matter of time.

Wasn't it?

NOR THE LEOPARD HIS SPOTS

M. FAE GLASGOW

(Note: This story is set in Albert Square, London—home of EastEnders. For readers familiar with the show, it should be noted that the Professionals and EastEnders timelines have been twisted and pulled a bit to suit the purposes of the story. No matter: this is fantasy about fictional characters.)

“Oi, Colin, who was that bloke wot was movin’ in your flats this mornin’ then?”

Colin took a careful, calming sip of his Churchill’s, damping his temper down with the coolness of his beer. Voice clenched, he gave Darren the same answer he’d given half the Square already. “I don’t know, Darren. I’ve absolutely no idea and if you want to find out, why don’t you either ask the bloke himself or get on the ’phone to Kelvin and ask *him* who he’s rented the flipping flat to.”

“All right, all right, don’t get your knickers in a twist. Was only askin’, wasn’t I? No ’arm in that, is there?” the black man muttered, smoothing down his natty grey suit in lieu of ruffled feathers. “No need to get shirty. Just wonderin’, that’s all.” He leaned in, grinning suggestively, “Wondered if you an’ Barry were on the outs, an’ you had a new fella movin’ in.”

“Oh, not you as well! What’s the matter with the people round here? Some man moves in and everyone’s leering at me as if he’s my bit on the side.”

“Keep your shirt on, Col, just ’avin’ you on. Not that you c’n blame us—I mean, everyone knows you fellers are all the same.”

With exaggerated control, staring straight ahead, Colin put his glass down on the bar, taking his time. His hand wasn’t quite entirely steady as he ran it over the tightly rippling waves of his cut-to-the-bone hair. “Darren, this is going to come as quite a shock to you, but I’m going to try to teach you something, so listen to me, will you? Us ‘fellers’ are *not* all the same, some of us are actually real people, not something out of ‘Agony’. And if me and Barry were breaking off, believe me, with the speed gossip travels round this square, you’d know about it

before we did. Now, why don’t you change the subject before you put your foot in it again, all right?”

“Okay, okay, if you can’t take a joke, man, then I won’t say nothin’ t’all. Hey, Wicksy, ’ow ’bout getting me a lager before I die of thirst down ’ere?”

Lager delivered, Wicksy leaned across the bar towards Colin, dark hair flopping over his forehead, eyes bright with curiosity. “‘Ere, Col, what’s this I hear about you and Barry splittin’ up and some new bloke movin’ in then?”

“What? Who told you that?”

“Dot.”

“When?”

“When I dropped me washin’ down the launderette this mornin’ on my way to help Ange open the pub.”

“Well, I’ve got news for you, old son. While Dot was telling you all about us breaking everything off, me and Barry were up West. Together.”

“Where you going’ then? You haven’t even half-way finished your drink!”

Colin stalked back to the bar, leaning on it with a thoroughly unfriendly smile. “I,” he said, mouth tight, “am going down the Market, where I’m going to go to Barry’s stall. When I get there, I’m going to talk to him. I’m going to make sure one of you well-meaning idiots hasn’t told him all this juicy gossip and landed me right in it, that’s where I’m going. Any objections? No? Then I’ll be off then, shan’t I?”

Behind his departing back, Wicksy and Darren stared at each other in silence for a moment, then Darren shrugged, grinning. “Probably just PMT,” he said, in the tone of a joke.

Wicksy drew him a stinker, turning away from him to serve another customer. “Leave it out or you’ll have Ange comin’ after you with a cake of soap. Or somethin’ sharp, complete with instructions of precisely where you’ve to shove it.”

“Oi, Barry, who was that bloke wot was movin’ into your flats this morning then?”

“Not you an’ all. I already told your wife, I don’t know who he was. Colin dragged me out

at the crack of bleedin' dawn this mornin', I didn't even see the geezer. Why don't you ask Dot or Ethel, they probably know what colour underpants he wears by now."

Pete nudged him, winking as if he had aspirations to being the new Benny Hill. "Thought that was more your line, eh, pal?"

"Won't be your pal much longer if you don't keep your trap shut, Pete Beal."

"Ooh, listen to him. Bit rich, you protestin' your innocence, innit?"

"All right, so I 'ave been known to wander a bit, it's not as if I'm married or anythin', is it? An' it's not as if it's any of your business neither."

"Wander a bit? Christ, mate, you may look like butter wouldn't melt in your mouth an' you may look like a perfect little chubby angel, but I reckon that's only because you've got one of them pictures up the attic."

Barry smiled very, very sweetly at him, the very image of cherubic innocence Pete had accused him of, then gave him the two-fingered salute. "Up yours, mate. The only pictures I've got are the kind you keep stuffed under the bed where your Kath won't find 'em."

"Touchy, touchy. Had a ruction with Colin, did we, then?"

"No, we didn't. Just having a rotten fuckin' mornin' an' you're not 'elpin' an' if you don't shut up, I'll land you one. All right?"

He was still simmering under his breath when another voice spoke up.

"Barry..."

"Wot d'you want, Col?"

Pete, far more sensible than his old battle-axe of a mother ever gave him credit for, quietly disappeared back to his own stall—although he made sure he could still hear every word. Colin and Barry always had such interesting arguments...

"Came down to find out if you'd been getting an earful about this new bloke, but I see you've been giving Pete a mouthful instead."

"Yeh, well 'e asked for it, didn't 'e. Don't need him goin' on at me, not after this mornin', do I."

"Come on, it wasn't that bad. Just another blood test, that's all."

"Yeh, but I don't like 'avin' it all rammed down me throat, do I?"

"Look, we've been through this before. Like it

or not, we have to get checked, make sure we're both still clear."

"Yeh, but I don't like bein' reminded of wot c'n 'appen."

"Burying your head in the sand won't make it go away, Barry."

"Put another record on, Col."

A pause, a customer picking up then discarding a reggae tape as the first plop of rain landed on him.

"All right, another record then. *Have* you heard about this bloke?"

Barry grinned at him, all imp and satyr, argument tossed casually aside, as usual. "You mean the one you've chucked me out for or the one I've gone an' dumped you for?"

"Oh, that one's new. I'd only heard that I'd broken off with you. Well, what does this man you've thrown me over for look like?"

"Come on for tea, might as well 'ave a break, goin' to 'ave another downpour an' there'll be no customers till the worst of it's over, will there. Might as well be comfy while we're waitin'."

"So this rival of mine—or this rival of yours, whichever you'd rather—is he tall, dark and handsome, like me?"

"Or small, fat an' pretty like me?"

"You're not fat."

"Pudgy was wot you said the other day, though."

Colin had the grace to look shamefaced. "Well, I was justifiably furious with you Sunday, so that doesn't count, does it? Anyway, you asked for it."

As they reached the café, Ethel was bustling out of it, muttering away to her pug. "Yes, we shall go an' find Dot an' she'll soon tell us all about this young man Colin's leavin' poor Barry for."

Over her oblivious head, the two men of her gossip exchanged glances. "D'you think she even saw us?" Colin whispered, laughing.

"Nah. We're nowhere near as much fun as wot Dot 'as to tell 'er. Two teas, please, Ali, an' a ham roll an' a cheese'n pickle sandwich, while we're at it."

"Oi, you two, what's goin' on wiv you pair? Sue said she saw some bloke movin' in this mornin', an' 'ere's Ethel been tellin' me that you two have gone an' split up an' this 'ere bloke is your new 'young man', Colin. But now I see the

pair of you standin' there as nice as ninepence, as if you 'aven't got a care in the world."

Barry made a face. "Ali, all either one of us know is that someone's moved in. An' seein' as 'ow Carmel's still in 'er flat an' Wicksy an' Mags just moved into theirs, then my guess is that this fella's taken the room Ian an' Tina used to 'ave."

"So you two 'aven't broken off then?" Staring, intently, from one face to the other.

Appointment book firmly tucked under one arm, plates balanced precariously on top of the teacups, saucers held tightly, Colin muttered, "What do you think, Ali? Not yet, anyway."

They were both a good half-way through the food before Barry re-started the conversation. "You know wot's got me really puzzled is why they all thought he was gay in the first place, let alone your new lover."

"Who knows. Perhaps it was the lavender shirt."

"Or the high heels."

"Or the silver lamé frock."

They were still laughing over it when the rain stopped and Barry went back to the stall and Colin headed for home, strict instructions to find out who the 'raving poofter' was still ringing in his ears.

Knowing that the bell wasn't working, Colin knocked hard on the door to Ian's old flat, but then shrugged and went on upstairs to get the new logo project finished in time. He glanced back down, briefly, just to check, for he could have sworn he saw a light on when he'd first come over, but there was no sign of life from outside.

There wasn't much sign of life from inside, either. The bed had the worn bedspread on it, the one that looked as if several generations of children had whiled-away their nightmares by pulling out tufts of the candlewick, trying unsuccessfully to make pictures prettier than the ones in their minds. Even the sheets were old, with the faint sheen peculiar only to aged sheets and aged skin. Tea-towels, bath towels, kitchen mat, curtains, the whole lot of it was one step away from the dustbin, and it depressed Doyle to hell, but not quite back again. He was leaning against the alcove wall behind the bed, using the cellulite pillows to dam some of the damp chill, whilst he surveyed his new kingdom.

It wasn't much. One room, kitchenette oppo-

site the bed recess, with only the faintest of lighter patches on the wall, as if the pictures that had hung there had been up for too short a time to make any real difference. The lighter patches marked transience, but the bright red handles carefully screwed onto drawers and cupboard doors, the thriving plants in earthenware pots on the window-sill, the floral appliqué on the bathroom tiles, those things all spoke of permanence. A failed home, then, was where his job had taken him. Seemed appropriate, somehow.

He thought about going out onto the street, getting the oppo underway, but all he could summon the energy for was to go over to the cooker to make a cup of tea. And when, half way through, waiting for the kettle to boil, he realised that he had neither tea nor sugar, nor even instant coffee, he simply shrugged and sighed and went back over to sit, once more, on the bed, surveying the gloom around him. Footsteps sounded on the stair again, but this time, no-one came knocking at his door to disturb him. Shortly, he could hear voices, muffled and indistinct, neither male nor female, coming through the dividing wall. He speculated, idly, on the people next door, doing for them what he should have been doing for himself—creating both histories and personæ. Not that he could be bothered doing that for himself, not after the 14 weeks, 3 days and—a lethargic glance at his watch—11 hours and 33 minutes he'd been working. It didn't help, not really, knowing that everyone else was just as overworked and underpaid, although it did ameliorate the sense of being singled-out for punishment. True enough, mind, that CI5 had had more than its fair share of exceedingly hush-hush cases, more than its share of find-the-terrorist, but that came with the territory. If he'd had the energy, he'd have been busy getting upset over the threat or, to use Whitehall double-speak, the *promise* of having the trimmed-off excesses of MI5, MI6 and that department that didn't actually have a name all sent over to bolster CI5's roster. Just what they all needed: old school boys, complete with the proper ties and marbles vying for supremacy over the silver spoons in their mouths. If he'd had the energy...

He spilled out over the bed, as sprawled as his stiff and sore limbs would allow him to be, a

pillow crumpled under his head. The voices next door turned into a drone, as soporific as bees dipping into flowers, London's version of halcyon summers. Sluggishly, he turned over the details of this latest case of many, a tip-off that the drug lords who were muscling their way into the East End were financing their drug deals with weapons money from the IRA. Or was it they were using the money from the drugs to buy weapons for the IRA? The two threads wove around and around in his mind, cat's cradle turning to tangle, until he was drifting off to the sound of lovemaking next door and the echo of Cowley's voice telling him to infiltrate and report, infiltrate and report. And the knowledge that those instructions were his death-knell, the signal that he was getting too, too old to be on the streets was what made him shiver and pull the candlewick up over his shoulders, then higher, to cover his head. If he couldn't shut the world out, then he'd shut himself in.

By the time the couple next door had had their noisy climax, he was already completely oblivious to them and everything else, lost in the sleep of complete exhaustion.

It was such a cliché, it should have made him laugh. The good old slip of paper falling out of the pocket, the scrawl of name and phone number silent accusal and conviction, and all of it done like something out of a Trevor Howard film. For a minute, Colin fingered the paper, his own training telling him that this was artist paper, the kind of stuff he used himself. Quite possibly was something he used himself. Wouldn't be the first time Barry had brought someone back to the flat when he'd known Colin would be out for long enough. But then, when it came down to it, just how long did it take? A short fifteen minutes, for a quick shag, or a couple of hours, for a long, slow fuck? He actually believed that it was, as Barry so loudly protested so often, nothing more than sex, a change of scenery, but that wasn't really the problem. Problem was, he also believed that the same description applied to himself. 'Us', he referred to them as, but Barry only used that linking word when they were having yet another serious talk to sort out yet another infidelity.

Slowly, very carefully, he tucked the slip of paper into the pocket, covering up Barry's in-

discretions with his own insecurities. He didn't want to hear about this one, didn't want to have to go through another scene. And certainly didn't want to hear Barry tell him he was tired of the nagging and was breaking off... He could feel his old friend, fear, waking up with a luxurious stretch, spreading out from the pit of his stomach to reach down to his toes. Anxiety joined in, making him tense, making him chill. He wandered into the kitchen, putting the kettle on, taking it off, putting it back on again with a sigh of resignation. Some things never changed: Barry's peccadilloes and the British panacœa for all ills, a good hot cuppa. The bell went while he was pouring the water into the pot and he decided not to hear the self-important chimes. A click, a rustle, and Pauline was coming in, calling out to make sure that he either was definitely out or that he would hear her if he was at home.

He rubbed his temples, the hair there greying and so short that not even the shaking of his fingers could disarray it. His eyes closed for a minute, then he straightened his spine and made the best of a bad situation.

"In the kitchen," he shouted through, before Pauline could start on the Hoovering, "and tea's just made. D'you want a cup?"

Pauline came into the kitchen, face as faded as her overall, her hair straggly and obviously the result of a home-bleaching attempt. You could see that she'd once been pretty, very pretty, but middle-age was racing her to the finish line and she was losing. She'd become blowzy and furrowed, the wear and tear of motherhood borne in poverty marking her. But her smile, if you didn't see her eyes, was happy and bright, bringing back some of her past glory. "Ooh, I could murder a cuppa. Absolutely gasping, I am, desperate for something 'ot an' sweet. Wot with Dot beggin' off sick till late..."

"Again? She should just move into the surgery with Doctor Legg, save everyone a lot of fuss and bother."

"Save me some bother an' all. At least then I'd know not to depend on 'er. Launderette was supposed to be opened for ages before she even rang me to tell me she wasn't coming in at 'er usual time. Not that she's got a usual time these days, not with the way she's been skivin' off. Bloody hypochondriac, that's wot she is."

Deftly, he loaded up a tray with tea things, smiling to himself at the way Pauline's eyes widened when he took out the gâteau and added that. He'd bought it for Barry today, in a rush of benevolence after the giggle they'd had about their new 'young man', but not surprisingly, he was feeling less than charitable towards him now, thanks to one more piece of paper. He'd make sure there wasn't a bite of cake left, even if he had to eat the whole blasted thing himself. Leading the way into the sitting-room, he kept up his conversation, even as most of him was thinking wicked, vengeful thoughts he knew he'd never enact. "What's it this time? Her stomach again?"

Pauline collapsed on the sofa, her breath gusting from her wearily. "No, that was Tuesday mornin' an' it would never do to 'ave the same thing twice, would it. So "Never? You mean, you know," he went on, imitating Dot to a T, "*down there?*"

"Oh, yes, *down there*, she says. Honest, the way she talks sometimes, you'd think she was 'avin' tea with the bloody Queen 'erself."

"Well, if she did, she could tell Her Majesty all about her trouble 'down there', couldn't she?"

"Probably would an' all. Speakin' of trouble, who's this bloke wot moved in downstairs?"

"Oh, don't you start, Pauline. I've no idea who he is. We weren't even home when he turned up, Kelvin hasn't uttered a mutter about him, not so much as a quick 'phone, nothing. Tell you what I want to know, though, and that's why everyone in the square seems to think he was moving in with me. Or with Barry, which is a lot more likely if you stop to think about it."

Pauline quietly forbore from commenting, Barry's wanderings common knowledge and common source of pity—or ridicule, depending on one's sympathies. "Lovely cake," she said instead of offering platitudes that wouldn't help. "All that talk, well, came from Dot, dinnit..."

"Oh, I *am* surprised. What brought it on this time?"

"Well, she says that she was on her way to see Dr. Legg this mornin' about 'er problem..."

"*Down there*," he intoned seriously.

"An' she says she sees these blokes parkin' this flash car outside 'ere. So Dot bein' Dot, she stays to watch, don't she, even though the launderette was supposed to be opening by then.

Anyway, she watches them an' they take a couple of suitcases an' a telly an' a box of stuff down into Ian's old flat."

"So if she saw two blokes moving stuff into the basement flat, then why's she spreading all this rubbish about me and Barry?"

"Well, she says that when the second bloke was gettin' ready to push off—an' a right 'ard nut an' all, she says 'e was."

"Must've looked like her Nick then, mustn't he?"

"Don't be nasty, you, just cos you're ticked off at 'er. But as this bloke's leavin', 'e shouts over to the other fella, an' 'e says somethin' about the other feller not sleepin' with any strange men while 'e was away."

"And of course she assumes that means he's gay. So what you're telling me is that because this man's gay—because she *thinks* this bloke's gay—she's spreading rumours all round the square that me and Barry are splitting up?"

"It's not as if she means any 'arm, Colin."

"That's not the point, though, is it? She might not mean any harm, but the last thing we need is anyone making up stories about one of us running off with someone else. And I don't see the point in that either. I mean, surely there's enough truth there to keep even her stocked in gossip for a month without having to make up lies."

"I always land myself right in it, don't I? 'Ere I am, tryin' to tell you wot's all been goin' on an' wot's been said an' you end up biting me 'ead off when I've done nothin' but 'elp. I ask you, sometimes I wonder why I even bother."

"I'm sorry, Pauline, you're right. Shouldn't have taken it out on you." He gave her one of his loveliest smiles, his eyes warm with affection for one of the few people in the Square who genuinely accepted him, warts and all, middle-class background not the least of them. "Listen, you've had to cover for Dot, why don't you skip here today, come back tomorrow then?"

"Would you mind? It'd be lovely—little Martin's playgroup's 'avin' a party this afternoon an' I thought I'd 'ave to miss it. 'E'd be ever so pleased if I could be there. Wouldn't be puttin' you out too much, would it?"

"No, you go. And put that tray down, I'll do the tidying up."

"I shouldn't, not really. I'm supposed to be

'doing' for you, not 'avin' you make me tea an' everythin'.

"Least I can do. Go on, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"If you're sure you don't mind..."

"Pauline, just go! I've got work that has to be done, anyway."

But after she left, the only work he did was another dozen sketches of Barry to add to his collection.

The sky was crawling over the roof-top when he awoke, all the light leached from the streets in that strange time between full dark when the streetlamps shone brightly and the greyness that swallowed all light up into a uniformity of dullness. So he just lay on the bed for a little while, watching the way nothing in the room actually cast shadows in the feeble light, watching the blackness creep up the walls as the light from outside faded into night-time and the glow of lamps stayed up in the street away from his new bedsit. He should be up and bathing, he knew, but it seemed pointless. One more possible terrorist supplier, or just another entrepreneur in London's fastest expanding business. Didn't seem to matter too much, not now. Once, when first he'd started, he was going to be SuperCopper, Chief Constable Raymond Aloysius Doyle, the best and most incorruptible policeman on the face of this God's green earth, scourge of criminals and bent coppers alike. But that was half a lifetime ago, and he was feeling every single one of those years in every joint in his body. He raised a hand to his cheek, feeling the bump there, wondering, for the first time in a long time, just how different life would have been for him if that night had never happened. Wondered if he'd have been able to make it all the way to the top instead of stalling at lowly Detective Constable. That last meeting he'd been at, the one Cowley had him sit in on, whilst the various delineations of authority between the various departments were worked out. Cowley had been the only one there who'd been an out-cast like him, product of neither the right school, University nor regiment, but even he had the advantage of years in the right spy pool. Even had a couple of years at one of the 'right' Universities, even if his accent was off by 500 miles or so. But Doyle... All he had going for him was

an integrity that didn't know how to bend, nor how to disguise itself as the same self-serving ambition of a stripe of ruthlessness shocking to anyone who had ever believed in English fair play. Not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game. Now, going on 40, he could no longer ignore the fact that he wasn't even being allowed to play the game. Oh, Cowley wanted him as his right-hand man, to match Bodie doing the dirty on the left, but without Cowley, he wouldn't even be allowed to hold the doors open that led to the hallowed corridors of power. And if Doyle were feeling his age, then Cowley was showing his, his skin more often the colour of putty than rose. Once Cowley went, someone else would come in, and where would that leave Doyle? On the dole, probably. No room at the inn for aging mop tops still playing cops and robbers long after it was obvious the robbers had won.

At least, that was how Doyle felt, right now, snowed under by both case-loads and failures. He couldn't forget that woman's face, when he'd interviewed her after her husband had been gunned down. Even as she blended into a montage of faces made ugly by grief, she remained individual: the way she'd twirled that pound coin endlessly on the coffee table, picking it up every time it fell, to spin it again. Like June Cook and her screaming at him, it stayed with him, building up the pressure until something had to give. And the way he was feeling, it would probably be him.

There was only the one light on when Barry came home, blowing on his hands to ease the pins-and-needles itching at him as warmth returned after the dankness of a day spent working his stall. Such an illusion of warmth, the draw of it visceral, reaching in through his skin, enrapturing a path through the fulgent brilliance of DNA, spiralling back through the ages to the beginning of memory. He was smiling under it, coming closer to the warmth and the man sitting within its glow. Colin was sitting back on the settee, a magazine open upon his lap, the light upon his hair, upon his skin, skimming his clothes, sending the beauty of his hands into a collage of shadows.

"Lovely an' warm in 'ere," Barry said, dumping his belt bag, the coins jingling and clanging

according to weight and value. The old-timers down the market swore they could tell how much money was in the pouch by sound alone, but Barry never had time for tales the likes of that. He was more interested, at the moment, in coming in from the cold and filling his belly. "Strewth, it was bloody Arctic down there today. Lost track of me feet a few times. Wasn't too cold in the mornin', but by the time it got dark, it was bleedin' dismal. Poor old Pete, 'e was the worst off. 'Ad old Mother Beal on his case all afternoon, didn't 'e, 'arping on about 'ow 'is dad 'ad done things an' 'ow it was better in 'is day an'—'ere, you listenin' to me, Col?"

Still not a look from him, winter's eyes fixed firmly on the glossy page. "Yeh, 'course I am."

"Not sayin' much, are you?"

"Well, I can't, if I'm listening, can I?"

Barry plonked himself down on the coffee table, not even noticing the annoyed tightening of Colin's mouth. "Nah, I know you, mate. Somethin's wrong, innit?"

Magazines slap shut very ineffectually, a whimper of paper instead of the bang of hard-back book. "Never happy, are you? You get on at me for nagging at you and talking at you all the time, now when I'm quiet, you're complainin' about that, too. Make up your mind, Barry, will you? And when you do, you'll be sure and let me know, won't you?"

Barry's hands descended upon Colin's thighs, squeezing the cord of muscle. "All right, all right, 'ave it your way. It's usually me wot goes flyin' off the 'andle about you moanin', but if you want to do a turn-about... Hey," he leaned forward, cocking his head, trying to get Colin to look at him, "could be fun, that. You an' me swapping, playing roles. Fancy a bit of make-believe tonight, then, do you?" Familiar fingers traced even more familiar territory, homing in on the vulnerability at the cusp of strong thighs, pressing, just so, offering the only solution Barry knew. "C'mon, Col, let's go to bed. We can 'ave supper later, bring it through the bedroom if we feel like it after. Go on, cummon through to bed."

"I'm not coming anywhere. Look, I've got to finish reading this thing in the magazine on design, so why don't you just go off and 'phone your friend and have a lovely time with him."

"Now wot're you goin' on about? You made that sound bloodywell significant, 'my friend'."

"Yeh, well, you're the one who'd know if it was significant, wouldn't you?"

"You accusin' me of 'avin' it off with some other bloke, is that it? After that row we 'ad just last month?"

Weary, hands rubbing across reddened eyes. "I'm not accusing you of anything, Barry. You've never promised fidelity, but I hope you're being bloody careful."

"Oh, that's rich, that is, after this mornin'. If I'm goin' to the AIDS clinic like a good little boy with you, d'you think I'm goin' to be off shaggin' strangers round the back of the pub, is that it? Well, if you think I'm stupid enough to do that, then you're way out of my league, mate. An' it'd never do for the workin' class to get above themselves, would it, m'lud? So I'll just remove myself from your royal highness' presence, shall I? Wouldn't want to forget me station nor nothin', would I?"

The door slammed behind him, knocking a pile of papers skittering to the floor. And knocking Colin back against the sofa, more tired than he'd been in years.

The jacket was faintly ripe with the dogged smell of wet cloth, but he barely turned up his nose at it, barely noticed it over the dampness crawling up the front wall. This place reminded him, the reminding making him feel vaguely sick. The folly of youth, throwing away what had been happiness, of a sort, for ambition, of a sort. An ambition which was now bearing fruit, as withered and as bitter as the cursed fig. He stood staring at his own wraith-like reflection in the window, wreathed round by the invisible smells and invisible memories, letting himself drift. The road once trod is easier to find when the present is comfortless and the future barren. He looked at himself, as he had been, as he was, and inevitably found the man he had become to be sorely lacking. To have given up so much, for what was now nothing more than an unattainable goal... To have denied the very truth of what he was, all for the childish dream of making the world safe and Disney-bright. So much for dreams: now he was left with the awakening and age was telling, making the waking painful and slow and difficult.

A finger rose to trace where his silver chain used to lie, before he'd lost it in that chase down

in Kent. He'd never bothered to replace it, disheartened even then, and the gnawing cancer had quietly metastasised since then, spreading its blackness through every fibre of his being. The lies were wearing on him, the lies he'd told himself more than any other. Too many tell-tale signs demanding that he follow them to their answer. Too many inexplicable dreams refusing such a cowardly description. Too, too many waking temptations, stamped upon and ground underfoot with half a life's practice. And all it left him was standing here, cataloguing the big, fat zeros of his life, pretending to be someone else. Again.

He straightened his shoulders, coming to his full height, letting his hardness and bitterness show in his face. If he were to 'infiltrate and report' a criminal activity, looking the part was one of life's little basics. So. He'd be... Richard Duncan, a name he'd used so often, it required absolutely no effort to maintain, coming complete with personality and history. Yeh. Richard Duncan, hard man, trouble with a capital T, chip on his shoulder bigger than the Rock of Gibraltar, nasty temper and nastier record. Perfect.

Hand on the fecund roundness of the door knob, he hesitated, struggling to find some small spark of energy that he hadn't already used over and over again. But there was nothing there, apart from duty, apart from the hollow knowledge that if he didn't do this, then all the losses and all the denials and all the work had never been worth anything in the first place. Ray Doyle grimaced: Richard Duncan strode up the stairs into the night.

There was an old pub almost directly opposite the stairs, an even older woman coming out of it, small dog clutched to her bosom, words spilling out of her, high-pitched and fractious, the sounds of either the very young or the very old. Behind her, a taller woman, the kind who maintained a very proper façade to plaster over the cracks age was leaving behind, was going on about the 'young man' who had moved into Number 3, her voice cutting the night stillness to ribbons.

"...right downstairs from that Colin an' 'is Barry. An' I ask you, you know wot that sort are all like, all those men-who-lie-with-men, so I ask

you, 'ow long will it be before they're all doin' it together, or 'avin' rows all over the Square, sayin' all them things wot shouldn't be said where a decent, God-fearin' woman can 'ear? Not that I've got anythin' against Colin nor young Barry, mind you, but you know wot I mean, you mark my words, Ethel Skinner, you just mark my words. No good'll come from all this, no good at all. Turnin' the Square into another Sodom, that's wot they're doin' an' no good can possibly come from somethin' as 'orrible as that..."

The local gossip was the last thing he needed, and it was obvious that Bodie's stupid comment had been heard and misinterpreted and now he was lumbered with the reputation for being queer.

"Wonderful," he muttered into his collar, turning the thick fabric up to keep the wind away from his neck, turning himself away from the kind of pub he'd grown up around—and in—to go up the street to the flash new place he'd noticed when Bodie'd driven him in this morning. With ease so long established and so automatic he didn't even notice it, he skipped over all thoughts of Bodie as anything other than colleague and back-watcher, focussing entirely on details of the job they were both in.

Except that this time, it didn't work, not entirely. The woman, with her face as out-of-time as a fading rose, had planted a maggot in his brain, eating away at his defences, his carefully constructed façades that kept the world, and himself, away from the truth. He wondered, far from idly, just how prevalent the story about him was. Could complicate things no end for him, if the rotten bastards he was after heard about it. Not that he could summon up the fire to go with the words, the language that of habit, not conviction or passion: that had been dying for a long time, and now the body was barely twitching on its way to becoming a corpse.

The music spilled out of the pub even more brightly than the neon lights, the sounds of Erasure dancing and soaring out to snare the passer-by. The door to this pub was all glass and vaguely seen figures, the translucent barrier between the bitter night outside and the laughter within.

Reminding himself who he was, Ray Doyle took Richard Duncan inside to start making contacts with the young trendies that would use

both this pub and the drugs that were being brought in.

The woman behind this bar made him wonder if there was anyone round here under the age of 40, or if all the young people had managed to escape what the rest of the world labelled 'gutter'. He nodded to her, got a wonderfully bright and perky smile, found himself responding to it in spite of his own lethargy.

"Wot'll it be then, dear?"

"Half, please."

"Churchill's do you, love?"

He shrugged, not particularly interested in the name of the brewers. Such concerns were best left to the Bodies of this world with their discerning palates and pert taste-buds. He skittered away from his partner again, uneasily unwilling to think of him as a person, avoiding a multitude of issues that were becoming harder and harder to deflect, escaping instead into his one and only refuge: work. He went over again what the old women had been saying, thinking of the best way to lay that rumour to rest, thinking about the possible complications if the tale reached the hard men before the 'truth' did. A breath of wind stirred his curls, setting the hair on the back of his neck to attention.

If the wind had made him shiver, the voice made him go stock still with shock.

He hadn't even allowed himself to think of that voice for years, not since he'd consigned it with all the other secrets to the tacit anonymity of wet dreams...

"Ello, Colin—"

—Christ, it was him, after all these years, couldn't be, was, what the hell could he say, so much for Richard Duncan, oh fuck, why did Colin Russell have to show up now when he was losing the battle already—

"—didn't expect to see you in 'ere tonight. Thought Barry was over the Vic, givin' our Den a run for his money."

"That's a bit of a sore subject, Ange."

Sympathy softened her face where her make-up had made her hard and brittle. "Another row, then, love?"

Silent, resigned nod, reluctant smile, all of it glimpsed out of the corner of Doyle's eye. Beautiful hands, so strong, long-fingered, hard-working hands that could out-paint and out-draw Doyle any day of the week. Colin was reaching

into his pocket, pulling out a pound, fingers as deft with the gold-toned coin as he had been with—

—50p pieces when the meter had run out and the lights were out and I wasn't about to brave the stair cupboard, not when the fire had been out for hours, leave that to him, he never feels the cold, even when the covers would fall off him when he was—

The spilling of the glass off the bar garnered Angie's quick mopping up and drew Colin's attention.

Doyle swore the world stopped, just for a second, then and there, when that man laid eyes on him again for the first time in almost 20 years.

"Ray? Is it? Ray Doyle? My god, it is!" Face bright with pleasure, the memory of the ending not yet come over him.

And Doyle, oh, poor Doyle, inundated by years of denial poisoned by dreams, all the goodness viciously suffocated so that he wouldn't ever remember or think about what he'd given up to become a policeman, years of suppressed desires and re-routed predilections, lies and self-deceit, all of it coming home to roost with vitriolic glee, laughing at him whilst it merrily snowed him under.

So much for his homosexual tendency being nothing more than just an extended bout of adolescent confusion, so much for it being a temporary experiment, so much for it being dead...

For this was far from dead, this surging of blood through his veins, this blossoming of heat like summer suffusing him, all this life suddenly erupting in every cell. His body thought itself a teenager again, hands suddenly sweat-damped with the rush of adrenaline excitement, his cock abruptly, devastatingly hard, springing erect with frenetic need. So many years and so much denial, all denied in its turn, by the resuscitation of the past. Every other time arousal had begun because of a man, he'd been able to damp it, reclaim it for a woman's lushness, turn it into a romance with a lady both willing and enthusiastic.

Enthusiastic enough to cover up his own lack of ardour—at the very start, anyway? All their hunger for him feeding him, helping him paper over the cracks in his façade, until he'd convinced himself that the homosexuality was over

night jolted into him and he raised his eyes to actually look at Colin. It was only as he said the words that he realised they were true: “If it’s any consolation, if I had it all to do again, I wouldn’t give you up for the Police. I’d find something else to do. And I am sorry that I left you.”

“You’ve really changed, you know that, Ray? What happened to the man who was going to right all the wrongs of the world?”

“Maybe he realised that all he was doing was tilting at sodding windmills.”

“You didn’t stay in the Police, then?”

“Nah, went on to...” his training and years on the street finally made their way through the shock of coming face to face with both a former lover and the man Doyle himself used to be, rescuing him from completely botching everything even more badly than he had already done. “Went on to something else, and that didn’t work out either—” —*oh, clever, he thought, right out of the books. Use the truth as a lie to give yourself cover, but they never warn you to know what the truth is before it gets you in the back of the neck, do they though?*— “—so now I’m footloose an’ fancy free. What about you?”

“Oh, this is a fine kettle of fish, innit? Talk about the pot callin’ the kettle black?”

Doyle turned round to see a young man, early twenties, small, dark brown hair, hazel eyes, round faced and almost furious enough to hide the hurt and the jealousy. Beside him, he could feel Colin stiffen, feel the tension surge through him, feel the pain and anger begin.

“I come back ’ere cos I found that bit of paper in me pocket an’ I wanted to set the record straight for once, didn’t I. Came over ’ere to tell you I wasn’t ’avin’ it off wiv ’im, cos ’e’s me bruvver-in-law. An’ ’e an’ me sister just moved, which is why I ’ad their ’phone number in me pocket, right? So I’m sittin’ there, an’ I can’t enjoy any of it, cos I know ’ow upset you was about it all, so I come over ’ere just so’s I c’n sort it all out. But look wot I find ’ere. Mister Fidelity, sittin’ chatten’ up an old flame of ’is. Got tired of ’avin’ to keep up wiv me, is that it, Col? Thought you’d try somfin a bit more your speed, eh? You’ll be raidin’ the old folks’ ’ome next.”

Doyle stretched his legs out, emphasising their length, baring his teeth in a predatory smile. “Tell me somethin’,” he said, letting his own accent slip back to his knife-wielding youth,

“you always this Cockney, or d’you just do it cos you know ’ow much it turns Colin on, eh, mate?”

“Ray Doyle, you can just pack that it in right now—”

“Oh, Ray, so that’s ’is name, is it? Well, Colin,” leaning forward, face inches from Colin, both of them so terribly pale, prideful façades up to hide the hurt, “I ’ope you an’ your fancy man are very ’appy together.”

“Barry! Hang on a minute.”

Doyle grabbed his arm, holding him at his side. “Let the boy go, Col. Didn’t think robbing cradles was your style, *mate*.”

“Now you just listen to me, Ray Doyle. If you think you can come waltzing into my life after all these years and start wrecking everything for me, then you’re just as immature and self-centred as you were then, the only difference being that this time, I’m not about to let you do it. Now get your hands off me, because I want to go after Barry and undo the damage you just did.”

“C’mon, Colin, all this for a boyfriend, a kid who’s still wet behind the ears? When I’m offerin’ you something really special?”

“For your information, he’s not just a boyfriend, he’s my lover and he’s a hell of a lot more special than what we ever had, mate.”

“Get off it, Col!”

“No, you listen to me. We had great sex going for us back then, but that was it, that’s how you were able to up and off the way you did. But I’ve got someone I really love now, and I’m not going to lose it just because you’ve got an itch between your legs you can’t scratch often enough.”

With that, he wrenched himself free, leaving Doyle chained to the ugliness of his words.

A patch of dingy white on the other side of the doorstep became a used envelope, Bodie’s scrawl covering the back of it.

Terrific. Just what he really needed: Bodie coming over tomorrow, first thing, to find out for the old man how much progress he’d made. Progress? The only progress he’d made was in going backwards. His hands were shaking as he washed his face, brushed his teeth, did all the nightly ritual that becomes so entrenched in all our lives. Under the bright bathroom light,

he stared at his face in the mirror, counting wrinkles, stopping when the number became depressingly high. Another entrenched habit of his, marking the march of time, fighting it every inch of the way, with his yoghurt and exercise and giving-up smoking, not that it had stopped time from scything through his life. Smoking was another thing he'd given up to join the Force, convinced that if he wanted to have the puff to chase the baddies, he couldn't be puffing away on fags.

And that word made him think of an American he'd seen once, very briefly, so briefly he'd been able to forget all about it, forget about the way his heart had beat a little faster at the sight of the man, gloriously aglow with the pleasure of being blown against the 'cottage' wall by an English fag... He'd buried that memory deeper than the sea, but he'd woken up with wet sheets and foul temper for months after, snapping at everyone, biting Bodie's head off... Wasn't going to think about Bodie, didn't dare think about Bodie, think about the past instead, leave today alone.

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He'd been so bloody young, then, when, with the zeal of a true convert, he'd decided to join the police instead of drifting into petty crime the way his dad had, Mum dragging the family all over the country, settling in town after town, until the Law started sniffing around too closely. Swore he would never end up like his Dad, swore blind, but it had been so easy in college, to lift a couple of quid left in someone's jacket, or a book left behind, or a bit of portable equipment... That was what had scared him, seeing himself slipping down the same slope that had claimed his dad, and his younger brother. Oh, definitely the zeal of the convert, for there is nothing more adamant than someone sinking their teeth into a saviour, whether it be religion or authority or cause. He'd thrown over everything to become a copper, to save himself from ending up nothing more than a thief. And it had seemed so easy then, the immortality of the young blinding him to the fact that forever is a very long time. Giving men up had seemed like nothing, not when he could function perfectly well with women, and liked them, too. Except, giving up men wasn't so easy, was it? Breaking off with Colin—a sudden whisper of shiver down his spine, a curling of arousal in his belly, remembering the

taste and feel of Colin filling his mouth, spilling into him, down his throat, inundating him with the taste of man—had been bad enough, but that was still easier than learning not to look, learning not to touch. And learning not to want had been impossible.

Ironic, wasn't it, that the need he had denied to join the Force had ended up being the cause of his being denied getting anywhere with his precious career. One night, one moment's weakness, when he hadn't been able to control the hunger, when he hadn't been able to deny what his body knew it needed: *the lean hardness of a man in me, after all the plunderings of soft femininity that left me hungrier than when I started.* And he'd been beaten up on his way to a gay pub, although the bastard who'd done it swore that Doyle had been coming out of the pub and propositioned him, as queers will, so what was he to do but defend his virtue from an insistent poofster? Of course, a policeman landing in hospital, ribs cracked, face stomped into the concrete, nose and cheekbone broken by the enthusiasm of bovver boots, that causes Questions to be asked. He'd cleared himself, the barman swearing that Doyle had never set foot inside the place, but still... The taint was upon him, and unless it came complete with the right school tie to make it all respectable and therefore not really homosexuality at all... Detective Constable he'd been, and they made it very clear that that was precisely where he'd stay.

And then Cowley had descended upon him like the angel Gabriel, offering to take him away from all this, giving him his chance to get the really powerful bastards, not the petty crooks. He'd jumped at the chance, grabbing it with both hands. But that still left the problem of certain wantings that wouldn't be controlled.

So if they wouldn't be controlled, he'd make them go away.

Naked, shivering in the chill, he switched the light off, stumbling into the main room, barking his shins on the chair before his fumbling hands found the bed. Clambering under the covers, he couldn't forget the nights he'd done this, in a flat almost the double of this one, a gigglingly warm Colin waiting for him with tongue and mouth and hands...

But he'd made himself forget all that, the way people make themselves forget things that hurt

too much, or that they simply can't face: the man who worked in the factory supplying gas to the concentration camps forgot that his company produced anything other than paints; the woman who had brutally ostracised the unwed mother forgot her role in it all when the young woman was found suicided; the rapist who forgot that the woman had said no; the sex abuse victim who forgot what the vicar had done to him.

Not forgot, not precisely, but locked away in the fallow corners of the mind along with all the useless memories that are never brought out for dusting: the smell of the nursery school, that first day; the name of the little corner dairy that time you went to Portsmouth on holiday; the colour of the library book that was lost and never returned. Harmless little memories to act as bolster to the memories that could rend, pillows to be sandbags of protection for the conscious mind. He made it as if he'd never been 'that way inclined' in his entire life, remembering only the girl at the cinema, not the boy in his form at school. Remembering only the sweetly smelling charms of women, not the sharpness of male musk that intoxicated him so. And it had worked, albeit leaving the odd foible of a scar behind, his furies and his guilts prime examples of that. And all his dreamless sleeps, blank façade to cover what his waking mind couldn't deal with.

He pulled the covers up over his head for warmth, the movement reminding him of reading under the covers as a child, engrossed in Biggles and Kipling, tearing off on his ripping yarns. So natural, then, to envision himself as 'best friend' of the woman-less manly heroes, so natural to picture himself crawling into their lonely beds with them to make them less alone. And what a sickening lurch in his stomach the first time he'd mentioned his innocent longings to a grown-up and seen the horror on his Mum's face... That had been worse even than the expression on his Sergeant's face, that night in hospital. And an expression he never wanted to have to face again, not when the price paid was the loss of belonging.

The only place he still belonged was with Bodie: ergo, he refused to lose Bodie. Not his Bodie...

But he couldn't lose the memories either,

rampaging through his mind with all the delicacy of army boots. Make or break. He'd finally hit make or break.

A choice. Fulcrum of life, balancing his future against his past with the present in the middle. And this time, he knew full well how long forever lasted—a far smaller number of years than it had been when he'd been young. He was past it, now, as far as being a field agent was concerned, so that left him still convincing everyone he was straight and going in for management and information gathering. In Whitehall, with people he wouldn't want to spit on if they were on fire. Apart from Cowley, and there were times, even with him... Or giving up all his years of working for the Government, giving up all his seniority and finding something to begin all over again with, with the added cross of being publicly gay.

Not much, was it? Not for half a life already gone for good.

He closed his eyes against the shadows around him, let his muscles loosen, his body sag.

And let his heart rule his mind and think about Bodie.

A dangerous thing, that, unless you looked at today as the day he'd opened his very own Pandora's Box and all that was left inside now was his personal Hope—Bodie. Or perhaps Bodie would prove to be his Bitterness. Or Hate. He wasn't entirely sure which way Bodie would react, the only thing certain about him was his sweet tooth. If he were to confess... Bodie might throw him up against the nearest wall and fuck the life out of him, for Doyle was well aware of the fact that Bodie would screw anything if it stood still long enough—and was still alive. Career and prospects were two things very low on Bodie's list of priorities, coming long after surviving and living whatever life was left to its absolute limits, so he cared not a fig for what the authorities and the world said about him. He had nothing to lose, not when you viewed things from Bodie's point of view. And the other reactions? Contempt, for never having the balls to be honest? Pity, for having been so wounded and driven that he had deceived himself as much as everyone else? Or horror, a sudden shying-away from the affection and friendship they had.

Had had, before these three months past.

Things had been getting decidedly rocky between them of late, as exhaustion had worn Doyle down and his id had started making him suffer from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. It had been Bodie he'd taken it out on the most, for obvious reasons.

You always, after all, hurt the one you love.

And that thought got him back up out of bed, padding on bare feet to the small hearth-rug, hunching down, lighting the electric fire, the twin bars slowly turning bright orange-red, the fake flames setting the fake coals on fire. He was bathed in the light, face and legs and arms burnished, chest hair glinting, his back white and blue in the dark light of night-time. He rubbed his forearms, bringing the heat back into them, aware of the heaviness of his sex hanging between his legs, heavy with unspent desire. But there was a part of him scared of bringing himself off, doing it consciously thinking about men for the first time in years. Afraid of what it would bring to the fore and what would catch him unawares. Admitting that you've made a complete bollocks of your life is never an easy thing to do, especially when the only way to undo that is to bollocks up the other half of your life. But the box was open, and if Pandora, with all the ancient gods hadn't been able to close it in time, then no more could Ray Doyle.

He dragged the bedspread over, wrapping it around himself, resettling himself in front of the fire, biting on one thumb nail. The more he worried both the nail and his brain, the more the obvious began to scream for attention. The exhaustion and overwork and disillusion were only the symptoms of this re-awakening of his recalcitrant libido. The cause was entirely different, wore size 8 shoes and went by the name of Bodie. It was difficult—and unhealthy—enough to ignore sexuality, but it was outright impossible when there was a man beside you who had become the centre of your Universe and the barometer with which you measured your happiness. Not to mention the fact that the man constantly felt you up, made blue jokes and generally threw his sensuality in your face.

Christ, to think he'd even been able to suppress his tendencies for this long! He supposed he should be grateful that he hadn't turned into a queer-basher or Bible-thumper, the Mr. Whitehouse of CI5. No, he hadn't turned into

that. But he had turned into a unhappy, sere man, middle-age and all its crises threatening him, bitterness and disillusion gnawing away at his bones, a ghoulish feeding on the guilts of the dreams he never dared look at.

Not much, for half a life already gone.

Or, his partner's irrepressible voice piped up, half a life yet to come.

He spread his hands before him, supplicant to the warmth of the fire, filling his hands with the glow of flames that weren't there, worker at an anvil. His artist years long gone, he still thought most clearly in images, not words: in his one hand, he held Whitehall, with its back-biting and corruption, its politicians and power-broker Civil Servants, Permanent Under-secretaries sabotaging good ideas for no other reason than the politician who proposed them was Labour instead of Tory; MI5 squealing for more funding at the cost of CI5, complaining about spheres of influence and overstepping of boundaries, jockeying for position, pushing and shoving for the sake of keeping face and maintaining façades; MI6, still too busy playing James Bond to recognise what was going on in the real world that was frivolously passing them by.

And in his other hand, he held...nothing. No certainties, save the knowledge that he could at least try to grab his share of happiness, snare a plateful of love for himself, before he found himself in his bath-chair, retired out into the country with all the other senile old 'civil servants'. But no Bodie. Not necessarily, for although there was a good chance that Bodie would leap at the chance to screw him, there was another chance.

He might run a mile, even if Doyle never actually said that dread word out loud. Oh, it wasn't that they didn't know that each loved the other, but it was a matter of the whys and wherefores, now. It was one thing to love a mate to whom you owed all nine of your lives, plus a few more, borrowed on account from all your reincarnations yet to come, but it was something else entirely to love your partner as if he were your...well, mate, was the only word that came to mind, with its connotations of both rutting and standing side by side to face the world. Animals mated for life, swans coming back year after year, until suddenly, the pair would disappear, unable to survive without the other. And that was precisely the kind of metaphor that

would drive Bodie miles away, to the second star on the right, straight on till morning.

Always supposing that Bodie was surprised by all this, of course. He wouldn't be at all surprised himself if the rotten bugger hadn't known all this for years...

The knock at the door was the familiar rat-a-tat-tat signal his lunatic partner had stolen from the Secret Seven books. Startled, Doyle straightened, taking a minute to clear the guilty expression from his face. Bloody typical of Bodie to come over in the middle of the night and catch him mooning over him and still dizzy from what he'd discovered about himself.

Rat-a-tat-tat, less politely Enid Blyton, more insistent Maggie Thatcher.

"All right, all right, I'm comin'," he said, loud enough to be heard, not loud enough to waken the lovey-dovey couple next door. "I'm coming!" he snapped. Then, muttering under his breath, with a wry glance down at his turgid prick, "I should be so lucky."

"C'mon, Doyle, it's cold and wet out here and these bags are bloody heavy and I'm starving."

The door groaned open, a grinning Bodie, hair and jacket dripping, framed in the meagre light from the street. "Aw, you shouldn't have bothered getting all dressed up, not for me, Ray. You know I love you no matter what old rag you've thrown on." He took a good look at Doyle's face, recognising all the old signs of turmoil and trouble. "Ray? What's the matter?"

"You wake me up in the middle of the night and you've got the cheek to ask me what's the matter? Stupid git."

"What d'you mean, wake you up? You were never asleep, not with the fire on, you're too bloody mean, worse than Cowley, you are. Anyway, saw you through the window. Ought to make sure your curtains are drawn properly, mate, never know when a Peeping Tom is going to turn up on your doorstep, do you."

"Such as tonight, you mean. Anyway," standing aside to let Bodie in, pointing at the two bulging carrier bags where one sharp corner was winking its way free, "what's all this lot then?"

"Dinner for two from the local chinkies, and milk, tea, sugar, bickies, and all the other necessities that you won't have bothered getting in, right?"

"Right. An' why should I, when you're the one

who's going to scoff the whole lot anyway?" He was very proud of himself and the total normalcy of his voice, keeping up their usual patter as he followed Bodie over to the kitchenette, propping himself up against the doorjamb whilst his partner rummaged through cupboards and drawers.

"Scrooge the Second, that's you. Here, take the cutlery, or is that too much to ask? Go on, I'll bring the nosh and the drinks."

They didn't talk during their supper, letting the silence seep in after too long on the front lines.

"Nice, this," Bodie finally muttered, spoiling it all by burping indelicately.

"Yeh. Been too much running from pillar to post for my liking recently." Then he said it, started what he had no idea how to finish, but he had to tell Bodie. His voice was very small in the brightness of the fire. "Bodie..."

No answer, simply a silence that invited Doyle to fill it with whatever he wanted to say. "Bodie, I've been thinking..."

"Trying to give yourself a strain so you can get a sick line? Won't work, mate, Cowley'd just give you a rollicking for damaging Crown property."

"It's got to that stage, 'asn't it, though, us bein' nothin' but useful gadgets to be used wherever he needs us most. I'm gettin' properly fed up with it an' all. I mean, we haven't stopped for three months, an' what do we have to show for it? A handful of small fry stuck behind bars until their fancy barristers get them out and a lot of aches and pains for our trouble. We're not making a difference any more, Bodie. Not the blindest fuckin' bit of a soddin' difference."

"Give it a rest, Ray, we've been through all this. If it's getting on your goat that much, then it's time to throw in the towel, isn't it? Or tell Cowley you're burned out, make him give you a breather. But stop moaning about it, for fuck's sake."

"Yeh, well, after I do the big confession, he might not give me a chance to resign."

He wished the words unsaid the moment they left his lips, but they just sat there instead, grinning at him, like a rabid Cheshire cat.

"Something you ought to tell me, Ray old son? Gone over to the other side, have you?"

"Could say that." Deep breath. Hold it. Let it go slowly, let the words come out. "I'm gay."

Bodie nearly choked on the last bit of spring roll. “You what?” he said, finally, eyes streaming, face red. “Come on you all of a sudden or something? Or had you just never noticed before?”

“Nah, always been there. But I stopped letting myself see it, cos I wanted to get on in life and you know how far queers get in this line of work.”

“About as far as I’ve got, and I’m only bi. So come on,” a gleeful rubbing of hands, a pantomime leer, “you tell your Uncle Bodie all about it then. What brought this on? And don’t spare my blushes.”

“Will you be bloody serious for five minutes, Bodie? Look, this might be a breeze for you, you’ve never given a piss in a pot what anyone thought of you, never wanted to do better for yourself. But I did, always have done. Wanted out, wanted to be different from my old man. And...”

“Back then, the only way to do it was to pretend that you were straight, right? So that’s what you did. Go down the cottages a lot did you, nice anonymous blow jobs in the toilets, or did you let them fuck you up against the wall?”

“You bastard, get your mind out of the gutter for a minute. Listen, Bodie, I’ve given up half my life for this fuckin’ job, so don’t you go making it into some sordid little secret that doesn’t mean anything. Means something to me...”

“Half your life to save the world? Well, hip, hip, hooray. Bring on the violins and the bleeding hearts while you’re at it, mate. Just because you didn’t have the balls to face up to the truth...”

“It was because I *did* have the balls to face up to it that I forced myself into a square hole, Bodie. Knew that I wouldn’t get past Detective Constable if I didn’t keep my nose clean, and that meant no shirt lifting, not even a hint of it. Couldn’t even look at a bloke, in case someone got suspicious. I’ve spent years, Bodie, fucking *years* pretendin’ to be someone I’m not. Pretendin’ to *myself* to be someone I’m not.”

“And when did you—what’s it the Yanks say? Oh, yeh, and when did you find yourself then?”

Doyle lowered his head, temper rising like a louring storm. “Tonight, if you must know.”

Silence, ponderous and heavy. Then—“Christ, mate, sorry. Thought you’d been brood-

ing on this, you know, thought it explained your rotten temper this past while. Thought you’d known for ages and this was you just getting round to tellin’ me. Didn’t know it’d just hit you.” He stopped for a moment, using the drinking of his beer to give them both a breathing space, trying to give the tension enough time to fade, at least a little. “Seriously though, what brought it on? My lovely body?”

“Yeh, actually.” It was worth the risk of saying it for the expression on Bodie’s face. “Some old dear heard your loving farewells to me this morning and spread the word round the Square that I was as queer as a three pound note. So that got me thinkin’, and on top of all of it, I’ve been sick of the job for ages, then when I went into the pub tonight... Bloke who used to be my lover came in an’ it was as if I’d never been away.”

“What d’you mean, never been away? Thought you hadn’t realised you were gay?”

“Don’t you ever listen to me? I told you, knew that I liked blokes when I was still a teenager. Then when I went to college, I got involved with Colin, even moved in with him. We had a place the spittin’ image of this, in an area like this. An’ seeing him again, Christ, I went right back to being the way I used to be.” He saw the look, explained a bit more. “Back to being a kid before I decided to join the police.”

“And in the bad old days, you couldn’t be a poof and a policeman at the same time, so you had to give one of them up. So bein’ the selfish little bastard you are, it was this poor sod, Colin.” And he grinned at his pun, turning the mood topsy-turvy, making everything between them all right. “And then you pretended you were the local vicar and convinced yourself that you didn’t even fancy men any more. Right?”

“Dead bloody right.”

“So now what? Or haven’t you got that far? You’re not going to take up with this Colin bloke, are you?”

Doyle wondered if Bodie even knew how much jealousy there was in his voice, or how much possessiveness on his face. “Chance’d be a fine thing. He’s got someone, not that I’d call the little boyfriend a man.”

“Ooh, ducky, you must tell me all about him! Is he absolutely divine?”

That got Doyle laughing, finally breaking him out of his steadfast gloom. “Bit precious, though.

You know the sort, too young—well, very early twenties, anyway—bit plump, lovely smile, nice hair, angel-faced and hard as nails, and he has Colin wrapped round his little finger.”

“Christ, don’t tell me even gays go through mid-life crisis by chasing after someone half their age?”

A sudden dangerous glitter of angry eyes. “Not all of them, no. Some of us finally can’t go on pretending any more, that’s all.”

Neatly, Bodie sidestepped the abrupt flare of hostility, sliding straight past it on to the friendship they’d built over such a long period of time. “Which brings us back to what are you going to do now? I mean, you can stay on with our mob, Cowley’s not about to throw anyone out because they’re queer—”

“Well he couldn’t, could he? Lose half the squad that way.”

“And lose the other half if he got rid of the loonies. Yeh, well, you could stay on as an instructor or administrator, cos let’s face it, you’re gettin’ too old for the streets.”

“Oh thanks a lot. Make me feel good, why don’t you?”

“Rather keep you alive, mate. You’re getting slow—even I’m slowing down a bit, and I’m younger as well as handsomer. Time for us both to be off the streets and Cowley knows it. Bet you a pound to a penny, the minute some of the new lot are experienced enough, he’ll have us down the Bowels, feeding those fucking computers.”

“No bet, mate, no contest. Not sure that I want to be shut in all day, though.”

“Well,” Bodie leaned over to him, putting on his best upper-crust face and plummy voice, “there is always the Palace, you know. They’re always looking for a few good men, aren’t they, petal?”

“Don’t knock it, mate. Money’s good, not to mention the work conditions and if me bein’ queer goes on my security record, it might be all that’s on offer.” He looked at Bodie, face alight with suspicion. “But you’re taking this very well, all things considered. You’d twigged before, ’adn’t you?”

“Be a liar if I said I hadn’t wondered. Nothing specific, just undercurrents sometimes, signals that I didn’t think you even knew you were sending. Or sometimes, it was the way you looked at

me or camped it up with me.” It was his turn to take a deep breath, hold it, let it out slowly, jump in with both feet. “You fancy me something chronic, don’t you, Ray?”

Doyle didn’t know where to put himself. To say yes was to invite Bodie to bed, to say no was to push him away. And although his cock was screaming, ‘take me, I’m yours’, his other head was screaming caution just as loudly. He didn’t want to be hurt, didn’t want to have a quick leg-over and then nothing—at least he didn’t think so. A great one for worrying a subject to death, he’d barely had time to start chewing this one over, let alone make any decisions. And then Bodie made his decision for him, a large hand snaking confident as the Serpent under the folds of his cocooning bedspread, enveloping his cock in matching heat. He could feel how perfectly he filled Bodie’s palm, could feel how hot and hard he was compared to the softness of Bodie’s skin. And Bodie’s other hand was taking his, leading him on, taking him to explore the smoothness of fabric, the parallel pattern made by zip. He heard the zip come down, felt his hand move, under Bodie’s, to do it, felt himself shake Bodie’s grasp off to dart forward, faster, and touch Bodie himself.

There. He sighed, relief and passion and a feeling of rightness commingled in that sound. Christ, but he’d missed this, both in the abstract of having a man and in the very personal reality of it being Bodie. In the palm of Bodie’s hand, he had become nothing more than a fascicle of nerves, sensation flooding him. He buried his head in Bodie’s shoulder, opening his mouth soundlessly, sucking on flesh that tasted, smelled of Bodie. Was pulled close, had Bodie’s body pressed hard against him, overbalancing them until they had tumbled to the floor, Bodie thrusting hard against him, hands hard under Doyle’s hips, cock even harder against Doyle’s cock. All he could do was gasp for breath and swim in the sea of sensation, losing himself in the purest delight of being with a man again, of having Bodie. A subtle shift, a flip of awareness, and he was complete in himself, welcoming the return to what he should have never left. He spread his legs wide, wrapping them around Bodie, thrusting up as Bodie thrust down, dark clothes rubbing on his own denuded skin, na-

ked cock on naked cock. It was wonderful, hearing Bodie’s breath so ragged and shaken, every juddering breath wracking them on pleasure. Bodie’s finger found him, whetted with spit, pressing into him, fucking him as much as the frantic need of the moment allowed. Doyle turned liquid with pleasure, his cum letting Bodie slide smoother and faster over him, adding to the darker man’s lust-filled pleasure.

He lay flat on his back, holding Bodie tight and close to him, rocking with the motion of Bodie’s body whilst he himself floated on the after-glow. Bodie’s eyes were closed, body arched with rapture, then he felt the stickiness blossom on his belly to mingle with his own spilled seed. Bodie was heavy on him, the once-familiar weight of a man pinning him to the floor, the bedspread a buffer against the cold. Gently, his own eyes wide open, he stroked Bodie’s hair, fingers dappling in the small waves, the dampness of sweat on his nape. He was content enough to be silent, all the confusions in him slowly settling, a Christmas snow-ball coming to rest to show tranquillity. Shaken by the day, more shaken by the night, he was finding his path, beginning to know where his feet were going to lead him. Somewhere he could take Bodie with him, somewhere they could be together. Seemed so right, that he should come back to himself at last, only to find Bodie already standing there, waiting. A chuckle tickled his throat, wry amusement coming to rescue him from raving sentimentality once more. *Oh, yeh, you’ve got it bad, thinking like some blushing heroine from a bloody Mills & Boon. But it is right that he’s here, now that I’m finally facing that there’s nothing left for me worth sacrificing who I am for.*

He dropped a small kiss on the top of Bodie’s head, hands moving down to stroke the breadth of shoulder, rising and falling with each of Bodie’s breaths. There was a ripple in the muscle under his touch, then movement of the body pressing down on his. A fluid moment, then Bodie was lying beside him, arm up to cover his eyes from the brightness of the electric fire, other hand lower, covering the vulnerability of his cock.

“God, that was fuckin’ fantastic, mate. Quite the little firecracker, eh? If that’s you out of practice, I can’t wait till you’ve got your hand back

in.” A filthy chuckle, a pointed grope of Doyle’s rear. “So to speak, eh?”

Doyle rolled over onto his side, going up on one elbow, the better to gaze down into Bodie’s face. “Romantic sod, aren’t you? Small wonder none of the girls—or blokes—would take you on. Was good, though, wasn’t it? Should’ve known we’d be perfect together. I mean, stands to reason, doesn’t it? You and me. Hephaiston and Alexander. David and Jonathan.”

“Bill and Ben, the flowerpot men. How does it feel to be a pansy again then, Ray?”

Doyle grinned at him, fingers busy arguing with Bodie’s over the minor matter of just how many shirt buttons should come undone. “Ooh, it’s ever so nice,” he camped, then, lowering his voice, dropping the act, “specially since it was with you, love.” He was coming closer, eyes warm and smiling as he leant down to have his first kiss.

And Bodie turned away.

With alacrity all the more startling amidst the languor, Doyle scrabbled to his feet, candlewick billowing around him like a burnoose, covering him up. “Tea, then, mate?” he said, voice nowhere near calm, perilously close to betraying him as he had just betrayed himself to Bodie’s casual, callous sexuality. He jabbered on, covering up his weakness, giving himself something to do to stave off the emotional reaction. “After you going to all the effort of bringing it, least I can do is make it, isn’t it?”

Bodie, at least as uncomfortable, desperate to escape before this could turn into a scene, before emotions could spill over and complicate life beyond all endurance, was coming to his feet, tucking in and zipping up, erasing every sign that they had ever been intimate. “No, no, but thanks all the same. I really should be getting home, catch a forty winks before I have to go out on this bloody consulting game Cowley’s got me doing for some Arab embassy. Thanks for dinner...”

Awkward silence as both remembered who had brought dinner, and both remembered numberless nights that had ended up as one night stands and the difficult moment of saying goodnight to the girl without insulting her or getting her hopes up.

“Shall I report in to Central, or does Cowley want me to wait until you can pop over again?”

Bodie's gratitude was palpable: he'd obviously been worried that Doyle was going to be difficult, was going to turn all limp-wrist and lavender on him. "He said to give your reports to me, unless something urgent crops up, then you've to get in touch with him himself."

Not-quite able to look at each other, then the shuffle of feet, the restless silence before embarrassment became terminal. "Best be off then, hadn't you?" Doyle finally said, keeping the disappointment inside where it wouldn't make things worse than they already were. If he could keep things where they stood now, then at least when next they saw each other, they could pretend that tonight had been nothing more than lust given rein and a quick fuck for both of them. And give him time to lick his wounds in private and sort out what the hell he wanted out of life in the first place.

But for all his rationalisations, his eyes were hollow with misery as he watched Bodie walk out the door.

The unholy clatter of a beer lorry being unloaded, dozens and dozens of bottles rattling in crates and kegs thumping to the ground, woke him up, rudely. At least the sun was out, watery greyness filtering in through the curtains, casting shadowy patterns of dirt upon glass, lace against curtains, the floral pattern of the fabric overlaying it all, the whole *millefeuille* of it finally coming to rest upon the wall, with its accusatory pale patches where the pictures had hung. It took him a long time to get up out of bed, the prompting of his bladder far more effective than the nagging of the clock and his job.

Ah, yes, the job. He pondered that, in the kitchenette, making tea with all the stuff Bodie had brought. That started him off down a track he didn't want to follow, not yet, not while the pain of disillusion was still seeping raw. If it hadn't been so pathetic, he'd have laughed at the picture of a man leaning on 40, finally giving it all up and coming out of the closet, only to find that he was supposed to leave the loving still neatly hidden away.

The clicking-off of the kettle brought him back to the job in hand and there was some measure of relief with the distraction. He'd better think about the bloody job before he went

outside, get it all sorted out in his mind. His real life would have to take a back seat to Richard Duncan's, for the time being. And if he were really lucky, Richard Duncan could keep him occupied long enough to get the disaster with Bodie into some semblance of perspective again. Who knew—he might even be able to come up with some way of rescuing the whole situation with Colin as well. But better to concentrate on the job—that wasn't too depressing. As long as he didn't think about how little a difference he was making, as long as he didn't think about sitting behind a desk in Whitehall, as long as he didn't think about how Cowley would react to his announcement. Perhaps he should send a card, thick cream parchment with gold trim, elegant black calligraphy: *Raymond Aloysius Doyle is proud to announce his formal coming out. Tea and sympathy at 3 p.m., R.S.V.P.* Oh, yeh, that was definitely the way to go.

But in the mean time, until he ended up on the dole, he *did* have a job to do. There wasn't a snowball's that he'd be able to infiltrate the drug/weapons group as Richard Duncan, not unless he could persuade Colin to cover for him and as that boyfriend of his had heard his name, then he'd have to bring Barry in on it as well, which didn't exactly auger well for the success of the oppo. He could always play himself, stretch the truth a bit, claim he was a good copper gone wrong, kicked out because of what he was. Which might not be fiction soon—Cowley hated, with a passion, his agents lying to him. You were more likely to be fired for that than any nefariousness. But the idea of living here, for however long the operation took, as a gay man, that appealed. It'd be like dipping his toe in the swimming baths, give him a taste of what it would be like. And whether it was even something he wanted to do. After all, he had too many years of living in deception behind him to be sure if he could even make so radical a change, despite what his psyche was demanding.

The door went, an insistent peal of the bell. Not Bodie—he wouldn't be back until Cowley threw him back in here, too scared that there'd be the scene to end all scenes, his partner throwing himself at Bodie's feet, doing a wonderful impersonation of Juliet. So that left...postman, with a parcel for the couple who used to live

here. Or a neighbour—*i.e.*, the ratty old gossip who'd started this all off in the first place.

It was his neighbour from upstairs, a lovely black woman, introducing herself as Carmel from upstairs, wishing him well and welcoming him to the Square. He almost put the moves on her, but then habit was superseded by the burgeoning desire to try out being himself and not what his career had dictated him to be.

“So, d’you know anyone round here? Sorry, don’t mean to pry, it’s just that I’m the local health visitor an’ I sometimes forget to switch off.”

“Not to worry, I don’t mind. Actually, a bloke I went to college with lives in the Square, so I’ll look him up again. Haven’t seen him in years, though, if you don’t count bumping into him for two minutes at the flash pub last night.”

Someone who had already finished college could be only the one person in the Square. “You mean Colin? Colin Russell?” He could see it written all over her face, the question of whether or not he knew about Colin, and if he did, did he know about Barry, and if he didn’t, should she tell him—and how *did* you tell someone his old mate was queer? “Did you know him well?”

He grinned at her, winking. “Very. You might even say intimately, if you were being naughty. And don’t worry, Carmel, I also bumped into that vixen of a boyfriend of his.”

“Oh, you mustn’t mind Barry. He’s still a bit confused, a bit unsettled about which lifestyle to pick.”

Me and him both. “Well, he’s young yet,” so what’s my excuse?, “he’ll get himself sorted out eventually.”

“But in the meantime, Colin has to go through the growing pains all over again. Well, I had best be off, now, I’ve got too many cases on today as it is. It’s lovely to meet you...?”

“Ray,” he answered, after a moment. *Not everyone who had a chance to try a life out for size before deciding whether or not to buy it.* “Ray Doyle. I’ll walk out with you, you can point me in Colin’s direction.”

“It’s lunchtime, and I know he’s out, so that means he’ll either be over at the tea-bar or at the stall with Barry.”

Now there was a prospect singularly unappealing: facing the pair of them, and in public

at that. Oh, well, he had decided he wanted to try the lifestyle out, hadn’t he?

Hovering in the background, Doyle stood back, thinking, while Colin and Barry indulged in another of their famous spats. “I’m telling you, Barry, yes, he is someone I used to know and no, I’m not going to take up with him again.”

Doyle was appreciating the slim body, strength and suppleness obvious under the open jacket and closely fitting jeans. He still wanted Colin, wanted to bed him again, relive and enjoy some of the best of his past, but he could control it, now that the first mind-numbing shock of discovery was past, now that he might have—he hoped—Bodie. But that didn’t stop him appreciating the view, and revelling in his freedom to enjoy it and to stand there, watching, not running away to sublimate it in a woman or work.

“And anyway,” Colin was saying, unaware of the approval his body was garnering, “what’s all this carry on about? You take the hump when I get upset when you go off with someone, but now it’s all right for you to cause a fuss because I was speaking to someone I knew when you were still in nursery?”

Sullen expression on pleasant face, enough to curdle milk. “E seemed to think there was somethin’ between the pair of you, didn’t he? An’ you know wot they say.”

“Yeh. You can’t believe everything you hear. Look, Barry, you know perfectly well I’ve no intention of breaking off, so what’s behind all this?”

“You an’ ’im are the ones with experience, so you tell me.”

“So that’s it. You’re not just jealous, you’re worried that I might be tired of all the aggro of living with you and I might want someone who knows how to cope with a proper relationship.”

“An’ if that’s the case, then don’t look at me, Barry. ’Lo, Colin.”

“I’ll go off an’ leave you two to it, shall I?” Said so sweetly, but with such vicious intent.

“Oh, stop bein’ such a stupid little prat, will you? Me and Col aren’t goin’ to run off and fuck each other blind, so for Christ’s sake, grow up will you. Could do with having a word with both of you, if you could bear to spend two minutes in my company without throwing a fit.”

"Yeh, well I'm busy, got a stall to run."

"An' I used to be a barrow boy, so I know that all you have to do is get someone to keep an eye on it for you for half-an-hour while you have your dinner, right? Come on, I'll make it worth your while—I'll buy us all lunch. What's best, pub, caff, Chinese?"

The last voice he'd expected to hear put in its tuppenceworth. "If he's paying, pick the dearest—he owes me a fortune in lunches."

"Bodie, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Had the afternoon free, thought I'd pop over and see how you were settling in. Occurred to me that there might be a couple of unforeseen complications, as the Cow would say."

And make what you will of that, Doyle thought to himself, following Colin and Barry to the Chinese restaurant, noting the way they had automatically split into couples, trying not to crown Bodie one for being bastard enough to pretend that last night hadn't even happened. Now all he had to do was undo the damage he'd done to Colin and Barry, persuade them to provide him with a cover and juggle whatever the hell Bodie was up to.

"No point in beating around the bush, is there?" he said, discreetly showing the two men his ID. "Recognise that, do you?"

"I thought you lot did terrorists? If that's wot you're lookin' for, you won't find many round 'ere. Closest thing we've got to one of them bunch is old Lou Beal. An' I wouldn't take her on, not if it's just the two of you."

"Barry, is it?" Bodie asked, all good manners and smoothness, the velvet glove over iron fist. "It's not just terrorists we go after, it's anyone who doesn't fit as a Police matter but isn't halloved enough for the other departments. We," he leaned forward, smiling quite sweetly and with great enthusiasm, making Barry suddenly nervous of this nutter and appreciative of Doyle, "get the really nasty ones."

"So who are you after now?" Colin, to Doyle.

"That'd be telling, wouldn't it?"

"But if you don't tell, we can hardly help, can we?"

"What I need you two to do is not blow my cover. The fact that you know me, Col, 'ad to change who I was coming in as, an' unless we end up tabling the whole operation, we need you two to keep quiet about CI5 and all the rest of

it. Let people know that you knew me in college, then lost track of me when I started to get in with the wrong crowd."

"Like the 'eavy team 'ere, for instance?" Barry said.

Bodie bristled, very convincingly, at Barry, actually quite enjoying the whole by-play that was going on, everyone either jealous of or fancying everyone else. He hadn't played like this in years, not since he'd left the Forces and put on mufti. It could be fun, taking Ray places and watching all eyes turn to him. Even pretty Barry—whom Bodie could see the point of, even if Doyle seemed to think he was a right wally and ugly to boot—was having problems keeping his attention to himself, eyes wandering down to stare at the open neck of Doyle's shirt and the hair curling there, or to the purse of his lips as he bit into a bit of food that was too hot even for him.

"Don't push me, son," he said, seeing as how Doyle was too busy choking down water to answer Barry. "Look, we can tell you this much. There's a new mob trying to move in on this area, and they're pushing drugs on the kids, and then using the money to buy nasty little presents to leave in the shops at Christmas. Now, you can either help by keeping your mouth shut, or you can blab all over town and warn these bastards that we're after them."

"Can do one better than that, if you want."

Bodie looked politely disbelieving, whilst Doyle warned him off with his eyes. Doyle might not like Colin's little friend, but he didn't want to have to explain to Cowley precisely how his cover got blown sky-high. "An' how could you help..."

"Wait a minute," Colin butted in. "I thought you'd given the drugs up? And no, it doesn't make a difference if it's light stuff or the hard stuff, you said you'd given it up!"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Col, I did give it up. Wasn't worth the money, wasn't worth the risk. But I can still tell you who the suppliers on the street are. Can tell you who pushes it round the market, can even tell you the names of some of the West End blokes who're selling the stuff to the pushers. An' I can tell you who in this Square to watch, because 'e just had a very interesting trip, paid for by the local 'eavy team an' come into a ton of money, unexpected, like."

“Den would never push drugs, Barry. He’s not the most honest of blokes, but no-one in the Square is.”

“Wot d’you mean no-one’s ’onest? Just cos we don’t ’ave the money to afford your middle-class morals an’ middle-class attitudes—”

“Who’s Den?” They both turned to look at Bodie, tacitly dropping their argument.

“Den Watts, runs the Queen Vic. Been on the take for years, went to school with the blokes wot run all the crooked deals round ’ere now,” Barry said with the nonchalance of familiarity.

Colin was staring at him, taken aback by something he’d never bothered to see before.

“The usual games ’aven’t been doing so well, wot wiv people ’aving no money, so they’ve been gettin’ into the drug game, cos they know that if it comes down to it, the kids’ll steal or mug if they ’ave to, but they’ll come up with the money to get their fix. Guaranteed income for the ’ard nuts, keeps the big wigs in business an’ keeps them off the backs of villains like Den.”

“Dennis Watts, then. I’ll get onto it right away, Ray and I’ll be back this evening. See you.”

“He always leave as quick as that?”

“Usually can’t see Bodie for dust.” Colin looked at him sharply for that, hearing the undertone of bitterness, but before he could say anything, Barry piped up.

“You said you used to be a copper. Did you get tossed on your ear cos you’re gay?”

Doyle stared at the froth decorating the sides of his beer glass, the patterns as delicate and pretty as lace. He raised his eyes, looking at Colin, offering explanations more to himself than either man with him. “Not really. They had their suspicions, but it wasn’t as if they could prove anything. So I moved on to CI5, where the slate was clean an’ I could keep the rest of it quiet, as long as I packed in all the gay stuff. I’d never been openly queer anyway, even though I lived with Colin when we were both at college.”

“Livin’ with octopus ’ere an’ you’re tryin’ to tell me that no-one knew you were gay? Pull the other one, mate.”

“There were hardly any openly queer blokes at our college, so no-one gave it a thought. Anyway, lots of people shared digs to save money, an’ we never did anything outside our closed door that could tip anyone off.” He stifled his grin, enjoying the cat he was just about to set

amongst the pigeons—especially the pigeon called Barry. “Just the same as you and Col, when you think about it.”

Contempt, and an edge of possessive pride in the face of an out-done rival coloured Barry’s face and words. “That’s not ’ow me an’ Colin are, mate. Everyone knows we’re living together, an’—”

“So you’ve told a couple of people, oh, I am impressed. But apart from that, it’s precisely the same as we were in the dark ages.”

Doyle was watching them like the hawk he was, cataloguing, learning, measuring. Seeing what it was to love someone and not be loved in return, watching how Colin dealt with the same situation he was in himself.

“Ow the hell can it be the same? You two went sneakin’ round, pretendin’ to be straight...”

“Col didn’t exactly prance about, but he never lied about it the way I did. It was me that wanted a career that stopped me from lettin’ on that I was gay. But you know what I’m on about, so don’t come the innocent with me, pal, an’ don’t try to change the subject.”

“You keep your nose to yourself, mate. This is between me an’ Col, it’s none of your naffin’ business.”

Doyle grinned cheerfully malicious, Barry reminding him of a terrier protecting its own: all teeth and bristling hair. “That’s more or less what Colin said last night an’ I’m willin’ to listen to ’im, so don’t get yourself in a tizzy over nothing. All I’m saying is, that as an observer, mind, an outsider, you two don’t look like lovers to me. Oh, yeh, everyone knows about the pair of you, but you two behave like maiden aunts, the way you never touch each other. It’s exactly the same as it was with me and Col years ago: sneakin’ around an’ all behind closed doors.”

“You don’t know nuffin’, so shut the fuck up before I ram your tonsils out your arse along wiv your teeth—”

Doyle had time to be surprised by the viciousness and aggression coiled tightly in Barry, before Colin spoke up, metaphorically stepping between them. His voice was less than totally steady and the veiled hurt and defeat in it pierced even Barry’s livid temper. “Yeh, but it is the same thing, Barry, just the reason that’s different. Then, it was because we didn’t want

the trouble that went with people knowing, didn't want being called pansies and fairies and getting jumped by yobbos. Now...the people round here more or less accept us being gay, but keeping it all on the qt—well, it's a way for you not to make a commitment to me, isn't it? Apart from the sex, you act as if you're simply sharing the flat and nothing more."

"That's not true! An' even if it is, you're the one who insists I pay rent to you..."

"I want you to pay your *share* of the rent, Barry, the same way any other working couple does it. But you don't want to be one half of a couple, do you? You're the one who wants to be able to waltz off with anyone who strikes your fancy. But if you let what we have go beyond the bedroom, you wouldn't be able to do that any more, would you, cos people would know and talk and remind you that you've made promises to someone else." He looked at him, as sadly as Doyle had stared at Bodie's departing back. Barry looked ready to keep on fighting, and Doyle recognised the weary retreat in Colin's expression: it seemed Ray already knew some of the ways of coping, when you loved and weren't needed. Colin was getting to his feet, digging in his pocket to pay the bill Doyle had apparently forgotten. "And in the mean time, I've got work to do. Walk me back to the flat, Ray?" He smiled, quite melancholy: continued, "We've a lot of years to catch up on, haven't we?" He reached out, touching Doyle's broken cheek for the first time, lightly, as if wary of doing more damage, as if there was already enough pain for both of them. "And by the looks of it, those years have been what the Chinese would call interesting."

Bodie didn't come back that evening, but the 'phone rang, Central telling him that Bodie had been put on to cover while Donaldson had an impacted wisdom tooth pulled out and that Doyle's instructions from Cowley were to stay put and hurry up with the information. There were some very interesting patterns developing in the drug movements across London and his boss wanted to find out about them. So he settled in, two full days of being Ray Doyle, good guy gone wrong and queer to boot, gathering information, watching all the ones Barry had fingered and coming up with some very interesting stuff indeed, not least of which was a

certain Mr. Watts' trip to a country which boasts more drugs than water.

He would walk around the square, passing the time of day with the locals, talking to Colin, sparring with Barry who was still after his blood, even if he had buried the hatchet enough to help get the buggers who were pushing to kids like his youngest sister. Not that the young man had any time for a bugger he thought was trying to push in between him and Colin, though. But it was fun to talk to him, pushing and prodding him, feeding the jealousy and possessiveness that was there. It was nice to know he was still attractive, that he wasn't so old he wouldn't be seen as a rival.

It went without saying, of course, that Bodie showed up out of the blue—after several days' silence—on the dot of tea-time, although to give credit where credit was due, he'd brought food with him again, from the fish restaurant this time, half the vinegar-drenched chips eaten long before they made it all the way across the square to Doyle's flat.

"Wotcher, mate," Doyle said, not noticing just how much the East End had permeated both skin and language, taking him back to what he had been before. There was a moment of intense awkwardness, this first moment alone after the emotional and sexual tangle of the night Bodie had refused Doyle's kiss. But then Bodie grinned, holding the brown-paper-wrapped food out as if it were a gift to the gods.

"Nectar, this is, Ray, pure bloody nectar. Best cod an' chips I've had since Liverpool. Remember that time?" he said, moving around with brisk efficiency, the old routine between them unchanged, despite all the changes that were clamouring between them.

Until Doyle stood behind him, close, terribly close, so that Bodie stumbled into him, all unsuspecting.

And felt the hardness taut in Doyle's jeans and the heat of his body as it flared against Bodie's smooth bulk. It began all over again, a grain of sand gathering other grains to it until it was the expanse of the desert and just as heated, the ground shifting constantly under their feet.

The awareness was there between them, all through the chatter and shop-talk of that meal, that the inevitable was going to happen: they were going to end up having sex again. It was

there in every less-than-innocent glance, in every ‘accidental’ touch when they both reached for something, or in the brush of thigh against thigh as they sat close by each other on a settee that was big enough to seat three with some room to spare. It was there in every sentence that fell away into silent staring, and in every word that ended with a tongue-tip moistening lips, adding to the allure.

A spring was poking into Doyle, and he made a mental note to make sure that he wasn’t lying on it when they got going. It was that simple, no more soul-searching, no more analysis, not when the answer was so well known to both of them. The acknowledgment crept between them, that Doyle, like Colin, would settle for the sex, if it was that or nothing. *Half a loaf, and all that...*, he thought to himself, his jeans already uncomfortably tight. He’d settle for a quick mutual wank on the sofa or a scramble on the floor, if that was all that was on offer. Not quite what he wanted, but it’d do. And it was early days yet, still fledgling time, when he had barely found his feet, was still trying all this out, getting used to what he should never have given up. Time enough for love, later, if Bodie didn’t run from him, if Bodie wouldn’t let the feelings slide from friendship into something more. But for now, there was the heat of the body beside him, a hand stroking his thigh, Bodie turning to cover him, pressing him into the sofa and he was beyond even noticing the spring that was digging into him, as he felt Bodie’s mouth on his neck, biting and sucking whilst his hands were stroking and squeezing.

This time, they both ended up naked, clothes all over the place, and Bodie was lying as he had after the first time, except this time, Bodie was on the settee and they were far from finished yet. Doyle’s erection was rubbing against the hardness of Bodie’s shin, the froth of hair there teasing him with its light touch. And his mouth, his mouth was open, wet, laving the length of Bodie’s cock with a skill that had been buried, not lost. He was almost drunk on the smell and taste of Bodie, intoxicated by the quintessential strength personified by the rampant cock. His tongue slipped under the fore-skin, silking it back to bare the head to his sight. He opened his mouth wider, taking the head in, groaning in pleasure at taking Bodie in. His

tongue caressed the flange of the head, then the vein with its rhythm of Bodie’s heart, and he was swallowing, pulling Bodie in deeper, until his nose was being tickled by the prickle of hair and his chin was pressing into the fragility of balls.

There were noises coming from Bodie, small sounds of helpless hedonism, involuntary little thrusts of his hips, pushing himself in and out of Doyle’s tight-kissing mouth. Doyle sucked on him, his hand playing with Bodie’s balls, rolling them between his fingers, feeling them jump with the leap and pulse of Bodie’s pleasure. His other hand was splayed, fingers wide, on the sharp jut of hip and the fineness of skin, the large vein there beating in echo of the one that he was tonguing. He could feel the ripple of Bodie’s belly, felt the pleasure peak in the other man’s body, drank deep of the lifeseed plashing down the back of his throat. The cock in his mouth stayed hard, his tongue caressing it, his mind glad that Bodie didn’t become hyper-sensitive after. He nuzzled away, worshipping with his body, loving the sex and the man. And not wanting to pull away, for when he did, he knew that it would be all harsh reality again, Bodie sitting up and complimenting him like some stranger he’d picked up for the night.

Instead, Bodie’s hands were on his hair, carding through the curls that he refused to cut off for the sake of paltry fashion. “Shouldn’t’ve done that, mate,” he heard Bodie say, and tried to close his ears, not wanting to hear it, not wanting to hear Bodie say that even this was more than he was willing to risk in the emotional morass that lay in wait for them.

“Shouldn’t’ve, Ray. Shouldn’t swallow like that.”

He let go of Bodie then, sitting up, averting his face, wiping his lips and chin, licking his fingers clean, silently defiant. “Why?” he finally said. “Afraid it’ll turn me into a frog or a bleedin’ fairy? Too late, mate, it’s already happened.”

“Nah, not worried about you turning anything awful—you couldn’t get any worse, could you? No, Ray,” the gentle stroke of his hands on the soft hair of forearm giving lie to the unfeeling calm of his voice, “you shouldn’t suck a bloke off like that, not nowadays. Christ, mate, you’re not that innocent that you haven’t heard of AIDS, so don’t look at me like that.”

“Shite, I never even thought of that. Had some french letters in case we ever did the other, but never thought you might... Was so desperate to have you...”

“Yeh, well you have been out of the game for a while and old habits die hard, eh? Fucking equals durex, but when was the last time you sucked someone off, eh?” Doyle watched the expression change on Bodie’s face as the rhetorical question burst full-blown in his mind, becoming something that he had to know. Not that Bodie was going to ask himself why. “Colin, was it?”

“No,” a shake of Doyle’s head, as deeply concealed memories meandered, ghostly faded, through his mind. “There were a couple of times after that, when I couldn’t handle pretending to be straight as a die. But not for years, Bodie, too many bloody years. And yeh, you’re right, I should’ve put something on you.”

“We’ll remember next time.”

All bulldog tenacity, Doyle latched on to that. ‘Next time’, Bodie had said, even if the man hadn’t seemed to have heard himself make that promise. Next time...

“Now come here, you, let me take care of that for you...” And Bodie pulled him close, large hands pressing into the small of his back, rocking Doyle against himself, one hand sliding lower to play with the opening to Ray’s body. “That’s it, mate, let yourself come, make it feel good, yeh, that’s it. Rub your cock on me, fuck yourself on me, c’mon, fuck us, let me have that cock...”

He came with the sound of Bodie crooning dirty words in his ear, Bodie’s hands on him, Bodie’s body under his. Afterwards, he lay, limply sated, listening to his heart slow to match Bodie’s, basking in the simplicity of holding and being held. *Next time...* That kept all the woes at bay, making it so easy to simply drift along and let life happen, for once not running himself ragged trying to control the world and everyone in it. Languid, he rubbed his cheek on the satin of Bodie’s chest, a small fist of nipple rising to press into him. He flicked his tongue at it, enjoying the responsiveness and the slow fall back to the nitty-gritty of reality. He was quite content, for if there was something he was good at, it was making things invisible, so he didn’t even see the need in himself, whether it

was to love men or to kiss and make it more than just ‘good mates’ sex. He didn’t even flinch when Bodie eased him aside and got up, going into the bathroom to wash Ray’s musk off.

By the time Bodie came back through, the fire was on, his clothes were folded neatly on the couch and a fully-dressed Ray Doyle was in the kitchenette doing the washing-up.

“You off then?” he asked over his shoulder, taking casual to new heights, not looking at Bodie, but listening to every rustle that signalled him getting dressed.

“Suppose so. Got anything else to tell Cowley?”

“Just what I told you over supper. Be another few days before there’ll be anything else. Bit slow to accept newcomers round here.”

A long pause, with nothing to fill it but the swish of water and the whisper of clothing being donned. Then, Bodie’s voice— “You all right, mate?”

“Why shouldn’t I be? This is a bloody dawdle, your old granny could do it.”

“I’m not asking about the job. I’m asking about...you know, all this. The sex an’ everything.”

“It’s not like you to be this concerned, Bodie.”

“Yeh, well, you’re not much, but you’re better than being partnered by some of the weak-kneed kids that Cowley’s bringing in. And it can’t be easy, what you’re doing.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, mate, it’s the easiest thing in the world. And it’s a bloody site easier than the way I’ve been living. I’ve got this weight off my shoulders, now. I can stop pretending, I can actually pay attention to what I really want, not what I’m supposed to want.” As he said it, he felt the truth of his words settle into his soul, easing the last of the churning there. “It’s absolutely bloody brilliant, Bodie.”

Bodie frowned at him, unconvinced.

“Yeh, yeh, I know it’s not all going to be a bed of roses, but give me a chance—I’m still feeling like a kid starting his summer holidays.”

“What about the job?”

Doyle shrugged, going back to washing the dishes he’d accumulated over the past couple of days. “No great loss, is it? Never going to get any higher than I am, so it makes no odds, does it?” He slid a pile of plates into the suds, face thoughtful. “Miss you, though.” He

could've bitten his tongue out the second the words got loose.

"Only cos perfection's hard to give up once you've found it." The joke fell, landing flat on its face between them. "Look, Ray," Bodie was bluff and gruff, his tried-and-true method of hiding when he cared. "Look, all this...it's just cos I was there when you were ready to find a nice warm body. It's just infatuation and sex, that's all. Give you a week and you'll've moved on to someone as pretty as that Barry and forgotten all about messing around with your partner. And that's better than you going off like a lamb to the slaughter to the nearest gay pub and getting picked up by someone who would hurt you."

"Someone who wouldn't be gentle with me?"

"Or someone," Bodie insisted, the weight of experience behind him, "who would hurt you. Really hurt you, and maybe not just emotionally. I don't want you getting torn to pieces by some bloke who's kinky and would screw you up."

"Specially not after I've done such a good job of screwing myself up all these years, is that it?"

"Partly. You've got to admit, what you did was bloody unhealthy, Ray."

"You'll be getting me an appointment with Dr. Ross in a minute."

"Might not be a bad idea, that."

Slowly, Doyle pivoted, unable to believe his ears. "My Christ, but you're serious. You think I'm that far gone?"

Face hard, body immovable. "I think you're taking it so fucking lightly, you're going to need help. Ray, you're changing your whole lifestyle, throwing a career away, going to alienate your family..."

"Hang on a minute there. Throw away a career? What career? In case you 'adn't noticed, mate, I'm not the right sort to get anywhere in Whitehall, even nowadays. Ten years from now, things'll've changed enough, but not right now. I've no chance, Bodie, of anything better than a desk job. And just because you've alienated your family, doesn't mean to say my family'll do the same thing. And as for changing my lifestyle... Haven't you been listening to me? The mistake I made was when I got the idea that I could just stop being gay, that I could just go out there and pretend, like thousands of other blokes, that

I didn't fancy men. And what good did it do me? You've seen what I've been like these past months. The strain was beginning to show. Only a matter of time, Bodie, it was only a matter of time."

Another pause. Then—

"And don't worry, your virtue's safe with me," he said, all the more angry for the quiet, "I've got the message, Bodie. You'll break me in gently, but I've not to get any stupid romantic notions about you. Well, no need to worry, mate. I wouldn't touch you with a barge-pole. If I remember correctly, I like a bit of maturity to my men, not scared little boys who'll run away at the first sign of commitment. And didn't you say something about having to get on? Work to do or something?"

The longest pause of all, whilst Doyle washed the same plate again and again, dish-mop circling endlessly through the suds. Footsteps, then, the sound thudding into the tense muscles of his neck, and then he heard the turning of the handle, felt the gust of cold air leaching the life from the room, until it was shut out again with a very quiet click of the door closing.

He could feel the emptiness of the room on his skin, matching the emptiness in the pit of his stomach. *So much for 'all this' being a dawdle, he thought, and so much for the truth setting you free an' all. I might be free when it comes to sex, but Christ, I've really landed myself in it when it comes to feelings, haven't I? And there's not a fucking thing I can do about it. You can't make someone feel the way you want them to. More's the fuckin' pity.*

He dropped the soggy tea-towel on top of the wet dishes in the drainer, turning on his heel and going out. There was still time for a drink before closing—in fact, there was still time for several, if he went to the Dagmar with its late-licence. And its decidedly mixed clientèle. Who knows, perhaps he'd cock a snoot at Bodie and pick up some dangerous man in leather and take his chances. After all, he couldn't get any more hurt than he already was, could he?

The bubbly brunette was behind the bar again, a fresh-faced young man pulling pints beside her, his bow tie askew, hair falling over his forehead. Wicksy, he remembered, running through his mental files, Simon Wicks, son of

the hatchet-faced blonde barmaid over the Vic and so squeaky clean, it was enough to bore you to tears, instantly. Bustling out the door after him, came the old dear, the Square gossip, done up to within an inch of her life, and beside her, an even older woman, resplendent in wig and powder, a drooling little pug clutched to her dried-up bosom. A lot less inspiring than the night he'd come here after Bodie had left so silently, but if he hadn't bothered to pick someone up then, he didn't know why he was even bothering to look for talent tonight. Apart from the obvious, AIDS had a lot to answer for, when a man couldn't even sow a few wild oats any more. Not that there was anyone here he'd be willing to get close enough to to turn into porridge, never mind sow any oats with...

He heard them arguing, as usual, before he saw them. These past few days, he'd learned what everyone in Albert Square already knew: Colin and Barry used arguing the way everyone else used valentines and boxes of Black Magic. He called Wicksy over, setting up a round, waiting for the other two to come over. Barry still didn't like him, but he was beginning to realise that even if Doyle would have Colin, Colin wouldn't have him. It was bitter-sweet, watching himself become part of the glue that was holding the other couple together, seeing all the little arguments turn into solutions, with the attractions and refusals surrounding him used as proof of genuine affection between the pair of them. They were shutting him out, but not so far that he couldn't see what he wanted for himself: something to which he was more than entitled, something he had given up years ago and denied himself ever since. A bit of happiness, that was all. A relationship that worked, some kind of home and someone who loved him. Everyone was entitled to dreams, weren't they? His stomach tightened as he thought of Bodie four nights before. Oh, yes, everyone was entitled to dreams, even if they were impossible.

Oh, well, at least he had the sex. Always supposing Bodie came back for more. And if he didn't? You might not be able to engender feelings in someone else, but sparking lust in Bodie was as easy as pie. He felt the other two come up behind him and he interrupted their backbiting with the flick of his voice.

"White wine with orange juice for you, Colin and bitter for Barry. Perfect choice, eh?"

Barry glowered at him, but he took the drink, starting off for one of the tables against the wall. "Aren't you comin'?" Ungracious, but still an invitation.

"Not with you here, I'm not."

"Oh, ha bloody ha. Very funny, I'm liable to die laughin' at you any day now. Listen," leaning forward, whispering, "you gettin' anywhere on all that stuff we were talkin' about at Wu's?"

"Got some more names, found out some of the distributors, but still no farther in actually getting on the inside. Why?"

"Cos my sister almost got hooked, didn't she? Anyway, I might 'ave a way in for you."

Colin's voice, warning. "Barry..."

"No, not through me. God, you're worse than me mum, you are. No, me brother Graham 'ad some stuff wot fell off the back of a lorry," he studiously ignored Colin's aggrieved and long-suffering expression, "an' 'e approached this fella to sell it, didn't 'e. At any road, the bloke wanted 'im to do a job, but me brother won't touch drugs, an' 'e won't 'ave nothin' to do wiv roughin' people up. But the man said that if Graham found someone who wouldn't have no problems doin' it, then the job might be open."

"Then have your brother put my name forward then. Thanks, Barry."

A shrug, leather jacket creaking. "Don't mention it. Can't stand these toffee-nosed gits wot're tryin' to move in on our area. Sorry, Colin, didn't mean you."

"Better not. Your rent would take a sudden leap upwards if you did."

Barry glanced slyly at Ray, winking at him, waiting until Colin had taken a healthy mouthful of his 'toffee-nosed' drink, timing it to perfection. "Could always take it out in trade, couldn't you though?"

Perfection. Cocktail sprayed everywhere, mainly on Doyle, with Barry sitting back, laughing like a drain. "Gotcha!" Watching Doyle mopping up the sticky spray of drink, he grinned again, not quite as nicely this time. "Didn't I just?"

"Barry! Colin! C'mere, you two. Need to talk to you." Angie, shouting at them from behind the bar, cut with ease through the loudness of music.

“Still cheaper than anywhere else in London.” The Square was behind them now, the houses around them becoming steadily more gentrified. “And I s’pose I could always chip in some of my mercenary money...”

Wonders would never cease, taboo subjects being broached like so much tissue paper, not that Doyle was stupid enough to comment on it to a man as skittish as Bodie. “Thought you’d spent all that years ago?”

“Never even touched most of it. It’s been breeding quite happily in a nice little vault in Switzerland.”

“You sure you want to do this?” It had to be said, for he knew well enough what happened if things were ignored completely. It was one thing to be tactful, another to play ostrich. “Aren’t you scared shitless I’ll be all over you with red roses and chocolates? And kisses?”

Doyle wasn’t the only one who was capable of thinking and changing the leopard’s spots. “Worse things in life, Ray. As long as you don’t hit me with your handbag, I’ll cope.”

“Yeh?”

“Yeh. Any objections?”

“Apart from your smelly socks? Nah, but don’t worry, I’ll come up with some.”

But he wasn’t looking back towards the Square any more, and he was grinning happily as he considered just how quickly Bodie had yielded some of that much-vaunted and often flaunted autonomy. Casually, he reached out to rest his right hand on Bodie’s left hand, grinning even more when the driver, even more ostentatiously casual that Ray had been, lifted that hand and moved it a little higher, where it could rest on a quickening hardness.

“Barry, where’d Ray go?”

“If ’e’s lucky, probably exactly we’re goin’.”

“And where’s that?”

“E went off with that great bruiser of a friend of his and hopefully, ’e’s goin’ to get fucked into next week. Just like me, right, Colin?”

“Barry!” Angie leaned across the bar at them, manicured fingernail stabbing Barry in the chest. “You want to watch your language round ’ere. I run a clean pub, I do. Go on, Colin, take ’im ’ome, before ’e gets hissself in trouble.” She smiled at them, face lighting up, giving Colin a quick kiss on the cheek from lips that were as

red as her nails. “An’ do yourself a favour. Do wot ’e tells you, love. ’E’s making sense for once in ’is life. ’Ello, Pete, wot’ll it be?”

“Ethel? Ethel? Did you see that? That man’s back, an’ ’e’s takin’ all that Ray Doyle fella’s stuff out. Leavin’, ’e is, a moonlight flit. ’Asn’t paid ’is rent, I warrant. Should be grateful we don’t ’ave the Police round ’ere wiv the likes of ’im ’angin’ about, up to no good. Should’ve known. Nothin’ but trouble, that one, wot did I tell you?”

“Actually, if I remember you rightly, you said ’e was a very nice young man, you did.”

“Oh, I did, did I? Well, just goes to show ’ow that type can take in even the most discernin’ of people, like wot I am. But movings in an’ movings out, I don’t know wot this Square is comin’ to. Wasn’t like this in the old days, was it, Ethel?”

“Nah, not back then. Back then, whole families would live here, year after year after year. Squads of children everywhere, an’ the parties we used to have. D’you remember the parties, Dot? Everyone all ’avin’ fun together. ’Ere, d’you remember the V-E Day party? Wiv all them flags all over the street, an’ the bunting ’angin’ from all the windows?”

“An’ Dr. Legg—’e was just a young man back then, weren’t ’e?—brought out his fancy gramophone player an’ we was playin’ all them wonderful, old Glenn Miller 78’s ’e ’ad, quite lovely they were, not none of this modern muck. An’ there was dancin’...”

“An’ the punch old Will wot used to ’ave the Vic gave out?”

They were quiet then, old faces recapturing some of the glow of the past as each remembered their salad years. Their footsteps tap, tap, tapped on the slick pavement, dulling as they stepped off the kerb onto the street, pools of reflected light rippling in shallow puddles. Behind them, little Martin was crying over the last of his teeth forcing its way in, and in front of them, Pete was shouting to Ali to wait a minute, he had something to tell him.

Dot sighed and helped Ethel back up onto the pavement, steering her clear of the slippery rain. “Oh, it was marvellous back then, wasn’t it, Ethel?”

“Grand, it was grand. ’Specially when all the men came ’ome...”

THE BAKER'S DOZENTH

"Yule Log," unquestionably a cylindrical piece, exists merely because it had to conclude this issue. There is no justifiable reason to pen a Blackadder tale, but such lack has never dissuaded the Glaswegian. If you thought the Twin Peaks story in volume one was ridiculous...well then, read on.

YULE LOG CALLY FORNIA DONIA

"I HAVE A CUNNING PLAN, MR. BLACKADDER, SIR."

"Oh yes, and what is it this time? We go marching up to the Palace, bang on the door, apologise to Her Royal Fatness Queen Victoria and offer you to that raving pansy Prince Albert to roger and hope they give us the £50,000 after all?"

Baldrick got up from where Blackadder had seated him on the fireplace, brushing smouldering embers off as he went. "No, although that is a good idea, but it'd never work. I'm far too old for Prince Albert, and I've got hair on me chest. Nah, my plan is much more cunning."

Edmund Blackadder settled himself in his favourite chair and reached for his footstool. It not being there, he cuffed Baldrick round the lug'ole and stuck his feet on him instead. "All right, all right, tell me this even more cunning plan of yours. I could do with good laugh."

"Well, Mr. B, sir, I was thinking about this Spirit wot come 'ere last night, all spectral an' eerie an' magickal, an' I was thinkin'..."

"Remind me to change my religion in the morning—miracles do happen and I might as well get in well with the old boy upstairs, as I'm not going to get very far down here, am I, Balders? My god, how could I have been so stupid? It's your fault, Baldrick, you must be contagious. How else could I have been so foolish as to turn our beloved Queen Victoria out—before old fatso could make me a bloody baron."

"Yeh, but I've got this plan, Mr. B., an' it's better than bein' just a rotten old baron."

"Well," Blackadder said, stretching out more comfortably in the warming glow of the fire, "tell me in a few minutes. I should already be asleep

by then, save you the effort of boring me to death."

"Right, Mr. B. sir. Anyway, my cunnin' plan, Mr. B. is soo cunnin', not even what's-is-face Eyesapped Newtown could better it. My plan, Mr. B., sir..."

"Is more long-winded than an entire battalion of infantry after a supper of cabbage and beans. Get on with it, Baldrick, before I kick you into the fire to save you the bother of fetching more coal."

"Well, Mr. B., sir, if we was to trick the Spirit into comin' back... I could dress up like you an' lie in your bed an' then when the Spirit comes over, you could leap out from behind the wardrobe an' bong 'im on the bonce with a heavy stick-like weapon an' then we could tie 'im up an' force 'im to show you all the secrets of the future. Then you could make a bloody mint buyin' up inventions cheap-like an' then sellin' them for vast, untold profits."

"And tell me why, Baldrick, you should be the one resting all snug and cosy in my bed whilst I get to stand around, freezing my John Thomas off?"

"Well, that's the really cunnin' part of my plan, Mr. B. See, when the Spirit pulls the bedclothes back an' sees me instead of you, 'e'll be so..."

"Busy throwing up, he won't see me coming at him from behind. But it'll never work, Baldrick, for one simple reason."

"Oh, an' wot's that, Mr. B.?"

Blackadder lifted one lank strand of Baldrick's greasy hair, pincering finger and thumb to catch one of the little beasties that made its home there. "I'd rather have every slob-

bering Scotsman who ever wore a skirt in my bed than you and the hordes who live on you—it would be far less crowded.”

Baldrick pondered this as quickly as he could, making supper, rebuilding the fire, doing the wash and polishing Blackadder’s fourteen pairs of boots before he had the response he’d been rummaging in the cesspit of his brain for. “I know!” he shouted, waking Blackadder from a rather sound sleep. “I could ’ave a bath!”

“You? Why would you want to break the habit of a lifetime, Baldrick? Ah, I know. The Thames is too clean, and you want to make sure that not even the Loch Ness Monster could survive in it.”

Baldrick donned an expression of profound hurt, even managing to bring a few tears to his eyes, although he did have to turn away and use the onion he kept specially down the front of his trousers for just such occasions. “You’re a hard man, Mr. B.,” he mumbled.

Blackadder looked down at himself, then back at Baldrick. “You should be so lucky and I should be so desperate, Balders. But if you were to bathe, apart from civilisation as we know it collapsing from the sheer shock of it, your plan might actually work. And if I were rich, I could buy a baronetcy, I wouldn’t need any poxy Queen to scribble an X on a piece of paper. Yes,” he said, thinking of the kingdoms he would buy if he had all the money in the world. “Yes, I do believe it’s worth it.” He kicked Baldrick in the passing. “Be worth it just to have you bathe once a century. All right, Baldrick, you may use my bath. Just be sure to delouse everything when you’re finished.”

It only took him about two hours, three cakes of soap and a six-inch scrubbing brush to get clean. He put on one of Blackadder’s night-shirts and went in to see his master.

Who reacted not at all as expected. “Who the hell are you? And why the hell are you wearing my nightie?”

“It’s me, Baldrick, Mr. Blackadder. An’ I’m wearin’ your night-shirt cos all me sacks are dirty.”

“So that’s what the smell from your attic is then. I thought it was the remains of all Lucretia Borgia’s old boyfriends.” He walked slowly around Baldrick, examining him, touching the now-gleaming brown hair. “You know, I think you’re several stone lighter, now you’ve got rid

of all that dirt. And did you know your hair is almost chestnut, not the colour of the slops bucket after a long night? Well, well, well. If your cunning plan doesn’t work, I could send you out on the streets and you could earn my fortune for me.”

Baldrick smiled at him, teeth actually white, which came as quite a shock to Blackadder. And there was something about the limpid gaze... Blackadder shook his head, impatient with himself. “Nah, can’t be. Must be my imagination. Anyway, Baldrick, the night is fair drawing in and if your stupid plan has any chance at all of being anything other than a complete cock up, we had better be off to bed.”

Blackadder squeezed himself in behind the wardrobe, one brown eye peering out as Baldrick went off to fill the coal scuttle and came back with a tin of sweet-smelling unguent. He muttered under his breath as his servant got into his nice warm bed in his nice warm night-shirt and under his nice warm quilt. “The things I’ll do for money,” Blackadder muttered to himself, “I should take up working, probably be less bother in the long run.”

Eventually, with a final few, pathetic crackles, the fire died out completely, leaving behind a silence that was broken only by Baldrick’s snores and Blackadder’s shuffling, as he tried to get some life back into his feet. The moon was beginning to set and Blackadder was beginning to turn into a blue adder. “Baldrick!” he hissed. “Baldrick!”

More snoring.

Blackadder took off his slipper and threw it, hitting Baldrick square in the face.

One missed snore, and then the engine started up again.

Blackadder threw his other slipper.

Baldrick rolled over onto his side.

“Baldrick! Wake up, you monolithic moron, it’s bloody freezing out here.”

He got a response to his yell.

“Shh, Mr. B., sir, you’ll scare the Spirit off. An’ ’e won’t come if you scare ’im, not even for that crate of finest malt whisky we’ve left out to tempt him back.”

“If he doesn’t get here soon, I’m going to be a spirit myself. And if I catch my death of cold doing this, Baldrick, I shall come back and haunt you.”

“If you’re that cold, Mr. B.... I ’ave a cunnin’ plan, sir. You come over ’ere an’ get into bed with me, an’ then when the Spirit comes in, ’e still won’t see you an’ you can still leap up an’ beat ’im unconscious.”

“Oh, gawd, where were you when they were handing out the brains to all the other gnats. If I’m in bed, he’ll see me and...”

“Not if I’m lyin’ on top of you, ’e won’t. An’ that way, you’ll be all nice an’ cosy as well, won’t you?”

The numbness plaguing his feet had obviously spread to his brain, for the lure of warmth was enough for him to give in to yet another of Baldrick’s cunning plans.

There was a great deal of mumbling and fumbling and the banging together of knees and the riding-up of night-shirts and dressing-gowns before Blackadder was finally settled in under Baldrick. Who was wonderfully, blessedly warm and felled faintly of lavender and cedar. Blackadder moved, stretching in the glorious comfort of being warm again. It was then that he noticed just how high various night-shirts and dressing-gowns had ridden and what was pressed where—and that what was something that felt as big as a Yule Log but considerably harder, not to mention warmer. As it had only been the previous night that the Spirit of Christmas had shown him the error of virtuous living, he hadn’t yet had a chance to become thoroughly debauched, so it was true shock that raised his voice several octaves.

“Baldrick, what do you think you’re doing?”

“Shh!” Baldrick whispered, half an inch from Blackadder’s face, his breath smelling nicely of cloves and sweet rosemary. “D’you ’ear that?”

There was an eerie whispering sound, a faint keening in the distance. It was either the Spirit of Christmas on his way or a cat getting shagged.

Blackadder was discovering the truth about the love that dared not speak its name: it felt fucking fantastic. Especially when Baldrick moved like that and his prick pressed down on Blackadder, just so.

“Feel’s nice, don’t it?”

Blackadder, with one last nod at his rapidly departing moral standard, opened his mouth to protest—loudly. “Shh!” Baldrick whispered, tilting his pelvis deliciously, “can’t make a noise, or the Spirit won’t come. But in

the mean time,” he undulated, rubbing skin against skin, “even if the Spirit is weak, the flesh is willin’, in’t it?” Baldrick was whispering, quick hands shoving night-shirts and dressing-gowns even farther out of the way, pulling them off entirely, leaving them naked, his body pressed down into Blackadder’s, who was gasping and groaning quite nicely already. Baldrick slid down Blackadder’s body, staying under the covers where it was warm and smelled excitingly of men and the darkness shut out everything but the luscious sensation of touch. Blackadder squirmed as the wet tongue played with first one nipple and then the other, pausing to dally with the dark hair that lay between. The pert nipples were obviously as glad of the attention as Blackadder was, erecting to meet his tongue.

There was another, not so little, part of Blackadder erecting to meet that tongue as well. Blackadder was straining—30-odd (30 *very* odd) years of abstinence, celibacy, clean-living and other forms of insanity demanding to be wiped out this very instant. He was more than willing to oblige and fortunately, Baldrick seemed rather keen as well. Baldrick also seemed to know exactly what he was doing, which was all for the better, Blackadder’s brain currently completely overruled by his balls. Baldrick’s hands appeared to have been breeding, for they were everywhere over Blackadder, touching and kneading and teasing with consummate skill. And the mouth was never far behind. Blackadder almost choked him when that mouth finally lowered itself onto the hard prick that was standing to attention at his groin, demanding its share of the fun. Oh, what fun it was... Baldrick’s tongue was fibrillating on the pulsing vein, while one hand massaged the sarsenet of his balls, and the other hand... The other hand was pushing its way between his legs, knuckles rubbing on delicate hair and even more sensitive skin, until one finger was skimming the nodule of flesh between his cheeks.

“You can’t!” Blackadder shouted, shocked.

“Yeh I can,” Baldrick replied, dipping the finger in the unguent he had brought. “At least, I can, if I use enough of this stuff, can’t I?”

When the slick finger pressed into him, Blackadder was not about to argue with him,

not for love nor money, although he was willing to surrender to both.

He did argue, and loudly, when Baldrick stopped sucking him and took his finger back.

“What the hell are you doing, Baldrick?”

Baldrick looked at him with utter calm. “Fucking you, Mr. Blackadder, sir. Hope you don’t mind.”

“You’re doing what?”

“Fucking. It’s when one bloke shoves his prick up another bloke’s arse...”

“Isn’t that something that’s supposed to be done between a man and a woman?”

“Oh, no, women usually like it shoved up their cunts. But seem’ as ’ow men don’t ’ave those, you ’ave to use ’is arse instead. Here, I’ll show you. Now you lie there like that, an’ shift your legs round ’ere, like that, an’ if you use this ’and to wank with an’ this ’and to pull your nuts up out of the way an’ then I ooh...”

“Ow!”

“Shh, go on, play with yourself, take your mind of your arse, an’ before you know it, it’ll feel all lovely, bein’ rogered. Go on, sodomy’s fun...”

If he had realised he was following Baldrick’s advice to the letter, trusting the man, he would have fallen into a dead faint. As it was, he did as he was told, discovering that it was true, it really did feel lovely, being rogered and sodomy really was fun...

He clutched Baldrick to him, closing his eyes, locking the sensation inside, not regarding the world until he felt a mouth on his own. He looked up, into eyes that were warm and brown and far more intelligent than they were supposed to be. Sinking back into the pillows, loosing himself to the wonderful symphony that was his body, he opened his mouth to Baldrick, getting filled to overflowing.

Baldrick was thrusting into him harder now, and every time his prick slid in, there was a gliding jolt of intense pleasure that made his balls jump. This was even better than all those naughty things he had done in the water closet when no-one was looking and he’d have time to ‘forget’ this sin before his next visit to Church, a whole week away. This was much, much better, this rhythmic pulsing pleasure that was singing through him, all the way to his toes. Above him, Baldrick threw his head back, all his muscles rippling, his cock spasming deep inside Blackadder. It was such an exquisite sensation, he felt the cum stream from his own prick in a prism of pleasure.

After a little while, Blackadder had recovered enough to take note of minor details, such as the fact that an enormously heavy—although no longer enormous, ejaculation having taken its toll—Baldrick lying on him. One quick heave and Baldrick was now lying beside him, leaning up on one elbow, looking as pleased as Punch after he’s beaten the Bobby to pulp. His brain no longer ruled by his balls, certain salient facts began to dawn on Blackadder. Blackadder. Wide-eyed, he looked around the bedroom, at the window lying agape to winter’s blast, to the empty coal-scuttle, to the tin of unguent lying beside the bed. It, like himself and Baldrick, all came together. He’d been set up! It was also Boxing Day, and the Spirit of Christmas being the laziest bastard in Christendom, worked on Christmas Day itself and that was it. There never had been a chance of anything other than Blackadder dying from cold and...getting into bed with Baldrick.

“You sodding bugger!”

“Yeh, I am, in’t I, Mr. B., sir,” Baldrick grinned down at him happily. “But I warned you I ’ad a cunnin’ plan, didn’t I?”