

BLAKE'S SEVEN

BLAKE'S SEVEN PROFESSIONALS BLAKE'S SEVEN PROFES

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BENE DICTUM

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the BENE DICTUM series (well put, well said, well dicked)

A Dickensian Christmas

by M. FAE GLASGOW.

The fiction word count for BENE DICTUM: HALF 'N' HALF is 121,771 of which 44,869 is <i>Blake's 7</i> and 76,902 is <i>Professionals</i> .

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BLAKE'S SEVEN CONTENTS

Bene Dictum is a series designed for any sort of slash material we at Oblique Publications choose to put together. (This is a bit different from our other lines which have a tighter focus.) The first *Bene Dictum*, *A Dickensian Christmas*, was exclusively *Professionals* Christmas stories; *Half 'n' Half* is not. As its name implies, the contents are split between *Blake's 7* and *Professionals*. There is somewhat less of the former and rather more of the latter. We hope you will not complain too much about it!

As the editor, I should like to draw particular attention to all seven of the contributors to this issue. Although they were working with the same characters and universes, I think you will find a great range of voices in their stories. In addition, none of them grumbled about the long wait for publication of their pieces. (Oblique has taken more than a year off since our last zine. Our new motto: No zine before its time!)

My greatest thanks to all the authors—ever patient, to Kota—ever helpful, to LDM—ever on call, and most especially to M. Fae—(n)ever finished.

—Caroline K. Carbis, *editor*

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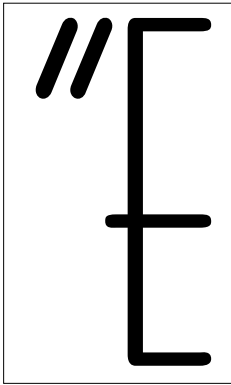
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PROFESSIONALS CONTENTS



nough!”

M. Fae is rarely willing to let Blake get the upper hand in his relationship with Avon, and not surprisingly this story runs true to form. Here is an angst-laden, tortured Blake struggling with his private demons and discovering he has fallen into a hell far worse.

Loud enough to wake the dead, but never loud enough to drown out the screams, the bellow echoed through the darkened bedroom. Even his tastebuds could remember those screams, and the sickness in him afterwards. His bones and muscles ached from night-time struggles that were as much use as his real-life struggles had been, and about as impressive. As for his head—Blake didn’t want to think about

— OPEN ALL HOURS

M. FAE GLASGOW

his head. Not about the truly spectacular headache, and certainly not about the state his mind had been left in by one or two mindwipes.

He grimaced, reaching for water kept habitually by his bed as if it could wash away the taste left by not knowing just how many times his mind had been wiped, or adjusted, or even just had psychomanipulators trampling noisily around inside, cruel, sharp boots making mincemeat of what little memory he had left.

“Enough,” he said again, not screaming to free himself of nightmare this time, but softly, quietly, dark with defeat. He disengaged himself from the sweaty cling of sheets, shoving them aside, their softness no target for the viciousness within.

The bathroom next, to stare at himself in the mirror. Dark eyes, though not as dark as Avon’s, but with more shadows, here, in the bright-lit honesty of solitude. Broad face, strong bones, pale,

too pale, sweat still clutching the clamminess of skin. Plenty of muscle on the torso he saw reflected back at him, overlaid now with the beginnings of softness. He’d had those muscles when he’d come to in a hospital, once, a lifetime or three ago. Didn’t remember getting them. His hand was large as it skimmed over the planes of his own flesh, moulding himself, forehead wrinkling as he tried to decide if the pattern of muscle indicated dedicated gym exercises for the hypertensive Alpha, or the sinew-weary slog of the criminal sentenced to hard labour. Impossible to know, either from what his body could tell him, or from what his mind could dredge up.

He straightened, spine complaining, slipped the soft white trousers off. Not too big, not small, uncircumcised, dark hair straight and damp with the lingering sweat of his nightmare. He looked at himself with something akin to dislike. Not too big,

Always supposing the charges against him really were lies, and those boys' memories were as unreliable as his.

Side by side in his head, he played the two images of the two completely separate families he could remember. Father, mother, sister and brother, in one, no sister in the other. Clear, sharp, brilliant memories, of birthdays and holidays, good report cards, first job, first date, two of each of those snapshot memories. Just as sharp, his cousin Inge, on that hardscrabble planet, her hair long, limp, her limbs long and skinny—a piece of string with knots in it, he could remember calling her. Could remember, equally clearly, a non-existent sister calling Inge the same thing. And worried over the way Inge had accepted him, no questions, no doubts—no reminiscences. Worried more because of his uncle, and betrayal, and yet more doubts.

Cold water splashing his face, his breath catching. And wouldn't Avon just love this, he thought. Leading a revolution—trying to lead a revolution—to change the Galaxy, and he couldn't even find his way out of a maze of memories. Here he was, the second nightmare in one night, the third this week, the pattern increasing, the memories becoming more confused, more entangled. Colouring it all, the sour-taste fear of himself, of what he'd done because a single command had been left lurking in his mind, hiding there amongst the logjam of memories and lives unlived.

He stared at himself in the mirror, stared into eyes that reflected back the horror of distrust, the insecurity of knowing that a simple signal sent by Servalan had triggered that command, and the fear of not knowing just how many other commands lay fallow in his brain, and just how many signals were whistling just out of the range of his hearing.

"Orac," he told himself.

His reflection didn't seem to find that any more reassuring than he had. So Orac said there were no more booby traps littering his subconscious. Wonderful. A machine diagnosing a human using information it had stolen from other machines that had been programmed by the same humans who had stolen Blake's own memory and left guerrilla war behind.

Small wonder his reflection looked the way it did.

Perhaps a shave would stop him looking quite so much like a derelict. Perhaps a comb would tame the Learian wildness of his hair. Perhaps a

shower would wash away the stench of fear.

"But what are we going to do," Blake asked the misery that faced him in the glass, "about the guilt?"

An indulgence he called it, harder on himself than even Avon would be, but he selected real water, hot water, the mirror steaming and clouding until the reflection was gone, the accusing eyes no longer looking at him. Soap sharp smell in his nose, shampoo silk between his fingers, pain cold and dark and leaden in his stomach.

Guilt. Those children. What had been done to them in his name.

What was it Jenna had told him? Her asking Avon what he knew about guilt. "Only what I've read," he'd said, and Jenna had hated the way Avon had said it and the smile that had gone with it.

Interesting, Blake thought, that even Avon suffered under the burden of guilt.

Interesting? his conscience demanded. Reassuring, he admitted. Very reassuring that even Avon could know guilt as well as dish it out.

Gan. Oh, Avon had had a field day over Gan, using the death—using *his* death, he corrected himself ruthlessly, scrubbing viciously at his chest and belly, *his* death, Gan's death, a friend, a colleague, someone you commanded, forced into danger, left to die, left to die—the litany was forced down, kicking and screaming, into the hard little knot of guilt and pain that he kept so carefully locked away. Back to Avon. Bring it back to Avon, to Avon enforcing the guilt, to Avon making him feel guilty—

As if he needed any help to blame himself.

He just didn't believe in wearing it on his sleeve, a declamation of guilt, martyrdom built on the suffering of others. He'd bear his guilt, and the blame, privately. Alone. In the shower. With water already cascading down his face, and the shampoo the perfect excuse to make his eyes redden and stream.

Drying himself, shoulder muscles already tight, bunching and clenching under the skin till his neck was stiffer than Avon's. Ridiculous, this, he told himself, using the damp towel to clear an oasis in the mirror. Taking one look at himself, wishing he hadn't bothered.

Is that how he looked to the others? Is that what they all saw when they looked at him as he walked onto the flight deck? That haggard, grey lump, as

lively as a bowl of gruel?

He cleaned his teeth, tamed his hair, covered his flesh with cloth. Resolutely. Refusing his body's quiet whimpers for touch, for release. The defenseless bed was glared at, the covers smoothed haphazardly over the evidence of both nightmare and wet dream. The smell of his own sex stirred him, waking his cock a little more, his pulse that beat faster. No. Not now, he told himself, shoving his hands into his pockets, snatching them free again, away from the heavy desire of his own flesh. Hands clasped behind his back, knuckles whitening, forearms straining. He would not indulge in the solitary vice. Not unless he could disconnect his mind from his body.

Not until he could stop reliving a life—a debauchery—that he didn't think was truly his. That he could not accept could ever have been his.

And if it were? his quisling conscience whispered. If it were all true, if all the sins were his, what then?

Blake found himself thinking quite fondly of the weapons wall.

That wasn't the answer, he told himself. Again, and again, until he started believing it. Suicide was not the answer. Who would destroy the Federation, if he were not the one? Everyone who had the strength was dead, or betrayed, or mindwiped. As he had been. At least once. Probably twice. Terrifyingly, possibly even three times. No way for him to know, no certainties, only doubts and more doubts, crowding into his mind to mill around with the horde of faces who lived there.

His body ached with need, his head pounding, all of it feeding on everything else, consuming him.

He had to stop this. Easier, probably, to destroy the Federation single-handed. His cock pulsed, and an unbidden memory snapped at him, arousing him all the more. He needed—

He needed the things he had been taught to love. Or had been born inclined towards. He tried to think of Jenna, of her beauty, the lushness of her body—and despite himself, he flustered open his trousers and stroked his hand along his cock as the image of Avon burst forth in his mind, naked, hard, dark hair clustered around a perfect cock, the smile—

Oh, God, the smile.

Avon laughing at him, or Avon pitying him. Give Avon control in the bedroom, and there would be no freedom anywhere else, ever. And

there would be no secret too deep to elude Avon, all of it laid out in front of him, sacrificial lamb slaughtered by an amused smile.

Perhaps worse: if Avon were shocked, or disgusted. What price his own self-esteem if even the worldly Avon were appalled?

His hand didn't care that he'd promised himself that there'd be none of that until he could control the images at the back of his mind that festered in sexual heat. His cock cared even less, hard now, demanding, thrusting into his fist, his mind fixing upon the sexual pleasures of the past, hating himself even as he gave in to the basest parts of his own excess of memory. He could relive it all, several times, so many memories—so many lives?—from which to choose, all of it ripe with lust, rich with experience. So many nights, so many men, and he focussed on that, on the nice, normal deviancy of man lying with man, of hard cock, wet mouth, filled to overflowing with the salt tang of another man's passion, think about that, only that, he told himself, clinging to the memory with all the intensity of his fist around his cock, one small voice amongst the many demanding why he was doing this, why this was so imperative, what was making him do this. But the chorus of chaos that was his memories drowned that one voice with a litany of lust, words and images and memories and cocks, and Blake sank beneath the surface of his darkest desires, fucking men he may or may not have known, but remembered, now. Sucking and being sucked, strong hands holding his own confined over his head, his body stretched as his cock was devoured by the tightness of a man's arse.

But then They came, the black uniforms and white coats, the hands, the straps, the prods, the pain, oh, the pain, and there it was too, older memories, true memories, falsehoods, it didn't matter, it was there, bent over a man's lap, huge hand spanking him, fingers shoving into him, cock filling him, hands tied, eyes blinded, the thin lash cutting his back so perfectly, and then he was the wielder of the whip, white skin splitting to red, his cock forcing into the too tight arse, the screams and the cries and the voices—

His cock shrivelled in his hand, and he curled up into a fetal ball, agony crushing his spine as the faces of boys erupted in his mind like overripe melons. "No," he whispered, voice louder and louder and louder until he was shouting his denials at the walls. He had not done that. Could never

have done that. No matter what the Federation had done to him.

Wished, fervently, that he could scrub his soul clean.

Felt instead a compulsion to reach for his cock again, to bury that horror in the pleasure of the moment. Couldn't keep the pictures from his mind, men with men, himself with men, under men, on top of men, inside men, flesh hot and damp around him, and then it threatened to change again, ugliness rising.

He would not let them do this to him. Would not.

His body screamed at him, denial of pleasure turned to pain. He welcomed it, dug the heel of his hand into the softness of his cock, tears springing to his eyes. Tears to scrub him clean. Pain to wash away the stains of memories that were not his own. But nothing to cure the fear that gnawed him, the fear that this was inside him, just like that programming Servalan had had left behind. A sound had controlled him, then, and risked this ship, all of their lives, and the rebellion to boot.

But if this were programmed into him, what would *this* destroy? There were at least eight planets or space stations within easy reach of the *Liberator*, especially if he poured on the speed.

Could they have programmed him to do this? Had that been the worst part of the crime they had framed him with? That it wasn't a frame up at all?

No. He had proof that the boys had gone to the clinic at precisely the same time, when he himself was already in custody.

Which didn't help the boys: who better than Blake to know just how real false memories could be?

Almost without volition, his hand reached downwards once more.

But Orac had said there was no more programming hidden in his mind. So it couldn't be that. Perhaps it was just abstention. Regardless of how fucked-up his mind was, his body hadn't been fucked in a very long time. Unrequited lust, then. That's all it was.

Apart from the dreams of mastery, the dreams of him taking someone and doing unspeakable things to them. The things in his dreams! They made his own simple perversions look healthy.

And perhaps that was the answer. Fight these nightmares, these compulsive desires with desires he knew to be his own, desires that had been

subverted and soiled by the guards in their black uniforms and the puppeteers in their white coats.

Yes. There had to be an answer, and perhaps that was it. Break the conditioning, or the programming, or the effluent of the past, whatever it was, but defeat it not by running away and hiding from sex—just look where that had got him, the latest nightmare making his stomach churn with bile. Find a way to break this compulsion to make others suffer.

And so he thought of Avon, of Avon in his glorious mask of leather and malice that couldn't quite hide the fear and desperation within, and as he thought of Avon, Blake had his answer.

To starve the one desire, he would feed the other. To expiate the lies they made him remember as if it were truth, he would suffer. Penance, and pleasure, combined. Let others control him, let others do to him the things that stretched back farthest in his memory, and that the puppeteers had tried hardest to rip from him. Give himself over, taking control by yielding control under his will, by his own decision. Strength in submission. Yes. That was his answer.

If he had the courage to reach for it. If he had the strength to endure.

Avon's silence was telling, his expression even more so. Well, Blake had wanted to know how he appeared to the others. Proof that even a mirror could lie, or at least soften the ugliest of the facts.

"Yes, Avon?" Blake asked with a touch of loftiness, refusing himself permission to smile as Avon's expression clouded like a winter's day and a nice, clean battle commenced.

"You might try saying that when I point out a more intelligent course of action than whichever hair-brained scheme you've concocted."

The usual answer was poised on the tip of his tongue, when Avon turned away from him, bending over to do something obscure to an access panel. Memory, delusion, nightmare, heart's desire, all or none of these, it hit him hard, his breath sticking in his throat as images, vivid, of heart-stopping clarity, drowned him in lust, in a terrible, consuming, destroying lust. What he could do to Avon, what he wanted to do to Avon, that white skin red-welted with blood, bruises, tender flesh raped and impaled, terrible pictures cascading through him, his body leaping to response.

He slumped then, knees weak, back bowed and

bent, and he wanted to weep and rage and kill. Hate boiled, scalding him, self-loathing unleashed.

Let loose the dogs of war, he thought in the ringing, reverberating dungeon of his skull. Let loose the dogs of war and hope they tear me limb from limb.

He looked up, to see Avon watching him, something terrifyingly akin to pity in those eyes.

No. No pity, not from Avon. Especially not from Avon.

“But I have,” he heard himself say, part of him as confused as Avon, taking longer than the other man to reconnect the interrupted conversation. “You and Cally seem both to think we all need a rest. So, yes, Avon, I agree, a rest would be just the thing. Rest we shall.” But not in peace, not for him. Hell would be a rest-cure after this particular life. “Bacchanalia, I think,” he said, naming a space station that would set Vila’s heart aflutter, knowing he was talking too quickly, sounding nothing like himself, Avon damn near visibly worried. The words poured on, running and gurgling and covering the cracks in his mind. “Yes, Bacchanalia, that should keep Vila happy. There’s supposed to be an Auron enclave there, so that should be a treat for Cally.” As if he were buying the guerrilla an ice-cream. He had to shut up, had to stopper his mouth. “And for you, there’s every debauchery ever thought of by man, so I’m sure someone will have thought of something to tempt even your jaded palate.”

It wasn’t often anyone got to see Kerr Avon agape. Blake swore he could hear Avon’s teeth snap together when he finally shut his mouth.

“And what does Bacchanalia hold for you, Blake?”

“Only what I’ve read, Avon,” Blake told him, his mind finally catching up with its fractured self, “only what I’ve read.”

And with that, Blake abandoned the flight deck and his duty watch, profound silence in his wake.

They’d all been looking at him, of course, since that little...incident on the flight deck. He refused to call it a breakdown, although Avon, surprise surprise, had no such scruples. But it was not a breakdown. Just a...malfunction. A malfunction of the sort he’d dealt with before.

In one of his lives, anyway.

And did it really matter any more which ones were real and which ones constructed? Was any

reality truly certain? Just look at Avon’s version of the flight deck incident and recent events—Gan’s death, he shouted at himself, don’t make that into a false memory—and compare them with Blake’s. Two different, separate realities, with very little in common. Three, if he were to include Rill, and her planet.

Small wonder the nightmares had grown so unbearable after that. Time to think, he’d told himself. Time to deal with the pain, and the guilt, and the misery. And all he’d done was get someone else killed. Another life gone, erased, just like his own.

Enough, and more than enough.

He forced his mind off the well-worn circuit, pushed past all the usual traps and delays, denied to himself that his body was restless, full of compulsive desire, focussed, intently, on the defined goal, the object at hand.

An hour later, Cally and Jenna had teleported down to the rather gaudy space station decorating this sector like tarnished tinsel, Vila had departed amidst a cloud of words clustering like gnats, and Avon—well, Avon hadn’t bothered with going into any great detail.

The sound of Avon’s boots along the corridor had been familiar, Blake waiting patiently to set him down before allowing himself his own brand of freedom.

A raised eyebrow, a very cool, very measuring stare, and then Avon was moving easily behind the teleport console, edging Blake out smoothly. A small glance to make sure that Orac’s key was in place, and then Avon, mellifluous: “You go first.”

The lack of trust stung far more than it ought, well accustomed to it as he was. “So that you can follow as always?” he snapped. “Orac already has the co-ordinates I want.”

And then let Avon see how it felt to be not trusted, Orac instructed to blank the co-ordinates as soon as Blake was down and safe. Then let Avon feel the cut of not being trusted on his own ship, with the only people left in the Galaxy that he dared risk trusting, now that would—

Serve no purpose at all, he told himself glumly. Taking it out on Avon was the surest path to disaster and hardly a wise move if he wanted Avon’s help with Star One.

And hardly conducive to his own mental well-being if he started allowing himself to turn the bitter anger outwards to those who didn’t deserve

it. Correction, he amended, thinking about Avon, to those who hadn't earned *this* particular stew of emotions. There were other people who deserved those.

Funnily enough, the zone wasn't even vaguely seedy, a far cry from the outright sleaze he had been expecting—anticipating, really. He had wanted a nice, long walk down a dark and dangerous station corridor, with shadows and evils lurking in every nook and cranny just waiting to pounce on him and devour him. Instead, there were bright lights, good restaurants, dance clubs, pubs, even, to the bogglement of his brain, a book shop. A quick perusal of the window's contents reassured him no end: this, then was what true moral decay looked like. The darkest of sins catered to with the same bright professionalism as the most mundane appetites for food.

Still, all this cleanliness was off-putting for a man who had very specialised needs this night. Imagination stirred, old vids cohabiting cosily with true memory, dark interrogation rooms, dank cells deep in the bowels of cavernous buildings, and he wished there was a dungeon round here, a dungeon with damp stone walls and clanking metal restraints, faint screams and loud groans.

And if he could get his hands on the puppeteer who had perverted his most cherished perversions like this, then he'd quite happily strangle the bastard. With his own intestines.

The thought cheered him no end, and he might even have whistled, if the nightmares hadn't been hounding his steps. Yes, let Vila have his brothel with a dance floor, tall drinks and taller women: Blake would dearly love to find a wonderfully dank dungeon, complete with man in black.

He made do with a very well appointed domicile, a huge door opening on a plush lobby that was unnervingly similar to any hotel chain, the main differences being in the near nudity of the bellhops, and the very discreet, very pricey, list of services posted in florid script in a red-lit display window.

The desk clerk had the same bland unctuousness of a million others, his polite impassivity rendered bizarre by the "Yes, sir?" as he looked up from a catalogue of restraints and manacles.

"I'm looking for..."

Redemption. Freedom from nightmares. Penance. And the rebirth of desires too long denied. As the silence stretched, the man behind the

desk looked at him with more interest, eyebrows arching, all too reminiscent of Avon. "We cater to every taste here, sir, without judgement."

But it was judgement he wanted, and absolution, or at least a pause in the relentless guilt.

He kicked himself for behaving like a teenager, and stated his needs, cold, precise, distanced.

The man behind the desk smiled. "Certainly, sir. That would be our back room you would be looking for." A standard debit sheet flourished under Blake's nose for a second, removed along with the untraceable cash chit he had brought with him.

"Sir, we maintain the highest security and discretion here. There really is no need to go to all the trouble and added expense of anonymous chits."

"Yes, yes, and the authorities couldn't care less who does what to whom. I am aware of that." He was aware of other things too. Avon's dark eyes, Avon's darker mind, all that cleverness, bent in Blake's direction. Oh, no, he wanted nothing traceable. Not for this. Not when it could well be Avon on his trail.

"Well," it was the first time Blake had actually heard someone harrumph, "everything is in order, sir. This is your locker number, standard print lock—" a fetching smile, underladen with the heaviness of sex, "keys are such an inconvenience at times like these. If you'll go straight down that corridor there..."

Blake left him still giving instructions, the plain corridor beckoning like a Siren. Quite a distance, and then there was the marching phalanx of doors, each numbered, each with its blue glow of print lock at its side. Barely larger than a closet, too small for anything but the most uncomfortable of kneetremblers, Blake stripped, taking his time, thinking, thinking, every garment another thought, another memory, another face. Trying not to think too deeply, he made the necessary preparations, opening himself, making sure that he was already well lubricated and ready for even the hastiest of scenes. He denied himself the discretion and psychological prop of the small white towel hanging there, stood naked to palm the lock, walked naked along the corridor that stretched forever. No one else there, not yet, alone, the walls pressing in on him, the carpet pressing up into him through the soles of his feet. He could feel the passage of air on his skin, the pulse of his blood,

the working of his lungs. Was aware of everything, and nothing, and all of it commingled.

Noises, now, very faint, muffled and muted, brightening suddenly, fading again quickly. Brightening again, as Blake opened the door, fading away to scant murmurs as he walked inside, and closed the world out behind him.

Almost dark in here, the light diffused, cold-light sticks mainly, from the look of it. Portable light, then, nothing permanent but the lights over the bar itself. A light moving around the perimeter, groups and couples and solos illuminated long enough to tantalise, too briefly to arouse. But so many people—the room not crowded, bodies free to press tightly together only if they so chose, but there were still so many people here. Hundreds, he estimated. Hundreds. One, perhaps, for each of his sins. And not one of them even vaguely childlike. Every one of them a man, every kind of man imaginable, from bears to delicate eyelash-fluttering ‘damsels’ with sharp-toothed clamps hanging painfully from rouged nipples.

A deep breath. Another. Courage almost failing him, need spurring him, cheeks reddened with an embarrassment he told himself was absurd, Blake walked forward from the comforting dark by the door, into the mottled light of this group of strangers.

On his left, dark hair, pale skin, an arrogance of stance, and it reminded him so much of Avon. Temptation, that, to have ‘Avon’ here, the only way for Blake to have the man without having his heart ripped from his chest and fed to him.

The bar, first, crossing a roomful of hands, and mouths, and dicks. Touching him, pinching him, slapping his arse as he walked past, his nakedness a very specific declaration here.

Like bees to honey, he thought to himself, taking a glass of some sort of alcohol from the nearly clothed barman. He looked up, forgetting to hide the honesty of his eyes, saw someone gulp, and turn, and leave. Or perhaps it's moths to a flame. One hand, sliding up the back of his thigh, up over the curve of his arse, into the hollow of his back, up to the planes of his shoulder.

Blake didn't turn to look, but spread his legs, invitation, offer, confession.

“My room. Now.”

An attractive voice, reminding him of Avon, but coarser, crueller. Not quite close enough.

“No,” he said, loudly, to the man behind him.

“I said,” repeated, voice soft and dangerous, more Avonish than before, the timbre not quite right, but close enough for Blake's needs, “my room. NOW.”

Ah, but Avon would never have raised his voice like that. Had never needed to. Sibilant hisses were more his style, elegant insults, decorous malice, all of them drawing blood.

“No,” Blake repeated, shrugging the wandering hand off. He turned, at last, facing the blond man, making a show of his own strength and power. “You're not what I'm looking for.”

Fuming, one backhanded slap to Blake's face for pride's sake, and the blond left, Blake almost smiling, hand going to the print on his face. A nice sting, but the man's anger was all wrong, making the pain an act of violence, a million miles from what Blake wanted.

He went back to his drink, and waited.

Waited for so long that desperation began licking at his toes. Waited until the blond and his chums departed. Waited until the music changed, waited until the mood changed. Waited until he felt a presence behind him.

Blake started to turn, was stopped. Hand heavy on his shoulder, soft leather, so black against the space-pallor of his skin. Avonesque. Intriguing, appealing. Curse and benediction in one.

All right, he confessed to himself, hating himself for this. He was supposed to be here to exorcise his demons, not invite a new one to move in and set up home.

The hand flexed, and a tongue laved the nape of his neck, and the hand moved round to twist his nipple, as if this man knew exactly how much pressure would hurt him, and precisely how much hurt pleased him. The black leather glove glittered in the light, as chrome studs caught and refracted the light, breaking the light into tiny pieces. The leather stroked across his mouth, his tongue reaching out to taste it, the smell of it washing over him, so familiar and so strange.

Was there any point in denying it?

And wasn't it better than the little horrors the Federation had left behind?

All right, he told himself, relaxing at last into self-knowledge. So it's Avon I want.

Want?

All right, so it's Avon I need. Avon, and Avon's punishment.

Avon's punishment, only because it was the

door to Avon's forgiveness. For if Avon could forgive him, then surely he could forgive himself?

"Please," he whispered to that leather clad hand. "Please."

And was rewarded, by the heaviness of hand descending upon his naked arse.

"Yes," he said, loudly, drawing attention to himself and whichever man it was behind him, setting the rules for this encounter. "More."

He got what he asked for. The leather hand slapped him again, and he could feel his blood rushing to the stinging pain of his backside, and blood racing to his groin, his cock growing heavy, his balls shivering with the force of the blows to his arse.

"More," he said again, and was silenced, leather fingers stuffed into his mouth, two fingers, three, his mouth working on them like a cock, making them wet and slick and gleaming in the low light. More slaps against his arse, then the wet fingers were taken from his mouth and slapped against him, then shoved, hard, into his mouth. Taken from him, and shoved, harder still, into his arse.

Blake bellowed with pain, his cock rushing erect, his nipples hard and aching, his mouth agape with the need to be filled. The fingers inside him moved, in and out, twisting round, finding his prostate and rubbing it, excruciating pleasure blended with the exquisite pain, the chrome studs excitingly smooth little bumps stimulating every fragment they touched.

He was panting, making animal sounds deep in his throat, all of it adding to the humiliation of his need. He could envision himself in his mind's eye, a big man, pressed up against the bar, naked, flesh so pale, the gloved hand so very black against him, there, where it disappeared inside his flesh. Every move danced along his spine, every twist of those fingers set him on fire, every pleasure was punishment, every punishment, pleasure.

Perfect. It was absolutely perfect.

Another hand on him, this one ungloved, and Blake shivered with the awareness that he had no way of knowing if this hand belonged to the man fingerfucking him, or if this was another stranger, another unknown man using him. A cock was pressing into his flank, moist and hard, pushing against him until it was pressing at his hole where the fingers filled him.

He shuddered then, with the fantasy of being fucked by hand and cock, of two different men, two

complete strangers debauching him, debasing him, controlling him.

The fingers in his arse were tugging at him, edging him backwards, and every step he took rubbed the fingers against his prostate, made him even more aware that he was under someone else's control.

A red haired man came into view, smooth chested, big cock, erect, so much darker than the rest of his skin, an angry, hungry red. The man slapped him, across the face, a droplet of blood oozing from the corner of his lips. Slowly, savouring his penance, Blake licked it away. Saw the redhead smile, no, not smile, but uncover his teeth, predator licking his lips in anticipation of his prey.

Blake groaned aloud.

Moaned, piteously, as the fingers were pulled from his arse, suddenly bereft, his muscles clenching down on an aching emptiness.

Someone started to turn him around, to face the man who had been fingerfucking him, and at the last moment, Blake closed his eyes.

The fantasy was what he needed, not the truth.

Far more painful than the slapping, stinging blows across his backside, far more hurtful than harsh fingers pulling and twisting his nipples, the truth was there, in his mind.

He needed the fantasy, because he needed this man to be Avon.

He moaned again, and there was enough agony in that one sound that all the hands stopped hurting him, making the pain inside all the worse. Nothing to detract from it, nothing to distract him from it. Just the inescapable knowledge, that he wanted this to be Avon's hand upon him. Avon, inside him. Avon, controlling him and punishing him, and stifling the sounds of his own screams.

No.

Not that.

He wanted desperately for it to be purely lust, carnal desire stoking his need for Avon. But it was something else, something other.

No.

Not that, please not that, he whispered in his mind, his own memories, true, false and suspect, drowned out by the barrage of memories of Avon.

Oh, how cruel, that he had thought to know himself on this. Blinded by lust, driven to distraction by the nightmare his sex dreams had become, chased all over the galaxy by the Federation, he had

been so busy fighting for his life he hadn't noticed what was happening right under his nose.

Small wonder everything always came back to Avon. Small wonder it was Avon's forgiveness he craved, Avon's approval he sought, Avon's disapproval that stung so.

Love will do that to a man.

He almost laughed, but bottled it up inside for fear that the laughter could too easily turn to tears. He was too near the edge, and now he couldn't even guess what had driven him there.

Like a lifebelt to a drowning man, the kiss descended upon him, wet mouth open against his, and he welcomed it, sucking the other man's tongue inside, concentrating fiercely on the sensation.

Felt something tear deep within his mind, and didn't care. Let the pretense begin. Let this be Avon. Just for tonight. Let this be Avon, and hang the consequences, because for this, Avon would surely hang him.

He started to wrap his arms around the man kissing him, and changed his mind, sinking deeply into the old memories, memories that went back, he thought, to long before the men in the white coats had raped his mind. He put his arms behind his back, clasping his hands together, and groaned into the mouth kissing him when someone restrained those hands, a thong going round and round his wrists until he couldn't possibly free himself.

Perfect.

He spread his legs, and the invitation was accepted, hands on his arse, fingers in him, another hand stretching his balls to the edge of pain, another hand holding his cock steady until a mouth could take it, hot wetness, hot sting of hand on his arse, and there, perfectly, suddenly, the heat of a cock thrusting into him, a man taller than Blake himself, lifting him up onto his toes with every deep thrust.

Someone tied a blindfold around him, and Blake opened his eyes to near darkness. If he looked down, he could see his own body, and brown hair bobbing as a mouth sucked him, an erect cock standing on his right, waiting its turn in his arse, the hard cock of the redhead who had slapped him, but where—yes, there, on the left, black leather gloves, black leather thong tied round cock and balls, other blackness covering paleness, such a beautiful cock standing upright.

As he'd been through hell, it was surely only fair

that he be given this heaven.

The man with the leather gloves had dark hair, was slim enough to pass as Avon, and happily, Blake could only see him from the waist down.

A savage thrust from the cock in his arse lifted him right up onto his toes, and he felt the swell and rush, semen washing his insides, making him slick and ready for the next man. Barely a pause, and the first man was gone, and the man on Blake's right disappeared, a cock shoving into him again, Blake stumbling under the onslaught.

It was the leather gloves that caught him, steadied him.

Just like Avon had, that day on the flight deck.

Definitely heaven. Or if not, then certainly an acceptable purgatory.

The man he had decided could be Avon for the night was standing in front of him now, and Blake's cock had been left alone, the man plastering himself down Blake's front, his mouth kissing Blake, his cock pressing against Blake's, and every time the man fucking Blake thrust forward, Blake's cock rubbed harder against this Avon. On and on it went, until Blake was drowning in pleasure, and the man behind him came inside him and was replaced, and this Avon reached and stretched Blake even farther open, one finger slipping inside to fuck him along with the cock.

Blake gasped, his head dropping back, his arse stretched exquisitely far. It hurt, oh, it hurt, but the pain was beautiful, tingling his spine, putting his cock on the brink of orgasm. A mouth fastened on his nipple, sucking and then biting, laving and biting again. Blake glanced down, caught only the quickest glimpse of dark hair, and then he closed his eyes: he didn't dare look, didn't dare prove that this was not Avon.

No. Let it be Avon. For tonight.

Avon was sucking on his nipples, his finger still inside, stretching him so wide, and Blake imagined Avon's hand there, black against his arse, that finger pressed on one side by Blake's own body, on the other by the cock fucking him. Felt, with joy, the pressure of teeth on his flesh, the pain quite perfect, felt, too soon, the man fucking him orgasm, filling him, but leaving him still aching, still empty, because it was Avon he wanted to fuck him—fuck him hard, ruthlessly, making Blake his domain.

So quickly it dizzied him, he was shoved, flung face down over the height of a bar stool, a cock thrust into his mouth. He swallowed it down, as far

as it could go, and felt it begin to piston in and out of his throat, every thrust inward tantalising him with the clinging kiss of the man's balls against his chin. On it went, Blake sucking for all he was worth, near gagging, unable to control even when he breathed. That control was given over to the cock fucking his face, the cock that had the sharp edge of a leather thong swaying against his chin.

The cock shoved into him, stayed there, holding his breath for him, and a strap crashed into him, lengthwise, snapping against his bound wrists and his exposed arse, and Blake knew it was this man wielding the strap, this man giving him pain and pleasure, punishment and redemption. Avon, for tonight, giving him everything, being everything.

He wanted so much to tell Avon he loved him.

And then the cock left his mouth, and the heavy strap made love to his arse, and his thighs, and his back. It lasted a lifetime, until he was giddy with the pain and the relief. Someone kicked his legs wider apart, and his arsehole was visible, unprotected, and he shuddered as a hand came down on him there, the fingertips, that leather, hitting his balls. He very nearly blacked out, from the pain, from the pleasure, but the hand was stroking him again, then hitting him, pain and pleasure interspersed with pleasure and pain, strength in that hand, power in the way the man—this Avon—handled him, more power still in Blake for yielding.

Another blow, staggering pain, but he took it, took it deep inside, and held it, and conquered it, made it his plaything, and the next blow was pain beyond pain, purest pleasure, his nerves incredibly alive, his mind filled with nothing but sensation and the thought that this was Avon, his Avon, doing this to him, giving him this, exorcising the demons.

When it came, the cock entering him with terrible slowness was almost a disappointment. There was no pain, save the sweet sting of abraded flesh where others had fucked him before, but he was slick inside, slick with other men's cum, and this Avon of his slid in so easily, his thick cock an undiluted pleasure, and in that, there was pain.

It was so perfect, to have Avon fuck him like this, bound, and blindfolded, and now he was gagged by a glove pressed into his mouth. His tongue fondled the leather of the glove, found the studs, tasted the lingering heat of the hand that had been encased in the leather. The cock was all the way in him now, crisp hair pressing against his

cheeks, the soft hair on this Avon's thighs smooth against his own inner thighs, there, where he was sensitive. He could feel every movement, could feel the weight of the cock moving so gently inside him.

And that gentleness, that tenderness, from this Avon, was the sweetest hurt of all.

Blake gave himself over to it utterly, losing himself, gratefully, in the slow plundering of his own body. He smiled, as this Avon began at last to thrust faster, to fuck him harder, and he appreciated this Avon all the more. The force of the fucking drove him forward, his own erection pressed hard and fast against the flat side of the stool cushion, that cool leather hard against his own heated hardness, and the cock inside him claiming him, owning him, controlling even the pleasure of his own cock.

He could feel orgasm building, Avon's cock pounding into him, feel them both hurrying onwards, hurtling into pleasure, and he needed more, needed that one last thing—

This Avon, fucking him, leaned down onto him, the weight of his body crushing Blake's bound wrists into the small of his back, and the combined weight of this Avon and his own body pressed Blake's cock hard against the bar stool, the pain sharp enough to bring tears to his eyes, and still the pleasure was building, and building, and he felt his Avon erupt inside him, heat splashing deep inside, his own cock grinding into the unyielding hardness of the stool, and he still needed more, just a bit, just more and—

Teeth sank into his neck, and the pain screamed through him with his orgasm, blinding him more than the blindfold ever could, draining him body and mind.

All of him was limp, cock and body and mind, Blake hanging over the bar stool like an abandoned rag doll. Sweat and semen pooled on him, and under him, and he wanted to stay there forever.

But hands were on him again, removing his blindfold, exposing his eyes to the sight of a multitude of legs and cocks and bums, Blake keeping his eyes lowered, not wanting to break the fantasy yet. Behind him, someone untied his hands, and someone was helping him to his feet. Blake shut his eyes, trying to hold onto the dream of Avon doing this for him, of Avon doing this to him, but nothing lasts forever.

When he looked, brown eyes met his, beautiful brown eyes, a mouth more beautiful still, but it

wasn't Avon. Close enough on the surface, but a million miles away in what really mattered. The eyes were smiling at him, the man—not his Avon, not any Avon, just a nameless stranger—leaning forward, using his white teeth to pull the glove from Blake's mouth, coming back for a kiss, deep, and pleasant.

"You certainly know—"

Blake kissed him hard, to shut him up, to stop him from saying anything that would destroy the fantasy any more.

Turned away quickly, so quickly that only a fool wouldn't understand, and it seemed that even pretend-Avons were no fools. Not looking around him, ignoring all the men looking at him, talking to him, talking about him, Blake walked quickly from the room, walked down the long corridor, pace increasing as the corridor grew absurdly long, almost running by the time he reached his cubicle, hand slapping against the lock, and then he was inside, propped against the wall, encased in a room small enough to be a tomb.

All alone, Roj Blake stood there, and concentrated fiercely on not crying.

Hours later, and he was clean, and clothed, and there was nothing whatsoever about him to reveal what he had spent his evening doing. Nothing to show how many cocks he'd had inside, nor how many cocks he'd sucked. Nothing at all, he hoped, to show the dreams that had been born and died in a single night.

The dream was dead, the pretence past as soon as he'd opened his eyes in that semi-dark room and seen a face not Avon's. But the knowledge lingered, laughing, mocking him from the corners of his mind.

At least the voices had quieted, and the compulsive need: small mercies, perhaps, but enough, for now. He was quite sure the nightmares wouldn't return, at least for a while; when he thought of sex, he thought of Avon. And who would be surprised by Avon monopolising something, or someone?

Those three boys might still be screaming somewhere in the dim recesses of his mind, but he couldn't hear them for the pounding of his own heart and the memory of Avon's voice, and the rare, carefully hoarded memory of the very few times Avon had laughed.

There was no one else in the teleport room, only Orac, flickering away to itself. To the flight deck, then, Blake not quite ready for the too familiar

confines of his own room.

Every single step reawakened a twinge of pleasure or discomfort, a reminder of what he'd done. The bite on his shoulder itched, and his cock and balls ached in a way he enjoyed, the echo of good, rough sex, the sort he'd always liked. The sort he'd probably always liked.

But the lack of certainty had lost a certain amount of sting, stolen away by the new certainty that had avalanched over him tonight. Avon.

Of course, he had half expected Avon to be on the flight deck.

"Anyone else back up, or am I the first?" he asked, very pleased with his perfectly casual tone of voice.

"You're not the first back, and yes, the two of us are the only ones on board."

He should, he knew, probably make a fairly nasty dig about how short a time Avon had needed, but even so peripheral a mention of sex with Avon was not a good idea. Not right now, so soon after.

He saw Avon watching him out of the corner of his eye, ignored him as he was his habit, and threw himself down onto the flight couch. His body protested, pain echoing, a dull thrum through him, and his eyes closed, just for a second.

Even before he looked up, he knew what he'd see. Avon, looking at him. Avon, clever, clever Avon, reading him like a book.

Well, let him make of it what he would. It would do no harm (no? a hysterical voice in his mind demanded, laughing madly at the thought of Avon being harmless if he knew such things) for Avon to guess that Blake had indulged in sex. Might even put an idea or two in his mind if he thought that Blake had been well fucked.

Changed his mind immediately, when he saw knowledge begin to darken Avon's eyes.

He should have gone straight back to his room after all. But he didn't dare leave the flight deck too soon, Avon scenting weakness like a wolf in spring. So instead of fleeing, he snatched up a batch of flimsies from the table, made an issue out of reading them. Promptly dropped one, and cursed his clumsiness even as he stretched awkwardly to reach it.

He grabbed at his shirt as he felt it slip, but knew immediately that he'd been that fraction too late. The itch of the bite turned to the burning heat of Avon's stare. Unwillingly, Blake turned round to

look into Avon's all-too knowing eyes. All he could read was that Avon *knew*, that his secret was in Avon's hands. It was impossible to fathom what Avon was going to do, or even whether Avon was disgusted or aroused or simply viciously amused.

And then Avon smiled.

Blake still couldn't read Avon, not clearly. Feared that not only did Avon know his dirty little sex secret, but that it was only a matter of time before Avon knew that Blake loved him, in spite of himself—in spite of them both.

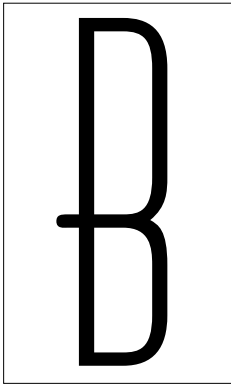
He swallowed, hard, and willed himself to look away disdainfully, as if unruffled by Avon seeing

something so minor as a mark of passion. But a love bite was different from the circle mark of teeth, and the telltale of blood. Avon knew. Avon would always know.

So. The nightmares had been silenced, for now. The compulsion to hurt and destroy had been sated, for now. The screams of the three boys had been silenced. And in their place, there was Avon, and love.

He had traded, then, three small demons for the devil himself.

Turning back to his search for Docholli, Blake waited for hell to begin.



And now the tables are turned. 'The Night Watch' pairs Avon and Blake once more, or perhaps that should be Blake and Avon, as it is the former who dominates this story and gets what he wants. Ah, but what hell will Blake endure now that he's tasted of an addictive, forbidden pleasure named Avon?

lake walked slowly through the shadows of the corridor, surrounded by the quiet of ship's night. In his mind something whispered, an awareness of Avon like a faint sound that grew louder as it drew him on. At the entrance to the flight deck, he paused, rolling the bottle he held between his hands. Illumination spilled into the corridor; the flight deck was brightly lit, as Avon preferred when he was working.

THE NIGHT WATCH

ERSZEBET BATHORY

He looked inside. Avon was standing at the weaponry station, his back to Blake, head bent in concentration. He was resplendent in solitude, clad in a black leather tunic, his trousers closely fitted to his long, slender legs and tucked neatly into black boots just below the knee. Blake's hand tightened on the neck of the bottle.

As he strolled onto the flight deck, Avon looked up.

"This is my watch, Blake."

"So?" Blake found a clean glass someone had left on a table. He went down to the couch and poured himself a drink.

"So I'd like the flight deck to myself, if you don't mind."

"You spend too much time by yourself, Avon," Blake said genially.

"That's your opinion, is it?"

"Very much so." Blake raised the bottle.

"Cerastean brandy. It's quite good, and quite rare. Care to join me?"

"I like to keep a clear head." Avon seated himself at the console. "I shouldn't think you'd want to corrode your mind any further, after what the Federation has done to it."

Blake shrugged and sipped his drink. "No harm in relaxing a bit now and then."

"Is that what you call it?"

"You might try it some time," Blake said. He stretched out on the couch. "You might enjoy the novelty."

Avon smiled at him as if greatly amused. "I wouldn't concern myself if I were you. I have my own ways of relaxing."

"I'm sure of it."

"An uninterrupted night watch can be very pleasant, for example." Avon turned his attention back to the weaponry controls. He set aside a cover

plate and examined the circuitry beneath, then picked up an instrument and began to make delicate adjustments.

Blake rested his drink on his knee, rubbing a thumb over the soft weave of his brown trousers. His mouth burned a little from the aromatic brandy. As he watched Avon, the careful movements of his hands, the calm intentness of his face, Blake barely noticed the whispering in his mind.

"What are you working on?"

"I am fine-tuning this launch relay for quicker response. The reflexes of humans are slower than those of the aliens who built this ship. As you insist on manning the weaponry stations with half-wits, it would be a good idea to adjust the computers to compensate."

"A faster response is a good idea no matter who is operating the systems."

"I'm glad you approve."

"Will it take much longer?"

"About half an hour, if you let me get on with it."

Blake sat up and pulled off his green leather tunic, draping it across the back of the couch. He loosened the cord fastening the neck of his brown shirt and lay back again, taking another sip of his drink.

A short time later, Blake glanced up at the sound of Avon's voice.

"Zen," Avon rapped out, "confirm that the battle computers have integrated the new launch relay settings."

"Confirmed."

Avon nodded his satisfaction. He leaned back in the seat and gazed at the main screen with its display of deep space.

"All finished?" Blake asked.

Avon went on staring at the screen. "For the moment. We'll need to test it, of course. The others should be present for that."

"Why don't you come down and sit with me, then."

"I prefer the view from this position," Avon said coldly.

"Avon, come and sit with me," Blake repeated, lowering his voice slightly. He waited. Avon rose slowly to his feet. "That's it. Come down here."

"No." Avon looked at Blake, startled. He staggered and grabbed the edge of the console.

"Blake, what are you doing?"

"I'm not doing anything."

"The hell you're not. Whatever it is, stop it *now*."

Blake was smiling now, his voice still low and rich. "Avon, you sound frightened."

"Only disgusted." Avon's body quivered and he gripped the instrument panel as if to steady himself against a wave of vertigo. "It must be some sort of telekinesis," he said with difficulty, "since whatever it is you're doing, it's not affecting my mind."

Blake felt the whispering grow stronger, awakening every nerve, as it touched what it had been seeking. He focused again on Avon.

Avon's knees gave way, and he fell against the console. He leaned there, panting slightly. "Blake, stop it."

"Did that affect your mind, Avon?"

Avon glared at him. "You know what it did."

"Straight to the pleasure center." Blake smiled. "Fascinating, isn't it?"

It was easier to reach Avon with his mind now, and Blake watched him gasp as another surge of feeling rushed through him, then dissipated instantly. The whispering in Blake's mind coalesced into pure sensation, a vital, shifting tension. The link had formed.

"It's not—" Avon stopped, shuddering. "It's too focused, it can't be telepathy."

"No."

"Direct influence on brain centers..." He shuddered again, shook his head to clear it. "This has something to do with your visit to Cerastes, doesn't it? I knew you shouldn't have been allowed to go down there alone."

"They did insist that only one man come down. Not surprising, really, for people who sell highly advanced weapons to anyone who can afford them." Blake shrugged. "As I recall, you agreed I should be the one to do the deal for the components we needed."

"You're not psi-developed." Avon eyed him suspiciously. "How are you doing it, Blake? They gave you some sort of psionic amplifier, didn't they?"

"You're stalling, Avon. I believe I asked you to come and sit here."

Blake watched Avon move toward him, step by reluctant step, his eyes black with shock. The light caressed his dark hair and the warmed leather that clung to his body. Blake felt a thrill of arousal along the length of his cock, and deep in his mind. As Avon neared the couch, he suddenly lunged at Blake. Blake made a quick gesture, and Avon fell

heavily, crying out in pain.

"Don't try that again."

"If you're going to kill me, Blake, just get it over with. You said it would be ironic if the next death were mine. I hope you're enjoying the irony."

"Oh yes, you were charming about Gan's being killed. I thought about that while I was on Ceras-tes."

"I thought you were going to confine your attempts at thinking to your cabin."

"Get up and come over here."

"No," Avon said, but even as he said it, he got to his feet and dragged himself to the couch, sinking down next to Blake.

"Look at me."

Avon turned to Blake, his face drained of color.

"What the hell did they do to you back there?"

"It's not what they did, Avon, it's what they *undid*. When the criminotherapists go to work on a man, they implant phobias, distortions, repressions... The Cerasteans simply gave me what I wanted."

"Which seems to be me."

Blake slid closer to Avon and reached out, his fingers tracing the arch of Avon's lips. Avon flinched.

"Cally will pick up what you're doing," he said harshly. "She'll be down here any minute, with the others."

"I doubt it. The techniques I learned on Cerastes have nothing in common with Auron telepathy. She won't notice a thing. Anyway, they're all asleep, and I guarantee they will be for some time."

"So much for your noble façade," Avon spat.

"Be quiet."

Avon tried to speak. He stared at Blake in horror as his efforts failed to produce the slightest sound.

Blake pressed a fingertip against Avon's mouth. The soft lips yielded to him. Wetness, his finger inside Avon's mouth, inside Avon... Blake closed his eyes for a moment. "Don't even try to move unless I tell you to," he murmured. Slowly, he moved his hand to the back of Avon's neck. "You've been pushing at me for a long time, Avon. I've decided to push back." He looked into Avon's eyes, extending fine tendrils into the other man's consciousness, finding the places where a touch would evoke ecstasy or insane fear. Or the most important thing: submission. The places that Avon considered central to himself—these were the places whose invasion would leave him utterly without will. They

were well-defended. Blake thoroughly enjoyed the search and the little challenges of unlocking the doors. And when Avon began to shiver as Blake proceeded with his exploration, Blake sent a silent command through the strengthening mental link, and the shivering stopped.

He returned to the pleasure center, and sent the slightest touch of his mind across it like a light breath. Avon's eyelids fluttered, his lips parting soundlessly. Blake leaned forward and kissed his mouth, licking Avon's lips slowly, then battenning on him, thrusting his tongue into the unresisting mouth. He bit into Avon's lower lip, sucked at his mouth, ground against it, his breath coming faster with the rising sensation of his own power. Then he pulled back, eyes narrowed as he regarded the other man. Avon looked back at him, eyes glazed, forehead sheened with sweat. Blake ran a finger over Avon's mouth, traced his cheekbone, then leaned forward and let his tongue follow the track his finger had taken, down to Avon's neck, where he fastened his teeth again and slowly increased the pressure. He stopped just short of breaking skin, and began to suck. A muffled groan escaped the other man. Blake drew back and examined the purpling bruise he had left. Then he cradled Avon's head in his hands and kissed him again, his cock swelling rapidly as he tested the resistance seething beneath the enforced immobility. He exerted just a little more control, sensing the currents of Avon's will and bisecting the delicate links between thought and action as if they were golden threads stretched fine.

He moved still closer, unfastened Avon's tunic, pulled it off him and tossed it aside. Running his palms over Avon's bare chest, Blake forced him flat on his back on the couch. Avon stared up at him, pupils fully dilated, fathomless black. "You know," Blake said casually, "I could make you kneel to me on the flight deck in front of all of the others. How would you like that, Avon? It would be interesting to find out." The dark eyes flickered. Blake sent a small needle of thought to the pleasure center, and Avon shuddered in his hands. "As easy as that," Blake said, moving his hand downward. "You're ready for me, aren't you." He kneaded Avon's cock through the black trousers. It was hard, tight against the cloth. "I wonder how much of this is a result of the...technique," he mused. "I suspect you'd respond even if I left your pleasure centers completely untouched. They're useful for now,

though. As a sort of spice. I like to see you enjoying yourself.”

Again he sent the fine, singing wire of his thought into that subtle dark place in Avon's mind, and Avon's eyes clouded as his cock pulsed against Blake's hand. He opened Avon's trousers and fondled the naked flesh, running a thumb up and down the warm length of it. He tongued Avon's nipple, moved slowly over his chest, leaving a line of small, reddened bites as he went, keeping his hand wrapped tightly around Avon's cock. He felt the fine tremors of resistance in Avon's thighs as he lay across them, the pulse beating rapidly in Avon's neck under his lips. His own cock throbbed painfully; he pressed it against Avon's groin and gasped, his composure suddenly turning brittle. Pulling the other man with him, he sat up. “Get down on the floor,” he whispered.

He watched as Avon slid down and knelt between his spread thighs, and sent the next order without speaking. Avon's hands went to the fastening of Blake's trousers, opened them. Then there was a flare of defiance. Blake sought for the core, where Avon's voice screamed silently *I AM*. The shields around that core had already been torn by Blake's earlier probing; now he pushed at them again, ignoring the waves of terror that came at him from Avon, and broke through. As the barriers gave way, the rapture of penetration into Avon's mind nearly made him lose control over his own faculties, nearly drowned his own senses. He balanced himself carefully, steadying his grip. Then he summoned Avon forward. The dark head bent, and Avon opened his mouth. Blake pushed his cock inside, groaning as the touch of Avon's tongue on the head of his cock sent heat rushing through him, redoubled by the shock of Avon's reaction reflected back to him through his lock into Avon's psyche. He could feel his own mouth invaded, filled with hot flesh that pressed insistently against the back of his throat. For a moment he panicked, lost in a fugue of merging sensations; implacable hands clasped the back of his head, shoving him down onto the thick, rigid cock. Abruptly he was back in his own head, looking down at Avon, and he knew that what held Avon in place was his own focused will; his hands dug into the couch as he forced Avon down with his mind. He felt Avon fight to pull away, felt his desperation as his muscles refused to respond, felt the horror of his utter helplessness. He moved his hands to Avon's

shoulders, his hair, stroking, caressing freely the man who had always held himself so distant. He surged into Avon's mouth, half-aware of his own guttural sounds.

For a long time he kept his cock in that mouth, sometimes resting, then thrusting again, sliding against the back of Avon's throat. Through the link, he could feel a dull ache slowly spreading through Avon as Blake held him still, the sharp pain when Avon tried to resist or move. Each time that happened, his own cock burgeoned further, and his hands clenched spasmodically as he lashed at Avon through the link. From time to time he pricked at Avon's pleasure center, making Avon jerk against his paralysis, keeping his body aroused and sensitized in spite of the increasing pain. The confused sensations were steadily weakening Avon; Blake felt his disorientation, his struggle to retain the ability to think. Blake found the place in Avon's mind that would blot that out as well, and left it untouched. Leaving this much to Avon made things more interesting.

Finally he allowed Avon to lift his head away. His cock swayed, dripping with Avon's saliva. Blake dragged him back up onto the couch, and roughly pulled off his boots and trousers. He stretched out full length, lying heavily on the warm, naked body; he spat into his hand and closed it around Avon's cock. “I won't *make* you enjoy this, Avon,” he whispered, “but you will enjoy it anyway. All I am doing now is keeping you still. You like that too, don't you. It's the knife-edge, and you're very close. Look at me.” The blank eyes fixed on him as he squeezed Avon's cock in his rhythmically moving fist, his thumb gliding back and forth over the head. Through the link, he sensed Avon's feverish response, felt every wave of compulsion to writhe under the merciless handling, and restrained him utterly, preventing any movement. He experienced the maddening frustration as if it were his own, and he rubbed himself luxuriously against Avon's slender thigh, riding the swells of sensation that rolled back through him, quickening the pace until they were overwhelming. Suddenly Avon's eyes rolled back, and his cum spurted over Blake's fingers in long, slow pulses. Blake shuddered at the agony echoing back through the link.

He scraped up the spattered, milky fluid and slicked it onto his own cock, coated with the half-dried juices of fellatio. Turning Avon face-down, he

stroked the smooth buttocks, probed between them, worked dripping fingers into the small opening until it was slippery with Avon's semen and his own spit. Then he lifted Avon's hips and thrust himself into the paralyzed body in a single hard stroke, letting out a strangled cry as he felt *himself* forced open, as he forced Avon open. He separated his own sensations ruthlessly from Avon's, and his cock gouged into the tight, resisting passage. Raking his fingers down Avon's sides, he drove forward, effortlessly maintaining his hold on the mind and body of the other. His instincts had taken over, and ruled through the fully opened psychic link as surely as his body and his cock ruled Avon now, his hands ranging greedily over the pliant, sweat-soaked form that he clutched to himself. He felt his own orgasm building, and with faint surprise he felt Avon feeling it. He drew his own sensations back through Avon's mind—his own sensations, but distorted, redolent of the unique psyche of Avon as it attempted still to assert itself, however weakly, clinging to its individuality. This was even more precious to him than the chords of his own body—this faint, insistent cry that was Avon. He heard himself panting as he twisted violently, welded to the trapped body, sucking at the trapped mind, a vampire long deprived and starving. "You... I want You... Avon..." and his orgasm ripped through him. He rocked Avon's body against his own as he convulsed, jet after jet of cum going deep into Avon; he struggled against blackout, struggled to keep control over the link. If he lost his hold now, at his most vulnerable, Avon might succeed in throwing him off.

When the spasms eased and died away, he was alone in his mind. He tried to reach into Avon's psyche and found he was exhausted; he could not feel Avon at all, except to sense dully that the man was conscious. Slowly, he lifted himself from the limp body and fastened his clothing. Avon did not move. Blake went down on one knee beside him.

"Look at me," he said softly.

Avon kept his face turned away.

"Avon, can you speak?"

"Yes." The voice was barely audible.

"Can you get up?"

Silence. Blake leaned close. "I enjoyed it, Avon."

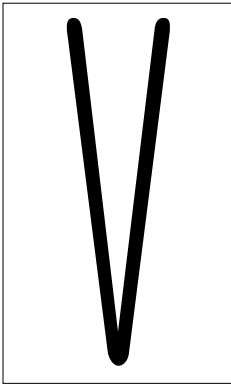
"I know."

Blake rose to his feet, looking down at him. It was time to complete the act. "You will not remember any of this," he said, "except that I had you, and you wanted it. You asked for it...you reveled in it."

He took the chain from around his neck, the long, fine chain with its small yellow crystal that had hung, hidden, under his shirt. A Cerastean ruby, pricelessly rare. He slipped the crystal off the chain and weighed it in his hand. Then he dropped it onto the deck and crushed it to fine, shining dust under his boot heel.

As he walked away, the after-effect of the link still reverberated in him, and with it a germinating need to drink again from Avon's mind, a need that promised to grow to a terrible craving. A need that would remain with him, unfulfilled, for as long as he lived.

No thirst his body had known had ever been so bitter.



The Scots use bothy to mean a hut or primitive dwelling, often used by shepherds or other rural folk. M. Fae says they are popular places for men to escape to to enjoy bouts of drinking and carrying on. In this story, the bothy becomes the deliberate equivalent of K/S's beloved isolated cave or shelter where our two heroes are stranded.

Vila literally stumbled over the answer to their prayers. Well, the answer to Avon's muttered invectives might be the more accurate description. Regardless, it was the toe of Vila's shoe that hit the metal protrusion, and his turning of the air a delicate shade of blue, that made Avon stop, and turn, and look.

Vila took a good kick at the metal, and did himself the greater damage. He grabbed his poor foot,

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hopping around on the snow, keeping his balance by what surely had to be a miracle. "What the bloody hell is that? And what kind of idiot would shove a huge big bit of metal right there where a man could do himself a proper mischief and—"

"It's a vent outlet," Avon broke in, actually sounding excited. "And where there's a vent outlet—"

"There has to be a vent," Vila chimed in, dropping his abused foot back onto the snow. He fell to his knees, right beside Avon, and started scrabbling away at the snow.

"And where there's a vent—"

A huge, impacted slab of snow came away in Avon's hands, a mini avalanche chundering off down the hill, the pure curve of a metal hut lying exposed in the dying sunlight.

"There has to be a room," Vila breathed, gazing at the small expanse of metal as if it were the most

valuable thing in the galaxy, and he the only thief to know how to break its lock.

"Given that this hellhole seems to be a largely agrarian society, then this hut," a sound that would have been called a grunt if it had come from anyone less determinedly refined than Avon, "will probably be a survival unit of some sort, with food—"

"And heating, oh, please," Vila said fervently, pulling snow away with both hands, "let there be heating."

"Right now, I'd settle for finding the door."

It goes without saying that the door was on the far side of where they had started to look, in the lee of the hillside itself. The locals, no doubt, would know to start there, but what chance did two stranded space rebels?

More chance than did Blake, when Avon got his hands on him. His cold, sore, chapped hands. He

was going to take enormous pleasure in wrapping those hands round Blake's throat, and choking him till Blake turned as blue as Avon's chilled fingers.

"Look! There's a handle, a handle, Avon, and that means—"

Avon found the door by the simple expedient of falling through it. Once Vila had stopped laughing long enough to actually lend Avon a hand to haul him out of the enormous pile of loose snow (thereby saving himself from having his name on Avon's current hit-list), they realised that the door was actually more a kind of movable awning, something that could be locked open to keep the snow from sealing the real door shut, and turning the hut into a tomb.

More work, hard enough physical labour that they both ended up sweating despite the bitter cold, and the wind, the snowflakes landing on them, chips of ice, but then they actually had the door clear enough to open it. With more haste than grace, they stumbled into the dark, away from the blinding glare of the snow, and leaned against the solidity of the door that kept the cold and snow at bay.

After the brightness outside, it took quite a while before their eyes adjusted to the darkness inside. Vila, ever the practical thief, brought out his pinpoint torch.

The outer layer had been metal, but there was old, old stone lining the inside arch, stone that looked as if it had been there when this near mountain had been a mere slip of a molehill.

"It's obvious the outer metal sheathing was an afterthought," Avon was saying, looking around himself, doing his usual assessments. "This wooden division is extremely old also, by the looks of it."

Vila ignored him, content to leave Avon to cope as Avon coped best, his own attention on finding heat and food, in that order.

This first section was tiny, with a privy, and cupboards. Vila loved cupboards, and shoved Avon aside to get to them. Food. Lots and lots of food, in self-heating mylar bags, in tins, in boxes of thickened paper—bottles, too, some clear, probably water, and some, promisingly, amber.

"No soma," he announced, mournfully, stuffing mylar bags and a bottle or two into his multitude of pockets.

"Is that all you can think about?"

Avon enjoyed a good sneer, and used one as he

eased past Vila and opened the door.

"Hey, I was going to open that," Vila said, following Avon into the next room—although one good look made him change his terminology.

"They obviously weren't expecting company, were they?"

"Either that, or they decided to sacrifice space and..." he ran his finger along the edge of the very plain box bed, "décor in favour of staying warm."

"But it's tiny."

"Large enough for two."

"Three, if they're friendly. Here, is that a light?"

"Battery operated," Avon said, fiddling around until he had the connections made correctly, and the soft glow of the lamp stung their eyes for a moment. The light showed that the room was slightly larger than they had thought, with cupboards below the bed, and more against the wall beside the door. The ceiling, curving over them like a cupped hand, was high enough only at the centre, the rest of the place arcing downwards gently.

There were no windows, that single door alone, and not enough room for two tall men to stand upright side by side.

Vila swallowed, and tried to convince himself that he really wasn't claustrophobic, not one bit.

"It's nice and cosy," he said, not even noticing just how much his voice trembled..

"And there's always a way out," Avon said with more sensitivity than he usually admitted to.

"True. But there's not enough room to swing a cat in here—and I know, I know," he didn't give Avon time to get a word in edgewise, "we don't have a cat."

Waited until Avon had his head inside the cupboard, and then muttered, "Only a bitch."

Fortunately, Avon was in the habit of not listening to Vila. He got to his feet, hands dug deeply into the glorious warmth of a sheepskin. "Bedding," he announced triumphantly.

"Heat," Vila said, shoving his own hands into the fur, the chill receding almost immediately. "Is there any more in there?"

"Quite a bit, from what I could see."

Vila made a dive for the cupboard, and pulled out armfuls of sheepskin and woollen blankets. Some sort of herb had been used, flakes of it dropping to the floor to lie alongside the few last drops of melting snow that had fallen from Avon and Vila. "Look at this," he said, rubbing his face in softness, "we'll be

warm in these. Lovely and warm.”

“Unless the temperature drops overnight.”

“But I thought the temperature always dropped overnight on planets?”

“Precisely.”

“Oh, great, that’s nice, the first bit of good news we’ve had all day, and you have to go and spoil it. I’m glad it had to be *you* I got stranded with.”

“You can thank Blake when we get back on board. After I’ve finished with him.”

“After you’ve finished with him, he won’t be in any fit condition to listen to anything.”

Avon smiled, sweetly. “Yes, that’s true, isn’t it?”

But for once, Vila didn’t mind: he was more than a bit displeased with Blake right now himself.

“Hungry?” he asked, offering Avon one of the packets from the storage area.

“What is it?”

“If you hang on a couple of minutes while I learn the local language and its dialects, I’ll be happy to tell you. How the hell am I supposed to know what it is.”

“I thought,” Avon said dryly, “that there might be pictures.”

Still, he took the silver bag, made an attempt to follow the illustrations, and hoped for the best.

“Is it working?” Vila asked, deftly pulling tabs and unfolding this and that.

“Oh, yes,” Avon said, curling his fingers around the heat, “it certainly is.”

With blankets and animal skins wrapped round their legs and draped over their shoulders, they managed to eat the food without freezing to death in the process.

Chewing thoughtfully at the unknown whatever with the odd texture, Vila said, “Pictures would be nice.”

Avon thought of the things that were considered delicacies in some parts of the galaxy. “Not always.”

Vila swallowed, took another bite, explored the odd mix of firmness and softness. Tried not to think about the almost slimy centre. “True.”

But it was food, and warm, and once they got past the strange spicings, really quite palatable. The clear water proved to be water, and the amber, in Vila’s opinion, proved to be the nectar of the gods.

“This is good stuff,” he mumbled, savouring the taste and relishing the heat spreading through him. “Lovely stuff.”

Avon took the bottle from him, tried a swig

himself. As soon as he’d stopped coughing, he screwed the top back on. “It’s also as potent as hell. Save some of it for later. I don’t think I could quite cope with you drunk in here.”

“That’s not fair! And anyway, I’ve had something to eat, so what am I going to do if there’s nothing to drink?”

“Sleep? At least it would shut you up.”

“But if I fall asleep...”

“You won’t be annoying me.”

“But I won’t know if Blake comes back for us or if something goes wrong.”

“In which case,” Avon said quite pleasantly, as he grabbed another armful of animal skins from the cupboard, paying no attention to other things that spilled forth from the shelves, “you can die happy.”

“Have I told you how glad I am that it was *you* I got stranded with?”

Avon just kept on arranging the skins and blankets on the hard planks of wood that were obviously intended to serve as a bed.

“It’s not going to be very comfortable, is it?”

“Better than sleeping on the floor.”

Stone of some sort, smooth, almost black—slate, Vila thought, going by that old entertainment vid he’d seen. The silver package on the floor, though, that wasn’t quite the same as anything else he’d seen before. He looked from package on the floor to Avon by the hard wooden planks and said, “But you’ll be comfy enough up there on the bed, won’t you?”

Avon didn’t bother to answer. None too subtly Vila kicked at the package on the floor, grinning to himself as he stooped to pick it up. He watched, quite patiently, as Avon tried various pilings of sheepskins and blankets, or just sheepskins, with blankets on top, and again, a different mix.

“Found the softest yet?”

“Well, the least hard.”

“Of course, if you don’t like it hard,” Vila said, dripping innuendo, “you could always try this.”

This time there were pictures. “Why didn’t you show me this five minutes ago? No—I’ve changed my mind. I don’t think I’m quite up to the answer. Give it to me.”

“Not until you agree to share.”

“It’s probably too small for two.”

“Then I’ll keep it, and you can have that lovely wooden bed all to yourself.”

And if Avon slept on hard wood until Blake finally came back to get them, he’d never straighten

his back out again. "Oh, all right. Give it to me."

The self-inflating form was large enough for two, three, in fact, as Vila said again, if they were friendly. With blankets and sheepskins piled on it, it was the most inviting thing Avon had ever seen.

Which was probably enough to explain why, contrary bastard that he was, he turned away from the bed and made a point of exploring the small area more thoroughly.

"Is it my imagination or is it getting colder in here?" Vila said, blowing into his cupped hands. "Must be dark outside there by now—it was almost dark by the time we even got in here."

Avon was engrossed with a perusal of data chips, and some sort of reader.

"And I wonder how that thing back in there works, if it's a toilet I mean."

"Why don't you go and find out? It should keep you quiet for a minute."

"Ten, if it's as cold out there as it is in here."

Avon just kept on going through the chips.

Time wasn't making his little problem go away, and every minute he stayed there, it got that little bit colder. "I suppose I'd better try. If I leave it much longer, I'll end up with frostbite on my willy."

And that sound had to be Avon sniggering.

"Willy? I haven't heard that since nursery school."

"Just goes to show then, doesn't it? You Alpha types aren't as well brought up as us Deltas. We know not to use naughty words."

"And it just goes to show the maturity levels of the average Delta that he's still using words the rest of us outgrew by the time we were five."

"Yes, well—"

"Hurry along now, Vila," Avon said, doing a surprisingly good impersonation of every nursery school teacher ever born, "mustn't wait too long else we shall get frostbite."

"You'll be laughing on the other side of your face if it's freezing through there and you get frostbite on *your* willy."

Avon was still laughing when Vila shut the door behind himself.

It was colder in the smaller area. A lot colder. There was even a draught coming in from where they'd cleared the snow away from round the door. Oh, he was definitely going to get frostbite in here!

The facilities were less than luxurious, but at least functional, and he was quick enough to not have to worry about frostbite on any of his extremi-

ties. Shivering, fingers clumsy with cold, he grabbed a few more packets of food. And another one of those lovely amber-filled bottles.

Even the main area was a lot colder now, for all that the snow provided some insulation around the stone and metal shell of the hut. Their breath began to plume, and a single sheepskin wasn't quite enough to keep the heat in.

Vila rearranged the bedding to his own satisfaction, and started to clamber in.

"Take them off first," Avon snapped.

"Oh, I didn't know you were interested."

"The shoes, Vila," dampeningly, "the shoes."

"There goes tonight's entertainment then." He hadn't expected a reply, which was just as well, because Avon kept right on ignoring him. "Course, you could be planning on doing the dance of the seven veils for me, and you just want to keep quiet about it to surprise me." Another look at Avon, who was still absolutely engrossed in whatever the hell it was he'd found in that box. "Yeh, that's it, the dance of the seven veils. Not that we have seven veils, but I do have a handkerchief."

"Which state of dress should guarantee frostbite. And of more than one extremity."

"Oh, so you are listening to me down there."

"Is there anywhere but the gutter in which to be on your level and listen to you?"

"If you're going to be like that, then don't you come running to me when you go through there and you nearly freeze your willy off. You can just forget running to me to get it all warmed up again."

"Vila," almost whimsical, the beginnings of amusement, or murder, it wasn't always easy to tell with Avon, "are you trying to proposition me?"

"No, I'm making you an offer you can't refuse."

"To warm my...extremities."

"That's a good euphemism."

"Tell me—why have you waited until now to make so generous an offer?"

"Well, it's the first time we've had the chance, really, isn't it? I mean, up on the ship, Blake's always wanting us to save the Galaxy and Cally's always poking her nose in— Here, I wonder what they're doing right now?"

Avon glanced at his watch, still on ship time. "Sleeping, I should expect."

"Avon..."

He didn't even need to hear the question.

"Of course they'll come back for us. Well, they'll

come back for *me*, Blake can't manage without my skills, and it would be churlish even by Blake's standards to pick me up and leave you behind."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence! I'm important too."

Avon's expression was a wonderfully eloquent disbelief.

"I am too! Who would open the locks if I'm not there? Who's going to break the security codes, and the door blockers?"

Now Avon's expression was perfectly unimpressed.

"Who would you have to kick around if I weren't there?"

"Ah—now that is a good point. Who indeed."

Not exactly a vote of confidence, but considering who it was coming from, and considering that half smile, Vila was willing to settle for that. "Anyway, what's that you've got there?"

"This? Oh, it's a standard multi-lingual reader, with quite a library of books."

"Nice. That should keep you occupied."

"And the bottles of alcohol should provide you with pleasant hobby too."

"Not if it means going through there every half hour. Freezing out there. I don't think I want to think about what kind of state we'd be in if I hadn't found this place. Frozen, that's what we'd be, frozen solid, and frostbite would be the least of our worries."

"Listen to that wind—if we were still out in weather so cold with a wind factor like that... We'd be dead by now."

"Frozen, I told you. Solid. Like ice lollies, waiting for Blake to come and thaw us out."

It wasn't a pleasant thought, enough to bring the cold in a little more and make them both shiver.

"Aren't you coming to bed?"

"In a minute."

Time passed.

"Aren't you coming to bed?"

"I said, in a minute."

"Yeh, but that was five minutes ago."

The look Avon gave him was inimical, but it was too cold to make refusing Vila worth the effort. So, he put aside the bookreader, moved the lamp over onto the small shelf over the head of the bed, and, discreet even in such circumstances, said: "I will only be a minute, this time."

It was more than a minute, and when he slammed the door behind him, Vila was curled up

in bed, only his bright eyes and amused grin visible. "Told you it was cold enough for frostbite. Warm you up, shall I?"

"Absolutely," Avon muttered, teeth chattering, hands trembling as he took off his outer layer of leather and dived into the nest Vila had made.

"My god, your feet and hands are freezing! Like blocks of bloody ice—here, you watch where you're putting those feet!"

"Why? I thought you said you were more than willing to warm me up? To make sure that my extremities didn't suffer from frostbite?"

"But those aren't the extremity I meant! God, you're fucking freezing! Here, let me rub your hands, that should warm you up."

A few moments, and then Avon's voice very quiet in the dim, yellowed light. "I'm warm now, Vila."

Vila stroked his hands the length of Avon's arm, fingers sliding up under the cuff of his sweater, flat of his palm smoothing the muscle under the synthetic wool.

"That's enough, Vila."

"No it's not. Takes a lot more, and if you'll just let me, I'll show you how much you'll like it. And you'll be warm them, toasty warm and—"

"That's enough, I said."

A snap in that voice, and anger beginning in Avon's eyes. Reluctantly, Vila let go, shrugged as best as he was able, and said: "Well, can't blame a bloke for trying, can you?"

"Not under normal circumstances, no."

It was awkward then, until Vila rolled over to face the wall, body curling away from Avon, and Avon engrossed himself in the bookreader, concentrating on it until his hands were shaking so much from the cold, even he couldn't pretend any more.

When he switched the light off, it was as if they had plunged into the depths of the Styx itself. Liquid dark, tangible, oppressive, the weight of snow and stone and hillside pressing down on them, wind howling like tormented souls coming after them, and over it all, bitter cold, numbing cold, enough to kill them if they'd been outside.

In the dark, they could both feel the other man awake, and Vila's fear was growing, the panic almost subliminal, but there, increasing.

"For once, your clumsiness was useful."

"I'll remind you of that next time you moan at me for spilling something. If I hadn't seen

that vent..."

"Exactly."

"Change the subject, Avon, will you? It's scary enough in here without thinking about what would've happened if we'd been out there right now."

"All right, let's discuss something thoroughly pleasant, shall we? I know: let's discuss precisely what I can do to Blake to pay him back for stranding me here in the first place."

"C'mon, it wasn't Blake's fault, not really. You were the one who said we shouldn't take this rebel leader bloke's word at face value, *and* it was your idea to teleport down. Can't blame Blake for all that, and if you didn't know the pursuit ships were going to show up, how can you expect Blake to know? And how was Blake supposed to know that you'd manage to offend the local leader that much, that quickly?"

Avon's silence turned sour.

Several moments, and neither one of them able to sleep, despite physical exhaustion, such darkness and such cold an atavistic sort of fear.

"What was it you were reading anyway?"

"What? Oh, it was some sort of regional almanac."

"Did it tell you how long winter lasts round here?"

"It was a regional almanac—I was still on the summer conditions of the desert planet three orbits in."

"Wish we were there."

"Only because you don't know what you're talking about. The summer heat there would fry your eyeballs in your head. If the chemical soup of the atmosphere didn't get you first."

"Whoever would think that freezing to death would be the best bargain?"

"Anyone galloping around the Galaxy with Blake, surely."

"What is it you've got against him, eh? You're always going on about him, but do you leave? No, you hang around, being a right bastard, and moaning your head off about him."

"He has my ship."

"Oh, is that what it is?"

"You could at least *try* to sound as if you believe me."

"I'll try that major feat tomorrow. Speaking of feet, have yours warmed up yet?"

"If they hadn't, you'd be the first to know.

You're the one worried about frostbite."

Another silence, and the dark pressed down on them, and the heavy stone, and the snow. If it hadn't been so cold, Vila could have reached up and touched the descending curve of the ceiling right over his head. He listened, hard, could hear something, probably only the wind blowing the snow up against their shelter, but it sounded as if the rocks themselves were groaning. He wanted to say something about it, but Avon would only laugh, or get annoyed with it being so late, if Vila kept yattering on.

But then, perhaps it wasn't only Vila who heard that sound, and felt the irrational curl of fear in his belly.

"Avon?"

"Yes?"

Quick that response, eager, nearly. Not reassuring to know that even Avon was unnerved by this place.

"What d'you think this hut's for, usually?"

A shrug, the heavy pile of skins and blankets barely shifting. "That depends on the local situation. This could be for shepherds or farmers during less severe weather when they are on the hillside with their animals, a smugglers stop-over point, even basic shelter provided in case of sudden storms like this one. Or it could be a hiding place for the local rebels."

"Or it could be a trysting place for star-crossed lovers."

"With a bed like this?"

"I've slept in worse. Fucked on worse as well."

"I'm sure you have."

"Some of the places I've fucked. There was that time—"

"Shut up, Vila."

"Don't you want to hear—"

"Given our present circumstances, no. Not in the slightest bit."

The silence was longer this time.

"So. Was there anything but almanacs about the third planet nearer the sun in that box?"

"Some standard Federation propaganda books. Several novels."

"Anything good?"

"None I recognised."

"D'you know what I used to love," Vila said into the conspiratorial dark, "were those Wild Range books. You know, the heroes taking care of the stranger dressed in black, saving the town from

rustlers, riding the range..."

The recapture of childhood brightened Avon's surprised voice. "I remember those myself. Heroes in historic costumes, all the fight scenes. And the bank robbers—much easier in those days, wasn't it? Just walk in, shoot a few people, and grab the bags of gold."

"And the heroes riding off together, leaving the townspeople behind."

Not, it seemed, a thought Avon was willing to dwell upon. "Then there were the Legend of the Forest books. I was always rather fond of those. Robbing the Sheriff blind—"

"Bunch of loonies, though, giving it all away afterwards."

"After the first time, I always skipped the last few screens of those stories."

"Didn't want to spoil it, eh? I've always loved those as well, a real hero that, someone I wouldn't half mind being."

"Although..." Long abandoned memory dredged up, the edges surprisingly sharp and bright, a whole life existing around the memories of childhood. "If I remember correctly, it was the Space Corps books I couldn't get my fill of when I was a child."

"Oh, yes, brilliant, I remember those! What was the name of the hero again? And that other fellow, the one who stayed with him no matter what—"

"The one who was madly in love with him."

"You thought that too, eh?"

Childhood always had been a minefield. Some things, it seemed, never change. "I did, back then, when I was much much younger and almost as stupid as you."

"And now?"

"And now I don't read children's books."

"But if he was still in love with the other one..."

At least Vila was transparent, the lack of subterfuge a refuge after the complexities of dealing with Blake. "I still wouldn't have sex with you."

A snort of disgust. "How to kill the mood in one easy lesson. Thanks, Avon, you really know how to make a man feel wanted."

"Would you rather I beat around the bush?"

"I'd rather you'd just let me cuddle up nice and close to you, and see where the mood takes us."

Uncomfortable, Avon positively fidgeted, hid himself by changing the subject. "You still haven't told me why you're suddenly so keen on having sex with me."

"I have too! And who says there's anything sudden about it at all anyway? I've fancied you from the very beginning."

"Hardly my impression."

"That's only because you're useless at reading people."

"Useless?"

"Bloody pathetic, if you didn't realise I fancied you like mad." Fancied him? If only the poor bastard knew! One look at Avon, and Vila had known he was in trouble, serious trouble. No-one had ever had that sort of effect on him before, and it had taken him all of five minutes to realise it was horribly close to love at first sight. Certainly, obsession at first sight, lust at first sight. But more than that, too, and how Vila had resented Avon for doing that to him. "Oh, you've no idea how much I fancy you! You just can't see what's written all over people."

"And you claim that you can? What's more, that you've...fancied me from the very beginning."

"You should've seen yourself," Vila said, voice becoming as dreamy as his memories. "Sitting there in that holding cell, keeping to yourself, with this huge great bruise where your heart should be, all miserable and alone and just absolutely gorgeous."

Interesting, that Avon's voice could blush.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Oh, so you don't think you're good looking then?"

"Don't try to twist my words. Not until you've got the hang of monosyllables."

"What's so ridiculous about you looking like one of the heroes from a programme, eh? Because you did. Lovely brown eyes, all hurt looking, and that mouth, and the way you were so proud." A heartfelt sigh, and the ominous movement of warm leg against Avon's.

Who pulled away, with enough haste to discourage the average human being.

Vila, of course, just kept right on going. "Everyone noticed you, not that anyone was willing to chance talking to you, not after you tore that strip off poor old Smithers."

"He deserved it."

"Of course he did! But you can't blame the rest of us for admiring you from afar after that."

Honesty, while supposedly the best policy, was one Avon usually avoided assiduously. But they were alone here, in the dark, buried under a storm of snow, and Vila had always been safe. An old

memory, usually denied. "But you didn't keep your distance. Not until..."

"You cut my head off and handed it to me. But see—you *do* know I've always fancied you."

There wasn't much he could say to that and still keep Vila on his own side of the bed. "Very well, I concede that you have excellent taste. Now good night, Vila."

"Good night? We've been lying here talking about sex and fancying you and all that, and then you say 'good night'? What am I supposed to do then?"

"I don't particularly care, as long as it involves shutting your mouth."

The click of teeth clenching shut was audible even over the wind.

Avon lay on his back, the roof bowed over his head, close enough to reach. Right beside him, even closer, lay something else within reach. Vila, and sex. Almost an oxymoron, considering. Almost.

Time passed, slowly. No light, no passage of stars over head, no shifting starscape in front, only the faint glow of his watch face. With luck, it wouldn't be long before the *Liberator* came back, with Blake no doubt furious with him for wrecking this little set-up.

For once, Avon was willing to concede that Blake just might be justified. Stupid, to have allowed himself to be so annoyed by the triviality of yet another minor rebel leader. Worse than stupid, to then offend said minor leader enough to end up hounded from that pathetic excuse for a settlement. What a shame that the pathetic excuse was a veritable palace compared to his present quarters. He fiddled with the covers, pulling them more firmly over his head, squashing another bit into something more closely approximating a pillow, and breathed in deeply, filling his lungs with the heated scent of wool and sheepskin, himself and Vila. Not entirely unpleasant, he admitted, in his own head where Vila couldn't hear him and get the wrong idea. Not unpleasant at all. Quite appealing, really. Slightly musky, sexy in a way.

He rolled over onto his other side, his back to Vila. Alone in the night, with Vila beside him within easy and willing reach, was not a good place to be thinking of Vila and sexy in the same sentence.

It was almost enough to make him laugh. Here he was, with sex on offer, and what was he doing? Turning it down. The fact that it was the best

solution was no comfort at all. He stretched out then, grimacing as his feet encountered cold fur: still, better that than lying curled up, genitals cradled in heat, so easy to move one leg, rub it...

He really had better think of the devastatingly witty remarks that would best flay Blake.

Right, on the flight deck, then—

Beside him, Vila moved. Not much, but enough to emphasise his presence. Enough to distract Avon.

Not the flight deck, of course, there would be the teleport area first—

Surely that had been something unfastened? Fabric moving, the sound of skin—

Not the teleport area, no, there would be the initial contact, teleport bracelet chiming, Blake's voice coming down from on high demanding—

"What the *hell* are you doing, Vila?"

"Doing something that involves me shutting my mouth. And I'd appreciate it if you'd stop interrupting me."

There it was again: the unmistakable sound, made so loud by this cave of blankets and furs, of skin moving on skin, and over it all, sharp and clear, the smell of musk. The smell of sex.

"Are you masturbating?"

"What if I am? It's a solo project and it keeps my mouth shut."

"What do you think you're doing, in the same bed—"

"Having a lovely wank. Nice and warm, you right beside me..."

"Precisely. What the hell do you think you're doing, doing *that* not a hand's span from me?"

"But that's what makes it so lovely. You so near—best inspiration a man can have."

The only noise was Vila's hand moving, moving, and the two men breathing, in this cocoon of darkness and warmth.

"Are you telling me that you're lying there—wanking—thinking about *me*?"

"Mmm."

"You little creep!"

"Better than being a pricktease! An' will you shut up? I'm trying to—"

"Stop that right now."

But despite the protest, Vila was still alive, his head still attached, and Avon hadn't tried to strangle him yet. What more encouragement could a man need?

"Stop what? Stop what I'm doing with my

hand? Or stop thinking about what I'd do to you if you gave me half a chance. You want me to stop thinking about that? Stop thinking about how I'd go down on my knees for you, and open your fly."

"Don't be disgusting," Avon snapped.

But Vila had had stronger than that from Avon just for reciting limericks. More encouragement, then.

"And after I did that, I'd reach in and wrap my fingers round your cock, and you'd pull your trousers down out of the way and—"

"I'd do no such thing."

He'd sounded more convincing when he'd told Blake he'd never ever follow him, and Vila knew just how sincere that little declaration had proved to be.

"And then I'd put my mouth on you, and suck you down inside, and do marvellous things to you with my tongue—"

"No..."

But not even Avon was fooled by that half-moaned protest.

"I'd lick the head, and suck on it, and then I'd use my tongue on the slit, and after I did that—"

"Stop," Avon said, sounding more like a man begging for another crumb from the rich man's table. "Stop."

"I'd lick my way all down your cock, and I'd suck your balls, one at a time, then both of them together, and they'd fill my mouth. You'd be moaning by then."

Avon was all but moaning now, not that he wanted to admit it. But he couldn't quite force himself to utter even the token protest, his own body sabotaging him.

"And once I'd got you moaning, I'd lick right along that little line that runs from your balls all the way to your arse."

Nothing, but Vila moving and moving.

"And?" Avon finally demanded, voice cracking with need. "And then what?"

"And then," Vila said softly, edging closer, too smart to let any of his triumph show, trying desperately not to let the love show, "then I'd kiss your arse, lick it, even stick my tongue up inside, put my tongue into your—"

Avon shut him up by the simple expedient of putting his tongue into Vila's mouth, the kiss breathtaking. He moved on top of Vila, hips moving, Vila's hand caught between them, the hardness of his cock wrapped in the firmness of his

hand, trapped between the softness of Vila's clothes and the smoothness of Avon's leather trousers.

His hips moved, Vila's echoing him, and then they found their rhythm, and moved together, their cocks rubbing against each other through the leather barrier. It was wonderful: the softness of animal skin, the hardness of cock and of hipbone, the pulse of veins heavy with lust.

Grinding them together now, and Vila's hand was pushing between them, shoving at clothes, leaving them naked from nipples to mid thigh. Soft human skin then, and the fine line of hair running from Vila's belly button to the thicker hair at his groin, Avon's cock trailing in that hair, the slight roughness such a perfect counterpoint. Vila was moving under Avon, Avon slow to realise what Vila was doing, but quick, flatteringly quick, to seize both the idea and Vila's legs as realisation dawned. Bent nigh near double, Vila kissed Avon hard, his spread cheeks pressing into Avon's groin.

"C'mon," he said, the loudness taking them both by surprise, "stick it in me."

Avon was more than happy to oblige, backing off only when Vila shoved at him, making him wait.

"I didn't mean stick it in me dry," Vila muttered, wetting his palm and rubbing it over the small pucker. "Have you any idea how long it's been since anyone's been up my arse?"

No answer to that but Avon's groan as he buried his face in the crook of Vila's neck, his tongue warm and wet.

One fingertip easing open the muscle, Vila nearly died of shock as Avon started to slowly mouth his way down Vila's body, every inch of skin laved, nipples sucked and bitten and kissed. The uncomfortable brush of slight stubble against his cock, and then Vila felt the unimaginable: the mighty, the snooty, Kerr Avon, licking his arsehole, tonguing Vila the way Vila had said he would Avon, fucking him with his tongue.

"The women must all love you," Vila moaned, canting his hips to give Avon better access. "They must fucking adore you."

"Was there ever any doubt?"

"Oh, no, not from me, I'm too smart to— Oh, there, just there, yeh, like that, don't stop, for fuck's sake don't stop!"

Avon was too busy to bother answering that, his face damp where he pressed it to Vila's body and sucked and kissed him.

Next time, Vila promised himself, next time Avon did this would be in the light. He could imagine it, looking down the length of his body, Avon's handsome face framed by his raised legs, Avon's tongue disappearing inside him. He shuddered, his body more than ready, and reached down to move Avon where he really wanted him.

Withdrawal now, Avon raising himself between Vila's wide spread legs, his cock nudging at the entrance to Vila's body, the cock head feeling so large as it pressed and pressed.

"Here," Vila found himself whispering, one hand stroking Avon's cock, the other fingering his own arsehole to loosen the muscle, "it's been a really long time, be ages before you can fuck it like a cunt. Like this, yeah, that's it, that's it..."

The fingers edged away, and Vila was guiding Avon's cock, slipping it in slowly, so terribly slowly, Vila's body open now, and glad to feel that cock sliding into him, touching him deep, deep inside.

Moving, now, together, Avon making small noises, his mouth open, wet kisses on Vila's chest, lips caressing nipples, and lower, Avon's body rubbing against Vila's cock.

There were a million things Vila wanted to say, but words were a waste of time now, with Avon inside him and over him, Avon surrounding him with heat and strength and passion.

And Avon? Words from him, broken sounds, gasped on breath snatched from Vila's mouth, as his cock was held so very tightly, total acceptance, and a pleasure so addictive he had been right to beware it. He thrust forward, and even now, shivered with the visceral pleasure of a cock pressing into his belly even as he pressed his own cock home into another man's body. It was wonderful, this intensity, the sexual pleasure enshrouding him, the emotional pleasure infiltrating him with every clutch of Vila's arms around him, with every feverish kiss covering him.

They were moving together, synchronous movements too quickly becoming syncopated rhythm as the pressure of their pleasure increased. Vila was stroking his own cock now, knuckles a hard ridge against Avon's stomach, fast moving, Vila's back curving, his arse pushing up harder, taking Avon in deeper, until orgasm claimed him, body shuddering, semen wetting their skin. Inside him, Avon couldn't stop, couldn't slow, the con-

tractions of Vila's orgasm squeezing his cock, and the explosion of scent clouding round him.

His body drenching in sweat, Avon plunged into Vila's body, feeling the strength return to Vila's arms, fingers stroking his nipples now, a hand touching him there, where his flesh joined Vila's, fingertips dappling sensation against his balls, and all of a sudden, the climb towards orgasm had become a headlong rush, an inevitability sweeping him along, his own will mere flotsam in the rush of his body's pleasure.

Very still, all of him, then a deep thrust of his hips, repeated convulsively, until he had poured himself into Vila.

Vila was waiting for him, catching him as his arms gave way, cradling Avon in his arms. Kisses then, sweet kisses, full of affection and satiation, the long, slow sweep of hands over sensitised skin, the gentle caress of hand on spent cock.

"That was wonderful," Vila murmured into Avon's ear, punctuating the praise with a lick and a kiss. "Absolutely wonderful."

Too sated to answer, Avon kissed him in lieu of words, his actions speaking far louder than he would ever have wanted them to.

"You like me, don't you?" Smug, both words and voice, and supremely contented, Vila hugging Avon, scissoring his legs around the other man's. "And you enjoyed that, didn't you? Don't know why you were so reluctant when you liked it so much."

Avon stirred himself then, meaning to stop Vila's flight of fancy, but he was undermined by the tenderest of kisses, and the softness of a hand stroking through his hair.

"But it's been a while for you since you last did a bloke, isn't it?"

Perhaps it was the abrupt way Avon moved then that gave him away, or perhaps it was just Vila being as poor at arithmetic as Avon always claimed him to be, two and two adding up to twenty-two in Vila's mind.

"Unless—nah. But..."

As quick as only a skilled pickpocket can be, Vila's hand snaked down, touching briefly the tight knot of muscle between the lushness of buttocks. "You're not a virgin, are you? With men, I mean, just with men. But you can't be—not with your looks..."

"I'm going to assume you intended that as a compliment," huskiness lingering still.

"Well, you know what I meant. But I mean...are you?"

"If I were a virgin with *men*, then sleeping with you would hardly count as rectifying the situation, now would it?"

"You're supposed to sound nasty when you say that," Vila said softly, his lips brushing Avon's neck. "You sound far too pleased with yourself, you know."

Dangerous, that, Avon knew, and he should rise up in anger, shove Vila aside, cut him to shreds with well-placed barbs. But he found himself instead, lulled by a warmth both physical and emotional, laughing against Vila's skin, his tongue suddenly rediscovering the salt of sweat and the sweetness of mouth.

Sleepiness creeping, Avon slowly surrendering, Vila wrapped around him, fitting far better than what remained of their tangled, half-discarded clothes. He should be moving away by now, withdrawing, but what harm could it do, lying here like this, with Vila asleep and all unknowing? So Avon allowed himself the forbidden gift of comfort, and eventually, slept.

It might have been morning outside, but within their small shelter, it was still dark, windows shuttered and blind, who knew how much piled up outside. The air outside their cocooning bed had the beginnings of winter staleness to it, and the lingering odour of the food from the night before.

Cautiously, Avon pulled the covers down to test the air, and wasted not a second in getting right back down into the warmth of his bed.

"Cold out there?" Vila asked sleepily, cosying in that bit closer.

"Freezing."

"Don't think I'll be nipping out to the bathroom then."

"Not if you want to avoid frostbite," Avon said, and appalled himself by reaching down to cup Vila's genitals in his hand, the gesture unmistakably possessive. Before he could pull away, Vila's hand was over his, and his hips were arching forward, pressing his cock into Avon's palm.

"Don't have to worry about frostbite to my willy in here though, do I? Not with you to keep me warm." And if Avon's hand had been possessive, it could take lessons from Vila's voice. "But it'll be great when we do whatever we like, in the light, and not buried under ten feet of covers. Won't have

to worry about frostbite on anything then!"

Avon did snatch his hand away then, and wrenched himself free, less of Vila's grip than of Vila's lure. "Don't be more stupid than usual," he said, dismayed by the lack of venom in his voice, his usual acid neutralised by the echo of warmth from what they had done. What *he* had done. What he had felt.

Disaster. Definitely a disaster in the making.

"Last night—" He cleared his throat, began again, getting the rejection in before Vila could talk him into a repeat of last night's little seduction. "What we did was a once-only situation."

"So I was your first man."

"Well, that's a statement well up to your usual standards of stupidity and self-delusion. But last night was the only time anything like that will happen between us."

For a long moment, Vila said nothing.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Oh, I get it all right. You got what you wanted last night, and I don't get what I want any other night. Should've expected it, I suppose. I mean, why should I think you're any different, eh? As long as you get to do the fucking, as long as there's a convenient hole available when the notion takes you—"

"You were hardly reluctant. In fact, if you care to remember the facts, it was *you* who instigated everything."

"Seduced you, did I?" Such disbelief, such bitter contempt. "Oh, everyone'll believe that, won't they?"

"If you say a word about this—"

"Me? The soul of discretion. Not that I'd have any choice, right? Come after me with a gun, would you, if I dared tell anyone what we'd done? But they would believe it, wouldn't they though. I mean, it's not as if I'd be telling them that I'd fucked you. Why shouldn't they believe you fucked the nearest Delta?"

"It wasn't that at all! You make it sound tantamount to rape—"

"It's all right, I can tell the difference."

Neither spoke for a moment, and Avon surprised them both by being the first to break the silence.

"We can't continue this sort of behaviour on the *Liberator*, Vila, surely you see that?"

"Quite honestly, no I fucking can't. All right, so you don't want us flaunting it, but what's wrong with a nice bit of recreational sex?"

“What’s wrong with it? Aside, of course, from what would happen when Blake found out.”

“Blake wouldn’t find out.”

Avon laughed at that. “That’s almost as funny as you claiming it would be ‘recreational’ sex.”

The panic was audible now. “What’s wrong with recreational sex?”

“To begin with, just how long would it remain purely recreational? How long would it be, Vila, before emotion crept in, before you started trying to chain me to you with affection?”

There was nothing he could say to that. Not without sending Avon running screaming into the cold.

“And your silence is answer enough, I think.”

“That’s your problem, you know. You think. You think too much, spoiling everything, convinced it’s going to go wrong anyway, so you kill it before it can start—just in case, at some point in your life, it goes wrong. That’s the coward’s way out.”

“Well, you should know.”

“You’re not going to change your mind, are you?”

“I’m rather attached to the one I already have.”

“Flip bastard,” Vila muttered, clenching his jaw. He clambered over Avon, not caring at all if he should just happen to accidentally kick the rotten bastard. The cold hit him with all the force of brick wall, and the sound he let out could best be described as a horrified squeak. But nature called, rather loudly, and most of all, he had to get away from Avon, and the things Avon was saying.

Shivering violently, Vila took the top sheepskin from the bed, hoping that the loss would make Avon feel at least a little chilled, and jammed his feet into his shoes. Somewhere, between sleeping and sex, he’d lost his clothes, only one bedraggled sock remaining. His shoes were like ice, which was pretty much what his body felt like when he’d finished doing what was necessary. All lofty intentions of maintaining a dignified distance disappeared in a puff of freezing air, Vila throwing himself under the covers with a groan and an aching shiver.

He wrapped himself around the nearest source of heat, leeching off what warmth he could, completely ignoring every last one of Avon’s protests, barely noticing when the protesting stopped, and the comfort began.

It was the warmth that he noticed first, warm,

warm hands rubbing his back briskly, warm, warm legs wrapped around his own, rubbing, rubbing, the hair slightly rough, the soles of the feet unexpectedly soft. More heat, then, concentrating at his groin, increasing heat, increasing size and hardness, and for the first time in his life, Vila Restal felt like temptation personified.

That man-sized ice-cube had shocked Avon, the cold singularly unpleasant. Not that he could have done much at first, not with Vila wrapped around him with all the single-mindedness of an amorous octopus. Still, it was a pleasure, albeit a guilty pleasure, to be enveloped by Vila like this, a mirror, nearly, of how Avon himself had encompassed Vila the night before.

Which was enough to make common sense kick him in the teeth. Avon pulled back, started to move away, only to feel Vila clamp around him like a limpet. Move now, and he’d be raging at Blake in a perfect soprano.

“Let go.”

“Why? C’mon, Avon, where’s the harm?”

Avon’s hand was taken and wrapped, firmly, around Vila’s cock, that extremity noticeably colder and smaller than the night before, both conditions rapidly rectifying themselves under the instinctive tightening of Avon’s hand. “You could always just say, yeh we really could just say that you were making sure I didn’t get frostbite. C’mon, c’mon, it’s only a bit of fun.”

Oh, but it was considerably more than that already, and they both knew it: why else would Avon be so very insistent that they never repeat the experience, nor the intimacy?

“Go on,” Vila was murmuring, in exactly the same tone of voice he’d used last night when he’d told Avon precisely what he wanted to do to him. “Go on, when else are we going to have an excuse this good, eh?”

When indeed?

“And we can always pretend that nothing happened, when we get back to the ship. It’s not as if it’s going to show, is it? No flashing lights, no signs hung around our necks, nothing written all over our faces. Who’s to know? It’s just you and me, all warm in here together, feeling nice...”

Avon did not want this. The sex was one thing, but the love in Vila’s voice, the love in the way Vila touched him, that was too much. Too risky by far.

Vila’s mouth was on him, sucking on his nipples again, his hands gloriously clever on his

cock, on his arse.

Tempting, that. Who safer than Vila to allow the power of fucking him? Who was there less likely—less able—to use such power against him?

Who else, Avon thought to himself as his body responded, could fit him so perfectly as Vila did right now?

Vila was easing lower on him now, sucking him, and Avon knew the voracious hunger of wanting to take a man in his mouth, to do as Vila was doing unto him. The idea tantalised him, as did the mental picture of himself, mouth agape, lips wrapped around the thickness of Vila's cock.

Once more wouldn't do any harm, surely, he told himself. This was nothing but a lull in their lives, a side-step, something that would be over as soon as the enforced intimacy of this bothy was taken from them. What harm could once more possibly do them?

And after all, as Vila had said, he could always excuse it to himself as just a method of avoiding frostbite on important places.

He smiled at the sheer silliness of such a justification, and decided that real life could go to hell. After all, five minutes back on the *Liberator*, and life would be going to hell at standard by ten, so why not snatch a mouthful of fantasy and indulgence now?

Why not indeed.

He manoeuvred them round, until they were head to groin, Vila's mouth hot and wet around him, his own mouth filled with Vila's erection. He took the taste inside, and savoured it, sucking on the rigid flesh, luxuriating in the touch of hands roving his skin. Oh, yes, this was definitely worth a postponement in the return of real life.

Vila had no such thoughts going through his mind, just the glorious sensation of Avon's cock in his mouth, and Avon's mouth round Vila's own. This, surely, had to be heaven, lying here like this, he and Avon an endless circle of pleasure, giving and taking, in perfect balance.

And then the bracelets chimed.

Cold, harsh, industrial sound rending the liquid pleasure of their flesh, Blake's harried voice more effective than any bucket of cold water.

Avon, Vila, answer me! Are you safe?

"No thanks to you," Avon growled, fastening the bracelet round his wrist and thrusting the other at Vila. "Where the hell have you been?"

Is Vila there?

Vila's 'No thanks to Avon' was drowned out by Avon's "Where else would he be? Unlike you, I'm not in the habit of leaving people behind."

With luck, Avon thought, Blake wouldn't have heard Vila's decidedly mocking comment.

What was that, Vila?

But before Vila could get himself into more trouble, there was noise coming over the open channel, Blake talking to someone neither Avon nor Vila could quite hear.

"Not in the habit of leaving people behind, eh?" Vila sneered, not even vaguely capable of hiding the hurt. "Well, when we get back to the ship, we'll see how long it takes you to decide you miss this—"

And Avon, trapped in the sleeves of the sweater he was trying to struggle into, was helpless as Vila's mouth closed over his cock again.

And both of them were equally helpless as the teleport took them without warning, dumping them from the animal heat of their bed to the metal chill of the ship.

Jenna was yelling something over the open link, and the ship was swooping wildly as it rocked from the near impact of a plasma bolt.

From the floor of the teleport, Avon glowered up at Blake, daring the other man to so much as notice that he was lying there, nearly naked, embroiled with an even less adequately clothed Vila.

"As soon as you can," Blake said blandly, politely, "I need you both up on the flight deck. We thought we had shaken off the pursuit ships, but obviously, we were wrong about that." Right on cue, another, lesser, blast shook the ship, Blake grabbing for the jamb, Avon and Vila instinctively grabbing at each other, their position more compromising than ever.

"We'll be right there," Avon said, politeness matching Blake's, all of them pretending that no one had noticed Avon and Vila lying entangled in a sexually explicit embrace on the floor.

"You do that."

To Blake's retreating back, Vila said, "You won't mention to the others about—" A wave of his arms, taking in the entire situation of him and Avon.

"Not the specifics, no," and where Avon had expected threat, or scorn, or disgust, there was only warmth, and amusement, and something quite unnervingly like understanding.

Even, Avon shuddered over the thought, the

same sort of expression people usually reserved for absurdly romantic announcements of commitment.

"But I think," Blake went on, smiling openly now, "that I will mention that rumours of frostbite were greatly exaggerated."

The silence when he left was profound. Until the next sudden swerve of the ship kicked Avon's survival instinct awake, and sent him to his feet.

"Avon—"

A grinding of teeth, and Avon stopped, back still turned toward Vila. "What?"

"Since Blake already knows—"

"We are being chased by pursuit ships, I don't know if we are nearly out of range or nearly out of power. This is not the time to discuss sex, Vila." He did turn then, and looked. And stifled a groan at the sight of Vila kneeling naked on the floor, hair a mess, and Avon remembering how much of that was due to the touch of his own hands, and the swollen lips and the nipples reddened from the sucking of his mouth. Under his glare, the brightness of hope in Vila's eyes darkened to the pain of rejection.

Dispiritedly, the slouch coming back to his shoulders, Vila said only: "That'll be something to look forward to."

"I'll deal with you later," Avon muttered, and stormed off down the corridor.

Slamming drawers and hauling on clothes, he couldn't keep the picture of Vila out of his mind. Sitting there, body covered with the signs of sex—and what the hell was Blake going to say about that, later?—and his face miserable with the knowledge that it was over and done with already.

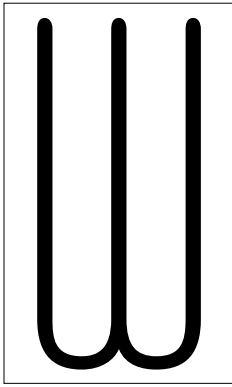
But now wasn't the time. The ship had stopped swerving, but he still had to get the flight deck. Still had to walk in there and face Blake, the others.

Face Vila, if and when he showed up.

But he'd deal with Vila later. Absolutely. At least for now, Vila was convinced that it was over.

Face like thunder, hand absently rubbing the pleasant ache left by Vila's mouth on him, Avon stalked off to the flight deck and real life.

Last night had been nothing but an interlude. Even Vila knew that. Now, if only he could convince himself...



A particular strength that the Blake's 7 characters have always had is their distinctive speech patterns and rhythms. M. Fae is a master at putting those voices on paper. Note here, in this powerful ending story, how finely constructed Avon's language is, how it is and is not the Avon we all love.

Whirlpool of disorientation, pain and churning nausea, lights, sounds, retching helplessly, cool hands upon him counterpointing his agony, voices, speaking, fading, fading, everything fading apart from the horrible, horrifying smell and the painful darkness consuming him.

The stench in his nose again, cloying, obscene. Dizzying thought, swirling him round and round

CLEAN SLATE

M. FAE GLASGOW

until he cried out, and immediately, there was someone there, someone murmuring quietly, strange sounds making unknown words, but the tone soothed him, soothed him like the hand gently brushing the hair back from his forehead, and the coolness of water trickling into his mouth. Ease, then, softness under his head, comforting warmth over his body, and more comforting still, someone there, still touching him, making him not alone. Darkness once more, but painless, a gentle eddy into the eiderdown softness of the dark.

Oddness, something strange, voices of strangers speaking over him, hushed conversation, and he knew instinctively it was about him. Couldn't understand it, too difficult to concentrate, headache pounding again, reach, reach, find sleep once more...

Light leeching the darkness away, no voices

now, soft thrum of—something. Couldn't quite think what, would come to him later, when he was properly awake. Pleasant smells, with the bitter tang of medicine underneath. A whisper of fabric, an indrawn breath, someone moving beside him.

"Are you awake?"

Nice voice, a woman, caring, but anxious too. Awake? Not quite, he thought, not quite awake, he'd sleep for a little while longer...

Coolness, drifting through his sleep like snow, waking him slowly. Someone—the woman with the pleasant voice from before?—was rubbing a soft cloth over his body, faint scent arising: a bed-bath then. Eyes still closed, he reached down and stilled the offending cloth, his other hand scrabbling for some sort of covering to pull up over himself.

"You're awake!" No melodic tones those, but

sheer joy and exhilaration. "I thought you were never going to wake up—I mean, what does that bloody Orac know, eh? I never thought I'd be grateful for a chance to let that bugger gloat, but you're awake." A pause, audibly indrawn breath. "Aren't you going to open your eyes? Orac says they're all healed, and the medical computers agree with him for once. Here, hang on a minute, let me turn the lights down a bit—and I suppose I'd better let the others all know, hadn't I? I'll never hear the end of it if I keep you all to myself, will I?"

The jabbering voice hurt his head, his brain as tender to thought as muscle was to bruise. Hurried movement from the chatterbox, then a few words, muffled. He lost track of it all for a moment, distracted or dozing, he was too tired to much care. More noises then, drifting louder and quieter as he drifted half in and half out of sleep again. It was so comfortable, so lovely and warm and comfortable—

Someone was speaking to him again. "Are you awake?"

Well, of course he was bloody awake with them all asking him that.

A different voice, pleasant, feminine, a twist of accent to set it aside from the demanding one.

"There's no need to shout at him—"

"I wasn't shouting—"

"He's been unconscious so anything above a whisper probably sounds like shouting to him."

"Sorry," whispered now, of course, a sibilance in the dark. In the semi-dark, he ruefully admitted, light dancing dimly on his eyelids, changing the black to dark red, with shots of gold gleaming through it like dreams.

The man's rich voice was whispering to him again, asking him things, sounding worried. Pity, that. He didn't want to upset anyone. Carefully, he tried to listen to what the man was saying, brought it slowly into focus, heard and understood. Open your eyes. Should be so simple, but he didn't really want to, wanted to stay here, where it was dark and warm and cosy. But perhaps he should at least let these people know he was all right. These people. Comfort withered and his mind shrivelled, pain pounding him into a bleeding pulp. Desperate, he thrust all thought of these people aside and stretched out to reclaim his dark and his warmth and the comfort those voices stole.

He awoke to darkness again, but knew, some-

how, that he was not alone. Someone else there, someone breathing in the lightless room. Not lightless, just his own eyes tightly closed. There was a pain in his head, as if his brain were too big for his skull, the tender matter swollen against unyielding bone. Nausea threatened again, but he pushed that aside. He had been hurt, he remembered that much, remembered bright flaring light, burning pain, slamming into a wall—

Not the best of things to think about, if one wished to recover. Carefully, he opened his eyes the smallest fraction, peering through eyelashes to defuse what little light there was in the room. There, in the corner, chin drooped to chest in deepest sleep sat a man, a man he knew—

The pain hit him hard, destroying everything in its path until he was nothing but a knot of agony scrabbling frantically to regain the painless dark.

The two voices were back again, and they had brought others, anxious murmurings like children scared in the dark. So much pain—he didn't want to hear it, but he couldn't shut it out, all that upset and worry in the voices. And they were keeping him awake, stopping him from floating free again. One of them was wishing he'd open his eyes, and another one was all but demanding it, concern tight in his voice. Why on earth were they so desperate for him to open his eyes, when he was still so tired? Now another voice was adding to the conversation, arguing about some machine not being right all of the time, and still going on about if only he'd open his eyes. Might as well. Just look at them for a minute, open his eyes for them, and then he could go back to sleep.

Vague shapes, coming clearer as he blinked, one of the voices leaning forward to wipe his eyes, and that helped. He could see them now, although the light was too low to really make out details. The pleasant woman's voice: surprisingly harsh, thin face, nothing at all the way she sounded, no ripe-bosomed matron she. Curls, nondescript, pale skin, thin, ungenerous features so at war with her voice and the tender touch of her hands. Behind her, a man, as generous of body as she was of voice, curls like her, but darker, and there lay the full mouth that belonged with the concern in her voice. Large eyes, frowning now with worry, broad nose, a dolorous face, a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders. And over there lurking at the

edge of his vision, almost invisible, a mouse of a man, quick eyes, nervous, jittery hands fluttering, fidgeting, darting forward to touch him, just for a second, as if he expected his hand to be cut off at the wrist for his temerity.

He closed his eyes for a moment, his ears awash in the cacophony of their relief. Obviously, he had been seriously ill—injured? Not the melodic voice, but the other man's voice, had to be the jumpy one, something about his eyes being healed now. These people, obviously, had taken care of him, perhaps even saved his life. What the hell did one say?

Not that it mattered, going by the croak his own voice had become. The nondescript one had a glass of something poised and ready almost before he'd finished his first attempt at speech.

"Drink this," the woman with the cruel face and the gentle hands said, and he did as he was told, linctus slipping sweet and soothingly down his throat. "Now, don't force anything, just take your time, Avon."

Avon?

"Yes, don't you go rushing back to your precious computers the way you usually do," the man with the worried face said, patting him—Avon? He rolled it around in his mind, trying to make it fit, finding only hollows and depressions where no such name belonged, panic beginning, slow, becoming faster, choking him.

"We can manage without you for as long as it takes you to get well again, Avon."

That name again, not his, surely, surely he would know his own name, they must have mistaken him—

The timorous one, creeping forward, bright brown eyes staring at him. "Are you all right, Avon?"

The name still didn't fit, but he couldn't find another, searching and searching and finding nothing—random thoughts, how to connect some microwires, the size of the—couldn't think of the name, knew its dimensions, specifications, but not the name, only the functions—the coordinates of a planet—which one? which one?—nothing else, blurs, thoughts running away from his frantic, searching, clutching fingers, too fast, making him dizzy, his head hurting, the light too bright—

"Cally, we need to calm him down, he's going to make matters worse, thrashing around like that," he heard a man say—did he know this man? what was *his* name? friend? doctor—no, not arrogant

enough for a doctor, but if he didn't even know his own name, how could he know that doctors were arrogant?—the woman's voice arguing, the twined sounds driving him mad with not-knowing, the sounds of voices raised in argument over him tantalisingly familiar, teasing him with his own past.

Voice ragged as poverty, he shouted at them then. "Who are you? And what the hell have you done to me?"

The knowledge was there, just out of reach, beyond the blackness and the oceans of pain. He struggled, fighting nightmares and demons and ignorance, fingertips scrabbling at the pitted wall of knowledge, dislodging tiny pebbles, bits and bytes of knowledge. And as he looked at them, truth snarled cruelly, painfully, hurting him until, as suddenly as falling off a cliff, the darkness embraced him once more and he was unaware.

All too painfully aware, the three people he did not remember but who remembered him stood there, each one avoiding the others' eyes, not one of them wanting to be the first to say what was so appallingly obvious.

Now he had a reason for not wanting to wake up. Fiercely, he tried to cling on to sleep, where there was an excuse for ignorance and freedom from the pain of knowledge. But there was a voice again, and it was more worried than the other man had been before.

"Avon?"

The name still did not belong, a refugee in his mind, but that's what those people knew him as. "What?" he muttered, and at least his own voice worked this time.

"Thought you were awake. Are you hungry?"

Automatic denial, but his body intervened, the smell of food making his mouth water and his stomach rumble. Impossible to sleep then, and so he opened his eyes, adjusting to the dim light, wincing only slightly as the mousy man turned the light up. "Sorry," the man said, "but you wouldn't want me spilling any of this on you, now would you? It's nothing very exciting, a bit bland, really, but Cally says..."

Obviously, he wasn't to hear what Cally—the thin-faced woman? Or someone else? Not a man's name, but he couldn't explain to himself why he was so sure of that—had to say about him, and

judging by the way the man's face was twisting unhappily, he—Avon? Better get used to it. Avon—probably wasn't going to want to hear it. Slowly, and with help, he sat up, the man tucking pillows behind him to make him comfortable, touching him as little as possible, apologising for every contact, almost flinching every time Avon looked at him.

What kind of man was he, that an act of kindness was offered like penance? And what had he done to warrant such nervousness from this man?

Eating the food given him, he worried the corners of his mind, trying to find a name, a fact, something, anything to attach to this man hovering so uneasily around him. Obviously, he was known to this man, and just as obviously, the knowing had not been entirely pleasant. There was something, tickling his memory, a will-o'-the-wisp, this man's hands, something about this man and his hands... But it was gone before it was even fully there, dancing from his grasp like bogfire. This was ridiculous. If he didn't know, then he should ask—after all, it wasn't as if his lack of memory was a secret, was it?

The man was staring at him intently, an odd way of staring, out of the corner of his eye as if he weren't looking at all, but missing nothing. "My name's Vila. You used to know me.

Avon stared back, putting the name to the face, accepting it if only because he couldn't come up with anything that fit better. "Vila."

"Yeh. Vila Restal. And the woman who was here last time you woke up," another flicker of unhappiness scudded across the man's—no, he had a name for him—Vila's face, making Avon wonder if he had been delirious and cruel during his...infirmity.

"She was kind to me, wasn't she?"

A melancholy smile for that, and Avon thought that perhaps Vila would have liked to touch him then, some offer of reassurance. "Yeh, that's our Cally. We all pitched in, of course, but that was Cally—don't know if she has another name, or if that's all there is. She's not like us, you see," Vila was prattling on, pouring information into the parched desert of Avon's mind, "she's from Auron, you know. Well, you don't know, but you did, if you see what I mean..." He paused for a breath, took another look at Avon, plunged on. "And the other bloke that was here, he's Blake, and I don't

think you were with us when Jenna came in—Jenna Stannis, she's our pilot—"

"Pilot?"

At that one question, Vila looked stricken, his face crumpling miserably, as if abstract knowledge had just taken on a horrible reality. "You don't remember even that? Avon..." Pause, tentative, and Avon could tell just from Vila's reaction that he hadn't always been kind to this man in the past, for Vila was as forthcoming as a child at the dentist. "Do you know where we are?"

Fumbling for an answer, another wave of panic threatening him, act of will forcing it back, forcing his breathing back to normal, yet unable to disguise his fear. "No," he said, scarce above a whisper. "I thought it was a hospital of some kind..."

Vila, either bless his tact or curse Avon's past treatment of him, busied himself tidying the neat array of equipment. "We're on a ship—a space ship, called the *Liberator*." Another pause, another of those cautious glances that were already getting on Avon's admittedly strained nerves. "Does that ring a bell?"

Liberator? Space ship? At least that would explain the almost subliminal sound, the barely perceptible vibration, the metallic look of the walls, as opposed to—

Nothing. He had nothing with which to compare this single room. He must have had a home before, knew that this ship couldn't always have been his home, but there was nothing else to fill in a single detail.

The nervous man—Vila—was waiting for some sort of reaction, some sort of response, but too obviously wary to prod. "The name doesn't mean a thing to me. None of the names do."

"Not Cally? Or Jenna?" A darting, furtive glance, and Avon felt his temper rise: so he was an impatient man. Perhaps that would explain Vila's reactions to him. "What about...Blake?"

"Nothing. What's his last name?"

"Last name? What d'you mean—oh, of course, I told you about Jenna Stannis, and my name, and Cally's, but I said Blake instead of Roj and that would make it sound like—" Something akin to alarm and pity in those brown eyes, and Avon wanted to turn away from that. "Here, you do realise that Avon's your last name, don't you?" Took one look at Avon's face and raced on, his spate of words flooding the aching emptiness of Avon's eyes. "Kerr, that's your first name, Kerr

Avon, don't know if you've got any other names—come to think of it,” in the tone of someone thinking of it for the first time, “for all we know, it might not even be your real name, cos a lot of you Alpha types change your names before you go for trial, you know, save the family name and all that—” Vila broke off abruptly, took in a huge breath and then he was off and running again, “Not that I suppose that's what you want to hear, is it, not when you can't remember anything.” Another screeching halt, another one of those sharp glances from the corner of Vila's eyes. “You can't remember anything, can you? Nothing at all?”

The suspicion and distrust in that were almost as un reassuring as the notion that what little he knew might, in its turn, be false. “You make that sound as if a protest of—” There was a reluctance in him to actually use the word.

“No, no, nothing like that, really,” Vila paused, his briefly hopeful look quickly extinguished, and Avon wondered what kind of life he led where a reference to honesty should expect denial. “You're just bloody brilliant at answering questions with another question. You've never been much one for out and out lying—”

Then perhaps he should be grateful for small mercies, he thought to himself sarcastically, wishing this unending yattering would go away.

“Not that that means you've always told the truth—or not all of it, at any rate. No, you always like to keep a bit back for yourself, you know, in case you need it.”

A life where truth was a formidable weapon, or at least barter. Ignorance was becoming more appealing by the second.

“Especially with—no one, really, no one particularly.” Too bright a smile, not enough to hide the conflict of expressions, the change of subject as clumsy as the sudden swerving from naming names. “D'you need help with this, or d'you think you'll manage?”

Oh. Yes. The food. His appetite had faded in direct proportion to the sordid hints this Vila had dropped. “I'll manage,” he said, with not the faintest idea how he would, his hands feeling an awfully long way away from his brain. Slowly, he edged himself farther upright, only half surprised at how drained so little activity left him.

Vila was still watching him, fidgeting like a man on an exceedingly sharp cusp. “I could give you a hand,” Vila said almost diffidently, a verbal echo of

the near flinching earlier. “If you don't mind, that is, cos Cally said I was to help you, and you know how Cally is if we don't do what she thinks is best for her patients, don't you?”

“Actually,” he said, tiredly, “I don't.”

Vila squeezed his eyes shut, opened them, his face a rueful mask. “Sorry. I didn't mean it like that, well, I did and I didn't—”

“Vila.”

“Yes?”

“Shut up, Vila.”

And why the hell had *that* elicited so heartfelt a smile?

“Shut up, right, I'll do that. I'll just shut up and concentrate on lending you a hand with this grub, and then I'll settle you all nice and comfy and let you get some rest, eh?”

Avon didn't bother to reply to all those words, simply lay back and ate what was put into his mouth, the bland, liquefacient food slipping over his tongue the way Vila's words slipped over his mind, warm, comforting, soothing in a way. Food fed, Vila eased him back down flat on the bed, tucking the covers up around him, dimming the lights, then moving slightly to one side to sit on a chair that was almost out of Avon's field of vision. Sat there, remarkably still in contrast to his flutterings and bustlings before, simply sat there and watched.

It was nice, Avon decided, to have someone sit there and keep watch over him. Reassuring. Comforting that whoever he was, these people—or this one person—cared for him enough to not leave him alone, as if aware that the darkness was both best friend and worst enemy. There—that triggered something, something—someone—important, something he should know. But it was gone, will o'the wisp, out of grasp before he could do more than identify that here was something else he'd forgotten. An entire life misplaced, he thought, years lost. If it didn't hurt so much, he'd laugh—he couldn't remember how many years were lost. Couldn't remember his birthday. Or his mother, although the thought of her made his soul shrivel.

So. He knew his (probable) name. Knew the names of the ship and the people on it. Knew that he had treated this Vila fellow so badly that any offer of kindness or affection was hedged and disguised, and expected to garner rejection or worse. And he knew that there was something seriously wrong between him and his mother.

Wonderful. Not much to show, for a lifetime.

He should ask Vila to fill in the blanks. Should. Found that he didn't really want to. Didn't want to know, didn't want to ask. Wanted to sleep, to forget how much he had already forgotten. He turned on his side, away from his silent watcher, and escaped once more into sleep.

Waking, and with it, knowing. His name was Kerr Avon, he was on a ship called *Liberator*, with Roj Blake, Jenna Stannis, Vila Restal and Cally-from-Auron.

And that was it.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, expecting another bustle of activity, but this time, it was a blonde woman—presumably Jenna Stannis—who was regarding him with warm smile and worried eyes.

"I see you've decided to rejoin the land of the living," she said breezily, rising gracefully to check various readout screens. "How are you feeling?"

He really wished she hadn't asked that: now that his mind was clearing, every muscle in his body was demanding equal time. "Sore," he replied, wincing as his back agreed loudly with him.

She looked at him sharply, looked back at the data flashing across a screen. "Just physically, or does your head hurt?"

"Physically, and the headache's down to one military band."

Another one of those warm smiles—and he wondered about his relationship with her. And wondered, suddenly, if he was attractive. If he was dark or fair, if his eyes were the same colour as hers, if—the pain behind his eyes turned itself a notch higher, making him wince, driving out all attempts to dig into his memory.

"I saw that," Jenna said, looking at him over the peaking pain graph. "I wish I could give you something for it, but..."

"But with head injuries caution is indicated." Well, well, another thing he knew. Had he been injured like this before, had he— The pain dug into him like a spike, and he flinched from it, leaving the memory alone. The clashing lights receded, taking the pain with them, and he lay very still for a moment, catching his breath, lolling in the lack of pain.

He heard Jenna murmur, "Now *that's* interesting," and couldn't be bothered asking. Unprotestingly, he let her prop him up, slowly ate the food put in front of him, drank the foully

medicinal drink, allowed himself to be lowered until he was midway between sitting up and lying down. Like an invalid, he thought, and couldn't find the energy to care. So much better to close his eyes, drift, thinking little, aware only of the sounds and smells around him. Sinking, finally, after one final prodding and checking from Jenna, into the wildness of dreams.

A field, fallow, furrowed, the soil dried and dusty, rising in clouds around his feet as he turned, and turned again, whirling round to face the unnamed dangers dancing behind him, always behind him. There was no sun in the sky, only featureless greyness of banked clouds, threatening rain. The ground underneath his feet thrummed, the vibration clawing its way up his body until it lodged in his head, his teeth aching, jaw clenched too tightly, head pounding and pounding. From the corner of his pain-narrowed eyes, he caught sight of something, someone. His head felt as if it would fall off or explode, so he was slow and careful as he turned round.

Astride some great hairy creature, Blake sat in full regalia, the costume of an age long gone and a Crusade as forgotten as Avon's own past. A banner hung from his lance, a banner tattered and blotched with gore, but still it glowed golden and bright. Smiling sweetly, Blake lowered the lance, and the creature he rode gathered its strength.

No, Avon thought, refusing to panic. He won't do it. He won't.

Thunder beneath his feet now, and the beast charging forward, coming closer, coming faster. He tried to run, tried, but could not, the ground swamp beneath him, sucking him down, holding him still as a painted target for the lowering, gleaming lance hurtling towards him.

A bright red splatter, and more gore to festoon the banner. Astonished, Avon looked down to see the blood pulsing from his chest, red blossoming from him like flowers in spring. He looked up, and Blake was still there, and still smiling as sweetly, his armour as shining, his lance as pointed and glinting as brightly with the pureness of gold.

And stabbing more deeply than the sharpness of the lance was the love in Blake's smile.

He sat bolt upright in bed, his head a heavy mass of pain, his heart pounding painfully fast, chest a burning agony. Restraints held him fast, and he fought them, mouth stumbling again and again over Blake's name.

"It's all right," he heard, and recognised the

restraints as someone's arms. He looked up, and saw Blake, not smiling, thankfully, but frowning in concern. "I think you had a nightmare," Blake's mouth was saying, and Avon focussed on the shape of Blake's lips as the words were formed. He was eased back onto the pillows, Blake withdrawing to a polite distance.

"I..." his throat was parched, and he gulped at the drink proffered him.

The silence was awkward, Blake breaking it while Avon was still satiating his thirst.

"You were calling my name."

"You were killing me."

The brutally honest words struck Blake, his expression twisting. "Avon, I'm sorry—"

"It was only a dream, nothing to do with you."

"Wasn't it? You don't remember that either, do you?"

"It would seem that there's a lifetime I don't remember."

A pause, an odd look from Blake, then the question offered as if prelude to a massacre. "Do you remember me?"

Avon looked at him hard, trying to find something to go with this face, something that would explain the pain hiding behind the other man's eyes, something to fill the gap in his brain that gnawed like toothache. "Only my dream," Avon finally said, fingers rubbing his temples where the pain gathered, heels of hands pressing against his eyes where the sharp daggers of memory pricked him. "And before—"

Preternatural stillness from Blake, even his breath stilled.

"Before," Avon said, opening his eyes, "when I wasn't entirely conscious. You were there then, weren't you?"

An explosion of movement, Blake on his feet, pacing, one hand rubbing the back of his neck in a way that made Avon's mind itchy.

"You have to know," Blake was saying. "You have to know, but gods help me, I don't want to tell you." Abrupt volte face, skin pallid, eyes intense. "This—" a gesture encompassed the room, the medical equipment, Avon lying in bed, "it's all my fault."

"Then my dream—"

"No, that was definitely a dream, not a memory," Blake told him, reading his mind with more ease than Avon could muster. "It was an accident. We were—" He broke off, backed off.

"Let's just say that my timing was off and you came to my rescue."

"And?"

"And didn't get out in time yourself."

Avon raised his eyebrows at that. "Well now, that's one memory I won't be in a hurry to regain."

"Actually," Blake said, perching himself on the side of the bed as if this were just a pleasant chat between chums, "as that is the memory immediately prior to and part of the traumatic injury, you might never regain it."

Even a complete stranger could tell there was more, and that Blake approached this with all the joy of the condemned nearing the gallows.

Avon took pity on him. "I doubt you could tell me anything worse than I've already discovered for myself."

And this time, Avon found himself wondering why a kind comment from him should elicit so odd a reaction.

"Tell me," he asked, the pit of his stomach hollowing, "was one of my hobbies biting people's heads off?"

An unexpected roar of laughter. "Not to mention chewing them up for breakfast and spitting them out afterwards."

"Charming," Avon murmured.

"That, too," Blake whispered conspiratorially, and then caught his breath on the smile Avon threw at him.

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing at all, just something occurred to me—" Blake said too quickly, not wanting to explain himself. "And that something is what Cally threatened me with if I stopped you from getting the rest she says you need."

"She hardly strikes me as a harpy in full flight," Avon said tartly, the edge of humour fading completely. "But then," he added, bleakness showing through, "I'm hardly the resident expert." A measured pause, a sharp glance. "Or was I?"

"Our ever-mysterious Cally. Look, I really must be going—" It was Blake's turn to pause, to give Avon a sharp look. "I don't know," he said, hands spread as if to show that despite the sting of his words, he meant no harm. "That's something I'm afraid you'll have to ask her."

"But surely, on a ship this size—"

"We tended to be rather careful not to step on anyone's toes. Especially on a ship this size."

“So we are a ship of people carefully dancing around one another—to the exclusion of gossip?”

Blake grinned at that. “Never so much as a single word.”

“Yes, well, it’s usually the couplets that cause all the trouble.”

“Exactly. And on that note, I think it’s time for me to leave you to your rest.”

“You’re too kind,” Avon replied, sarcasm dripping like balm. “One last thing before you go.”

“Yes?” Blake asked, eyes cautious.

Avon lifted his chin, haughty as ever, not even the scantest measure of anything but pride showing. “Is there anyone I should know about?”

“To be honest,” Blake finally replied, “I really couldn’t tell you. Good night, Avon.”

“And a good night to you,” Avon muttered, sinking back against the pillows, his mind a kaleidoscope of faces and features, snatches of words and memories with all the permanence of sand. He snatched at a passing memory-face, and half-expected though it was, the pain still took him by storm, the sheer, slicing impact of it taking his breath away. Deliberately, Avon let the face from the past go, not regretting its loss at all, concentrating only on ridding himself of this eviscerating pain. Carefully, Avon banished all the half-formed memories from his mind, and one by one, went through those things he knew—those things that had happened today.

When sleep came, he welcomed it with more warmth and passion than he would greet any lover. Sleep, at least, was something he knew. And something that caused no pain.

In the night, Cally came to him again, her voice incredibly soft, with a tantalising hint of echo and of remembering. Gently, she took him through the now familiar pattern of checking his reactions and going through the medical readings, and not quite fully awake, he watched her. Something about Cally, and this room... Someone, restrained—no, someone ill, himself ill, sick and weak, poisoned—Blake? Had he seen Blake lying here, pale as death? Had he?

She soothed him when the pain began, soothed him and calmed him and settled him like a child. He tried to object, but his own need for comfort defeated him, and he yielded to her, closing his eyes and flowing back into the

perfect oblivion of sleep.

His body knew it was morning, ship’s time, before he opened his eyes. A too-bright voice, all but chirping away, nattering on and on and on. There was a name to go with that voice, it was on the tip of his tongue—

“Course you remember,” the squirrel was saying. “Vila Restal, that’s me, as if you’d forget that, eh, Avon? Cally says you’ve to have this, and that bloody Orac agrees with her, but that’s only because he doesn’t have to take this stuff. Disgusting, isn’t it? Really foul, and they won’t even let you have a drop of soma to wash it down with. Pity, that. A drop of soma would—”

“Vila.” Avon slit his eyes open, only to shut them again when confronted with Vila’s preternatural cheerfulness.

“Yes?”

“Shut up, Vila.”

Vila’s idea of shutting up, apparently, was to talk just as much, only more quietly. “I never thought I’d be glad to hear you say that! But I tell you, after we got you back, the mess you were in—we almost lost you, you know. Literally, I mean, as well as you almost dying on us.”

It really was too early to deal with all this, but his past was dangling in front of him like a carrot. “Tell me. All of it.”

Interesting. A command to shut up resulted in more chatter, and a request to tell all garnered silence. Vila, it seemed, was nothing if not perverse.

“Cally says we’re not supposed to tell you—”

“Cally isn’t here.”

“Yeh, but she will be, later, and then where’ll I be?”

Avon closed his eyes, considered making another assault on his own memory, but the one thing he could remember with utter clarity was the agony of his mind exploding inside his skull. His own memories out of reach, then—so Vila’s would have to do.

“And this Cally,” he said, mildly surprised at the soft seductiveness his voice proved capable of, “does she have such a claim on me that she can dictate what I can and can’t know about myself?”

The very silence was uncomfortable, and then he heard Vila shifting uneasily.

“Do we still practice slavery—or is that an Auron speciality?”

“No, it’s nothing like that, it’s just...”

Avon didn't help, not the way he had with Blake.

"It's just..."

Another hesitation, and the continuation, voice ever so bright and cheerful. "Well, what it is, is that Cally's our medical expert, you know."

But hadn't they all referred to Orac deciding on his treatment?

"What about Orac?"

He opened his eyes in time to see the joy blossom all over Vila's face. "Should've known it'd be Orac you'd remember. It's going to be all right, isn't it?"

"I thought Orac was the expert. What does he have to say about this?"

Now what the hell had he said? Vila looked an inch away from tears, or running away.

"Orac..."

"Yes?" Avon prompted. "Orac?"

"You always used to moan at me when I called Orac a him."

That gave Avon pause: obviously, if Vila couldn't tell whether Orac was a him or a her, then this current confusion wasn't entirely a new thing.

"Orac's a computer, you see," Vila was saying, his words adding data to Avon's meagre store of knowledge, but doing nothing to reduce the much too generous store of confusion. "And it used to really piss you off whenever any of us'd anthropomorphise him. It."

Which explained them not mentioning Orac as one of the people on the ship. And the way Vila had said it didn't exactly disprove the theory that Avon's main hobby had indeed been biting people's heads off. Not to mention chewing them up and spitting them back out again.

"I wasn't the pleasantest of men, was I?" he asked, the pain beginning again, somewhere at the back of his mind, where the darkness lay deepest.

"Well, I wouldn't actually say you weren't pleasant..."

"No, but you'd think it. Tell me," he asked as he struggled, briefly, before conquering gravity and managing to sit up amidst the cloying of the bedclothes, "just how much of a bad-tempered bastard was I?"

Vila visibly squirmed. "Let's put it this way," he finally said, "you've never been one for doing things by halves. And if I don't get these tests started when I'm supposed to, Cally'll be after my blood."

And so they slid uncomfortably into this new routine of Vila telling Avon what to do, and left the past to its own devices.

The better he felt, the more the indignities of his situation impressed themselves upon him. First to go were one or two tubing arrangements, Avon insisting over Cally's protests that he was quite well enough to get up and go to the bathroom, and what's more, no he did not need her holding his hand—or anything else, for that matter.

Next went the sponge baths with their efficient but unsatisfying towelettes, and after that—

After that, Avon had to deal with his body's recalcitrant infirmities.

He was trying, with many a curse and calumny, to persuade his body that it really was well enough to get up and walk, when a rich voice interrupted the flow of invective.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Avon," Blake said, the picture of ease, leaning against the door-jamb, such a sight making Avon's head begin to pound. Something, about Blake, leaning on the frame of a doorway—injured?

Blake was there to catch him as he fell. A few moments, Blake wonderfully discreet, acting as if everyone fell when trying to get out of bed, not a single platitude to embarrass either one of them.

Settled once more, Blake perched on the edge of his bed, the pain receded, and Avon could think again. "Thanks," he said, "I hadn't realised quite how difficult it would be to get out of bed alone."

Blake was quite beautifully impassive. "Of course, it's not back into bed you needed to go. Here, let me give you a hand."

And Blake kept his face very, very still, as Avon accepted the offered help with nothing more deadly than a smile of quite devastating charm.

The necessary taken care of, a proffered shoulder so readily accepted it was very nearly Blake who needed added support, and then Avon was back in bed, pallor more pronounced, sweat beading his forehead like all the best clichés, and Avon's hands clenching and unclenching on the bedcovers in a rhythm that betrayed the pattern of his pain.

Blake made a point of not noticing, leaving Avon at least that much of his pride intact.

The acerbic voice, at least, was familiar, Avon's tone bringing a near smile to Blake. "Well, if you're just going to pretend there's nothing wrong at all,

at least call Cally or Vila to help.”

“You’d let me help you—”

It was a most unAvonlike sound, that sigh, and it was repeated as Blake raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“All right, so obviously I am a bad-tempered bastard too stubborn to ask for help—but for the time being, I’d much rather we pretended I was a mere mortal and need all the help I can get. Would you either call one of the others or get the analgesic—please?”

“Mere mortal it shall be,” Blake replied, far more cheerfully than Avon thought was warranted. “And as much help as you can bear.”

“Then why don’t we start with the analgesic? Or would you rather sit there gazing raptly at me until mummification sets in?”

Gaze raptly? Hell’s bells, if that’s what Blake’d been doing, he’d better get his martyr mask back on: it was one thing for this oddly appealing Avon to see through him, quite another thing indeed when this Avon disappeared back into wherever he’d sprung from, and the *real* Avon, all poisoned thorns and tearing barbs, came back to haunt them all. Blake settled for smiling politely, a bit distractedly, and fetched the tube.

Avon looked at the outstretched hand, up at Blake’s impassive brown eyes, back down at the hand again. “Thank you,” he said dryly, taking the analgesic cream. “You’re too, too kind. Now if you could perhaps call for someone physically able to put it on for me?”

“Oh, of course,” Blake snapped, annoyed with himself for being so obtuse—see what happens, he told himself, when Avon is *nice*? “Allow me.”

Avon didn’t answer, simply leaned back a little farther into the pillows and closed his eyes.

I should be thankful for small mercies, Blake told himself, somewhat unconvincingly, glancing up at the unseeing eyes. Denying his hands any possibility of a tremble, he reached out, loosening the fastenings on the medicinally white bedclothes. Avon’s chest was a myriad of colour, startling against the bland whites and neutral greys of everything else in this room. Blake breathed in deeply, demanding calm, insisting that he was going to be very cool, calm and collected about this. But still, his fingers weren’t entirely steady as he reached out and touched the cream to the first of the welted scars. Reddish, almost purple, a cross between old blood and new bruises, raised and

thick, following the lines left by the shrapnel that had come so close to killing Avon.

Very quietly, talking to himself, to his own guilt: “This should be mine.”

Avon’s voice as quiet, as intimate. “So you’re the possessive sort—that must have made for some entertaining arguments.”

“No!” But then again—“Well, yes—but not the way you mean.”

A lazy eyebrow lifted, a half smile enriched the beauty of the mouth. “A yes and a no—almost exactly what I got from Vila, too.”

“What you got from Vila when you asked him what, precisely?”

“When I asked him if you and I were lovers.”

As soon as he had picked his jaw up off the floor and reined in his rank astonishment, Blake could actually imagine trading in this nice new Avon for the cutting, nasty and above all, secretive, old Avon. “Lovers?”

“Were we?”

“No. Well, yes, but—”

“Oh, how I love a definitive answer.” The eyes were very bright now, sharp as ever, only the faintest echo of pain still lingering. “No, yes, well and but. That just about covers every possible combination, doesn’t it?”

“Well, it is a difficult question.”

Avon’s expression was worth a thousand words, every single one of them sarcastic. “And which part was difficult? The word were? Or perhaps we? Or perhaps lovers?”

Avon took another look at Blake. “I’m sorry,” he said easily, ignoring the flicker of pain that told him there was a memory about this somewhere, lurking, in the dark. “I shouldn’t have been so awkward. It’s just...”

Not a sight to which Blake or any of the others were accustomed: Kerr Avon, in white, chest naked and exposed, shrugging in a combination of regret and apology.

“Your memory—”

“Is about as much use as Vila’s.”

And Blake was there to catch him, again, as he crumpled forward under the weight of the pain in his head.

Much later. Much, much later, hunger eating a hole in his belly, throat aching and dry, bladder protesting. Hands there to help him, a woman’s hands, strong, a cascade of blonde hair, steadiness

at his side, guiding him, helping him do what he needed to do, until those strong hands pulled the blankets up once more to cover him, and he slept.

It was hunger that woke him this time, not that much later. He recognised the smell, he thought, reluctant to try to actually snare the name and the memory and the pain that would come with it. But the name was there, unattached to anything but the food itself and the sure memory of enjoying eating this.

"Oh, good, you're awake."

Jenna, then, still. Stupid of him to feel embarrassed at what she'd helped him do, so he ignored such stupidity, opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Thank you—for earlier."

"Don't mention it," she told him, with that same edge of intensity that was making him very, very tired of whoever he had been. "Hungry?"

"Famished."

"That's a good sign. Now look, don't bother arguing, you need to eat the right sort of food, so here, just have some of this, it's good for you."

And he refused, point blank, to wonder why something as simple as helping someone eat should be regarded as combat training.

"I don't bite," he finally said.

"That's not what Blake's said."

Something in that... "Tell me," he began, quite conversationally, "were Blake and I lovers?"

She almost dropped the bowl, and there was an off-note to her too casual tone as she said: "Why don't you discuss that with him?"

"Because I've already tried and he didn't seem to be entirely certain himself."

That raised the wryest sort of smile from her. "Yes, well, I suppose it depends on what you mean by lovers."

Avon resisted the temptation to roll his eyes heavenwards. "I mean lovers, as in two people who fuck each other."

She did drop the spoon that time.

"What the hell was I?" Avon demanded as she fished it up out of the folds of the blanket. "An ogre?"

She had quite the charming smile when she was amused. "Something like that."

"A prude as well, it seems."

"Not a prude, just... discreet."

He was beginning to really dislike whoever he'd been. A bad-tempered bastard, an ogre, 'discreet',

vicious and a prude to boot. Oh, he must have been the catch of the year.

"So discreet that even Blake couldn't tell if we were lovers or not? Surely that's taking things to the extreme."

"You did tend to be a bit...intense about some things."

More and more wonderful with every second. It was a miracle none of them had tried to kill him.

"How was I injured?"

A quick flash of a glance from her, then she was tidying up, buying time. "I really think you should discuss that with Blake."

"Which would be useful advice if Blake were willing to discuss anything with me."

"Oh, come on, Avon, don't try that old trick with me. I'm sure Blake told you the truth, he wouldn't lie to you about something like this."

Which implied that Blake might indeed lie to him about some other things. And told him even more about his old self. Time to add deceptive and manipulative to his list of self-inflicted adjectives, obviously.

"Jenna, Blake hasn't told me anything at all. Which leaves me with healing burns, a rather interesting pattern of deep wounds, assorted cuts, sundry bruises and some sort of head injury. I think I deserve to be told something, don't you?"

"Well, obviously, but I'm not the person to tell you."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because Blake—"

"Damn Blake!"

She grinned at that, which was just what he really needed. Terrific. So in the past he'd been known for damning Blake. Wonderful. What a happy life it must have been.

"Jenna," he said again, making a show of his forbearance, "I have been half-killed, I'm in pain and I can't remember a damned thing. Surely that's worth more than making sure you don't contradict anything Blake might say on the matter?"

She looked at him for a long time, then. "Do you remember Docholli or Star One?"

He shook his head, regretted it immediately as the pain was souging back, chewing on his mind.

Jenna took in all the details, every small shift of expression, and when she spoke, was brisk, cutting everything down to the absolute essentials.

"We were trying to destroy a place called Star One. Travis was already there, he shot Blake..."

Like the sea devouring the shore, the pain washed in and over him, eroding his body out from under him, light beginning to dim, her voice fading.

"We found out Travis had betrayed us all to the Andromedans..."

Green slime, fizzling, pain in his head, pain in his chest, he was on fire, his body exploding.

"There was a battle, and even though Blake was injured, he insisted on staying on the flight deck—"

For what it's worth, he could hear someone saying that, again and again and again—

"One of the consoles blew up, you shoved Blake out of the way—"

Fire, ripping him, metal, slicing him, and Blake, Blake's face—

Trust.

I have always—

No. No. Not that—

Trusted you.

You.

Jenna grabbed him just as he started to scream.

A long silence, the dim, dark silence of a soul asleep. It was pleasant, soothing, as secure as the womb, but so much quieter. The only heartbeat was his own, slow and steady, and the rhythmic shushing of his blood through his veins, and the pump and whoosh of air through his lungs. But all of it quiet, serene, the natural way of things, no thought required.

He liked it here.

Something bright and hard shaking him, voices deafening him, whispers as loud as shrieks.

He hid from the pain they brought, found a nice, deep well in which he could curl himself up in safety. But there was something else in there, or someone else. People he knew, a life, decisions, options, paths chosen, choices bitterly regretted, people dead, people suffering, nothing he could do about them, himself, hurting, battered, attacked, locked up, her—he could remember her, Anna, his Anna, dead, dead, dead—and Blake, and Vila, hovering over them like a shroud, Servalan, in her white dress and malice. People shooting at him, monsters after him, doubts, doubts, doubts. Too many questions, no answers, none, just Blake muddling through, getting them all killed, wading up to his armpits in blood, Avon spilling Blake's blood, every bitter remark, every caustic comment—and Vila, look at Vila, wincing like a kicked

dog, and Cally, so disappointed, and behind her, his mother, oh, and what a long story it was with his mother, all of it laid out in front of him, a patchwork quilt of pain and words, hurts and failures, successes turned to ashes, people laughing at him, making fun of him, mocking, mocking, but there, again and again and again, there was Blake, not laughing but always looking at him, finding him wanting, failing Blake, failing them all—

Outside, bright lights, voices, hands shaking him.

He'd tell them to go away. Didn't want them. Wanted the people inside his head even less. His life, stretched out like a tattered ribbon, dragged through the mud. Muck and mire, that was his life. Base, debased, dark, hurt, hurt, hurt before they could hurt him.

For what it's worth.

But how could Blake trust him when he couldn't trust himself?

They were talking to him again, voices and voices and voices, enough for a choir, as cacophonous as hell itself. Go away, he wanted to tell them. But to talk to them would be to be noticed, for them to notice him, pin him with their honest stares and see just how much he had failed them. He would tell them to shut up, go away.

But later, when it didn't hurt so. Later, when he could face them with who they were and not hear them laugh. Later, when he could stir himself that much. For now, there was the pulse in his veins and the sweet darkness of his mind.

This time, he knew his name. Kerr Avon. Knew who else was on this ship, knew their names. Knew, too, that he knew very little, that his memory was all but gone. Gone, perhaps, but not necessarily forgotten.

No.

Gone.

The past was gone.

All of it.

Every last day of it.

Gone.

He woke up with a smile on his face.

"Find a good morning to you an' all," Vila said, the usual 'I'm a fool what do I know?' expression slipping a little.

"Thank you," Avon replied, all but grinning.

"But you look as if I've given you cause to worry. What's the matter?"

"Cheerful and concerned?" Vila squeaked, not entirely falsely. "My God, he's gone mad!"

"Oh, no, Vila," Avon said happily, "not mad. Not mad at all."

From the look on his face, Vila didn't believe him one little bit.

"I think I'll get Cally," he said, backing slowly away from the bed, the usually steady hands actually fumbling as he keyed the intercom.

Moments later, and it wasn't just Cally who arrived, but Blake, and behind him, Jenna. All of them, crowding into the small room, and Avon sitting in the bed in the centre, face positively cheerful. The others all stopped dead in their tracks, staring at him as one would at a vampire or some other creature of legend.

"Avon?" Cally said, gentle, her gaze steady as she checked his pulse and the readouts of the various machines. "How are you feeling?"

"Perfectly well, actually. Well, a touch of pain across my chest, but apart from that—"

"The readings are good. How is your head?"

"Clear as a bell."

"No pain? No confusion?"

Not now. Not ever again.

"Not a bit of it. Really, I feel quite fit."

The charm was just pouring off him, Cally responding with a smile, Vila positively blooming. Even Jenna relaxed, but Blake stared, frowning, almost afraid of this new version of the man he had never been able to truly know.

"The diagnostic computer agrees with you. The pain you are feeling is from scar tissue pulling healthy tissue, but that's nothing a few sessions with the regenerator can't cure."

"Excellent. So. Am I cleared to get up?"

Blake strode into the room, frowning fiercely at the readouts as if they could explain it all. "Not until we can be sure these problems with your...headaches are really cleared up."

"But I assure you, Blake, I'm perfectly well. And anxious to get out of here."

"Avon," Blake was very calm, gentling him as if he were an unstable child, "you have been very, very ill. We can't just let you waltz out of here the second you open your eyes. You've been in a coma for almost a week! You can't just open your eyes and...and pick up as if nothing has happened."

There was a dim echo, of pain remembered,

but Avon pushed that back, gazed fixedly at Blake's eyes. "A week? I was unconscious for that long?"

"Not unconscious. In a coma. You had some sort of attack when Jenna was in with you. You screamed, clutched your head, and that was it."

"Straight out of a bad drama. That doesn't happen in real life, Blake. There must have been something."

"There was." Jenna, stepping forward, expression hard. "You insisted that you wanted me to tell you what had happened. I did, you turned pale, I told you a little more, and then you fainted dead away."

"To lie here in a coma for almost a week? Oh, don't be absurd."

"If you don't believe us," Cally said, and Avon couldn't help but notice that they were all so much more comfortable dealing with his disbelief and his ill-manners than they had been his good cheer, "then you can check the medical logs."

"No, no, I'll take your word for it. But you must admit, it sounds absurd, simply ridiculous."

"I insist, Avon," she said, pushing the medical computer over towards him. "Go on, check the records."

There was more to this than just her wanting him to see for himself, that was obvious. But what would it cost to humour someone who had nursed him to health? Politely, he reached out, flicked the necessary switches, heard the appropriate responses, all of which completely agreed with what his shipmates had told him.

"Final diagnosis of condition," he asked, and heard the four sudden intakes of breath, felt the sudden pressure of them, waiting for the answer. No, they would know the answer. Waiting, then, for his response.

He really didn't think he was going to like this. *Further testing required for final analysis.*

He swallowed, hard, and did the only thing he could. "Proceed."

Through it all, he could feel four pairs of eyes on him, watching every movement.

Diagnosis, the flattened computer voice intoned finally, is voluntary post-traumatic amnesia.

Avon did not want to look up at them, did not want to see the expression on their faces nor the pity or contempt in their eyes. "Elucidate."

Patient suffered a severe head injury causing temporary loss of memory function. Patient recov-

ered from said injury, however, patient has not recovered full memory function. Only those memories of past personal life are nonfunctional. Before falling into a coma, patient experienced extreme pain when regaining memories of past life. All learned skill memories are currently present and remain in full order. The retention of all learned skills and the loss of all personal memories indicate that patient has voluntary post traumatic amnesia.

"In other words, my mind was damaged, and seized this opportunity to forget that which I did not choose to remember."

Correct.

Blake, moving, speaking. "Turn the damned thing off."

Automatically, Avon did as Blake told him, and sat there, staring at the machine rather than look at the man.

"And was my life so dreadful—was *I* so dreadful—that losing all of that would be a blessing?"

Jenna speaking, filling Blake's silence. "I don't think so. Although there are one or two moments in the past year or two that I wouldn't mind being able to forget myself."

Cally jumping in, offering comfort. "There are several times all of us would prefer to forget, Avon, it is not only you."

"But it is me. To all intents and purposes, I erased myself like a bad computer programme." He stopped then, looked at Blake. "I do remember that much. Computers, programmes. Two computers on this ship: one called Zen, and Orac's the other. I could tell you how to reprogramme them, how to create a voice override, any number of complicated procedures. The thing is," and he didn't quite smile, "I can't remember where or how or why I learned any of it."

"I'm sorry," Blake, softly.

"Oh, but I'm not. Not in the slightest."

"But surely," Cally said, "to have lost everything that made you who you are..."

"But that was the whole point, wasn't it? Get rid of all that, and you get rid of the Avon we all knew and loved. And *he*," Vila nodded in Avon's direction, "gets to start all over again. A clean slate."

"Exactly," Avon said, and did smile, this time. "Oh, come on, it's hardly my funeral. For whatever reason, my mind jumped at the chance to forget everything that ever happened to me, which proves that there must have been consider-

able misery and very little of anything else."

"Yes, but Avon—"

"No, Jenna, leave it. Losing a memory isn't always the worst thing to befall a man." Blake again, not softly this time, but with a bitterness that was all the worse for being turned inwards. "Sometimes, remembering is far worse."

"That," Avon said, eyes narrowing, "sounds like the voice of experience."

"Let's just say that I have one or two memories I wouldn't mind forgetting myself."

"Tell me."

"Not now."

They stared at each other, like that, for a long moment, and Blake was still staring at Avon when he spoke to Cally. "I'll stay with him, see that he gets some rest. Why don't you take a sleep cycle, Jenna can stand watch on the flight deck."

"What about me?"

"You, Vila, can have an entire bottle of soma."

"Getting rid of us all then, are you? Not that I'm complaining, soma's a nice way to go, especially when you get to wake up in the morning. Just makes a person sleep like the dead, not like some people I could name, who used to be as happy to—"

"That's quite enough, Vila," Cally was saying, taking Vila by the arm and pulling him out the door with her, her voice clear but fading as she hauled him off down the corridor.

"Very tactful of her," Jenna said, and Avon might not know the salient facts behind it, but he could read the emotion in her voice and on her face. "And I never could bear to be outdone by anyone, so I shall withdraw with grace and tact myself. I'll be on the flight deck for a while." She paused at the door, looked at them, at the taut emotion between them. "I'll arrange the rest of the watches between myself, Cally and Vila, so you needn't worry, Blake."

But it was Avon who thanked her, kindly, at that.

Just the two of them now, and the aftermath of Jenna leaving. "Is she simply fond of you, or is she in love with you?"

"That's one of the details I wouldn't mind forgetting."

"And some of the others?"

"Are ones I don't think I quite want to tell you about just yet."

"So." Avon lay back against the pillows, watched as Blake came over and sat on the edge of the bed. Watched even more intently as Blake traced idle patterns on the sheet beside Avon's hand. "What scintillating topics of conversation shall we cover whilst I lie here being useless for the next eon?"

"We could start with why you're so damned unconcerned about losing an entire lifetime."

"Ah, but have I lost a lifetime, or gained a new one? Isn't this more off with the old, on with the new, rather than a terrible loss?"

"It's your life, why don't you tell me."

"Because as far as I know, that life never existed. It's gone, Blake, completely gone, every last bit of it. Apart from the things I need to survive."

"That's what made us wonder at first, you know. You had no trouble with language or using the plumbing—you could remember how to read, what to use for localised body pain when a head injury made a systemic analgesic impossible. Not the sort of thing the average person knows to begin with."

"All of life's little advantages, none of its disadvantages." A beatific smile. "Seems rather clever, really."

"Is it?"

"For me, certainly." And then that honesty which still seemed so alien coming from this man. "I'm not so sure that the lover I'd forgotten would feel quite the same way."

"I'm not sure they would either."

So much camouflaged by that bland, disinterested tone, and so much revealed by the tension fluttering the tensed muscles of Blake's jaw. "Are you going to tell me," Avon said, by now almost accustomed to the surprise in others when he was gentle, "or are we going to go through the yes, no, well maybe routine again?"

A deep breath, a steady gaze, but the betraying muscle dancing still. "Yes, we had sex together. As for being lovers—no, I don't think so. Well, maybe, if—"

"Yes, no and maybe. If that's an example of my life, small wonder I chose to dump it. All right, so we had sex. I presume that the doubt over us being lovers has to do with me, rather than any uncertainty of emotion on your part?"

"My god, you're asking me if I love you!"

For the first time, the brightness of this new life tarnished, uncertainty and insecurity beginning

their corrosion. He had thought himself inured to the surprise of others, but this, and coming from Blake, was surely excessive. "Why should a simple question be greeted with such horror?"

"Avon, to ask me if I love you..." He shook his head, at a loss for words. "Ask me something else."

But only for now. "All right. Why are there so few of us on board?"

"Because... There was one more, Gan, but he was killed."

"On one of these...raids. Like the one that almost killed me."

"More or less."

"More in Gan's case and rather less in mine, it seems. Tell me, is getting killed a habit around here?"

"It's not one we like cultivating."

"But it seems to thrive regardless."

"Not through any desire of mine."

Low, seductive, enough to kindle heat in Blake's eyes. "And what are your desires, Blake?"

"Well, that's one thing that hasn't changed a bit," Blake said easily, getting up from the bed, finding something to fiddle with on the tray beside it. "You were always doing that, asking difficult questions, changing the subject, lulling your victim into a false sense of security, then you'd leap from one painful—but manageable—topic back to the original torment."

"Then why don't you regard this as an experiment? Discover just how much personality is dependent upon life experience and how much on the genetic hand we're dealt."

"No need. Orac could find that out simply by tapping into the Federation's medical computers."

"Are you saying..."

"What? That at least your memory loss was voluntary? Or that you should pick through my records like a crow through carrion? Why not? Or have you discovered scruples to fill in the gaps left by your memories?"

That hurt far more than it ought, and the nastiest of retorts leapt and strained on the tip of his tongue, until Blake turned, just a bit, and Avon could see the pain etched into his face.

Perhaps he should concede that not being able to remember wasn't an entirely good thing after all. "Blake, I don't know what the hell I've done to you in the past, but that's literally gone, as far as I'm concerned. Tell me: why should the Federation computers have data like that?"

An explosion of movement, to hold the emotions in. Blake, striding, stopping, striding again, caged. "I'm sorry. I simply assumed... But if you've lost as much as you say—"

Patience sat on his shoulders, stiff as a new coat, but Avon held his tongue and his breath, and waited Blake's silence out.

Blake arrayed the various bits and pieces of medical clutter neatly on the tray, ranging them by size, grouping them by function, adjusting the positions minutely. "There are rooms," he said, oblivious to the flash of pain and the bitter ache that his voice caused, "deep in the lower levels, where they take people. Rows upon rows of rooms, all of them exactly the same shade of grey, not one of them with visible numbers, names, anything. The staff have special trackers and locaters so they can find their way around, but the poor prisoners—it's the first of the disorientations for them. Then come the treatments, the ones that leave you not knowing what's real and what's false, or with half your life buried behind a wall so thick you don't even remember that you've forgotten something."

The reality of the memories drowned out the present for a moment, and Avon sat there, still and silent, watching, as Blake was lost in the maze of the past, waiting until the memories were shaken off, visibly, Blake shrugging.

"A few years ago, it was even worse. They weren't quite sure how all the new gadgets worked. Wanted to 'improve performance', and so they took political prisoners and other pariahs, took them down to those corridors and those rooms, and they played with their minds."

"Until?"

"Until they all went insane or committed suicide."

"And if they're all dead or mad, then how do you know this?"

"Research records that Orac's hacked."

"No, Blake," Avon said, and the softness of his voice was velvet against abraded hurts, "I meant, how do you know what those rooms look like?"

Easy to tell Avon this, now, after so very long, easy because this was no Avon he had ever known. "Because I've been in them. Or something like them. I've had memories removed and memories implanted like a fucking plant pot."

"And can you tell them apart?"

"Now I can." Hollow, aching pause. "Not at first."

"In which case, I must commend you for being so reasonable about my...condition."

"What else do you expect? A lecture? A temper tantrum?"

Avon didn't reply.

"Of course," Blake muttered, sitting down heavily, head in hands, "that's one of the things I suppose you can't remember."

"One of the very many things. It was nothing personal—"

"And how the fuck do you know that? You can't remember, Avon, you can't even remember whether or not we were lovers. You can't remember who I am, or what I am—why we're here, why you were almost killed yourself. All gone, just disappeared, because it was inconvenient for you, unpleasant—"

Deep ragged breaths, Blake's eyes scrunched shut, and Avon sitting there, staring at him.

"I should hit you for that. Do you know what it was like when first I awoke? The pain, ripping my mind apart every time so much as a hint of my past came back to me. Oh, I think it was for more than the sake of convenience that my mind wiped my past."

"Then what? Was life with me truly such a nightmare you had to erase it—that you had to erase *me*—from your mind?"

Teeth clenched, chaos threatening, the pain hinting and mocking at the fringes of his mind. "I. Don't. Know."

"But we have our suspicions, don't we? And you wonder why I hesitate to tell you how I feel about you."

"Actions speak louder than words."

A plasma bolt would have hit him with less force. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Surely the meaning's obvious? Look at you, Blake, look at the way you are with me, the things you're saying—and not saying."

"But don't forget the other old saying: you can't judge a book by its cover."

An intrusion, slicing cleanly through him.

"Books—I remember books. A huge room, books from floor to ceiling, dark bindings, someone there, someone..."

But then it was gone, only the faintest sneer of pain left to remind him of what would happen to those foolish enough to seek memories in this minefield.

"Now why would I remember that and not the rest?"

"Because," dry as ice, colder than space, "remembering books was...providential. Convenient, for a memory to rescue you just then, don't you think?"

"You don't believe me. My god, you don't believe me! What the hell is this?"

"Of course I believe you. On the whole."

"Another one of those yes, no and maybes of which you seem so very fond."

"Under the circumstances, can you blame me?"

Weary now, wishing he could just pull the covers over his head and sleep for a year. "No. Not really, and certainly not if I were to be fair. I seem to have been rather..."

"Ruthless. Creative with the truth."

"Cruel?"

"Sometimes."

"And you doubt that I wiped all that away? But of course, it would be unnatural to willingly give up such flattery."

"You always hated flattery. You used to say that flattery was worthless, you'd stick to fervent declarations of adoration and sincere compliments from qualified individuals."

"Modesty was obviously another of my many charms."

"But perhaps you were right to refuse flattery."

"So you think I had one or two redeeming qualities?"

"Yes. Oh, yes, you did. Still do."

"You hope."

"I know."

Which was said with rather more certainty than Avon could muster.

"Tell me... Were you to find yourself in my shoes, would you do as I did?"

"Sometimes. Not often, but sometimes. Avon—"

"Yes?"

"Will you answer a question for me?"

"That depends on what the question is. Or more, that depends on what the answer is."

Blake was staring at him now, intently, feasting on him. "Why are you so calm?"

"About what?"

"Infantile evasion does not become you."

"Why am I so calm?" He sort of laughed over that, a question he had not asked himself because it had seemed so obvious. "Because it's infinitely quieter than screaming my head off."

Blake's expression was telling.

"Because," Avon conceded, "I have no panic

within me. The memories are gone, and I don't find myself regretting them. I look around me at people I don't know, a life that is no longer mine, and feel—relief."

"And what of us, Avon? When you look at us, are we something from your past, or do we have a place in your future?"

Honesty begets honesty, and clutching its tailcoats, suffering. "I don't know."

"Well," Blake said far too heartily, "that's at least as clear as my answers to you. When you *do* know—be sure to tell me, won't you?"

"Would I do otherwise?"

"Before? Without doubt."

"And now, if I don't know, then how can anyone else."

"Oh, you'd be surprised at what I knew about you."

"But not whether or not I loved you."

Blake grimaced over that, an expression that had essayed a smile and failed bitterly. "I don't know that I shall ever get used to you actually saying that word out loud. If I should mention it—before—you would call it the dread I-word and change the subject. And be that as it may—" hastily, over Avon's indrawn breath, Blake's words filling all the gaps and leaving no room for Avon to say anything else, "I really must be getting on. With you out of commission, we're rather short-handed. I'll pop in later."

"Thank you, you're very kind," Avon replied, his very politeness sarcastic.

"Not often, Avon. Not often at all."

And Avon was left alone once again, to ponder the mysteries of a kind man who would not confess kindness, and himself unwilling to even speak the dreaded I-word.

Boredom drove him to it. It took very little persuasion—for some reason, a mild glower and raised eyebrow guaranteed Vila's instant co-operation—before Vila skulked through the door once more, this time, arms overflowing with clothes.

This time, both of Avon's eyebrows rose. "What the hell have you brought me?"

"Your clothes, just like you asked me to."

"These—" one hand lifting a black leather sleeve dripping silver studs, "are *my* clothes?"

Darting looks at him, Vila laid the clothes across the bed, covering everything in brooding black

leather and sumptuous silk.

Even the exercises Cally had enforced were no real match for being up and about, so Avon stood rather unsteadily in his sleepwear and stared at the embarrassment of riches displayed in front of him. "Either I was a hedonist," he said almost to himself as he fingered the heaviness of the jacket, "or a specialist in certain...esoteric sexual practices."

"Or maybe you were just a tease."

"Blake doesn't seem to think so."

Bright eyes, head canted to one side in interest. "So he told you then, did he?"

"So you already knew then, did you?"

"Well, I had my suspicions. And there's not much you can keep secret on a ship this size, not really, is there?"

"Ah, I rather think Blake would disagree with you on that."

"Only because Blake never gossiped. Unnatural, that, a person not gossiping. Well, at least the rest of us made up for him."

Avon was still touching the clothes, a scientist puzzling over an unearthed artifact. "Did I gossip, or was I holier-than-thou also?"

"Oh, Blake's not like that. Well, not when it comes to gossip. He just didn't join in if it didn't actually have something to do with his bloody Cause."

"But I had no such compunctions."

"You didn't have any such Cause! Not you—always slagging Blake off about it, getting at him, making all these digs..."

"But if I didn't believe in it, then why did I stay?"

"Who said you didn't believe in it? All I said was you'd get on his case no end, and it wasn't a Cause for you, not the way it was for Blake."

Under cover of Vila's chatter, Avon lifted the jacket, felt the weight, smelled the leather, ran his fingers over the metal smoothness of the studs. Put the jacket down again, picked up the heavy belt. "What is this Cause anyway?"

There was another one of those appalled, stunned silences, and Avon turned round almost quickly enough to see the dismay in Vila's eyes, but Vila was obviously getting used to this, recovering quickly. "Blake's Cause? Freedom for the oppressed masses, overthrow of the Federation, total destruction of Servalan and all the other evil hordes."

"A minor hobby in other words."

"Very minor."

"Safe and easy, too."

"Less exciting than cutting your toenails."

"And it was during one of these boring forays that all this happened to me?"

Vila perched himself on the edge of the bed just the way Blake had, busied himself with smoothing out the creases in the silken shirt. "Everything would've been fine, if Servalan hadn't turned up. Then everything just fell apart. There were troopers everywhere, shooting at everything, and when we tried to get away—"

There wasn't even a receding echo of memory for this. It was gone, as if it had never existed, blinked away like dust in God's eye. "Jenna gave me the bare facts. I want the details."

"You would."

"So tell me."

"Do I have to?"

"No. But if you don't..."

"You'll get your memory back and remember what you said when you thought you'd never remember and then where would I be? Right. The details. There's a space installation, Star One where the Federation have their top tactical people and the computers that run everything, all herded together—easier to stop any of 'em running off that way. Or any gifted thieves getting in there and lifting any interesting bits and pieces he might find. Anyway, Blake decided to put a stop to their plotting and planning, you said it was stupid, it would get us all killed, but you said that every time anyway, so no-one paid you the blindest bit of attention."

The featherweight of the silk shirt on his shoulders laded him down, jaded echoes of misery mocking him with every faint sigh of the silk moving against him. Teeth set, he pulled the trousers on slowly, discovering, as if anew, the feel of the leather against his skin, the coolness slowly warming, the gentle, erotic tug of leather on his body hair. He reached for the belt, but couldn't quite bring himself to pick it up.

Fingering the heavy weight and the pattern of metal studs, Avon wondered if ostentation had not been the purpose of this belt, what sorts of marks it had left, and on whose skin. And whether or not he had enjoyed it. "And once Blake had ignored me, we landed—"

"Emm, not exactly. Y'see, we have this thing called the teleport that I couldn't explain if my life

depended on it. You weren't much better either, for that matter. Anyway, we teleported down to the installation, get a message from Jenna that there's a herd of pursuit ships coming after us. We hurry up to get things finished, then one of us tripped some alarm, and before we knew where we were, the guards and troopers and all sorts of people were swarming all over us. By the time we'd got away from them, Blake was hurt, bleeding all over the place, and he had to take his teleport bracelet off to stop the bleeding. Or was it to pull a bit of shrapnel out of his arm? Anyway, he's standing there holding the bracelet, and about a million troopers come barging in on us. One of them was going to shoot Blake, and you shoved him out of the way. Well, of course his bracelet goes flying as well, and he's scrabbling about trying to get his bracelet with one hand and shoot the baddies with the other, while you're putting paid to the rest of them. Then just when Blake found his bracelet, and he's getting the thing back round his wrist, one of the troopers comes up with the bright idea of setting off one of those grenade things they like."

He had the belt folded in half now, so heavy in the palm of his hand. "And I put myself between Blake and the blast."

"That's what it looked like, but that's just not you, is it?" Avon had gone as pallid as his voice, his atrophied muscles far from normal strength. "Here, are you all right? You shouldn't be up, should you? Oh, that's great, that is, you pick my turn to watch you to have yourself a relapse, and when Cally finds out I'm the one who brought you your clothes, what'll she do? I'll tell you what she'll do, she'll blame me, that's what she'll do."

Amusing to note, Avon decided, that through this babbling brookism, Vila had neatly taken charge, the chatter covering a distinctly efficient disappearance of the clothes from the bed, and Avon himself edged back into bed, feet lifted up and tucked under blankets before Avon had the chance to do much more than look pale and interesting.

"There, that's better," Vila announced, pleased with himself, a glass appearing in front of Avon, a cloth wiping the sweat from his face, his neck, even dipping quickly down to dry his chest.

It was better, as Vila had said, and for now, Avon was willing to give in to the weakness of his body. It was, after all, far better than looking too closely at precisely why the mere thought of

donning the rest of those clothes had brought a cold sweat to his skin and a churning heat to his stomach.

The worst of the wounds on his chest were healed now, thanks to the advanced technology they'd stolen along with the ship. The pain in his mind no longer troubled him, gone as surely as his memories. The fatigue had lifted, the hours of careful exercise had undone the damage of so long abed, he was well.

Even Cally agreed, and with Cally no longer breathing fire and brimstone down Vila's neck, Avon was finally able to get his hands on his clothes again.

He refused to think about the last time, blaming it all on physical weakness, understandable ill health, that was all. Nothing to think about, really, just shrug the clothes on, let his hands do those automatic tasks his mind had chosen to remember.

For a moment, he simply stood there, knowing that Vila was waiting for him outside that door and that the others were all there, all waiting. That the rest of the ship was there, too, waiting for him to set eyes on it for what amounted to the first time. Everyone and everything waiting, and all of it to the rhythm of his heart, thump, thump, thump, faster and faster, sweat beginning a slow, itchy trickle down the hollow of his spine.

He stood straighter, gathering up what felt unnervingly like courage, and opened the door.

Which prompted Vila to open his mouth, an endless stream of words flooding out in full spate, stopping Avon from having to think, stopping him from hearing the beating of his heart. He walked along beside Vila, looking at the walls, the floor, the odd pattern of the lights, and the odder shadows they cast. He knew it was absurd, but the ship felt almost alive, looking at him; he could almost hear the whispers as he passed, corridors stretching out at intersections like arms spread in invitation, and whispers, whispers, whispers.

It was, he told himself firmly, only his imagination. That was all. Nothing and no-one else.

His footsteps echoed behind him like a threat.

Imagination. Nothing more, he promised himself.

But he whirled round, trying to catch the eyes before they closed and hid.

"My room—which is it?"

A place to catch his breath, surely, somewhere

comfortable and best of all, private. The others might cheerfully walk into the medical room with little more than a cursory knock, but they wouldn't come barging into his room. Especially not judging by the man he'd been before.

"It's down here, this one," Vila was saying, Avon belatedly realising that Vila had been talking to him the entire time, leading him down this corridor and that, all of it unnoticed, drowned out by the whisperings in his ear.

The door opened on a room he had never seen before. A bed, neatly made up, along one wall. A table, with neat stacks of parts, several reading tapes, a few tools. One chair for that table, and over there, an entertainment unit, glittering piles of music disks filling the storage areas.

Almost, almost, something there, he'd know what, if only the whispering would just stop.

He turned round, caught sight of Vila's concern, turned away from that, caught sight of someone else.

No. Not someone else.

Himself, reflected back in a mirror.

Strange, he thought, that he hadn't once asked for a mirror before now. He was hardly ugly, although the nose could do with improvement. Dark, of hair and of eyes, neither too tall nor too small, neither too fat nor too thin, competent, compact, perhaps, one might say.

Fading round the edges too.

His jacket was heavy, heavier by the second, and the belt was a noose round him, cutting him in half, slowly, notch by notch, and he needed to take this stuff off, get rid of it, shed it like old skin, get rid of it—

Realised, appalled, that he was yelling.

Couldn't stop. Couldn't stop until he'd ripped this hideous skin from him, the blackness making him dissolve into the darkness, the darkness reaching for him, the whispers rising to screams and laughter, arguments and pain, voices he knew, people, people, all around crowding him, suffocating him—

And this time, it was Vila who was there to catch him when he fell.

He did not ask how much later it was: hours, days, what did it matter?

The black leather had been taken away, other things left lying on a chair in their place, tacit invitation for him to rise and dress, for

him to rejoin the others.

If he could.

Carefully, he brought the memories of that abortive time out, watched the memory replay, the soundtrack out of sync with the image, but that was all there was to it. A relapse, the computer had said, Orac sounding almost sympathetic in explaining away his breakdown.

Nothing much, really, he told himself. To be expected, that the redonning of the costume of his past, the reacquisition of his face, should combine to undermine his own mind's attempt to wipe the slate clean.

It came back to haunt him again: what kind of man had he been that he would erase himself? And if offered the truth, would he even want it?

The clothes were still there, still folded as neatly, still as redolent of invitation as before.

Lying here wasn't doing him any good.

Going out there might do him even less.

But one thing he did know about himself: he was no coward. Not him.

They had wanted him to call one of them if he decided to venture once more into the breaches. Well, he would venture once more into his breeches without any of their help.

Without any of them there to witness his humiliation if he should fail. Again.

He forced himself to smile as he got dressed: these were probably the brightest things in his wardrobe, which was almost as telling as the previous leather fetish gear had been. A very dark green polo neck this time, and trousers so dark a charcoal as to be almost black. The belt was black, but this one was not the weapon that the other had seemed. Socks, shoes, not boots, no jacket.

This, this he could bear.

The corridors, too, were easier this time, no whispers to follow him when he was dressed like this, and alone, no memories muttering into his ears as he walked along the paths of his past.

He wasn't sure where he was going, realised he could find his way around by thinking about what needed to be repaired where, which circuit lay behind which panel. Mechanical things, or those things necessary to his survival. Oh, small wonder Orac had been so impressed by the perfect selectivity of his memory loss.

Another corner, and with it, knowledge. Technical, thus far, and therefore painless, still no whisperings, but tension crawled up him and

settled on the back of his neck.

Flight deck. They called it the flight deck.

He could, almost, remember that he'd forgotten, but he pushed even that away, denied even that last, faint awareness of the people with whom he had risked his life.

With whom? Or *for* whom?

"Avon!"

"Are you sure you should be up here?"

"Why didn't you ask for one of us?"

"Glass of soma for the wanderer returned?"

He chose to acknowledge the last comment, taking the large glass with its small amount of green liquid. Smelled foul, but tasted reasonably fair. The others had stopped chattering at him now, had taken on that unpleasantly careful quiet reserved for the mentally unstable.

"Well?" he asked, raising his eyebrow. "What did you expect me to do? Leap into the air, a joyous clicking of my heels? Or perhaps another collapse?"

"You should not chastise us for being concerned," Cally said, the frown doing nothing to cover the smile of relief in her eyes.

"You're right, I'm just taking my own uneasiness out on you."

Which statement had Blake sitting down rather suddenly, Jenna literally agape, Cally visibly taken aback and Vila looking as if Death had just walked in and asked him to tango.

"You know," he said, refilling Avon's glass and topping up his own, "I thought I'd got used to all this. But it seems a bit much here on the flight deck, doesn't it?"

"Probably because Avon's never been civil to you on the flight deck before, Vila," Jenna commented tartly, leaving her position to come down and help herself to a healthy dose of soma. "I'm surprised the shock hasn't killed you."

"Be typical, that, wouldn't it? Blake's spent two years tossing us at Federation troops, Travis is after us and Servalan wants my teeth for a necklace—and my cause of death ends up Avon being nice to me."

"It was never that bad," Cally stepped in, drawing attention to herself, taking over the conversation. "Don't you remember the time when Blake himself said—"

But of course, Avon wasn't listening, not to the here and now. Their voices receded, and the past pressed in on him. No details, no memories, but they were there, whispering again. This time,

though, he had promised himself it would be different. This time, he was expecting the whispers, and the crush of his old life encircling him.

He leaned back against the sofa, eyes closed, so as not to see when the others looked at him, as they must, as they should. He listened, to their voices, and to the ghostly echoes of what once had been. If he let it happen, then perhaps the memories would come back, tiptoeing in whilst his attention was elsewhere.

The fascia he'd seen: it had a name, some ancient philosophy, something to do with Jenna's first hours on the ship... A name he had forgotten, remembered and forgotten again.

Zen. And *Liberator* had come from Jenna.

So. What else was there, lurking?

Himself, here, sitting like this. His body remembered, even if his mind did not. He knew precisely how far away the table was, should he decide to put his feet up. Knew how long it would take to get from here to the console that was the back-up control for the force wall. He distinctly remembered repairing some hardware, wiring that had come undone when—

When—

Nothing.

The wiring was there, all the colours, all the complexity, tools even. There had been a voice talking to him, his own voice answering, but— who?

What had they said?

The others were talking now, just general conversation, all quite supremely casual, as if it were everyday that one of their closest associates should turn up on deck with nothing to show but a handful of days remembered and a lifetime of computer skills catalogued like spare parts in a cabinet.

Decent of them, really, to be so kind to him. He should thank them. Would, were it not that they would feel awkward by having him draw attention to something they were so considerately ignoring.

Orac could fill in a lot of the gaps, or Zen could. Tap into either machine, and some of the data would be there. Zen was there on the flight deck at all times, Orac tended to be taken along with the people, so both machines must have recorded large chunks of his life. He could retrieve it, if he wanted to.

If.

Such a big word. If. If he wanted to. If he chose to. If, if, if.

He could hear Blake talking to Jenna, her answer sharp, a nearly inaudible shushing coming from Cally to shut her up. Blake again, murmuring, too low for Avon to catch the words, but the very quietness of it stirred his memory, made the pain stretch and yawn and threaten to swallow him whole. Blake's voice was very low, the intensity quite daunting, as he argued—

No.

Avon slammed the door shut on everything, all of it, it didn't matter, none of it mattered. Not when the pain was there. Not when remembering felt like torture.

He had been right to wipe the slate clean, and was he a greedy child to want the remembrances without the pain?

He opened his eyes, and conversation stopped, stuttered, started up again. No-one stared at him, no-one fussed, they just carried on as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

His head hurt. His chest, too, and sundry other bits and pieces. A good enough excuse.

"I need to take something for this headache. I'll be back later."

"You should be in bed, Avon."

"No, Blake, Avon's right to be up and about. It will do him far more good now than lying in bed could. Do you want me to come with you to help?"

"Thank you, but I think I need to practise coping for myself."

Slowly, body troubling him almost as much as mind, he left the flight deck and the others behind, and refused to acknowledge the pregnant silence his departure engendered.

They had settled into a routine, of sorts. Subtly, or blatantly in Vila's case, they would try to jog Avon's memory. Subtly, or obviously in Vila's case, Avon refused their aid. Around and around they danced, a minuet of memory and forgetting, finding and losing, the ballet slowly becoming battle.

And then the inevitable happened.

A rebel group needed help. Only the rankest of fools could expect Blake to deny succour to those in need.

The argument grew louder as Avon approached the flight deck, the discord rising and falling into discrete words, voices scarcely reined in.

"—mollycoddle him forever."

"And I wouldn't try such a thing. But we don't

need him to teleport down this time. I can manage perfectly well with you and Cally—"

"Only if you destroy the complex. If Avon were to go, then he could reprogram the computers—"

"Which the Federation would know immediately and simply go back to the original programming—"

"That's not what Orac said and you know it. You just don't want to risk him being hurt the way he was the last time. Come on, Blake, you can't let guilt and fear rule your life."

"He's not going down because the situation does not require him."

Avon descended the stairs, silence his wake. "How much destruction will there be if I go down?"

Blake, mulish, daring Avon to risk arguing with him. "That's really not the issue—"

"Then what is?"

"Jenna thinks my original plan is better than my revised plan."

"And the differences are?"

"In the original," Jenna beat Blake to the punch, "you went down with the rest of us, we made it look like a routine raid, while you reprogrammed the computers to feed false data to the Federation and to sabotage the research readings, you finish your job, we all leave, making the Federation think that it was the experimental weapons' store we were after all the time."

"And the revised plan?"

"We blow everything up."

"You propose," Avon said to Blake quite calmly, on the surface at least, "to blow up an experimental weapons research facility? Whilst having limited knowledge of exactly which weapons they have down there?"

"Do you have a better plan?"

"No, but I think you did. The first plan has the benefit at least that it will kill far fewer people."

"When have you ever cared about the body count?" Jenna demanded.

That shut him up.

To not care—about a body count?

What sort of people were these? What sort of man had *he* been?

Not something to be examined too closely, that was certain.

"Blake—"

"All right, all right, I admit, I would much rather Avon reprogramme their systems. But I can't take

the risk of him having another one of those black outs, and I can't risk his life."

"It's *my* life. The choice of whether or not to risk it is *mine*. And I say I'm going down."

Jenna and Blake started arguing both sides of the argument, Avon caught neatly in the middle.

"That's enough," Avon said, but they ignored him, amidst excoriations of guilt and accusations of callousness. "Has it occurred to you, Blake, that I might *want* to participate in this? After all, I've been on this ship for two years—you're obviously not the only one to believe in this cause."

And he had the great satisfaction of leaving the two of them in stunned silence and gaping widely enough to land a ship in.

Suiting up, and the pleasure of shocking both Blake and Jenna had long since worn off, replaced by the revulsion engendered by hearing Orac's detailed report of just exactly what sort of weapon was being developed down there.

Blake, creeping up behind him like a ghost. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Are you?"

"Always. But you..."

"A leopard can, it seems, change its spots."

"Can it? Or can it just blend with the herd long enough to find a bolthole?"

"Listen, Blake, I don't know what the hell I was like before, but I can tell you right now that if I say that I'm going down there to reprogramme their computers, then that is precisely what I will do," said viciously, his finger jabbing into Blake with all the force that memories had once used on him.

"And if you think for so much as a second, that I would find a home amidst people who build some of the foulest weapons known to inhumanity, then I'm very, very glad that I'm not you. And that I'm not what used to be me either."

"That's not what I meant—"

"Then what did you mean? That I'd find arid land, dangerous levels of chemical pollution and UVB levels high enough to fry a man an alluring bolthole? So you think I'm either stupid or amoral. You really should ease up on all this flattery, else it shall surely go to my head."

"I meant," Blake began with the air of a man who'd been through all this before, "that..." He hesitated, conceded that he could either bluster or tell the truth. No less brave than Avon, he said: "It's just an old fear of mine, that you would one day leave without even telling me first."

The fury left Avon abruptly, astonishment covering the flood of very real affection he felt. "Old habits die hard, hmm? Then I give you my word, Blake. If ever I should decide to leave, then I shall tell you so. Before, rather than after, the fact."

"Thank you."

And for the first time since Avon's painful rebirth, the old fire began slowly to rekindle.

Flawless, the plan went off without the slightest hitch. On the flight deck after, glasses in their hands, the relaxation of a good job well done, Avon sat in their midst, and basked in belonging.

Scarcely had they caught their breaths from that than Avalon had asked them to provide transportation and firepower to a small group of guerrillas willing to exile itself on a miserably cold, wet planet the better to harry the Federation Flight Academy's attempt to train yet more pilots to replace those lost with ever increasing rapidity. Another raid after that, a week of flurried activity, of hurried conversations, hasty meals. Then came Blake's next idea, one that Avon was more than willing to abet.

"And after the medical changes are made, they call them mutoids?" Avon said in disgust.

"Oh, I dunno," Vila said, parking himself on the flight deck sofa beside Avon, "Travis likes them enough."

"That's obscene, Vila."

Vila paled, obviously envisioning Travis, with a mutoid. "I think I'm going to be sick," he said.

"Then don't sit so close to me," Avon said tartly and knew, immediately, from the expression on Vila's face that he had, for a moment, sounded exactly like his own late, unlamented self.

And just how much is a man defined by genetics, he wondered uneasily, and his environment?

"This procedure," he asked, "exactly what is involved?"

"Don't say anything! Make him read it or have Orac tell him all the sick bits later. Or at least wait until I'm out of earshot. Preferably on a different ship in a different quadrant of a different galaxy."

"Point taken, Vila," Blake said, "but it's still not going to get you out of taking your turn on the flight deck. Avon, why don't you come with me and I'll give you the details."

Automatically, Avon turned towards the galley, but Blake took his arm, steered him elsewhere.

"Well now," Avon said quite blandly, a tone that would once have sent even Blake ducking for

cover, "at least this saves me having to ask the traditional cliché."

"My place because this is where I have the printouts," said with as much dignity as Blake could muster, and it still wasn't enough to disguise either his embarrassment or his desire. "If you'll just have a look at these..."

Avon's intended response to that laughably businesslike tone was lost the instant he glanced at the papers in his hand, words leaping out at him like assassins.

"This is impossible," he breathed, turning the pages, going back to re-read a detail that was inconceivable. "This is—"

"Beyond description?"

"If only it were. Some of these descriptions are more than graphic enough."

"That," Blake said, taking some of the papers before they fell, "is the bowdlerised version. I destroyed the original."

"Keeping things from us?"

Blake nibbled on his thumb, and Avon looked away, knowing that he should recognise that trademark gesture, refusing to be discomfited by his lack of recall.

"Well? Are you going to tell me all of it or do you believe that ignorance is bliss?"

"No, Avon, it's you who seems to think ignorance is bliss."

That made him wince. "It still rankles, then, that I forgot you?"

"It still..." a too brief smile, "rankles, yes, that you forgot me."

"If it's any consolation, I've forgotten everyone else too."

"Oh, that's no consolation at all. And—" breaking in even as Avon opened his mouth to reply, "that's not why I brought you here. Just leave it, will you? This report..."

And Avon granted him the lifeline, and perhaps even admitted that Blake wasn't the only one grabbing the lifeline of work.

Over an hour later, and Avon was wishing he hadn't asked for any details, not the least little one of them. But there was one more detail he wanted. "You still haven't told me why you're withholding information from us."

"I'm not withholding information. I'm just not giving it to you."

"And I've left my credit disk at home. Perhaps I could owe you for it?"

"Don't be facetious."

"You'd prefer me obstreperous, perhaps?"

Beyond his will, Blake's face showed exactly how he'd prefer Avon: in bed, waiting, willing and ready.

"This report—you won't give me the original because you're protecting me, am I right?"

The lust written all over Blake's face was emended by a stricken look.

"Given my recent mental state, that's probably the wisest thing."

Now it was astonishment all over Blake's face. "I thought you'd rip my head off for doing that."

"You really must remember not to expect the same reactions as before."

A long pause, Blake staring at Avon, Avon returning the gaze measure for measure.

"You still want me," Avon said. "Why do you keep such a distance between us?"

"I wasn't entirely sure of my welcome. And it seemed...churlish to approach a man who had already cut me out of his life once."

"Churlish—now there's a charming, old-fashioned word, to go with a charming, old-fashioned motive," Avon snapped angrily. "You'll be taking me shopping for a chastity belt next."

"Certainly an interesting image, but I've no desire to force you into celibacy."

"No desire? Oh, I think you have every desire. I think you want me so desperately it's killing you. And I think that if I dallied with anyone else on this ship, you would be hard pressed to keep your hands from round their neck."

"Don't be ridiculous. That's hardly my style—"

"No? And yet the others were never actually certain whether or not we were sleeping together, but not one of them has made a move toward me."

"That's not *my* intimidation, Avon. For that, you'll have to look far closer to home."

"Am I so unapproachable?"

Blake ran his hands through his hair, let out a gusty sigh: this Avon was still as predictable as shifting sands, and twice as hard to cross. "You can be, yes."

"And if I weren't? What would you do then?" Asked with such benign curiosity, only the glitter in the dark eyes displaying any emotion at all.

"It would take more than that."

"Why? It's obvious you loved me, and I think you love me still."

"As you were so fond of saying, what has love

got to do with anything.”

“You could say,” dry humour, a hint of a smile, “that I’ve changed my mind.”

“What if I say that you’re not the only one?”

“You can change your mind, Blake,” Avon said softly, and he was far closer than Blake had expected, “but men like you can never change their heart.”

Blake’s eyes closed, giving Avon all the opportunity he needed. He closed the distance between them, and kissed Blake.

Who opened his mouth to Avon, deepening the kiss, his hunger a palpable thing, a rising hardness against Avon’s body.

“I shouldn’t,” Blake said, lips against Avon’s hair.

“Why the hell not?”

“Well, it could be argued that you’re not in your right mind.”

“The same could be said of you. And I could argue, Blake, that I am in my right mind, now, more so than I have been for years.”

Blake stroked his hands down Avon’s arms, his own strong hands relishing the meeting of equal strength. “The others will be looking for us,” he said.

“The others,” Avon replied drily, “aren’t quite as naive as you would have them. You and I disappear from the flight deck together, using a spurious excuse along the lines of come and see my etchings and you expect them to be looking for us?”

“I was giving you a chance to withdraw without drawing blood if you didn’t want to do this.”

“If I didn’t want to do this, then I would hardly still be here, now would I?”

“But you weren’t exactly falling all over me, were you?”

“And did you always talk this much before sex? If you did, it would go a long way to explaining why you weren’t sure if we were lovers or not.”

Blake erupted into that unexpected laughter of his, laughter that Avon found quite astonishingly attractive. “On the verge of falling asleep, are you, Avon?”

Avon pressed his hips forwards, just once. “Does that answer your question?”

The response was a groan, and Blake kissing him again, tongue thrusting into his mouth, hands grabbing him, holding him tight, as if Blake never wanted to let go ever again.

“Miss me?” Avon asked, lips still touching Blake’s.

“One thing you always credited me with was my perfect aim.”

“Care to refresh my memory?”

And it mattered to neither of them what had gone before, what either one could or could not remember, what either had needed to forget, or couldn’t manage to forget no matter what.

It didn’t take much for them to end up on the bed, clothing scattered here and there, clothes still being shed like masks as they entangled themselves in each other, legs interlocking, coming apart, Blake’s knee slipping between Avon’s thighs, Avon’s legs strong around Blake as he rolled them over. Astride Blake now, Blake’s hands clasped tightly in his fists, Blake’s arms stretched out taut over Blake’s head, the hardness of muscle a direct contrast to the softness of pillow.

“Is this what it was like?” Avon asked, sliding his rump back and forth across the demand of Blake’s cock. “Is this why I wore all that leather?”

“Sometimes.”

“And other times?”

“Other times,” and the voice was as much seduction as the words, as the evocation of times past, atavistic desire rising in Avon, “I was the one on top of you. You liked to be tied up, sometimes.”

“And the belt? What did I use that belt for?”

“Nothing you ever told me about.”

No answer that, not the absolution he was looking for, but it was something. “Did I ever hurt you?”

“Not physically,” said stoically, not even the eyes betraying the depth of pain.

“But otherwise... What I must have put you through if you couldn’t even trust me enough to tell me what we were in the past.”

“I wasn’t exactly a saint myself.”

“Do you always take on all the guilt?”

Avon’s erection was flagging, his expression troubled as the deeds of the past threatened the hopes of the future. “Don’t, Avon,” Blake said, flexing his arms in tacit enquiry, “don’t let this slip away from us.”

“Could it?”

Blake closed his eyes then, and was glad Avon was holding him back. “I thought the truth would have to come out sooner or later.”

“And the truth is?”

“It slipped away from us before. Long before

you were hurt. Shortly after Gan was killed.”

The sudden cold shocked him, Avon’s absence a torment after such hope.

“What did I do?”

“You? Oh, it was nothing you did,” Blake said, hearing his own cutting emphasis.

A bitter smile for that, one Blake hated to see reappear. “Then what did I not do?”

“You wouldn’t forgive me.”

“For Gan’s death?”

“For putting ‘that damned, bloody Cause’ before you. And me, for that matter.”

Blake rolled over, raised himself on one elbow behind Avon. The bowed back was cool to the touch, and tense. “It wasn’t just you, or me. Neither one of us would give the other an inch.”

“But now, of course, I’m a different man.”

“And I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Have you?”

“We won’t know until we set the exam, will we?”

“And whom shall we ask to mark your results?”

“Anyone you want.”

“Hardly the witty repartée of my dreams.”

“So that’s what you’re calling it today.”

“As opposed to fucking?”

Blake’s hand was very warm as it traced his spine. “Is that all it is?”

“Right now, all it is is a lot of talk and no action.”

“Do you want me to change that?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, will you stop treating me like an invalid? I am perfectly capable of putting an end to anything that isn’t what I want.”

“Then I shall make sure,” Blake said between the kisses he used to map his way up Avon’s back to the sensitivity at the base of his neck, “that I am always precisely what you want.”

“Right now, what I want,” Avon said, and turned round, manoeuvring them until they were both lying down, “is sex. After all, you still have the advantage over me—you know my body, better than I do myself in fact, while you...” His fingers, light as thistledown, followed the pulse in the heavy vein the length of Bodie’s cock, “You are a mystery to me.”

And stole Blake’s breath clean away by leaning down and taking him in his mouth. As with so many other details, his mind had forgotten, but his body remembered still. His throat knew how to open, how to accommodate Blake’s girth and

length, and the sensation dizzied him. He used his tongue, would have smiled at the response had his lips not been so tightly stretched. Sucking hard, the cock leaving his mouth with an audible pop, Avon let Blake go, but only for the barest second, taking him in again, consuming him, the power intoxicating. Inches from his eyes, Blake’s thighs were trembling, the long muscles flexing as Blake struggled with the imperative to thrust.

Even now, Avon wasn’t entirely certain what he wanted—everything, all of it, nothing omitted, nothing unexperienced, certainly—but the details of this, the rediscovery of his body’s fond memories, he was faced with an embarrassment of riches, Blake’s cock in his mouth, Blake’s arse a temptation, his own body hollow with the need to be filled.

With a luxurious lick, he emptied his mouth of Blake, and kissed his way up the lush body, tempted to linger by the enthusiastic response of small brown nipples. Eventually, Blake a writhing mass of pleasure under him, Avon rested, full body, atop of Blake, his arms comfortably folded on Blake’s chest. “So tell me,” he said quite conversationally, as if his own cock were not seeping need onto Blake’s hardness, “what did I like best?”

Blake groaned at that, and enveloped Avon in his arms, cocooning him, rolling them over until Avon was pinned under him, his arms spreadeagled by Blake’s hands, his legs spread by Blake’s, his cock nudged aside by Blake’s.

“What you liked best, not that you were ever willing to admit it, was to have me fuck you through the mattress.”

“That should do for now,” Avon remarked, pushing his hips upwards, his cock trailing through the hair on Blake’s belly, Blake’s cock dipping downwards, between Avon’s cheeks, the full, rounded head dabbing against his hole. “And next time, perhaps, I shall fuck you.”

“I’ve always been—” the words broke off for a moment, Blake’s eyes closing as Avon’s body opened, “—a great believer in equality.”

Avon shifted a bit, lifting himself up, relaxing back down onto the pillow Blake had put under him, one that raised him just the right amount. Unlike Avon, Blake had obviously forgotten not a single detail of their sexual encounters. There was a slickness sliding into him, Blake’s wet finger, and then Blake had him lifted up, shoulders braced on the bed, his backside where Blake could reach it,

Blake's tongue entering him with devastating intimacy. Blake laved him there, his curls teasing Avon's cock, as his tongue sundered Avon's will.

Why the hell had he chosen to forget this? It was surely nirvana, pure bliss, to feel Blake's tongue fucking him like this, but then that paled to nothing, superseded by the sensation of cock pressing against him, into him, filling him completely. No longer inviolate, no longer alone, but joined, completed, and the pleasure of it all was unbearable. Every thrust deep inside him stroked along his prostate, and every withdrawal stretched him. As Blake pushed into him, the crisp curls caressed his balls, and Blake's firm stomach rubbed his cock, almost enough, but before that could become a need, it was taken care of too, Blake's large hand encompassing him, cock held in a tight tunnel of warmth and perfect friction.

He could lose himself in this, and yielded to the pleasure of it, gave himself up to the binding of his strength and Blake's, the rhythm the pulse of his blood pounding through his veins. The sensations built and grew, so much better than the pallid imitations his own right hand had given him of late. He stretched downwards, and his fingers could just reach where Blake's body went into him, the large cock slick and hot as it slid from him, feeling even bigger as it went back inside him.

The cock in him swelled, and Blake thrust harder than before, and went still, pouring his essence deep within Avon, and Avon was transfixed by the expression on Blake's face. Inside him, Blake was no longer completely hard, and Avon's own need began to howl and wail. But Blake knew him as Avon no longer knew himself, and withdrew from his body, eager mouth coming down to suck Avon inside. A matter of seconds then, and Avon was coming, the pleasure of it turning him inside out, draining him into Blake.

Afterwards, Blake lay at his side, tracing idle patterns in the sparse hair on Avon's chest.

"I must be a fool," Avon announced calmly.

"For what?" Blake asked, as if it were every day that Kerr Avon called himself a fool without adding 'for listening to you, Blake' to it.

"To forget all this, to give it all up—proof of complete insanity."

"Or perhaps," the small voice of hope just stirring, "you had to give up the good to get rid of the bad. There's only so much the mind can do, even a mind as convoluted and twisted as yours."

"At least that's better than being a complete idiot."

Blake couldn't help himself kissing Avon then, sighing as he was welcomed, encouraged, Avon's hands roving Blake's back, stroking him, exploring the mass of muscle and bone that he had once known so well.

And Blake certainly wasn't about to ruin it all by telling Avon that this would be the first time, ever, that the sex had not ended in an argument, with Avon getting up out of bed and storming off—on those nights when he didn't kick Blake out himself.

The next morning, in the teleport area, Vila took one look at them, broke into the largest of grins and said: "So when's the happy day then?"

Blake winced in anticipation and waited for the thunderbolt at his side to erupt. And waited.

"I don't know about the happy day, but last night wasn't exactly miserable," Avon said mildly, although his eyes were bright, and shockingly, there was an incipient smile threatening.

"What are you talking about?" Jenna, clattering down the corridor in boots that had no place on a raid, but that she seemed to manage in, in spite of gravity, physics and common sense.

"Avon's just telling us about his and Blake's sex life," Vila piped up.

Blake sat down, Jenna looked as if her jaw were going to go through the floor, and Avon smiled, amused in spite of himself. "You're exaggerating again, Vila," he said, moving past the other man to set the teleport co-ordinates.

"More's the pity. At least it would give us something to chat about during the long, space nights, wouldn't it?"

"Not to mention it being the closest you're going to come to a sex life of your own," Avon put in tartly, but there was still that hint of a smile there, something tremendously puzzling about his expression.

And then he looked down at Blake and it was obvious: Kerr Avon looked like a man in love.

While the others were still trying valiantly to cover their shock, Avon set the co-ordinates and checked his weapon. "Shall we?" he said, gesturing to the teleport deck, refusing to speculate on what he had been that simple co-operation should garner so extreme a response.

Cally arrived then, throwing them back into routine, breaking the spell that this pleasantness

was causing. The usual procedure, and they were down, if not safe.

Quietly, they found their way along corridors Orac had mapped out, old architectural plans never the best guarded of secrets. Round a corner now, and ahead, they could see the nerve-centre of the installation, an ant hill crawling with white coats and black uniforms, weapons and gadgetry abounding.

Silently, Blake gave the signals each team needed, Avon coming with him as Jenna went off to the right, Cally and Vila to the left. A few moments only, and then the chaos began, troopers and mutoids running right and left to the sources of explosions.

Avon wanted to thump Blake, going first like that, but it was too late to stop him now, even though it was against the plan for Blake to be the first through the door. But first he was, and Avon was hard pressed to keep up with him enough to offer any real cover. The computers were in front of him, and he put one weapon down to take up his weapon of choice, nimble fingers darting over controls, tools unhooking hard drives, the storage wafers making satisfying, brisk snapping noises as Avon broke them into tiny little pieces. He heard it behind him then, the thunder of approaching footsteps, booted feet coming at a dead run, a woefully appropriate phrase, it turned out, as the first of the mutoids skidded into the room.

Instinctively, Avon raised his gun and fired, smoothly, bodies tumbling like ten pins, Blake at his side, the two of them cutting a swathe towards the door. A quick movement from Blake, and then the deafening roar of an explosion in a small room, Avon and Blake thrown against the corridor wall, a rain of blood and body parts flooding them.

Into the charnel stench came Jenna, her face twisting in repugnance as her boot heel skidded in bruised meat that was still vaguely recognisable as a human body.

"Don't you think this is a bit of overkill?" she asked, not that Blake or Avon could hear her, not after the impact of the explosion.

Hand signals again, then, the three of them pelting down the corridor to help Cally and Vila finish their side of things. More mutoids and more troopers coming at them every time they rounded a corner, giving them no time for thought, no time

even for any reaction beyond those basics necessary for survival.

But back on the *Liberator*, in the awful quiet, the ship running as fast as they could make her to some planet where there wasn't a sea of blood in their wake, there was time and time enough for reflection, and not everyone liked what they saw.

In front of Blake's door, waiting for it to open, impatience setting in. Another imperious peal of the door intercom, but still no reaction. Well, it wasn't for nothing that he'd had Vila re-teach him the fine art of breaking and entering.

The main room was in darkness, light spilling from the bathroom, Blake's solid form made amorphous by the shower wall.

Avon moved the chair, seated himself, and waited.

The shower finished, and Blake emerged, naked, hair still dripping. As he sat there watching, Avon wondered how many times he'd waited for Blake like this, how many times he had seen this.

Blake turned round then, and without so much as the scantest hint of surprise that there was someone sitting in the dark in his once-locked bedroom, gave Avon a welcoming smile. "I'm glad you let yourself in—can't hear a thing in there."

"So I noticed. I also couldn't help but notice that you couldn't hear anything down in that installation."

Blake gave him a look for that, one Avon knew now punctuated his every relapse into his old self. "Couldn't you offer the condemned man a drink? Or at least make a pretense of small talk before going for the jugular?"

"Thanks, but I've already had my quota of jugulars and condemned men for the day."

"Well, I shall have a drink. A large one, as you're obviously in one of your more difficult moods."

"With which you are more familiar than I."

"Into each life a little rain must fall."

"Judging by the amount of alcohol you're presently pouring down your throat, I'd say it's more a monsoon."

"You're the expert."

"I was the expert. Now the only thing I know for sure are computers."

"Doubts, Avon?" Blake asked him grimly, his hands less than entirely steady as he poured himself yet another glass.

"Can you expect anything else? What we did down there—"

"Will set back production of standard mutoids by months, and quite possibly permanently derail the development of the new, improved models."

"What a joy such blinkered vision must be."

"Why, what else should I say?"

"How about a reference, in passing, naturally, about the people we killed?"

"Is *that* what's worrying you? *You*? Amnesia as conscience. You should tell Orac, he could spend months doing research on that."

"What I was in the past is dead and gone. What I'm concerned about is what I am here and now."

"Oh, come, now, Avon, a man as sophisticated and intelligent as you, surprised that we killed a few people? How do you think revolutions are usually won? By lofty arguments in the halls of academe with people politely taking turns to express their opinions?"

A twist midstream, Avon watching Blake. "How many times have you bathed since we regained the ship?"

"No more often than you."

"So the blood did trouble you."

Blake turned on him then, the polite, disinterested mask slipping to reveal the murk within, sarcasm sharpening his voice to stiletto sharpness. "Trouble me? Oh, no, Avon, I enjoy having bits of people stuck in my hair and under my fingernails. I'm ecstatic that my clothes and skin stink of death and dying. I wake up with a smile on my face every morning just thinking about it."

"Then why the hell are you doing this?"

"Because..." Calming, for a moment, both hands coming up to tug at his hair, smoothing it back thereafter, those same hands coming down to cover his face as if he could wipe even the memory of the blood away. "Because that's the price and the penance I have to pay."

"Other people give their lives and all you can say is that it's *penance* for you? You didn't mention that megalomania was one of your hobbies."

"For once, just for once, would you stop trying to pick me apart like a fucking vulture and just listen? Penance, Avon, yes, because I suffer when those people die. When I kill them. I've had their blood on my hands before and I will again, and that, Avon, *that* is a horror I have to live with every single day."

"Then why don't you stop?"

It was supposed to be a laugh, sounded more like a sob. "Easier to rip my heart out and still live than give in and leave everyone else at the mercy of the Federation."

"Everyone else? Pardon me, but I don't see 'everyone else' rallying behind you and joining the fight." Or sharing your blood price.

"The food is drugged, the water is drugged, the very air is drugged—how are they supposed to resist?"

"You seem to have managed."

"Only sometimes."

Orac had given him enough dry facts for his imagination to fill in the bilious details, sympathy softening his attack. "If you could resist, if even only sometimes, then why do you forgive them for never resisting at all?"

"Because I wouldn't wish my experiences on my worst enemy. And because they're not me."

"And there we have the crux of the matter, don't we? Ego, pure and simple. I don't have many personal memories yet, but one of them is a dream, where you were dressed up as a knight in shining armour and you were tilting at me, killing me. You, of course, remained untouched."

"Why blame that on me? It could just as easily be your fear of me because I really am your hope, your knight in shining armour, and you're terrified of finding yourself tilting at windmills right by my side. Or two paces behind me."

Avon's eyes narrowed, and the nastiest of retorts danced on the tip of his tongue. But then he took in the state Blake was in, the amount of alcohol he had downed in so short a time. "Be that as it may," something he would definitely not be thinking about later, "it doesn't answer why you insist on wading up to your armpits in blood."

Oddly enough, that made Blake smile. "You said that to me once before. You said that I could wade up to my armpits in blood if I wanted to, but as soon as we destroyed Star One, you wanted it to be over."

And absorb that easily and quickly, Avon told himself, rather taken aback. "You mean, I was going to leave?"

"From the day you set foot on *Liberator*."

"And would you have let me?"

"You never actually got round to departing, did you?"

"And of course, after Star One, I was in no condition to do anything."

"Apart from forget."

"That's why you've never seriously questioned why I forgot, isn't it? You knew better than I."

Blake just took another mouthful of alcohol.

"Tell me, Blake, what would you have done were you in my shoes?"

Blake came over to him then, standing right in front of him, the heaviness of his genitals within a hand's span of Avon's mouth. "Why did you come here tonight, Avon?" he asked softly, leaning down now, hands on the arms of Avon's chair, his body entrapping Avon. "Was it for absolution? I grant it you. Was it to play messiah to the lepers in your head? I name them healed. Was it to torment me? Then mission accomplished and you can," leaning in even closer now, lips so very close, his breath touching Avon's skin, "just fuck off. All right?"

Blake retreated, crossing the room, heading back to the depleted bottle of booze. "No, you're not all right, are you?"

"Oh, how the mighty are fallen. Time was, Avon, when you would have had me flayed and filleted by now and hung up to dry."

"While you would stand there and take it stoic as a martyr. And take that as punishment for what you'd done. More penance, Blake, so that you could forgive yourself enough for what you'd done so that you could go out and do it again. And again."

"Today was the exception. It's not usually so..."

"Messy?"

"It's not usually so tragic."

"Then why even risk such disasters?"

"Because I've told you, I can't *not* fight! How can I stand aside, knowing what I do, and let the Federation continue?"

"But how can you expect anyone else to come with you? How dare you expect us—*me*—to wade in that blood with you?"

"I can't," said with monumental sadness.

"Oh, but you do. You expect us to fight right beside you—"

"I expect you to leave one day. That's one of my life's few certainties, Avon. And that's about the only thing I expect from you."

Considering what he'd been thinking since this afternoon, there really wasn't much Avon could say to that.

"There has to be a better way than blowing things up installation by installation."

"Which is why we are establishing rebel groups on every inhabited planet, in every Dome—and

why else do you think I've been talking to the Free Traders about moving large amounts of matériel?"

"But that's still doing it piecemeal, with one minor raid after another. There must be a way to destroy the Federation without killing so many people."

"No there's not."

"At least consider the idea instead of dismissing it so cavalierly. Some of us, Blake," said with some of the old fire and brimstone, "can't quite get the blood off our hands. It doesn't matter how many times I scrub myself, I can still smell their blood on me."

Dry as wine. "And it upsets you?"

"No, and I suspect you know that that is the *real* problem."

"It had crossed my mind."

"Not that you would say anything to precipitate my departure."

"Can you blame me?"

"All too easily. You have us wading through blood when there must have been a way for Orac to do some damage to those computers from up here, a long way from the blood and spilled guts of other people."

"I said there's no other way!"

And therein lay Avon's answer. "There's no other way—for you. That's it, isn't it, Blake? You have to do it this way, hands on—why? Do you get some sick kick from it? Did you and I get together after one of these little raids and lick the blood from each other's bodies and—"

The blow knocked him from his seat, and Blake made no move to help him. "You've always been a sick bastard, Kerr Avon, but that's going too far, even for you."

"But it doesn't alter the truth, does it? You need to fight the Federation this way because if you don't—what? You'll sink back into the soporised mire you escaped from 'sometimes'? Is that what worries you?"

"No, Avon," and Blake's voice was dangerous and quiet, "it's because I don't enjoy the killing, because the sight and smell of blood makes me sick and because seeing people dead at my hands makes my soul ache. But what would it make me if I could simply give Orac a nice, clean dispassionate command that would wipe out lives, without me even seeing a single one of their faces? I almost ended up like that, Avon, over Star One, and I won't risk it happening again."

"Not even for me?"

"Especially not for you."

"And if I were to tell you that I refused to take the risk that I might well end up enjoying killing with my own two hands, would you give up your Cause for me?"

"Avon, Avon, you just don't understand, do you? I can't even give up my cause for *me*."

"Which leaves us—"

"Precisely where we've always been. Me, locked into something I have to finish, you on the verge of leaving."

"And nowhere for us to meet in the middle."

"One of us will have to give in."

"And it won't be you."

"It never has been before."

On that cheerful note, Avon went over and helped himself to a hefty drink.

So quietly Avon wasn't entirely sure he'd heard it, Blake said, "Stay with me tonight?"

And remembering everything that he did, how much courage had it taken for Blake to ask such a thing of him? And how much more courage would it take to turn him down—to deny both of them?

"Why not?" Avon said easily, the rest of his drink disappearing in one long swallow.

It was slower tonight, much slower, and every caress was a goodbye.

The last of his various bags were piled in the teleport area when he heard the footsteps coming. He didn't need to look up to see who it was.

"I was just about to come and tell you."

"Orac told me. Said you were bringing your valuables to the teleport room."

Avon stacked and restacked all these things that he could and almost certainly would replace at some point. At least it was better than turning to look at every embezzler's biggest nightmare, the

perfect mark that got away. "And when has Orac ever been wrong? I've taken some things from the treasure room, and I shall keep my weapon, I think."

"The teleport bracelet?"

"Do you want it back?"

"Don't be stupid, Avon."

"If I weren't to be stupid by your standards, I wouldn't be leaving."

"If you didn't want me to think you were being stupid, you would have left two years ago. Before it hurt so much. For both of us."

"Good point. Well, obviously, Vila's stupidity was far more contagious than we thought."

A heavy silence, Avon finally standing up. "There's nothing else we can do, is there?"

Blake turned away from him then, rechecking the settings on the teleport console. "When this is all over..."

Avon did not change the 'when' to 'if': they could both hear it just as clearly unspoken.

"When this is all over, will Orac be able to find you?"

Avon thought about the blood on his hands, and the exhilaration of surviving while one's enemy died. Thought, too, of Blake dripping gore, his shining armour tarnished and stained. "I don't know," he finally said. "I honestly don't know."

"When it's over, I'll look for you."

"A possessive bastard like you?" said smilingly, to take the sting from the words and the pain from Blake's eyes. "You won't look for me, you'll come after me."

"I will, you know."

"Yes," was all Avon said.

And the last he saw as the teleport exiled him from the *Liberator* was Blake's eyes as the leader of the revolution fought the hardest battle of all and set Avon free.

PROFESSIONALS

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PROFESSIONALS CONTENTS

Bene Dictum is a series designed for any sort of slash material we at Oblique Publications choose to put together. (This is a bit different from our other lines which have a tighter focus.) The first *Bene Dictum*, *A Dickensian Christmas*, was exclusively *Professionals* Christmas stories; *Half 'n' Half* is not. As its name implies, the contents are split between *Blake's 7* and *Professionals*. There is somewhat less of the former and rather more of the latter. We hope you will not complain too much about it!

As the editor, I should like to draw particular attention to all seven of the contributors to this issue. Although they were working with the same characters and universes, I think you will find a great range of voices in their stories. In addition, none of them grumbled about the long wait for publication of their pieces. (Oblique has taken more than a year off since our last zine. Our new motto: No zine before its time!)

My greatest thanks to all the authors—ever patient, to Kota—ever helpful, to LDM—ever on call, and most especially to M. Fae—(n)ever finished.

—Caroline K. Carbis, *editor*

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—Caroline K. Carbis, *editor*

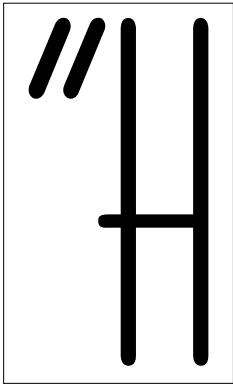
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BLAKE'S SEVEN CONTENTS



We open the Pros half of Bene Dictum as we mean to close it: on a hopeful note and with airborne swine. (Read M. Fae's last story & you'll see a few echoes of Crone.'s lighter sentiments.) Now, if you have the energy and inclination, the editor strongly urges that you find a quiet spot, perhaps gathering a few like-minded friends around, and read this piece aloud. It's a story meant for the rhythms and cadences of the spoken word.

e might have put me in that flat in Mayfair instead of sticking me in with you,"

Bodie mourned.

Doyle spared him a disparaging glance. "Pigs might fly," he said.

"Would have been quite comfortable there," Bodie went on. "Or the row house in Kensington," he added, keeping an open mind.

PIGS MIGHT FLY

CRONE

He looked at Doyle hopefully. Doyle stared at the house they were watching.

The house sat there stolidly as it had been doing all week. The only door seemed permanently closed, and the garage, while undoubtedly attached, obligingly fronted on the street right next to it. If anything about it had changed at all, it showed no sign. Well, maybe the bit of grass in front had grown a little, but Bodie doubted even that.

"Any tea left?" he asked presently when Doyle showed no sign of wishing to commiserate with him.

Doyle handed him the flask wordlessly and Bodie poured the last spoonful into his cup. He sighed loudly and slumped in his seat.

"Bloody boring, this," he announced.

"Right," agreed Doyle.

Bodie swallowed the mouthful of tea. "Stupid pipes," he grumbled. "Why'd they have to go and

break anyhow? Water all over the basement. Half the ground floor flats're a mess."

"Good thing you live on the third floor then, isn't it? Can go home any time you want."

"With no water in the building? Don't be daft, Ray."

"You just said there was too much water."

"You know what I mean." He sighed again into the silence. "Never had pipes break before. You'd think it was my fault, the way Cowley carried on. Just because—"

"Bodie, shut up."

Bodie turned hurt eyes on his partner.

"Was only making conversation. Breaking the monotony, like. If you don't want to have an intelligent conversation—"

"I'd love to have an intelligent conversation," Doyle broke in. "Listening to you moan is not my idea of intelligent conversation."

Bodie sniffed. Doyle took his eyes off the house for a moment to appreciate the incarnation of silent suffering beside him.

"Have some more tea," he suggested.

"Isn't any," Bodie pouted.

"Don't pout."

Bodie thrust his lower lip a little further out. "I never pout," he said.

Doyle kept his face straight with difficulty.

"Should be relieved soon," he offered.

Bodie sniffed again. "Relief's probably in hospital by now. Half the squad's in hospital as it is."

"Don't exaggerate."

"Exaggerate?" Bodie protested. "Anson, Franks, McCabe—" He counted them off on his fingers.

"That's three—"

"Well," Doyle asked when he fell silent. "Did you run out, or are you trying to remember what number comes next?"

Bodie's expression of offended indignation was almost more than Doyle could bear. He fought to keep from laughing.

"Rest of the squad's probably there by now," Bodie continued lugubriously. "Terrorists've probably blown up half of London and nobody's bothered to tell us."

Doyle gave up. "We'd have noticed," he gurgled. "At least, I'd've noticed."

Bodie's expression became even more deeply offended. Doyle rested his head on the steering wheel, giggling and cackling.

The beep of an R/T interrupted him. He wiped his eyes while Bodie brought their relief up to date, his report a masterpiece of brevity.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing at all."

"Let's go home," said Doyle, starting the car.

"Your home," Bodie pointed out dolefully.

Doyle smiled at him. "Yours, too," he said and added hastily, "for now."

Bodie returned the smile. It wasn't that he objected to staying with Ray. Sometimes it seemed as if he stayed with Ray half the time anyway and the other half Ray stayed with him. What he minded was Cowley telling him he had to, especially when luxurious accommodations were standing empty.

If Cowley'd put him in that flat in Mayfair, Ray could have come and stayed with him, and maybe, in that elegant atmosphere, amid the sensual delights CI5 considered unnecessary in

agents' flats—

Bodie snorted to himself. He sounded like a third rate romance novel. He never used to be capable of such drivel. His brain must be going—fast.

Still, it was a nice flat. All polished wood, fine upholstery, ankle deep carpets. He remembered discreetly placed lights glinting off a glass-fronted cabinet and its display of— Waterford? Edinburgh? Anyway expensive crystal. A bit of good brandy in a couple of those balloon snifters— Appreciated things like that, Ray did, for all his superannuated guttersnipe pose. And maybe, just maybe, relaxed and mellow in such opulent surroundings, Ray might—

And pigs might fly, Bodie told himself firmly.

Doyle divided the remaining lasagna meticulously and set both plates on the table.

"Choose," he said.

"Huh?" said Bodie.

"I divided it," explained Doyle. "You get to choose. That way you can't complain. Born complainer, you are."

He waited to see whether his partner would respond to that slander, but Bodie was fully concentrated on the problem before him.

"It's really hard, Ray." He walked around the table and pondered the question from that angle. "When you make them exactly the same size like that, it's really hard to choose."

He looked up, guileless blue eyes limpid with innocence.

"Choose, you lunatic," Doyle ordered, laughing again. "It'll get cold."

They ate in contented silence.

Good job Cowley didn't put him in that flat, Doyle thought to himself. Bodie belonged here with him, where he always was. Unless they were both at Bodie's place, of course. Only right they should share, being partners and all.

Although it was lovely, the flat in Mayfair, and suited to Bodie's suave sophistication.

'Suave sophistication,' he thought derisively. But you couldn't help sounding like that about Bodie. Like somebody out of a romance he was, all light and dark and beautiful.

And generous. He'd have invited Doyle to go along, share the luxury. They'd have had supper on the terrace overlooking the small enclosed rose garden, on a table set with linen and silver. They'd have eaten off fine china, poured champagne into

crystal flutes. And in the rose-scented dusk with Bach or Vivaldi playing softly on the stereo, Bodie might even—

And pigs might fly, he reminded himself resolutely.

“Afters?” asked Bodie hopefully.

“Only ice cream. If you didn’t eat it all for breakfast.”

“Would I do that? Well, yes, I would, but you didn’t let me.” Bodie stood up and headed for the freezer. “You want any?”

Doyle nodded. “I’ll have a little. Just to save you having to eat it all. Put the kettle on while you’re up.”

Bodie obediently reached for the kettle.

“Ugh. What’s this brown stuff?”

He fingered a granular substance lightly dusting the counter. Doyle shrugged.

“Dunno. Must blow in when the windows are open.”

Bodie sniffed at the tiny particles that coated his fingers.

“Sawdust, maybe. Somebody’s probably building something. Place needs a good cleaning.” He looked around critically.

“Feel free,” said Doyle. “Anytime you want.”

Bodie stuck his tongue out at him, filled the kettle, and switched it on.

Morning found them back at their post. The house looked exactly the same as it had the day before—and the day before that.

“Cowley seemed a bit tetchy,” Doyle remarked.

“I’m not surprised.” Bodie’d been catching up on gossip while Doyle checked them in. “On top of everything else, we seem to have half a dozen people in protective custody, what with one case and another. He say anything useful?”

Doyle shrugged. “He still thinks Herbert-bloody-Brewster’s holed up in there.”

“Must have a tunnel to the outside if he is,” said Bodie. “Either that or he’s supplied for the next ice age. Nobody’s opened that door for a week. Or the garage. Sealed up tight, that garage. Wonder what he’s got in there.”

“Entrance to the tunnel?” Doyle suggested.

“Besides,” Bodie went on, “I’ve met Herbert-bloody-Brewster. He has the backbone of a jellyfish and the brain of a retarded flea. There’s no way he could be behind that extortion business.”

“True,” agreed Doyle. “Still, he could be involved. Those anonymous letters are right

up his street.”

“Um,” Bodie grunted in agreement. “Well, we might get lucky for once. He might come waltzing out that door and give himself up. And who knows? Cowley might give us the weekend off.”

“And pigs might fly,” added Doyle.

“Yeah.” Bodie brooded silently for a moment. “Short-handed isn’t in it,” he went on. “Even without half the squad in hospital—” He glanced sideways at Doyle, noting the quickly suppressed quirk of his lips. “McCabe’s out, by the way. Got his arm in a sling, but he’s walking around.”

“Good,” said Doyle.

“But Lucas is laid up.” He waited a beat, then said, “Chicken pox.”

Doyle turned to stare at him.

“True?” he demanded.

“True,” Bodie assured him. “Half the squad’ll be down with it by next week,” he added gloomily.

The day passed slowly. Still, the sun was pleasantly warm and the breeze fragrant in this agreeably upscale neighbourhood. Doyle went for the first batch of sandwiches, Bodie for the next. They finished the flask of tea and had it refilled. And when their relief arrived, Doyle’s report was as succinct as Bodie’s had been the day before.

“Nothing,” he said. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Want to go out for dinner?” Bodie asked as they drove home. “I’ll buy.”

Doyle smiled at him. “Sure. Thanks. What brought this on?”

“You’ve been cooking all week. Thought you might like a change.”

“I would. Thanks,” Doyle repeated.

That had been a remarkably direct explanation, Doyle reflected. The invitation wasn’t surprising; they both tried to keep the balance between them more or less equal. But they tended to deprecate their more generous gestures or disguise them with humour. He found this departure pleasant but puzzling.

Not sure how to respond, he found himself exchanging an extraordinarily open smile with Bodie. A welcome warmth permeated him. He settled back in his seat and turned his head to look out the window, humming tunelessly.

Bodie returned his attention to his driving, still smiling. Ray seldom revealed such overt pleasure, and Bodie found himself inordinately happy. The comfortable glow that suffused him extended to the world outside. It seemed only fitting and proper

that he should find a parking place precisely in front of Doyle's building.

They took turns in the shower. Doyle dressed quickly and called, "Be right back," over the sound of running water. He wanted to get to the shop on the corner before it closed. They'd almost finished the ice cream the previous evening, and he wanted to replenish their supply. He'd nip out first thing in the morning and pick up some of those pastries Bodie liked.

"Where are we going, then?" Doyle asked when they were back in the car.

"New place," said Bodie smugly. "Found it a couple of weeks ago. You'll like it."

Doyle did. Small, almost hidden amongst an odd assortment of shops, it seemed to specialise in crisp vegetables, slowly simmered soups, and home baked breads. They ate unhurriedly, sharing a bottle of wine and long, friendly silences. Around them, the rest of the tables filled up and gradually emptied again. At last, contented and replete, they emerged into the street and ambled along to where they'd left the car.

Next morning Doyle returned with pastries still warm from the oven to find Bodie wiping down the counter and the kitchen table.

"More of that sawdust stuff," he said. "Where did you disappear to?"

Doyle opened the box of pastries and held it out. Bodie's face lit up.

"Oh, Ray," he said. "You shouldn't have."

"No?" said Doyle. "All right. I'll take them back."

But Bodie had found a plate and was arranging the pastries on it.

"Tea's probably mashed," he said, his mouth already full.

Doyle went to pour them each a cup.

The house they were watching hadn't changed. They settled themselves as comfortably as possible and prepared for another uneventful day. But a few hours later, noise from the garage alerted them.

Bodie was talking rapidly and intently into the R/T when the garage door slammed open and a car roared out. Its rear end slewed wildly as its front wheels climbed the curb and bounced into the street.

"Bloody hell!" said Doyle. "Would you look at that."

"Go!" yelled Bodie, and Doyle hit the accelerator.

"We'll never catch that," he said. "That's a

Maserati."

"We might," said Bodie. "It looked like Brewster at the wheel. He doesn't know how to drive a kiddie car, much less a car like that."

The Maserati rounded a corner, slaloming from lane to lane. Then it coughed, jerked, coughed again—and died.

Doyle stood on the brakes.

Just ahead of them, the driver's door opened and a head emerged, followed slowly by the rest of Herbert-bloody-Brewster, empty hands held at shoulder height.

"Don't shoot," he called.

"My god," breathed Doyle, awed. "I think he ran out of petrol."

Cowley appeared more distracted than pleased when they delivered their quarry, unharmed if inclined to gibber. Failing to make good his escape in a high-powered car with an empty fuel tank seemed to have unnerved him.

"Not that he had any nerve to begin with," Bodie muttered. "Told you he couldn't drive that car."

"Someone should show him where the fuel gauge is," agreed Doyle, "and explain what it's for."

"Shortest car chase in history," Bodie snickered.

"Not a shot fired," said Doyle. "He should be pleased," he added, indicating Cowley with a tiny jerk of his head.

"You can't shoot the afflicted, Ray," Bodie rebuked. "It's not done."

"Especially when they're surrendering."

"That, too."

"When you're finished sniggering," Cowley interrupted them, "perhaps you'd care to explain precisely what happened?"

"Yes, sir."

There wasn't much to tell, and they felt amply rewarded when Cowley's lips twitched involuntarily.

"Not an intellectual giant, is he?" he said. "Let's hope he can remember something beyond his name and address."

"Let's hope he even knows his name and address," murmured Bodie.

"What was that, Bodie?"

"Nothing, sir."

"You may as well go home," Cowley told them presently. "You can finish up your reports on Monday."

"Yes, sir," they chorused in instant obedience and started out the door.

"Oh, Doyle," Cowley called after them.

They turned.

"Sir?"

"You'll have to stay with Bodie for the weekend. Your building's being fumigated. Woodworm."

They looked at each other, several conversations compressed into a moment's wordless communication.

"Uh, sir?" said Doyle.

"What is it?"

"Bodie's already staying with me."

Cowley opened his mouth—and closed it again.

"Oh. That's right. The water pipes," he said at last.

They'd never seen the Old Man at a loss before. He stared at them, visibly considering and rejecting possible solutions to the problem. Finally he sighed.

"Go get the keys to safe house three," he said.

"You'll have to stay there. Everything more suitable is being used."

"Yes, sir," they said and vanished before he could change his mind.

Safely in the car, they grinned at each other.

"Woodworm," said Doyle softly.

"The sawdust stuff," agreed Bodie.

"And safe house three—" began Doyle.

"Is the Mayfair flat," chortled Bodie.

Doyle rolled his window all the way down and stuck his head out, scanning the sky.

"What are you doing?" asked Bodie.

Doyle pulled his head back in.

"Looking for pigs," he said.

They separated to collect various belongings and do some necessary shopping, meeting again outside the flat.

"I'll take that," said Bodie. He had his own holdall and a couple of carrier bags. Doyle, already festooned with bags and parcels, was struggling to drape one more bag somewhere about his person and free a hand to lock his car.

"Thanks," he said, surrendering the burden with relief.

Inside, Bodie put his own things down and set about investigating the rescued bag. His eyes widened as he drew out a dark bottle.

"*Courvoisier*?" he said. His voice squeaked a little. "Napoleon? Ray?"

Doyle concentrated on an already empty bag.

"You like it," he muttered.

"Uh— Yeah," said Bodie with what eloquence he could muster.

He regarded the back of his partner's head, cleared his throat, and—after a pause—handed a carrier bag to Doyle. "Here," he said. "Put these in the fridge."

He turned away hurriedly, picked up his holdall, and escaped.

Doyle watched him disappear. The bag he was holding weighed too much and clinked. He drew out one of the bottles of champagne and blinked at the label.

Obediently and reverently he did as he'd been told.

They wandered through the flat—each trying to look as if he weren't following the other—opening drawers and cupboards, putting things away, making the flat their own.

Difficult, mused Bodie, watching Ray without letting Ray realise he was watching him. Any minute now Ray was going to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing. God alone knew what he'd answer. But every time he almost met Ray's eyes, his own skidding hastily away, Ray seemed abruptly to be looking at something else. An unlikely feeling of hopefulness filled him. He closed his mouth firmly on a Handel *Te Deum* which kept trying to escape.

It was ludicrous, reflected Doyle, that he suddenly couldn't keep his eyes off Bodie—and at the same time couldn't bring himself to meet Bodie's eyes. He rather thought Bodie might be watching him, but surreptitious glances—all he dared allow himself—weren't enough to tell. Still, the idea cheered him. Perhaps Bodie wouldn't be demanding an explanation of his partner's uncharacteristic behaviour right this minute. Preposterous to want to turn cartwheels across this palatial lounge. Idly, he wondered if his feet would hit the chandeliers.

The kitchen provided breathing space.

"I'll cook," Doyle proclaimed more loudly than was necessary.

"I'll help," Bodie offered with unusual alacrity.

And if Doyle had occasionally to stop short before he actually turned himself upside down, the movement was easily disguised by reaching for a spoon or a knife. And if Bodie found the odd liturgical phrase slipping past his lips, a clatter of pots and pans quickly made the sound unidentifiable.

They could never remember afterwards just what they had eaten, although the food hall bags from Harrod's (Bodie) and Fortnum and Mason (Doyle) attested to its excellence.

They ate on the terrace, bemused but peaceful, sharing a bottle of superlative champagne and finally a single long if inscrutable look, the spring-time twilight gathering about them. The profusion of roses in the small garden grew dark and indistinct, but their fragrance rode the notes of a Scarlatti sonata to fill the vibrant darkness, sound and scent more vivid than the sunset-painted sky.

When eventually they moved, Bodie carried dishes to the kitchen while Doyle turned on subdued lights and opened the cognac.

"Here," said Doyle, filling Bodie's hands with an oversized snifter. "Sit down. The washing up can wait."

Finding themselves heading for the same sofa, they hesitated, then sighed simultaneously and sat down together, glasses cradled in warm hands.

Doyle let his head drop back, eyes closed but face turned toward Bodie. Bodie looked at him and swallowed. Their arms brushed. Neither drew away.

"Ray?" Bodie's voice was breathless and—expectant?

Anticipation coursed through Doyle. He opened his eyes.

"Bodie," he said softly. He smiled. Perhaps it was the brandy. He found he could meet Bodie's eyes unwaveringly now. His expression, tranquil and tender, spoke for him.

Bodie laid his head next to Doyle's and returned his smile. The tenderness seemed a tendering as well and Bodie's simple acceptance an equal offering.

It was easy once they relaxed. Effortless communication restored, they rested quietly together. Bodie sat up and raised his glass to his lips, inhaling voluptuously.

"Good, this," he said, his eyes never leaving Doyle's.

Doyle raised his own glass in acknowledgement. He took a swallow, then set his glass down and reached out a hand. Bodie's hand met it.

They lay back, savouring this new dimension of familiar closeness. Hand in hand, they needed no words, felt no impatience. A welling up of contentment filled them, a recognition of completion. They shared the cognac in one glass, then

picked up the other.

"Too good to waste," said Bodie.

"Or to hurry," added Doyle.

Outside, twilight had turned to night. Inside, unobtrusive illumination created soft-edged shadows, burnished high-lights. Scarlatti fell silent. The perfumed air diffused about them.

At last, forehead to forehead, they shifted only a little to nuzzle gently at each other's lips, sharing brandied kisses.

"Apricots," murmured Doyle.

"Umm." Bodie nodded. "Good."

"More?"

Doyle held up the empty glass, set it on the table when Bodie shook his head.

Untroubled and serene—and slightly amazed at their lack of amazement—they luxuriated in this newly dimensioned intimacy.

"I never thought it would be so peaceful," said Bodie, his voice hushed.

"Did you expect this to happen?" Doyle asked in wonder and shivered as he felt Bodie's teeth fasten onto his earlobe, the sudden, intense throb of excitement both confluent and contrapuntal. "I could probably work up a little urgency myself," he added, "if you're going to keep on doing that."

"Me, too," acknowledged Bodie.

Desire fed on tiny touches, wove its sharp, biting threads through their particular entirety, a fabric sturdy enough to glory in its bright embroidery.

"But not here," he said presently, rendered breathless by no more than the texture of Doyle's skin.

"Ummm?"

"Bed'll be more comfortable," he managed. He lifted Doyle's head and smiled into glazed eyes.

"Come on, Ray."

Obediently Doyle followed, surfacing sufficiently to relish the new possibilities inherent in the old situation of undressing together. But his hands slowed and stopped, his entire attention focused on Bodie, aware that he'd moved only when he felt Bodie's bare shoulder under his own caressing fingertips. Bodie, clinging somehow to basic essentials, leaned his cheek against Doyle's hand and finished the task of undressing him.

The bed, oversized and designed for comfort, welcomed them. Neither noticed. Absorbed in touch and taste, each had lost himself in the reality of the other. Nothing else existed.

"Did you really think this was going to hap-

pen?” Doyle asked again just before he went under for the third time. Then he abandoned himself to Bodie’s hands and mouth, failing to notice the lack of an answer.

Astonishing ease met unanticipated urgency. They were never clear on the details. They knew only fervour, ardency, comfort, and a silent perfection, a consummation beyond words. Then they lay lax and heavy, heartbeats slowing, still subsumed with adoration but beginning to breathe again.

“Not expect, exactly,” said Bodie. “More hope. But I did wonder when everything started coming all over peculiar.”

“Coming right, you mean?” asked Doyle. He placed a lazy kiss on the top of Bodie’s head, that being all he could reach without moving.

“That’s certainly peculiar,” Bodie pointed out and turned his attention to the skin along Doyle’s collarbone.

“You did wonder?” prompted Doyle when Bodie seemed to have lost track of the conversation.

“Whether maybe something else might come right, too.”

“Me, too,” admitted Doyle.

They exchanged slow smiles and lazy kisses.

“Haven’t seen any flying pigs,” Bodie added presently.

“Too dark,” said Doyle.

“Right,” said Bodie.

Drowsy and content, on the brink of sleep, they gradually became aware of small discomforts. Tangled bed clothes trapped Bodie’s foot, thrust an irritating lump under Doyle’s ribs. The pillows, so

abundant earlier, seemed to have disappeared.

Doyle sighed and sat up to investigate.

“This bed’s a disaster,” he remarked, trying to straighten a damp and crumpled sheet.

Bodie moved enough to rest his chin on Doyle’s shoulder and contemplate the situation. Even his biased gaze could see that Doyle’s myriad talents did not extend to making a bed with both of them in it.

“Is, isn’t it?” he agreed happily.

He stroked the length of Doyle’s back, unexpectedly available as Doyle leaned over to retrieve a pillow from the floor.

“How could *all* the pillows fall off a bed this size?” Doyle said, trying to sound disgruntled. He put the pillow under his head, wrapped an arm around Bodie, and collapsed contentedly on top of him.

Bodie ignored the question.

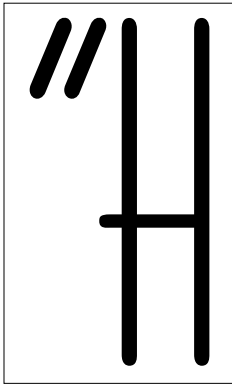
“We could go sleep in the other bedroom,” he suggested. “Cowley’ll expect us to use both bedrooms anyway.”

Doyle lifted his head and smiled approvingly.

“Bright, too,” he murmured.

Hand in hand, they crossed the hall and settled themselves, stretching luxuriously and then curling together between clean, crisp, freshly ironed sheets. Bodie dropped off to sleep mid-yawn; Doyle tumbled quickly after him.

They dreamed of white clouds in blue skies. Among the clouds—diving and soaring, floating and dipping and pirouetting—flew dozens of smiling pigs.



Time for a little more seriousness. One of the delights of Sebastian's work is her amazing knack of creating natural sounding dialogue. Read her Bodie and Doyle in this story and relish their banter. Our boys leap off the page and the reader suspects that yes, this is very likely what happened after Ojuka...

How would you feel if you'd let them get 'im?" Bodie demanded of his boss, who regarded him for a moment, following the line of his gaze, then turned away without a flicker.

"Oh, I think he'd have borne up quite well," Doyle muttered sourly, looking down at his wrists. "I screwed that up, in one big way, and *don't* tell me 'e 'asn't noticed."

"Look mate, you shot like an angel back there." Bodie's eyebrow lifted towards Ojuka, departing

AFTER OJUKA

SEBASTIAN

unscathed. And his lady wife, looking out at them with big, sombre dark eyes, on another journey entirely.

"Bitch," Doyle snapped viciously from the side of his mouth, turning away. "I *knew* it, knew there was something wrong when she showed up at the hotel. And yet I let them get in—!" He shook his head in disbelief at his own stupidity; he had been careful, just not careful enough. What counted all those years, months of the highest day-to-day training if at the last minute he was going to blow it with one stupid mistake?

Lives got lost that way.

"What's it matter now, anyway?" Bodie said, determinedly cheerful: after all, the job was done, they lived and breathed again.

Doyle was looking at him in an unfriendly way, eyes like chips of stone. "Well, nothin'. Not to you. Or to me, or Cowley. Another job crossed off and a

bit more unsung glory for CI5. But—that girl back there at the hotel—"

Bodie only shook his head, looking down at the ground. "We'd best get on our way, mate."

Through no fault of her own—

All she had done was be there. When he and Bodie, just by driving up to the door, had drawn her into someone else's war.

"Some angelfish we turned out to be," was Doyle's one, bitter comment as he swung himself into the passenger seat of Bodie's borrowed car.

"You coming out for a pint tonight?"

Doyle turned to stare out of the window as Bodie started the car. "Think I'll get an early night."

Bodie's face twisted. "Ah, c'mon, mate. Just a quick half."

Doyle's head came around, his stare burning like acid though his voice was quiet enough: "I said no, Bodie."

Bodie kept his mouth shut after that. His partner was best left alone at such times: throw in too many sweet words of comfort and you were likely to find yourself bitten to the bone. Doyle smelt of gunsmoke and of sweat: he kept his head down and studied his wrists, wincing from time to time as he shifted position. Always made a fuss about small injuries did Doyle, although when it came down to it he presented himself fearlessly to bullets, terrorists, bombs. Trusting his swift reactions and his perfect aim to save himself, no doubt.

And me, reflected Bodie, remembering Doyle's bullet whining past his ear to take out the man threatening Bodie behind, Doyle's eye as he sighted it in clear and cold and merciless. *Both have an extra hole or two by now, I reckon, without Doyle's speed and timing. Was that only yesterday—? Seemed like a lifetime ago.*

He stopped outside Doyle's flat to let him out. Barely a grunt of thanks floated back his way. He sat there a moment, hand on the gearknob, watching Doyle running up the steps, hand on the bannister, hunched over slightly, blue jeans dirty. The white jacket was dirty, too, looked like a bloodstain or two here and there.

Oh, Raymond. A white jacket. Not the best thing to wear on a shootout, was it?

No backwards look. The door slammed.

Bodie put the car into gear and drove off. Pity about Doyle turning on to guilt-trip mode: would have been nice to hang around with him tonight, unwind a bit after the tensions of the last few days. But that was Ray for you: he could switch from the matey grin to the look of ice at the drop of a hat. At one time Bodie had been sure Doyle disliked him; he hadn't cared one fig, Doyle could like him or loathe him as he chose just so long as they worked well together.

Which they did, right from day one.

And sometimes—

Sometimes he fancied an attraction between them that went beyond friendship, a sexual thing, electric and alive as hell. Whether Doyle felt it too he couldn't say and wasn't going to ask, but occasionally there were clues. *"So if you don't mind sharing?"* The look Doyle had exchanged with him in that narrow hotel hallway had been pure innuendo, shared, instantaneous.

Bodie sighed as he pulled the big car around the corner of the Oakham Court Road where his

current apartment was. Pity about the girl. Pity about Doyle, too.

NEXT morning, bright and fresh and early, Bodie was presenting his ID at the entrance to CI5.

"That's not you, is it?" said the girl on duty, peering closely at the picture.

Bodie was affronted, and peered at it with her. "Good mug shot, that is. Tall, dark and handsome devil, isn't he?"

"That's what I mean," she said, and Bodie swatted her on the arm for cheek, and sailed in through the narrow corridors to the recce room. He located Doyle at once, over in the corner. Cream shirt, clean jeans, brown boots, reading something that wasn't *Playboy* from the look of it. One lift of the eyebrow was all the acknowledgement he got, but then again it was all he needed.

"Didn't do so bad yesterday, I hear, 3.7."

Bodie turned around, grinned. "Didn't do so bad yourself, Murph. Hear you copped a vanload of hot goods along the way. You wanna watch that, mate, you'll be landing yourself a post back in the Force."

"An' I hear the Cow's got the two of you on report—"

"Wha—?" and then he saw the twinkle in Murphy's blue Irish eyes.

"Wasting too much ammo, Bodie. *One* bullet per one body, you know the rules. But Doyle's got his eye in, I hear."

He's a beauty," Bodie acknowledged. "Can't miss. I reckon, take out Towser's brain, whirl it round on a string, Doyle could it at sixty paces."

"No kidding?" Murph marvelled. "Put it back afterwards?"

"Why bother, who'd know the difference."

Murph stood with his hands on his hips watching Bodie push his way through the cluttered chairs and tables and agents to get to his partner, then he shook his head gently and went off to study some maps in the obs. room.

Bodie made a face, waved his hand around to disturb the haze of blue smoke around Doyle, who also grimaced, not looking up from the papers he held. "Yeah, I know, can't breathe in 'ere can you? Go out for a minute?"

"Yeh, okay." Bodie bounced on the balls of his feet. Business as usual.

In the cool fresh air of the corridor Doyle leaned

against the wall. "Wrists okay?" Bodie said, remembering; he took Doyle's hand in his own, turned it over, examined the skin where it was shiny and puckered in places. "Tried to barbecue yourself, hmm?"

Doyle retrieved his hand, ran it down the outside of his shirt; his thoughts seemed far away. Bodie tracked the absent fondling with his eyes; Doyle's hand got as far as the waistband of his jeans, then travelled up again to where his nipples must lie before he took the hand away and shuffled the papers he held, eyes downcast.

"What you got there then?" Bodie wondered, cheerfully enough, and he thrust his chin over Doyle's shoulder for a look. Doyle didn't exactly hold it out for him to see, but he didn't hide it, either. It was a double sheet of A4 printout. Bodie scanned the top quickly: Personnel Data Request/CI5/4.5/10.10.82. Davies, Virginia Sophie, DOB 12.9.60.

Date of death, 9.10.82, presumably; for Bodie guessed at once that this must be the girl from the hotel, a little souvenir Doyle had called up for himself the better to flay himself with. "Virgin for short, but not for long, eh?" he said, and knew at once from the look in Doyle's eyes that no amount of black humour was going to sort this one.

"*Bodie.*" Doyle said it with a kind of weary disgust, and Bodie's mouth twisted wryly.

"Okay, okay, not a joking matter." He took the sheets of paper away, gently. About eighty lines, he reckoned, to sum up and dismiss her: birth, school, job, bloke, death. Not much time. Never enough time...

He put his hand on Doyle's shoulder. "Don't blame yourself, Ray."

"I was there," Doyle said, eyes screwed up as he ran the memory one more time. "She was terrified—squawked like a fuckin' chicken—and I couldn't do one fucking thing to save her."

"All right. But it wasn't you that shot her. Not you that pulled the fucking trip on the gun. It *wasn't your fault.*"

"No," said Doyle, his eyes cold and set and hard, "it was that bastard Parker."

Bodie touched one finger to the split at the corner of Doyle's mouth, the little swelling there. "Wasn't very nice to you either, was he?"

At that, a peculiar little smile crossed Doyle's lips. "Oh, I think he wanted to be—far too nice."

Bodie stared at him. "Did he come on to you?"

Doyle smiled, looking him in the eye, tipping his head back a little. "In a way."

"I'd have killed him," Bodie said, a flashtide of anger giving him a sudden adrenalin rush. "I'd've ripped his cock off and made him eat it."

"Oh yeah, he'd have loved that all right." At least Doyle was grinning now, amused by his violence. Bodie was leaning in over him, actively protective, looking down at him, darkly troubled. A little cluster of agents were approaching and going past them; Doyle caught the curious backwash of their gaze. He kicked Bodie away from him. "Can't keep meeting like this. People will start to talk."

"What?" Bodie was still hard with anger, not with him at all.

"By the time that one gets back to the recce room, it'll be you giving me a quick one against the wall."

"What *are* you going on about?" Bodie realised he was crowding in on Doyle, moved away. They began to walk together, side by side, down the beige corridor towards the coffee machine, but before they reached it Cowley's head popped out of his office like a tortoise out of its shell. The same glare, the same discontented mouth.

"Bodie! Doyle!"

Thus summoned, exchanging a look they entered Cowley's inner sanctum.

"Well, the Ojuka situation is now resolved," Cowley said without preamble, and Bodie's lips wrinkled smugly.

"Just doing our job, sir."

Cowley glared at him. "There's no room for complacency, Bodie."

"No, sir," they chorused. "We'll spend the day training if you like," Bodie added: he quite fancied a day spent in smooth physical activity, shooting and diving and competing with Ray.

"Since when have I needed you, Bodie, to arrange my schedules for me?" and Bodie muttered something, abashed. "There's such a thing as being overtrained, you know," Cowley continued; and from the peevish tone of his voice, the hard glint in his eye, you would never know that in fact he was pleased with these two, very pleased, and in mind to reward them with a word of praise; *'good men'*, or the like.

Then his mind shut close on it and he glared at them again, standing there confident and cocky and sure. They knew they were good men. No

need to gild the lily.

"I've just had a reminder through," he said, favouring them with a nasty smile. "Someone's on the ball in Records. You're both of you long overdue for a refresher First Aid course."

Bodie and Doyle met each other's eye. Doyle rested first his elbow, then his head, on Bodie's shoulder and hid his eyes. "Off you go now and collect the details from the office." Cowley waved them briskly away.

As they left the office gloomily, Bodie said: "You'd think he might have said something. Nothing too heavy." He adopted an upper class accent. "Not bad, chaps'. Would've been enough, wouldn't it, Doyle?"

Doyle spotted a can, skittered up to it, aimed it for goal, and kicked. It scored against both walls. "I suppose you might say this is his idea of a day of rest," he offered, not very sure.

Bodie muttered, thinking of Avery, "Wish I had some dirty money in Africa. I'd take a very long safari."

"Oh yeah, you, well, closest you ever got to dirty money is that 10p you dropped in the mud out running."

"Yeh—and I couldn't be bothered to search around for it." Bodie clapped an admiring arm around his thrifty partner, leaning in close to his ear. "You could though, couldn't you, Ray? What did you do with it—just out of interest?"

"I'm savin' up, aren't I? Maybe you'll get a birthday card this year, after all."

This was more like it, Doyle's blues leaving him like clouds off a mountaintop, leaving only the clear sky of his eyes. Bodie reached over while the going was good, took the folded sheets of paper out of Doyle's top pocket.

"Don't hurt yourself with this, Ray." He dropped it into the nearest bin to lie among the crumpled cans and frag-ends. "If anyone could have saved her, you would have."

The truth of that reached Doyle at last, and he stood still for a moment, thinking about it. "She lived with her mother. On her own. D'you think I should go and see her? Try and tell her—"

"Tell her what." Bodie shook his head. "Whatever could you say, Ray; you didn't even know her. Leave it be."

In his urgency to reassure, he had moved very close to Doyle again, backed him to the wall. Brooding green eyes locked with Bodie's steady

dark gaze, he brought one hand up to Doyle's shoulder; he could see the throb of pulse in Doyle's throat, the little jump of muscle beside his mouth as he swallowed. Doyle waited, fascinated by the intensity of Bodie's attitude, the resolute set of his jaw. For a moment—

A long, long moment. Then Bodie took his hand off Doyle's shoulder, hit the wall beside him lightly, and turned and walked briskly off.

"Thought you were going to kiss me," Doyle said to him, catching up with no apparent effort.

"Murph, Peters," Bodie acknowledged, lifting a hand in greeting as they passed. He said without looking at Doyle: "Did you now? Relieved, or disappointed?"

"Whaddayou think, flower," Doyle camped, fluttering his eyelashes, and seeing the look in his eye Bodie began to run, dodging, just in time.

The First Aid course took place in a chilly little church hall in a shabby London backwater. There were eighteen other learners, from young women to old women, but all of them women.

"You wanna watch that. I think she's beginning to enjoy it," Doyle yawned, as he watched Bodie's rhythmic compressions on the pink plastic chest of the doll he was resuscitating. Bodie made a face at him as he lowered his mouth over the doll's open one and blew into her airway, once, twice. Then back to the compressions again.

"Oh no, you won't enjoy it," the instructor's voice startled him from behind. "Mouth'll probably be full of vomit. Snot all over the place." A relaxed, confident woman in her thirties, she had the tilted nose and dutch-doll looks of a Mary Poppins, except for her striped jersey and tight jeans and a liking for shocking her pupils: one girl had turned green and had to go out while Jo cheerfully related the story of a man with a severed finger which his dog then ate.

She moved Bodie's hands slightly, a hairs-breadth. "You do it there, you might break his ribcage."

"Guy's dead anyway, isn't he?" Bodie said ironically, annoyed. "He'll forgive me a broken rib or two, probably use his first breath to thank me for saving his life."

"Oi," Doyle said in Bodie's defence, "I bet he's done it more times for real than you've done it on a plastic dummy."

She sat back on her heels and regarded him with

interest. "That so? What are you—ambulance men brushing up on your skills?" She grinned, brushing a dark lock of hair off her face as she gave him the once-over, taking in the tough beauty of him, the tight jeans, leather boots, open shirt.

Sensing interest, Doyle grinned back. "Something like that."

Bodie was worn out with his effort. He checked grimly for breathing. "Nah, still dead as a dinosaur. See if you can work your magic on 'im, sunshine," Bodie said, sitting back and wiping his mouth, watching as Doyle knelt on one knee beside the life-sized doll and waved away the antiseptic tissue offered him for the purposes of wiping the doll's lips.

"Can't stand the taste," Doyle said, speedily and efficiently performing the checks: airway clear, not breathing, no pulse—

"On your head be it," she said briskly. "You might catch something, y'know."

"Anything he's got, I want it," Doyle drawled, and he leaned over and applied his mouth to the doll's pink plastic orifice. Bodie's stomach tightened for some reason, finding the sight perversely erotic, pretty mouth Doyle had, too pretty for a man.

"You'll 'ave to watch him," he said to Jo. "He might forget what he's here for, he's got a doll just like that at home y'know." Doyle managed to backheel him in the foot without breaking stride. The pit of his stomach still fluttered as he watched what Doyle was doing, the line of his thigh in faded jeans, thin, muscular forearms taut as he leaned onto his linked hands to compress the chest. The silver link chain he wore slipped down his wrist, prompting a comment from the sharp-eyed Jo:

"You'd take the bangle off first, of course?" but the scattering of laughter from the onlookers at Doyle's expense died out as Doyle looked up at her, flint-eyed, and said, "Oh yes, darlin'. An' I'd ask you to hold it for me," and Bodie felt another shiver inside himself: what was wrong with him today? Something was different: that all his instincts were responding to Doyle as someone he wanted to know more, and differently, than he should.

They moved on to blood loss. Shock. Internal bleeding. Gunshot wounds.

Their lady leader had her own way of dealing with hecklers, and cast around no more than a second for her volunteer to demonstrate various

body parts and manœuvres. "Oi! One of you two," she pointed peremptorily, "the Ambulance Men. Come and lie down for me," and Bodie, who disliked exposure, thrust forward Doyle, who thrived on it.

There was quite a lot of good-natured laughter from the female audience as Jo pushed Doyle to lie on his back, unpoppered his shirt for him and parted it, drew a line from his nipples and bisected it to demonstrate some nicety of anatomy. She invited everyone to feel his carotid pulse, rolled up his sleeve as far as it would go and called upon two victims to try to find his brachial pulse: and raised a laugh in indicating the general area of the major pulse in his groin, but archly announcing that she was not expecting anyone to search for *that* one. She folded him into the recovery position where he lay obediently unconscious while she showed them how to search for possible fractures, frisking him thoroughly from head to foot. Then she released him back into Bodie's care for everyone in the class to have a go at bandaging a partner's broken arm.

Doyle stood patiently as Bodie unwrapped a large sling practically and efficiently: in his vivid past he had dressed more wounds both small and large than either Jo, or Ray Doyle, or possibly the Surgeon General. As the others struggled with uncooperative lengths of sling Bodie was even able to look at Doyle's face as he tucked in the bandage, drew up his arm, knotted it neatly behind his neck. Doyle's eyes were distant, distracted, his breathing a little faster than usual, a light sheen of sweat on his skin.

"That got to you all right, didn't it?" Bodie said, half amused, half envious: maybe he should have volunteered after all. Mind you, he wouldn't have been such a pretty sight as Doyle, lying there with his tight jeans and his boots, his shirt undone, having some strange woman all but play with his nipples. The bruises which littered his broad but skinny ribcage seemed only to add to his pathetic charm. Probably everyone in the room wanted to mother him by now.

Doyle's half-slitted eyes came wide open and he stared Bodie full in the eye. "I'm gonna ask her for a date."

"Why, has she got palm trees?" and he fainted backwards as Doyle punched him. "Oops, there goes my collarbone. Still, I'm in the right place." And he presented himself to Doyle for bandaging, which he proceeded to do so efficiently that he was

singled out to demonstrate the technique to the rest of the class. Teacher's pet, already.

After Head Injuries, the next item on the agenda was Choking; bending Doyle over his arm and banging him on the back five times. And Doyle so ungrateful, too, complaining with a series of plaintive coughs that Bodie had gone about it with far too much enthusiasm.

"It's supposed to be more slap than tickle, y'know," Bodie defended himself vigorously.

Jo overheard him, and clapped her hands for everyone's attention: "What this gentleman just said is quite right: to be any use at all the slap has to be both hard, and direct. You're aiming to force the obstruction up the trachea by compressing the trapped oxygen. You two have done a bit of this before, haven't you?" she added, dropping her voice as she wandered over to them, grinning as she pushed a hand through her hair. "What line of work are you really in—police? Army?"

"Something like that," Doyle said deeply, hanging over Bodie's arm, with that devastating half-smile.

The look she gave him was speculative, searching. "Well, a bit of First Aid's going to come in very handy to you, I should think. Split lip, extensive bruising to the ribcage, minor abrasions everywhere, old scarring—you lead an interesting life, don't you?"

"Bit of a troublemaker," Bodie said, tutting sadly behind her. "Very nasty piece of work," but they both ignored him.

"Oh, very interestin'. Would you like to hear about it?" Doyle opened wide both eyes, sweet, dangerous, seductive.

She tilted her head at him, hands on her hips, and gave him a look.

"Promisin'," Doyle said as she walked away, and he rolled up his sleeves, cackling. "Very."

Bodie had to agree with him.

If the backslapping failed to dislodge the offending object, the next move was apparently the Heimlich Manœuvre. Doyle was beckoned out to the front again, held lightly in Jo's capable arms against her chest while she clasped her fists under his sternum.

"—apart from just finding the correct position, never, never try this out unless someone really is choking," she admonished. "—why?—well, because," and all the time she carried on talking

Bodie noticed that she wasn't in a hurry to release Doyle, keeping him right there as if she had forgotten she held him; finally, after several moments, releasing him with a pat on the shoulder.

"You wanna watch it, mate," Bodie muttered. "In danger of becoming an older woman's plaything, you are." Doyle looked very, very pleased with himself, as well he might, having just endured five free minutes of an attractive woman's embrace. "We'll have to do one of these more often, now I know why it's called a refresher."

Time to practise the latest topic: and it was Bodie's turn to hold Doyle in the Heimlich position. When they reversed their roles, Bodie could feel Doyle's body, warm and hard, pressing into his back, and something, some instinct of repulsion made him pull away.

"Sorry," Doyle said wryly, understanding; one hand rubbed the side of his face as he looked at Bodie, waiting.

Bodie patted his hand. "Don't be embarrassed, mate. I'm just happy you're enjoying yourself so much."

But the fun was at an end: the rest of the session was taken up with a written paper of multiple choice questions. They both found it very easy, getting perfect scores— "e marked his own paper, mind you," Doyle pointed out loudly.

It was 2PM. As the rest of the class gathered together pencils, paper, coats, and made their chattering way out, Doyle sauntered over and offered to tidy up. An exercise which ended in Doyle and Jo leaning on their elbows by the wall, engaged in a long, deep conversation, while Bodie grimly stacked every one of the twenty-four chairs himself.

Then, "Oi! You coming?" he jerked an eye towards the door, and Doyle turned his way.

"Oh. Right. Yeah." He strode out towards Bodie. Turned at the last minute. "Hey. How about comin' for a drink? Thirsty work, savin' lives."

A deep long dimple flashed in each cheek as she checked her watch. "Why not?"

And Bodie watched in disbelief as the two of them pushed past him laughing, and made their way to Bodie's car, and stood there chatting, waiting for Bodie to open the doors for them.

"Much as," Bodie leaned nearer, "I love you, I hope you won't take it too amiss if I go now." He nodded at Doyle and stood up, jangling the

car keys in one hand.

Doyle considered him over the rim of his pint pot. "Gonna abandon me, are you?"

"Well, you've got enough there to keep your hands full, haven't you? And, it may have escaped your notice, but we *are* officially on duty."

"Only standby. Do me a favour, Bodie—"

"Yeh," Bodie said resignedly.

"Tell the Cow I'm takin' two hours of my overdue leave, will you?"

"Ten minutes not enough?" Bodie marvelled.

Doyle leaned near him and winked. "Can't rush these things. I reckon she's going to turn out a peach. She's married—"

"Bad news."

"But her husband's very understanding—"

"Still not good news. I've heard that one before."

"Thing is, they're into all this wifeswapping stuff. He likes to watch."

Bodie remained where he was, eyes wide open, fixed on Doyle.

"Yeah, I know, tres kinky." Doyle's wry, expressive eye met his as he took a smacking swig of his lager.

"And you like the idea." Doyle had that look about him; someone had thrown his switch and there was no stopping it now, countdown all the way to the end.

Doyle shrugged. "I dunno. Just, I reckon she's going to know the game all right."

Bodie couldn't care less about Doyle's plans for Jo, but the sudden introduction of a voyeuristic husband threw a whole different light on the matter. "As long as *watch* is all he does. You wanna be careful, sunshine. Sounds like deep water to me." Not that Doyle was likely to listen to him, or take his advice if he did. If Doyle wanted to get into a sexual threesome with two people he hardly knew, or did not know at all, then he would, and that was an end to it. Doyle was old enough to know what he was doing; could look after himself better than anyone Bodie had ever met. Not a spare inch of flesh on him (except where it counted, Doyle assured him), smallish too, and yet he had the strength of high-tension steel and the nature of a mink. Exotic, but violent.

"Well, just make sure you tell me all about it afterwards."

"I will. Now push off, will you, Bodie?" Jo was wending her way back through the chairs and tables. "Two's company and all that."

Bodie gave him a meaningful look. "Ah. My point entirely."

"Husband's away at the moment, anyway," Doyle added, rising with grace to let Jo back in again behind the table.

"I'm off then," Bodie smiled at them both, a blaze of blue-eyed innocence. He leaned down and murmured to Jo: "He'll be putty in your hands, love. Just send him back in good working order, will you?"

Bodie worked on the Ojuka report all afternoon, finally dropping it into Cowley's in-tray by 5PM, where it was to cause the CI5 chief some surprise: the first ever on-time report from his best, worst agents 3.7 and 4.5.

BODIE was restless, various disconnected thoughts or feelings chasing round in his mind which he could not pin down: just the vague sense that he was not entirely happy about the way the day had gone, though backtracking it over and over did not result in enlightenment.

Well: in one sense he supposed it was all quite simple. It had aroused him, watching Doyle this morning, exposed and played with before a crowd: what that said about himself he did not know or care, but for whatever reason, it had turned him on.

Doyle, similarly afflicted, had immediately taken steps to deal with his own sexual tension, while he, Bodie, was still here wrestling with his. So. Simple.

He would ring up Louise—or Diana—fix up a date for this evening, and that would take care of that.

The expectation did not fill him with wild excitement, but it was the best he likely to get. He could, after all, hardly go off and screw Doyle instead.

Though sometimes he reckoned Doyle might not say no.

But that was not good enough reason to go for it. Lead to all sorts of trouble, would a romantic fling with Ray Doyle. Half the reason he and Doyle were so good together was that extra edge, some super-fine tuning of awareness, the attraction alive and strong between them. A dangerous attraction, it had to be said.

His R/T went off as he was cruising back home: he picked it up and held it close to him as he steered the car onehanded in and out of traffic. "3.7?"

The peevish voice of his boss crackled at him.
Alpha One. Where's Doyle, Bodie?

"Following a lead, sir," Bodie said. "Someone had something he thought he could use." He shut his eyes for a split second.

I'll want you both in at seven tomorrow. Don't be late.

Bodie exhaled with relief. "Are we ever, sir?"

And Bodie—get that partner of yours to write the report as usual next time. His punctuation's marginally more by the book.

A wry smile crossed Bodie's lips as he flipped off the channel; old man never missed a trick, he really never did.

He decided to call round at Ray's on the way home, for no particular reason, see if he wanted a pint perhaps before Bodie's date. He could ring Louise from Doyle's flat: she worked till ten anyway, and with any luck she'd come off duty very tired and only too ready to fall into a warm and welcoming bed.

About to press the buzzer at Doyle's flat, a little message all prepared on his lips, 'priapismic' being the operative word—Bodie noticed with a rapid chilling sensation that the door was in fact slightly ajar, hardly noticeable really, just that the catch had not quite snicked down when someone pulled it to.

Ray, in a tearing hurry to get the girl, whatser-name, to bed?

Or—?

Trouble flicked on in his mind; one hand diving inside his jacket to wrap around the familiar, comforting shape of his gun he gently nudged the door open with his foot, and listened. His heart rate was picking up, beginning a drumroll in his ears, a prickle of danger raised all the hairs on his skin. No sounds.

He kicked the door wide and open and burst in, gun fixed and ready. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dim hall light, but his senses told him there was nothing there and nobody waiting. He rose from his kneeling position and shut the door quietly behind him. Still wary, gun still drawn and ready, he listened, then nosed the Browning's barrel round the kitchen door, and then the lounge—nothing.

That left the bedroom. And at once, all notions of trouble left him as he approached it along the passage, because he could hear them as he drew near, sighs and murmurs and moans. *Still*, Doyle?

He stuck his head around the door. The room was darkened, just one light on beside the bed on which two bodies surged, making wild and passionate love.

Bodie grinned to himself, walking noiselessly over the carpet. Doyle deserved this. He really did. It wasn't funny, crack CI5 agent leaving his door open. To any passing madman.

"Got you," he said softly, appearing beside the bed. Ray Doyle was lying on his back, the woman astride him, both naked, writhing. Bodie took time to admire the full swell of pointed breasts, huge dark nipples, the way she had her head thrown back, the loud, rhythmic way she was panting—"Yes. Oh. God. Yes." Doyle had his hands on her hips: his thumbs dipped into and caressed the cleft of her body near where it was joined to his, and that seemed to increase the pitch and crescendo of the cries.

Doyle was quieter, his pelvis rocking up, and down, and up again; his head had turned to one side and he had, unlike Jo, taken in the fact of Bodie's presence, with just enough breath to whisper, "What the fuck are you doing here," a choice of phrase which amused Bodie.

He laid the black mouth of his gun tenderly at Doyle's temple. "You left the door open, Ray. Very careless." He leaned nearer Doyle's ear. "Bang bang, sweetheart," he whispered. "You're dead."

"Shove off, Bodie," Doyle gasped at some private, exquisite pang; he shut his eyes and whimpered.

"Oh, I dunno. Might as well stay now I'm here, mightn't I?" remarked Bodie, spinning the gun and stashing it safely away. He leaned back against the bedhead and regarded the action with a desultory eye.

Jo was grinding herself down on Ray's body now, meaning business. Doyle had his eyes shut again; his skin was flushed with sexual heat. His body was withdrawing itself from hers and spear- ing into her again, such timing, a boat tossing up and smacking down to meet the sea. They must be getting close. Ray certainly looked as if he couldn't hold out much longer, his forehead creased, his mouth parted, his breathing swift and sobbing as if he were enduring the limits of pain. Bodie smoothed his hair back for him, then let his hand wander, warm skin, damp curls of hair on his chest. He ran his fingers through it lightly, Doyle so distracted he thought he was beyond noticing, until he glanced again at Doyle's face, saw the sultry

haze of his eyes alight and watching him. Lightheaded, Bodie smiled at him, and his fingers found Doyle's nipple, pinching it lightly.

Doyle winced, eyes closing, and cleared his throat.

"Kiss it," he murmured, his voice rough, rasping.

"That's naughty, Ray," Bodie whispered to him, eyes bright and hot with his own desire. "Too far gone to care, eh?"

Doyle's eyes followed his lips as they grazed softly over moist and silken skin. Watched Bodie open his mouth, take his nipple in and suck, sweet and strong; nuzzle it with gentle lips, suck again. And as Bodie's eyes lifted up to his face Doyle gasped sharply, his whole body convulsing as he arched violently upwards; and Jo shrieking, highpitched, once and then once more. As she threw herself forward onto Doyle's chest Bodie moved back; through hard, slitted eyes he watched Doyle come, and come, trembling all over his body. And when the fuss and the fury was over Bodie got up and walked out of the room to leave them alone.

In the kitchen he took the kettle off the gas ring, filled it from the cold tap, replaced it and lit the gas under it.

Then he stood by the window, staring out, though whether the view was the Clapham Road allotments or the pyramids of Egypt he could not have told you.

When a noise behind him startled him he had whipped around with his gun drawn and ready to fire before he had time to think—

"Sorry, sorry," he muttered throwing up one hand in apology, tucking the gun away beneath his arm.

Her eyes were wide and her pose frozen. "Edgy, aren't you?" she said sarcastically.

The kettle began to whistle. "Cup of tea?" he asked her.

"Please." She was fully dressed, back in her old jeans and stripy sweater again. "Well, it's been an interesting afternoon..."

"Have fun, did you?" he enquired pleasantly, stirring a spoon briskly around. "Doyle up to scratch, was he?"

She looked at him without smiling. "What do you think? Look, I'll leave my number, in case he wants to call. Daytime's best." She accepted the mug he handed her and sipped at it in silence, exclaiming through a mouthful, "God, will you

look at the time. Must be off." She set down the mug on the drainer. "Thanks for the tea." Hands on hips, she winked at him. "And the rest."

"Did you *get* any rest?" Bodie enquired, interested. And she laughed delightfully, moving for the door. At the last minute she turned, dark hair swinging, and gave him a dimpled grin.

"Almost forgot." She reached into her back pocket, took out two pieces of paper. "You both passed," she said with a straight face, and then she slapped Bodie on the arm and walked out chuckling.

Bodie set the certificates on Doyle's mantelpiece, one at each end behind Doyle's horrible Chinese dogs. It was time for him to go: he did not particularly want to see Doyle again before the morning. By the morning they would both be—just as they usually were, and they need never think about what had happened. But he had already left it too late.

"She gone?"

At least he didn't pull his gun on Doyle, appearing now in the doorway, ruffled head emerging through the neck of his shirt, mouth distorted by a huge yawn.

"Yeh, she's gone."

"Didn't hang around," Doyle said, not questioning, just commenting; he stepped towards the hob, intent on a reviving drink.

"She left her number."

"Did she?" Doyle said, spooning instant coffee into a mug. "Want a coffee?" he indicated the mugs with a trigger finger.

"Already had one."

Doyle eyed Bodie over the rim of his mug, not missing the dark, brooding gaze, the sulky droop of his mouth. Bodie just stood there, leaning on the drainer, arms crossed, eyes trained on the floor; they flicked up, expressionless, to meet Doyle's, then down again.

Trouble of some sort. Doyle could see it in the blaze of Bodie's eyes and feel it in the air, charged with Bodie's tension. He mentally shrugged it away. Bodie would tell him if he wanted to, and if he didn't, Russian torture wouldn't make him open his mouth. He swooped down to look in the fridge.

"Want something to eat? Eggs. Fancy an omelette?" He got to his feet, precariously holding four eggs in one hand. "You know your trouble, don't you?" And his eyes homed in on Bodie suddenly, sharp and penetrating, too fast for Bodie to look away.

"No," Bodie said, very quiet. "Think you do?"

Doyle gave him a cheerful, lopsided grin. "Bottle it up too much, you do. Look at you, all tensed up. You should have asked Jo for a massage. She was an expert." He shrugged a shoulder experimentally, the one Parker had twisted behind him yesterday.

"Oh, I'll bet she was."

"Pity she had to rush off," said Doyle, reminiscent, and at last, from somewhere, Bodie found the will to smile.

"So help me, Ray, don't tell me you're up for it again."

Doyle winked at him, scratched his chest, broke the eggs into a bowl. "You know how it is. Just need a bit of time to build up me strength again." He whisked away with energy.

Watching him, Bodie stirred himself to move away from the drainer at last. "Yeah, well, I think I'm in danger of forgetting. Can I use your phone?" He was already moving towards it.

"Who's it going to be?" Doyle asked, intrigued. "That nurse—Louise was it?" Well, she should give a good massage if anyone can." He tipped the eggs into pan and ignited the gas. "Look, Bodie. I get the feeling you're in a mood with me. Are you?"

That stopped Bodie in his tracks. He looked over at the downcast head and said to Doyle's hunched back, "Why should I be?"

"I dunno. Well, I dunno," Doyle said inelastically, turning to face him. "Wish it had been you with Jo, is that it?"

Bodie faced him out squarely. "Well, what do you think? I'm not made of stone, you know," and a wide, considering grin spread across Doyle's face.

"I knew it."

"Psychic, aren't you?" Bodie observed, not sweetly.

"These eggs are done," Doyle said, peering into the pan. "More scrambled than anything."

"Like your brains, then."

"You could have had her," Doyle said, head down. "Why didn't you?"

Bodie's heart picked up speed again. Doyle seemed to have lost his appetite, ignoring the plate Bodie was holding out to him. Bodie took the pan himself, tipped the contents onto the plate.

"She looked 'appy enough with what she was getting from you. Same to show her what she was missing."

Doyle looked at him, amused. Bodie was wolfing the eggs down, waste not, want not. He

held out a forkful for Doyle, watched as Doyle swallowed it absentmindedly, opened his mouth for Bodie to feed in more, eventually taking over the fork and finishing the plateful.

"You never made your phone call."

Bodie shrugged. The urgency of his mood had fled him now, leaving him nothing so much as tired; he turned away from Doyle, rubbing a hand over his eyes. "Think I'll just go home, okay?"

"Stay if you want," Doyle said. "Quick beer, anyway," and Bodie nodded, might as well. Doyle was going ahead of him into the lounge, spotting the twin certificates behind the china dogs and chuckling as he examined them.

"Worked hard for these, didn't I?"

"Hey, who was her star pupil?" Bodie reminded him, affronted. "You just volunteered for extra stretcher duty, that's all."

Doyle laughed, a rich, dirty chuckle. "And this was Cowley's idea of a day of rest."

"Day of—? Oh. After Ojuka, you mean." Bodie sat down heavily on the settee and waited for Doyle to bring him a beer, which Doyle seemed in no hurry to do; he was wandering around, peering out of the window, drawing curtains, switching on lights, the telly. Very cosy and domestic.

Yesterday, Doyle had nearly died.

The day before, Doyle had shot within an inch of Bodie's brains to save his life.

What a bloody life.

"About time," he said, taking the cold can Doyle was holding out to him, but his partner was paying attention to the news, which was focussing on a bomb which had exploded at an army barracks in Northern Ireland. Bodie watched Doyle instead, the curve of his rounded cheek, the cool sculpture of his mouth. He was wearing jeans with all the colour washed out of them, still tight, the lean line of his thigh pressing next to Bodie's. Bodie swallowed some beer, and on impulse he slipped an arm around his partner, squeezed his upper arm tight, feeling the thin strength of it, the way the rockhard muscle tensed to meet his grip.

Doyle was taking no notice of him, incensed by the carnage in Derry—"I mean, I ask you, they were just doing their fucking job."

"Misplaced concern, Doyle. Don't waste your breath."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"I mean," Bodie said, "try looking a bit closer to home."

Doyle shrugged his arm out of Bodie's grasp. "D'you mind? I'm black and blue as it is."

"Nearly lost you yesterday, you know. And *you* were just doing *your* fucking job."

Doyle grimaced. "Don't remind me."

"But there's still tomorrow."

"*Bodie.*" Doyle turned to face him, exasperated, inclined to be annoyed, but his irritation faded out, the look in his eyes deepening in answer to what he saw in Bodie's face. He went on, more quietly, "All right. Point taken. But do we have to think about it tonight?"

Bodie's lips twisted wryly. "Reckon you 'ave to think about it sometimes."

"It helps?" Doyle challenged.

Bodie sucked some more beer out of his can.

"Makes you realise—better make the most of every day you get."

Doyle's expressive face twisted again. "Can't say I didn't try today." He glanced over at his partner; in an oddly pensive mood was Bodie, dark eyes midnight-shadowed, fringed by downswept lashes as he studied the can turning over and over in his hands, the twist of his mouth sardonic, violent even.

"You should have phoned Louise, Bodie," he said with sudden perception; he himself had passed beyond the post-danger blues, nothing like a good workout to do it, everyone knew that.

Bodie stirred a little beside him, eyes flicking to his with a flash of mockery. "Yeah, well, maybe I'd just as soon be here with you." And his sudden, savage smile had a devil's taint to it.

Doyle took that on board with outward calm, though he was considering what it might mean: nothing more than Bodie in a difficult, provocative mood, possibly.

On the other hand, Bodie had been very gentle to him lately, angelish, and the like. All the grittiness, one-upmanship, violence, he now reserved for people other than Doyle: Doyle seemed to walk inside a charmed aura at Bodie's side, the two of them together against the world.

Yeah. You let me in, didn't you.

Took a long time, god knew how many perfect shots across his line of cover: he had risked his own life time and time again to save Bodie, and Bodie had done the same for him, no thanks expected, never count the cost. But there was of course a cost: both hard, both unsentimental, first had come respect, that was all, and then another feeling

which had a life all of its own, out of control now and pushing them out to the limit.

He knew how Bodie felt. Goddamnit, he ought to: he had been to the same places, seen the same things, lived and died and lived again a thousand times and would again if their luck stayed in, if Bodie's eye held, and his own.

Deep thoughts, deep water. His hand strayed to his midriff, caressing it lightly; yesterday had been hard, and the beating from the sadistic Parker rather more severe than he had allowed Bodie to know.

"All right?"

"Yeah, just tired."

He saw Bodie's sharp, hungry eyes range over him, but he did nothing. "Get us another beer, will you," was all he said. "Or maybe we need something stronger."

When Bodie returned he put his hand out for the tumbler of amber Scotch, shut his eyes, tipped his head back.

"Didn't it get you all worked up, watching us like that?" he asked without opening his eyes.

"Maybe," was the only reply he got.

The liquid fire of the Scotch burned sweetly down to his guts. "Would've done me."

Bodie made a little sound beside him, sneer or smile. "Yeh, well, you. Not all like you, y'know, mate. Some of us have great self-control."

Doyle grinned, lip lifting away from sharp, uneven white teeth. "Never seen *that* as much of a virtue." His eyes snapped open, catching Bodie's burning into his skin; his heart was racing, fear or excitement, both. Because Bodie in this mood was volatile, dangerous; anything could happen.

Bodie watched Doyle's elbow lift, long fingers raking through his own curls; his shirt was clean, smelt sweet from the washing line, but beneath his armpit was a fresh, damp patch of sweat. The cuffs were rolled back, as always, almost to his elbow, his forearms honeybrown from outdoor shoots. He had not fully buttoned the shirt, and as he moved one nipple was plainly visible, also the crease in his flat belly; the hair went all the way down from his nipples to below his navel and, presumably, beyond.

Bodie watched him with one desultory eye. There was silence for a while.

Then: "She was a find, wasn't she," Doyle yawned.

"I wouldn't know, would I?"

“Lovely little mover,” Doyle said, and he wriggled reminiscently.

Bodie moved sharply. “Don’t keep on about it, Doyle.”

Doyle was all malice as he said, “Sorry. Keep forgetting you didn’t get off today.”

Bodie’s mouth twisted, caught unawares by the harsh whisky sting. “Yeah, well, keep on bringing it up and I just might be desperate enough to make a pass at *you*, Doyle.”

Doyle flicked him an enigmatic look. “Yeah?”

“Well, it has been known, you know.” Bodie threw himself back, closed his eyes. Now it was Doyle’s turn to look, unobserved; his partner was wearing a cream shirt, black cords, black shoes. He still wore his gun, banded on a worn webbing holster. Probably the last thing he took off at night. His chin was faintly shaded with blueblack stubble, his profile lazy, handsome. Bodie had all the dark tough beauty of a fighting war-film hero.

“I got kicked yesterday,” Doyle said, quiet. “Want to see?”

“Oh yeah,” said Bodie bleakly. “Can’t wait. That’ll be a real thrill for me, Doyle.”

Doyle undid the last button of his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. Arching his back a little, he began to unbuckle his jeans.

Bodie’s eyes flashed open at the sound. “What the ’ell—”

“Look at this.” Doyle unzipped his fly, pulled down the band of navy underpants to show Bodie Parker’s footprint, etched in black. Bodie spared it hardly a glance; his eyes, hard and dark and angry, were on Doyle’s face.

“I’d be careful if I were you. I’d say you were flirting with me for all you’re worth.”

There was a curious, offbeat stillness in the room, one man’s tension a feed for the other. Doyle met his gaze, unblinking. “Would you? Well, you know me best, Bodie.”

Bodie said softly, darkly, “Some people might say you deserved all you got.”

Doyle’s face twisted, abandoning pretence, his patience at an end. “Ah, *come on, Bodie*. Look, you’re obviously desperate for it. The vibes ’ave been comin’ at me all evening,” and this was suddenly desperately dangerous: they had arrived at last at the closed door.

Bodie was, he could see, under control, the terrifying control of anger, but only just, a pulsebeat leaping in his throat as he said, slowly,

“None of your damned business, Doyle.”

Doyle hooted. “Oh, that’s rich, that is. You made it my business, comin’ here this afternoon. Watching us—touching me—” He lay back, one hand pushing his shirt out of the way, shoving down his underpants a little more, revealing the pinkness of his sweetly curled cock. “Well, now you can touch me some more. I’m here and your girlfriend isn’t. Do it to me, Bodie.”

Bodie’s eyes dwelt on him, from here to there, angry, hungry.

“Come on,” Doyle said again, urging, coaxing, “*come on*, Bodie. You’re so hot for it you won’t even notice the difference. I promise you.”

His throat tight with fury, Bodie tapped him on the cheek with one finger, the only touch he allowed himself, the blaze of his eyes disturbed and violent. “Very touching offer, mate. Thank you. It’s at times like this you find out who your friends really are, innit?”

Doyle turned this aside with a sound of exasperation. “Don’t try and pretend with me, Bodie. Playing cool till you freeze up. I *know* you, Bodie, and I know what you want. Your eyes...you’ve been bleeding for this, all fuckin’ night.”

“Not for you,” Bodie said, deep and low. “Sweet as you are...what have I ever done that makes you think I could possibly want you, Ray?”

Doyle saw, out of the corner of his eye, that Bodie’s arm was shaking. He sat up, with an involuntary wince of effort, and reached over to begin undoing Bodie’s shirt buttons. “Didn’t say you did, did I? Don’t make a big deal of it: you’re in the mood for it, just bloody look at you, and I’m willin’. Shut your eyes.” And as Bodie did nothing, adding with more violence, “*Shut your eyes*, I could be anybody, damnit. Pretend.”

To hell with it: Doyle had happened on the perfect excuse. No big deal, two mates together, a little drunk: they need never talk about it, not ever. He would not and he knew Doyle never would.

He closed his eyes.

Lay back.

Forced himself to be still as Doyle’s hands, quick and light, moved over him, sorting through layers until he reached the man inside: he was hard, of course, as he had been on and off all day, forever, and he could not help, not with the strongest will in the world, the thrill that raged through him at the first cool touch of Ray’s hand.

He must have made some sound, some betray-

ing word, perhaps, *'oh Ray please'* because he heard Doyle answer him, very far away, and he knew they were in deep trouble, because he could not stop himself now, he wanted it too much, more than anything he had ever wanted.

When he opened his eyes at last to stare down at the long fingers ringing him, the flexing of Doyle's slender wrists as he worked on him, quick and sure and hard; *oh such skill, Doyle, you could sell it.* He must have practised on himself, to get this good, some lonely nights, the lights turned low: now wouldn't that be a sight to see...

Doyle murmured to him something, his name, and then: "yeah, you like this, don't you," and then his name again. Helpless, tender, Bodie reached out a hand to him, and in quick understanding Doyle nuzzled his fingers, turning his cheek against Bodie's palm over and over again; he kissed it, and his belly, and then he looked up. His eyes were very bright; "Is this what you want, Bodie?" he whispered; and Bodie watched through slitted eyes Doyle swallow the tip of his cock, wicked tongue flickering, the wet heat shocking; it sent him sky-high, right out over the edge. He twined his fingers in Doyle's hair and dragged him off hard, his cock shooting, the quick white spurts flying away from him while his whole body convulsed in the sweetest, sharpest pleasure: he heard himself cry out, like a man gutshot, the cruellest of deaths, and the most certain.

It was very late now: midnight, or soon after. They had lain this way for a while; perhaps they had slept, Doyle had lost track of time and couldn't be sure. Bodie was awake now, anyway. Doyle could sense the movements of his eyes looking out over Doyle's head. At least Bodie had held him afterwards, Doyle's head on the smooth warm planes of his chest, the hardmuscled circle of Bodie's arms loosely around him. Once or twice he had felt Bodie's fingers slip through his hair, smoothing it, in what was surely a caress. And that was more than he had expected.

He didn't want to move, not even to speak, knowing that to break the spell would mean the end of things—perhaps forever, but at last he found the courage, lifted his head away from Bodie's heart and spoke his name.

Above him Bodie sighed, a little waft of cool air stirring his bare skin. "Yeah?"

"All right?"

"Yeah." Bodie pulled away from him now, not in an unfriendly way, but gently, and sat up. Doyle watched him look down at his white shirt, wet through to his skin in several places: he wondered what was going through Bodie's mind.

"Should've let me go the whole way, sunshine," he said softly. "I would have done."

Bodie looked at him briefly. "Didn't want to choke you. Or whatever."

"Oh, cocky," Doyle murmured, and gave him a slow, beautiful smile. After a moment Bodie smiled back at him, enigmatically, the feeling in his eyes too deep to read.

"Must say, you did that as if you were born to it."

"Was quite a sight. You comin' silver bullets everywhere. Would've seen off any vampire." He was chatting for the sake of it, seeing Bodie reach for his holster, begin to strap it on over the stained shirt.

"You goin'?" he made himself say.

Bodie's reply came as a relief to him; he had had some idea that Bodie might be angry with him, or with himself, but angry, anyway.

"Not much point now, is there—Cowley wants us at 7. Don't mind if I stay, do you?"

Doyle shook his head. He reached out for Bodie's hand, took it in his own, squeezed it very hard. Neither of them said anything for a moment. Doyle was gathering all his courage for the next question, almost but not quite the hardest of all.

"Well? Was it good—or not?" he demanded, with cheeky bravado, and after a moment Bodie smiled, one of his rare, sweet smiles, a warmth beginning around his mouth and softening it, lighting up his eyes as he looked into Doyle's. *Don't let the cat get at 'im...*

"With you? Ah, mate, you don't need to ask, do you? Better than I ever dreamed, okay?"

"Then why do I get the feeling you wish I hadn't done it?" Doyle sharpened up his tone, though he almost wished he hadn't as he saw the light die in Bodie's eyes as he looked outwards, away from Doyle, though when Doyle pushed against him, demanding, his arm went around Doyle and stayed there, easy, as if it belonged there.

"I dunno...superstitious? Or something."

"How d'you mean?"

Bodie's face turned towards him again: it wore an expression of absorption as he pushed Doyle's shirt aside, began to trace around his nipples with one squaretipped finger.

He spoke very softly, looking at his own hand, not at Doyle's face. "I wouldn't lie to you, Ray, there's been times before I've thought about this. Thought about you like this. I shouldn't have, I know, but—"

"Ah, come on. You know I've thought about it too."

Bodie went on as if he hadn't heard, "I always thought, better that we never let it get off the ground. Never let it get a hold on us. It was always there, but—as long as we never did anything about it, I had the feeling we'd be okay. We'd be together. Nothing would go wrong—"

"A lucky charm." Ray Doyle laughed, quite harshly; and he grabbed back Bodie's hand, laced his fingers through it and brought it to his mouth for a kiss. "You're mad, Bodie, you know that. What difference can it possibly make—?"

"I dunno," Bodie said, and looked into his eyes, a look so sweet, so searching it got to Doyle and stabbed him to the heart. "Never change a winning game, they say. And now we have."

"Well, at least we'll die 'appy," Doyle shot back at him, but he saw this was not funny for Bodie, and he sobered quickly. "What do you wanna do then?" Suddenly he had arrived at it: the hardest question, and he was already feeling an angry premonition about the answer. He wiped the back of his hand over his mouth, jumped to his feet. "How does this sound then? Can't undo it maybe: but—" He shrugged. "—we got a bit drunk one night, a bit carried away, I

blew you—not that big a deal, is it? And now we forget it."

He began to move, blindly, towards the dark archway of the bedroom. Bodie was there with him in an instant, sliding arms around his waist and pulling him back against his own body, nuzzling at his ear.

"Ah no, you got me wrong there, mate. I don't want to forget it. I couldn't forget it."

The lightest touch of Bodie's lips against his ear was sending shivers all through Doyle. Hunger vanquished anger and ignited desire instead; he tipped his head back against Bodie's shoulder and let Bodie kiss the side of his throat.

"Could do the Heimlich Manoeuvre on me from here," he whispered.

"Yeah, but it wouldn't be top of my list."

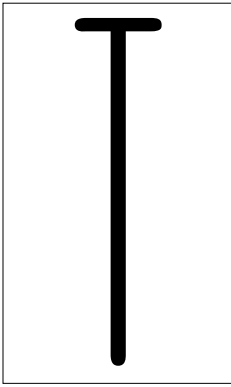
Bodie's hands slipped around to the fastening of his clothes, began to unbuckle his belt and unzip his jeans. All willingness he pressed himself back against Bodie, felt the hard dagger of his thrust against him, aggressive, all power. It scared him and thrilled him and made him hard and ready, to struggle with Bodie, to give in to Bodie, he didn't care which.

"All the way this time," he whispered as Bodie threw him down on the bed; and Bodie looked up from between his thighs to meet his eyes, to share a moment of perfect, perfect understanding.

Madness.

They were mad to do this.

But they were going to anyway.



Here are Bodie and Doyle in a London setting definitely underused in the TV series. Did I say 'underused'? Well, Doyle seems to be using Bodie, and then Bodie does it back to Doyle. The question is, does either one of them win?

he silver Escort sat parked in the night shadows of a slick, oily street. A steel bridge crossed overhead, the occasional train rattling above like the droning voice of God. One leg propped on the dash, Doyle exhaled a long sigh. "So, have you?" he asked his partner who sat, cramped and tired in the seat next to him. A lorry rumbled by, sending a spray of dirty water cascading up into the faint light of the night.

END OF THE LINE

TALLIS

"No, Doyle," Bodie stated adamantly. "For the millionth time, I haven't. And don't bother to go into that song and dance about Africa and mercs. They're a lot of wild stories and enormous lies." So he was lying, just a little. It hadn't been *Africa*, after all.

"Well, if you haven't *done* it, have you ever *thought* about it?" Doyle was bored. He'd been sitting too long in the cramped car with a grumpy Bodie, having had to cancel a night out with a very unforgiving Mandy and someone was going to have to pay for it. He felt fidgety, restless, like he wanted to run out and scream at the top of his lungs as the train rumbled overhead, pounding his fists against the stone embankment until they were bloody and sore. Since Bodie was the nearest punching bag then he was going to have to bear the brunt of Doyle's flaring temper.

Thought about it. A tentacle of unease slithered

through Bodie. Damn. How had Doyle got onto this topic again anyhow? Why couldn't they be discussing the Queen's Park Rangers or last night's episode of *Kojak*? He put on his blandest face and reached into his breast pocket. "Fancy a Polo?" Bodie asked, carefully peeling the paper back to reveal one gleaming white mint.

Doyle reached over to take one. "Ta much," he replied. His finger slid against the side of Bodie's hand, the touch sending an instant warning signal through Bodie, who scrunched back in his seat, uncomfortable and suddenly feeling claustrophobic.

"Yeh," Bodie muttered and found himself staring steadfastly out the windscreen as a couple crossed the road weaving and laughing shrilly.

Doyle shifted in his seat, turning slightly to face Bodie. He put one arm up on the top of the seat and drummed lightly on the edge of Bodie's headrest.

It felt unbearably stuffy in the car all at once. Bodie's left foot began to tingle as it started to numb from the cramped slouch he was in. A warm breath brushed his cheek, the minty smell of the Polo filling his nostrils. A shiver crept slowly down his spine, turning into a shudder as it reached his gut and groin. Ohhh god, he inwardly moaned.

"C'mon," Doyle whispered, his voice a sinuous tendril in the dark, tugging at Bodie. "Haven't you ever thought about it?" He shifted closer, his heat brushing at Bodie's defenses, melting his resolve. "I've often wondered...." He let it drift off into the dark, an open question, hovering, waiting for an answer.

"No," Bodie tried to say but the words never reached his lips. Doyle's whispers were spinning their seductive web around him, the words like arrows finding their mark even in the dark, pinning him in place when he should have run, stilling the jolt of his reaction when he should have lashed out against the light touch that fumbled across his chest, searching for the opening in his jacket.

Quickly, shakily, he grabbed the slender wrist, wresting it away from his burning skin. "No..." This time it came out, hoarsely. "Don't," he said, clearing his tight throat, squeezing shut his eyes, not against the dark. "Get your bloody hands off me or I'll serve you your balls for breakfast." Bodie reached down and opened the door as a car crept past, its headlights illuminating the inside of the Escort. A gush of cold air filled the car, brushing the dark curls back from Doyle's face, exposing the touch of grey at his temples. Bodie got out and slammed the door shut. He needed to get away from Doyle and the seductive warmth of the car, away from the itchy hypnotic sound of Doyle's voice and the dangers that lurked just below its tantalizing surface. He crossed the road and started to walk towards the illuminated shop fronts, the chill clearing his head and easing his feeling of entrapment.

Doyle sat back, squinting sightlessly, breath even as he watched Bodie dodge traffic. He turned on the radio and fiddled with the knobs. A thumping disco beat blared out of the tinny speakers and with a disgusted snort he turned it off. He reached underneath his jacket and fingered his gun, toying with the catch on the holster. It was warm and familiar as he ran his thumb and forefinger caressingly over the handle. A horn blared in the distance. He glanced over at the pub again. Nothing.

There was a squawk and a short burst of static. Doyle groaned, sinking lower into his seat. He reached out but quickly drew his hand back as a piercing screeeee filled the small car.

4.5, 3.7, George Cowley's voice burred over the transmitter. *Alpha One.*

Thumbing the handset, Doyle closed his eyes in weariness and answered, "4.5, sir."

Report, Cowley barked.

"Nothing yet, sir." He could hear the silent disapproval of his boss. "He hasn't made a move yet. He's just been, um, running errands." The door to the pub swung open, a pool of light tumbling out of the door and into the semi-darkness of the night. Doyle scanned the street. Where the hell was bloody Bodie? He'd been gone at least 10 minutes. Probably up at the late-night newsagents stocking up on sweets. Manfretti could finish his drinking and leave any time. Where the *hell* was Bodie? Serve the bastard right if Doyle had to drive off without him, leave him standing on the curb, pockets bulging with Dairy Milks and the *News of the World*. Explain *that* to the Cow, eh, Bodie, he thought, thumping the dash with a fist.

Keep me informed, 4.5, Cowley's voice, distorted and distant, filled the confined space of the car. *I don't want to lose this one. Do I make myself clear, Doyle?*

"No, sir. Yes, sir. He'll not get past us, sir," Doyle said through gritted teeth, murderous thoughts of his partner flitting across his imagination. Stupid sod. Can't sit still for 15 minutes. How the hell they'd made it through as many stakeouts and tails as they had was beyond him.

And then he saw Manfretti, the object of their stakeout, coming out into the night. Closing time. The glow from the pub backlit him as he hitched his trousers up and slowly started to head up the street, away from Doyle.

"Damn!" Doyle muttered, fumbling with the key. The car started with a cough and a lurch and he slowly began to inch out into the traffic, keeping one eye on Manfretti and one searching for the familiar gait of his disappeared partner. A loud thump on the roof of the Escort made him jump and then Bodie, red faced and puffing pulled open the door of the slow moving car. Cursing loudly he threw himself inside and slammed the door.

"Oh, very inconspicuous, that," Doyle turned to glare at Bodie as he sped up. "I'm sure no one on the street noticed you wailing after me."

“Don’t say anything, Doyle,” Bodie said furiously. “Just drive the car.” And he yanked the seatbelt around him, angrily punching it into the socket. They followed at a slow pace as Manfredti strolled through the thinning crowds and past closed up shops, heading up the high street, cutting across traffic and aiming unerringly towards the glaringly lit Underground station several streets away.

“Oh, nooo,” Doyle moaned. “Not a bloody tube station,” and he began scouring the street for a parking space. Bodie just leaned his head back and took a deep breath. Then he undid the latch on the seatbelt and opened the door.

“I’ll catch you up inside. Don’t be long” And he jumped out of the car, hurrying off after Manfredti.

The parking gods must have been watching over them for Doyle caught up with Bodie moments later. Keeping a discreet distance, they followed Manfredti through the turnstiles and down into the maze of the station. As usual, only the down escalators were working. Bodie grinned smugly at the puffing crowds laboriously climbing up towards them as they glided down the rickety escalator, a dizzying river of theatre and shoe advertisements sailing along beside them.

They came out on the platform, a scattered crowd milling around, waiting for the next, almost the last, train to ferry them off into the dark, to the end of the line. Manfredti had strolled several meters down the platform, past a group of mini-skirted and leather clad punks. Sauntering along, Bodie sidestepped the small tangle of punks. Stupid kids, he thought. All spotty and full of themselves.

Hands crammed in his jacket pockets, nervously toying with the car keys, Doyle assiduously stared at the adverts across the tracks, seemingly immersed in *Miss Selfridge’s* and *Silk Cut* cigarettes but tracking Manfredti surreptitiously.

Manfredti, bored with the *Borscht and Tears* advert across the way, ambled down to stare at the Underground Map, scarred and covered with graffiti.

Edging closer to Manfredti, Bodie debated the wisdom of gambling 10p on a packet of Smarties, his sweet tooth finally winning out over caution. Rummaging in his pocket for a coin, he kept a discreet eye on Manfredti pacing nearby. Slipping the thick coin into the slot with a satisfying *thunk*, the machine jammed. He jiggled the knob,

frowned, and then gave the glass front a swift thump. Doyle glanced over and glared. Bodie shrugged. Sprawled on the bench next to him, a scrawny, spotty kid with a shaved head and a safety pin in his cheek let out a snarly laugh. Bodie gave him and the torn T-shirt covered with swastikas a sideways glance then turned back to the stubborn machine. The punk sneered derisively and then he spat, not quite at Bodie, the blob of yellowish phlegm a defiant symbol shining and wobbling in the fluorescent glare.

Pulling up to his full, intimidating height, Bodie puffed out like a cat on the prowl. He looked dangerous, his eyes narrowed to a menacing slit as he turned slightly to face the lounging kid. He put his hand to his jacket, as if reaching for a gun and took a small step forward.

“Oow, ya fookin’ prick,” the kid snarled as he gathered his dignity and nervously shuffled on down the platform. To Doyle’s annoyance, Bodie smiled smugly, quite pleased with himself. Doyle looked away in disgust.

Bodie focused on the vending machine again, determined to get his Smarties. He was very near Manfredti who’d been idly watching. Close enough to smell his after-shave and hear the scraping of his nail across his jawline. Slowly, Bodie unzipped his leather jacket a little, the metallic rasp sounding clearly in the sudden stillness of the tunnel. Manfredti watched as Bodie reached inside for something to pry the machine with. The jacket gaped, the stiff leather bunching under his arm. Manfredti could plainly see the white woolen polo shirt as it pulled taut over Bodie’s chest, see the rounded fingers as they slid into a hidden, inside pocket, see the deadly, black gun in the holster as it caught the light. A strong breeze coursed through the tunnel, whipping up loose pieces of paper and trash as the approaching rattle and roar of a train filled the air. People sifted forward, impatient for the haven of the brightly lit cars and their promise of speed.

As Bodie slid a penknife from his pocket, a small smile of satisfaction played across his lips. Manfredti’s gaze was locked on the gun and as the gaping jacket closed over, obscuring its power and draw, his eyes travelled across the broad chest, up over the strong jaw and pursed lips to land squarely in dawning blue eyes. Pinned together, the two stood transfixed for long moments, a fine sweat breaking out on Manfredti’s temples.

Doyle turned from the adverts to see the still tableau, a funny, quizzical look on Manfretti's face, a look Doyle couldn't understand until he swung his gaze to his partner. Bodie stood rooted, one hand delicately holding the penknife, the other grasping the tab of the jacket's zip, hovering just below the planes of his chest, the heavy material still bunched slightly where the gun rested warm and secure in Bodie's armpit.

Awareness and instinct simultaneously swept over Doyle and Manfretti. Knocking into a woman standing near him Manfretti scrambled his way through the loitering crowd and headed for a way out. With a sharp shout of "Bodie!" Doyle started after him with Bodie a second or two behind.

And they were running, tearing after Manfretti down a long corridor with peeling posters and eerie echoes. The heavy thud of their footsteps reverberated with each racing step. The tang of sweat and urine filled their nostrils, almost suffocating in its pungency. Manfretti was fit. He was also scared. Realizing he had a tail on him gave him a speed he might not have found otherwise. Bounding up a short flight of stairs and over a wire mesh enclosed bridge that hovered above the tracks, he gained some distance on his surprised pursuers.

They reached a corner and skidded into each other, their momentum twining them for long seconds. Moving again, Bodie tugged at his zip and pulled out his gun. A woman walking towards them in the corridor saw the weapon and screamed, lunging back quickly to let these two madmen past.

"Put that fucking thing away," Doyle bellowed at him. "'S what got us in this mess to begin with." His breathing was paced, the words spat in disgust.

The tunnel that stretched ahead inclined slightly uphill. Bodie's heart was pumping furiously now, his lungs drawing in regular, short breaths, exhaling them used and depleted of oxygen. Suppose all those bloody tramps across Wales are paying off again, he thought morosely. And those bloody freezing runs through Brompton Cemetery that Doyle's always so keen on. They came to another turn, sharper this time, and found themselves slipping and hip-hopping their way around it. Bodie gave his partner a glance. Running half a pace ahead, face slightly flushed, a fine sheen of sweat on his temples, Doyle's attention was concentrated inward, focused on the pace of his feet, the

inhale and exhale of air, the slight burn in his left calf muscle as it loosened to the exertion.

Fear propelling him forward, Manfretti managed to keep just enough ahead. The two agents lost ground when a small covey of well-dressed tourists tangled into them in intersecting tunnels.

And then, just when they were almost upon Manfretti, they ran smack into a swell of people exiting a train. More football fans, their woolen scarves bright banners in the greyness of the underground. Manfretti dodged a path among the throng, darting through an archway and onto the platform. Bodie, trying to weave his way through the waves of people, ended face to face with a broad, half sober man. He grabbed the stranger's shoulders and with the momentum of the run behind him, they danced an elegant little ballroom swirl until Bodie, back towards Manfretti, disengaged his hands from the heavy winter coat he was clutching, and spun once more to face his prey racing down the platform.

The train that had just disgorged the football fans stood, doors open and beckoning in the fluorescent glare. As they began to shoosh shut, Manfretti made a wild leap into a car, catching hold of one of the metal poles inside and spinning round to watch as his two pursuers, breathless and furious, came slamming up against the closed glass and steel. The train began to shudder and move, Doyle pounding his palms against the thick, unheeding door. Manfretti grinned, his crooked teeth glinting, and shoved two fingers viciously into the air in a triumphant, obscene gesture.

Panting and angry, the two CI5 agents stood staring as the train disappeared into the black. Furious, Doyle turned away and stomped toward the 'way out' sign. In his fury he gave a vicious kick to a metal mesh rubbish bin. Bodie followed in silence. In front of him, Doyle stopped abruptly.

"Where the fuck are we?" Doyle asked. It was a large station with multiple entrances and levels, the kind of station one could wander around in for long hours and never tread the same stairs twice.

"Uh?" Bodie replied.

"I mean, *where the fuck are we?*" Doyle clarified. "What street did we leave the motor on?"

Bodie looked up at the names of streets on the exit sign. It wasn't where they had come in. In the chase for Manfretti they had managed to wind their way through the bowels of this fetid underground and arrive at the opposite end of

where they needed to be.

“Dunno,” he answered. “None of these, I think. Must be the other way.”

“Oh, bloody brilliant, that,” Doyle grumbled. “Not only do you bloody lose fucking Manfretti, now we have to fucking hike back to the bloody fucking car.”

“Might be easier to just leave from here,” Bodie suggested without enthusiasm.

“No, it would *not* fucking be easier.” Doyle staccatoed each word. “It’s *wet* and *dark* and fucking *cold* out there.”

“It’s *always* wet and cold. Yer point?” Bodie asked sarcastically. Doyle let a withering glare speak for him.

Bodie shrugged and turned, heading back into the long tunnels that had just surrendered them. Doyle followed, silent anger seeping from him, threatening to scald Bodie. They walked in silence together, footsteps echoing in the almost empty tunnels as they backtracked their way up stairs and across bridges. Doyle was unnaturally quiet, making Bodie ever more nervous. Tension bubbled and thickened until Bodie could stand it no more. In a deserted stretch of tunnel, the smell of stale urine permeating the air, Bodie stopped and grabbed Doyle’s shoulder. “Damn it, Doyle. Say it,” Bodie said, spinning Doyle to face him. “Just fucking well say it,” he spat, allowing his anger to rise.

“You fucked up, Bodie,” Doyle answered, rising to the bait.

Bodie winced inwardly. He knew he’d fucked up the job and was angry enough at himself, but it burned when Doyle hurled the words at him.

“You bloody sodding-well fucked up,” Doyle continued, anger unabated. “You scared off Manfretti with that bloody stupid stunt of yours.” He started to untwist the scarf from his neck, the air cool on his exposed skin. “What did you think you were doing anyway?”

“Yeh, I admit it. I let him get away. I’ll take my whipping from Cowley, face it like a man.” He nervously stuffed his hands in his pockets. “He’ll understand.”

Doyle sneered at his partner. “Oh, Cowley’ll be right pleased with this one, mate. He wanted Manfretti *tailed*, not chased away, and he’s not particular who he rakes over the coals for it. And you bloody think he’s going to just slap us on the wrist?” Doyle paced side to side, scowling at his

partner. “Cowley’d just as soon eat us alive as spitted and roasted.”

“What do you want from me, Doyle?” Bodie asked frustratedly. “I told you I fucked up. I’ll tell Cowley the same. *Mea culpa, mate*. What more do you want?”

“What do I bloody want from you?” Doyle straightened and took a step towards Bodie. Toe to toe, chests almost touching, he narrowed his eyes. “What do I *want*?” His breathing was fast as he tripped rapidly over the words. Something inside him seemed to snap, the problem at hand straining, twisting itself back into their discussion in the car, the discussion they’d been arguing over for the past two weeks. “What I *want* is something you’re too cowardly to give. What I *want* is something you obviously haven’t a clue about. What I want,” he grasped the lapel of Bodie’s jacket, pulling his face close, “is something you’re not fucking *man* enough to understand.”

It was eerily empty in this part of the station. Most of the late evening theatre-goers and football fans had already passed through. Even the occasional passenger hurrying by them blindly trying to catch the last train home seemed to have disappeared.

The suddenly intense closeness of Doyle disconcerted Bodie. The feel of him so near, almost pressed up against him caught at Bodie’s guts with a wrench. In desperation he took a small step back to stare at Doyle who let go of the jacket. He stiffened, trying vainly to control the emotions surging through him. He’d known with some doomed sense of premonition that it would eventually come to this, come to some sort of face off between the two of them. But damnit, why here, why in the middle of a fucking tube station? The little prick was really pushing it too far. But the cant of Doyle’s hips, the tilt of his sneer, the challenge in his eyes added up to a lure Bodie was finding increasingly difficult to resist. It also angered him to a point edging just beyond reason. The smugness of the little sod, the *assumption* that all Doyle had to do was crook his little finger and Bodie would come sliding to his knees in supplication. Well, it wasn’t going to be like that, not this time, not ever.

“Yeh. Thought so,” Doyle whispered, eyeing Bodie up and down. He could sense Bodie’s monumental resolve faltering, giving way. He knew this man, knew that if he kept chipping

away, that thick façade of indifference would shiver and crumble leaving him an obeisant Bodie. “Yer as yellow as they come.”

Bodie gazed slowly up the long stretch of empty corridor, heard distant voices rise and fall, the deafening rumble of the trains now a gentle purr. Here he was again, stuck in the winding bowels underneath the city with Doyle, his close presence an itchy reminder of earlier. He felt trapped, tricked into a situation he’d been assiduously avoiding. But Doyle wasn’t letting up.

“Afraid, aren’t you?” Doyle whispered still, a slip of a smile toying on his lips. “Afraid someone might come by, catch us?”

Bodie startled and looked at Doyle. Damn it. If the bastard was going to keep pushing like that, maybe he should do it, maybe he should bloody-well give Doyle what he thought he wanted. A small frisson ran up his spine. His cock gave a little throb as he reached out with one hand and grasped Doyle by the face, squeezing his cheeks, pushing him back against the tiled wall, bruising. Doyle just stared at him, eyes wide and wild, a satisfied smile creeping over his face.

“Is this,” and his other hand grabbed Doyle by the waistband, fumbling with the button, “is *this* what you want, you bastard?” The zip slid down with a satisfying rasp. Doyle’s hands instinctively went to push him away but Bodie swatted them off, almost growling. “Oh, no you don’t you little sod. You’ve been on me all night.” He pulled the front of the jeans open as wide as they would go, exposing a bright blue bulge of cotton. The scent of Doyle, carnal as the night, reeking of sex, of soap and musk and cum, assailed him, pushing him closer to that final, irreversible moment. “And now you’re going to do it. End of the line, Doyle.” With that he managed to tug the bit of stretchy cotton down. Doyle’s semi-hard cock rose, tingling, into the chill air. Bodie caught a finger underneath the elastic and pulled Doyle’s balls up and out, so that they were held aloft by the fabric underneath, the cock bobbing wildly.

A last bubble of contrariness, of spite, played in Doyle’s eyes. Now that the hook had pierced Bodie’s pale skin, he wanted to tug it, jiggle it, make sure it had sunk securely into the tender flesh and that Bodie wouldn’t squirm out of his grasp and go plunging back into the night. “Ah, now,” he spoke hesitantly. “Uncle George won’t be too pleased to drag us out of nick on charges of public indecency.”

Bodie simply stared at him.

“C’mon. Not here, Bodie.” Doyle’s whisper faded off as he looked squarely into the steely eyes in front of him.

Bodie gave a small smile, the kind he used interrogating villains, just before he got really *nasty*. “I don’t think so, Doyle,” he said without inflection. Doyle felt a momentary ripple of panic rise up within him. The bloody fool *would do* it. He would play it to the end. That was the trouble with Bodie. He didn’t know when enough was, always pushing things past their reasonable limit, Doyle thought, forgetting that he was the one who had been prodding at Bodie, seducing him with words and smells and touches until, dizzy and exhausted by the onslaught, Bodie was finally succumbing, angrily giving in to the whorish demands of his partner.

He tried again to brush Bodie’s hands away but Bodie lashed out suddenly and grabbed both of his wrists, bringing them around behind Doyle’s back, pinning him with his full weight in a suffocating bearhug against the grimy wall. “No, Doyle,” Bodie whispered into the mass of Doyle’s brown curls. “I don’t think you’re going anywhere just yet.” Doyle struggled, wriggling in Bodie’s tight grip, savoring his hardwon prize. His cock, still sticking out at an angle, rubbed against Bodie’s jacket, the supple leather abrading his length, making him quiver. Thrusting his hips slightly, he slid his cock along the warm fabric, the hairs of his balls catching and pulling on the zip. Bodie pulled back slightly. “Like that, do you, you little slut?” his breath whispered acridly across Doyle’s face. Doyle’s nostrils flared with the scent.

Pushing away just enough to free his hands from behind Doyle, Bodie leaned his weight on one forearm against the wall, his face inches in front of Doyle’s, their breaths mingling. His other hand grasped Doyle’s cock, the textures at once familiar and foreign. He didn’t like the sensation. He began, the movements the same as how he did himself even if the circumstances were different. He watched the jolt of surprise on Doyle’s face as he too understood the familiarity of it all, the intimacy.

It was the one way to shut him up, Bodie thought ironically. And he’d wondered, more than fleetingly, what it would be like to hold Doyle in his palm, quivering and fragile. Wondered how it would feel to see Doyle showing a glint of vulnerability. But it was a connection that he didn’t want

now, a sharing too personal, too intimate for him to be comfortable with. *Get out of here NOW!* screamed shrilly inside his head. His muscles twitched but his feet stayed rooted to the spot. Without thought of the mechanics, his fingers began an inexorable stroking, sliding down and up, excruciatingly slowly, seductively, tormenting the flesh in his hand. Doyle shuddered. Grasping the base of the sweating cock, Bodie's thumb stretched down, circling the flared rim of the head. Sliding his fist down the length, he let one finger caress the pink tip, dipping into the tiny opening to gather the tangy precum to spread upward and around the shaft.

Instead of struggling, Doyle let the feel of the calloused hand on his aching cock lull him into blindness, deafness, immobility, the ripples of intense pleasure the only thing he was conscious of. Involuntarily, he began a slow thrusting into Bodie's hand that rapidly quickened, his hips pumping, buttocks clenching. One hand reached up to grab Bodie's jacket, fingers tightly grasping the thick leather.

And as the wildness in Doyle ignited like dry kindling, the cock in Bodie's grasp grew full and rigid. Bodie's jaw tightened, his face hardening into a blank look of indifference. He was angry. He'd been maneuvered into this and resented it. He didn't want to be enjoying it, refused to allow himself to be a part of what was happening. Yet, a tickle of pleasure laced through him, charging his nerves. It was the feel of pliant flesh under his power, the look of stunned pleasure on his partner's face. Much as he'd prodded and needled him like an acupuncturist, Doyle hadn't expected this, hadn't expected Bodie'd actually *do it*. Bodie squeezed a little harder on the cock in his hand.

Doyle's eyes flickered and opened. His knees had begun to tremble and he couldn't seem to stop them. Pressed together, their two bodies entwined and angled back against the curving wall yet the layers of leather and wool blocked any real contact.

Bodie's eyes gleamed, the only bit of light in an otherwise hardened face. And then, without volition, he leaned in the few inches to Doyle's face and brushed his cheek lightly with soft lips. It was a feather touch and in his shock he wasn't sure he'd even done it. But Doyle's eyes opened wider with a puzzled look as he turned his face towards Bodie's. Time slowed and stretched as their eyes met, the

racing beat of Doyle's heart echoing in the hollow silence between them.

"No," Bodie said roughly, breaking the silence.

"No?" Doyle asked, surprised.

Bodie stared stoically at the wall. "No. It's not what you're thinking." His fingers continued to stroke Doyle's length, purposefully making concentration difficult.

"What am I thinking?" Doyle asked, probing.

"Whatever, it isn't."

There was something buried here, some tiny truth lurking just beneath the surface of Bodie's controlled features. Behind the indifference, underneath the cool veneer, Doyle could see a flicker of something. Something peculiar in Bodie's look, something familiar, something that told Doyle this wasn't a first for Bodie. *He's done this before*, Doyle thought, shocked and giddy with the covert knowledge. Now he understood why Bodie had been so bloody reticent, so fucking *coy* all this time. He'd been lying to Doyle; perhaps he'd been lying to himself. "You've been on this side of the street before, mate," Doyle stated firmly.

"You don't understand. You can't understand."

"Can't I?" Doyle asked. "What the *hell* do you think we're doing here?"

"No," Bodie said flatly, denying it all.

"Yes," was Doyle's only reply.

Bodie hesitated, faltered. He hadn't meant to do anything. It had happened without his awareness, without knowledge or thought. Such a small action and it had given away more than he had ever wanted Doyle to know. He was suddenly and acutely afraid. As his hand stilled, Doyle wrapped cool fingers around the fist that held his cock, urging it to continue. After a momentary pause the slow crescendo of sensation started again.

The strangeness of holding Doyle's cock ensheathed, his own hand encased by Doyle, moving, sliding, gripping, startled Bodie. The flood of understanding frightened him. Doyle had sensed the truth, some truth. And Bodie knew he wouldn't let go, knew this had been what Doyle had been after all this time, what he'd been badgering and wheedling for. And finally, Bodie, pushed to his limits, had cracked and opened wide letting Doyle see inside. A fatal mistake. An error of such immense, intangible proportions that he would have to tell Doyle the truth, share with him secrets so long hidden he had hoped them forgotten. But now, by this simple event, they would come

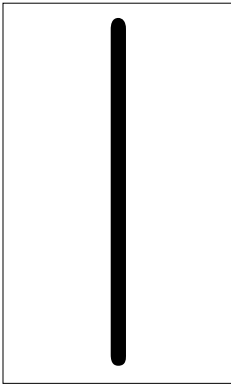
spuming up to wash his past in swirling eddies at his ankles. And they would bind him to Doyle in shared silence. He became numb.

The rhythm of his stroking hand had not let up as his thoughts had spun and collided in a tumult of chaos and recriminations. But Doyle's sudden stillness brought him back with a jolt. He'd stopped thrusting and his breathing was ragged and hard. He arched back shoving his cock fiercely into Bodie's grip, groaning out into the hollow silence. And then he was coming, the warm liquid oozing over Bodie's palm, trailing slowly, dripping over the back of his hand. Bodie stared at him in amazement. The fist that had gripped Bodie's jacket so tightly loosened and fell slack against Doyle's side. Bodie reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. Without a word he meticulously wiped his fingers clean.

Sightlessly, Doyle sagged against the wall and felt Bodie disappear from him. The warm bulk pulled away, the scent of his sweat and the sound of his breath dissipated as Doyle sank down on trembly legs. He wanted to reach out, call him back but was incapable. Instead, he lay sprawled, unable to move, to speak, to think, as Bodie's footsteps echoed away. Somehow Doyle's jacket had managed to mostly cover his pale and limp

penis. He closed his eyes. In the distance he heard the muted roar of a train hurtling down the line and a gust of chill air surged through the tunnel, cooling his sweat soaked face. He rested his head against the dirty tile of the wall. With effort, he fumbled with the woolen scarf, tugging one long end of it onto his lap, fingers tightly clutching the fabric.

He sat there for a long time, trying to reconcile the images racing through his mind, to grasp the understanding of Bodie's actions. In his haze he heard footsteps, the sound curling through the long corridors, bouncing and echoing. Faint voices swelled and fell. He knew he had to get up, to find Bodie, to demand explanations, to understand. He opened his eyes long enough to see a man round the corner, his raincoat open and billowing behind him. He closed his eyes again, not wanting this stranger to see inside him to discover the secret he was now holding. Instead, he stayed slumped and ragged looking, another drunk asleep in the safe embrace of the Underground. The steady footsteps wavered and slowed. Then he heard a distinctive clink and clatter as a pair of ten pence coins landed next to him. The man mumbled something unintelligible and walked on to catch the last train home.



Well, you're not going to believe the title are you? 'Sweetness and Light'? Hah! this is an M. Fae Glasgow story, a story where the Glaswegian lets rip enough venom to change creamy milk chocolate to bittersweet dark. Oh, our boys get together all right, but I guess the old saw is true: be careful what you wish for...

It wasn't often anyone caught Ray Doyle on the hop, and Bodie savoured it with all the joy, glee and exhilaration at his disposal. And when he ran out of that, he roped in Murphy, McCabe, Lucas, Stewart and half the rest of the squad to fill the shortfall. A red-letter day, definitely, one to be relished, and all it took to renew the triumph was seeing Doyle the next morning, standing sulkily in the train station, the destinations board clicking through its endless list of places of escape.

SWEETNESS AND LIGHT

M. FAE GLASGOW

"Well, well, well, what have we here, what have we here?" Bodie said, eyebrow raised and hands rubbing, going for Monty Python and coming closer to Fagin.

Doyle, however, was no Oliver Twist, and the Artful Dodger would've steered clear of so thunderous a 'mark', even if those pockets hadn't been too tight to be pickable. Having obviously given the entire situation some thought overnight, Doyle didn't deign to respond to Bodie's great good cheer, although he did give Bodie a look that would have killed a lesser man stone dead.

"Not talking, eh?" Bodie went on, clapping Doyle on the shoulder, grinning at his friend, making the most of Doyle's uncommon discomfort. "Course, you probably did enough talking yesterday to last you a month."

Doyle sniffed disdainfully, spoiling the entire effect by sounding as if he were coming down with

a cold and suffering from a complete lack of handkerchiefs.

Someone bumped into Bodie, distracting him for a second, so that when he turned back to the oh-so-tempting target of Doyle, said temptation had removed himself to the nearest kiosk, having discovered a hitherto unhinted at passion for perusing the Beano, the Dandy and the Fab 208. It was a sight to warm the cockles of Bodie's heart: Doyle, so embarrassed he was reduced to running away and hiding his nose in the children's comics and teen magazines.

A mangled announcement came over the Tannoy, and only years of practice and a quick look at the board told Bodie that their train was getting ready to depart. Grinning widely enough to make people give him the wide berth usually reserved for lunatics and French tourists, Bodie came up behind Doyle, rested his chin on the soft white fabric of

Doyle's good jacket, and unashamedly read over his partner's shoulder. Doyle ignored him utterly, flicking the magazine pages with a controlled, telling fury.

Subduing his grin to better the effect of his little joke, Bodie sneaked his arm round Doyle, sticking his hand between the pages of the magazine, a glossy two-page spread on hair and make-up tips now displayed. Knowing his partner well, Bodie marked the exact second Doyle would finally register what he'd been looking at. Waited, just long enough, then said: "Nah, think you're perfect the way you are, petal. Anyway, glitter eyeshadow is just *so* déclassé."

Lesser men might quail before the infamous Ray Doyle temper, but Bodie just dissolved into another grin, his blue eyes alight with devilment. "You—" Doyle said, then reconsidered the rest of his tirade in the face of an eavesdropping blue-rinsed OAP with a moustache Kitchener would have envied.

"I what?" Bodie enquired sweetly, stepping round Doyle to make a quick but substantial raid on the display of chocolate and crisps. "You were saying, Ray?"

"Nothing much," Doyle replied politely enough, turning his back to his partner, muttering under his breath: "Nothing that won't improve for the wait, anyway."

Bodie, never one to let well enough alone, pinched Doyle on the bum, moving forward quickly enough to evade any possible retaliation. "By the way," he called to the thundercloud still standing there like the second Flood waiting to happen, "that was our train they announced back then."

With Bodie still grinning and Doyle cursing under his breath, they each grabbed their hold-alls and took off for the right platform. Pelting through the station with scant regard for pedestrians, luggage and the infuriated whistle-blowing of assorted BR flunkeys, they made it with a whole three seconds to spare.

Doyle threw himself into the nearest empty seat, glaring as Bodie seated himself opposite with considerably more aplomb and certainly less haste. Bodie smiled. Doyle frowned. Bodie grinned. Doyle looked out the window, no doubt captivated by the passing glory of run-down smoke-begrimed buildings and broken-windowed factories. Bodie nudged Doyle with his foot. Doyle, without acknowledging that Bodie was even still on the face

of the planet, crossed his legs, folded his arms and turned sideways in his seat.

Well, it might not be often anyone caught Ray Doyle on the hop, but finding him out of sorts was a common enough thing, and encountering his black mood was a given—if Doyle were the butt of a joke. It just wasn't often Bodie found himself on the receiving end, not like this. Oh, yes, there was the usual minor Vesuvius, but then it was over and done with, and Doyle would grin at him, or make a sly dig at him, or even apologise. This, however, *this* was the sort of treatment usually reserved for the despised Cochrane in Files.

"Oi," Bodie said quietly, leaning forward to make sure that no-one else in the carriage could overhear, "you're as much fun as a wet weekend in Barnsley! What the hell's wrong with you?"

Well, anticipating an answer from a sulking Doyle had been a trifle optimistic, but going on past form, Bodie had every right to expect a pithy reply followed by reconciliation. This time, all he got was the cold shoulder and an even colder glower.

"Oh, get off it, you're never pissed off because I'm having a bit of a laugh, are you?"

"A bit of a laugh?" Doyle said, keeping his voice down to a civilised level only because he was all but hissing with fury. "A bit of a fucking laugh? You've been rubbing my nose right in it—and inviting every bastard we know to join in!"

"It's only a bit of a giggle—"

"Easy for you to say, you're the one doing the laughing. Well, mate, you'll be laughing out the other side of your face when I'm finished with you."

The joke, needless to say, had gone decidedly flat at this point, Doyle's pointed animosity enough to prick anyone's balloon. "C'mon, Ray," Bodie wheedled, giving Doyle a friendly tap on the knee, "it was only a joke that got a bit out of hand."

"That's a real talent for understatement you've got there."

"Yeh, but look at it from my point of view. I mean, Mr. Drug Squad-art-school-been-to-Paris-twice-seen-it-all Doyle—taken in by a pretty face and—"

"Shut up, Bodie."

Considering that Bodie was known to not listen even to George Cowley when the mood took him, God knows why Doyle thought telling Bodie to shut up would have the slightest effect.

“But you’ve got to admit—”

“Admit what? That I was fooled? Right, fine, I admit it. I would’ve admitted it to you, but did you have to broadcast it to everyone in a hundred-mile radius?”

“But it was funny!”

“Who for?”

Bodie started to laugh, remembering the day before, and some of the comments the other blokes had come up with—and who would ever have thought that Miss Pettifer had a mouth like a trooper and a sense of humour like a sewer?

Doyle went back to looking out the window, and if he hadn’t have been sitting down, he would have been standing on his dignity.

One look at that clenched expression wiped the last of Bodie’s smile from his face. Fair enough, Doyle was furious with him, but going by that expression—the poor bastard looked genuinely upset. Which could, of course, be just an act, reeling Bodie in to make a fool of him to even the score after yesterday. But if it weren’t...

“This’s really got to you, hasn’t it?” Bodie asked softly.

Doyle gave him a dirty look. “Oh, yeh,” he sneered far more nastily than a simple bad joke warranted, “you’re definitely the second Einstein. Does this mean I won’t have to do your expenses for you now?”

“Give it a rest, Ray. Come on, what the fuck is bothering you so much? It was only a joke, for Christ’s sake!”

“And it was such a good joke, wasn’t it?” Doyle snapped angrily. “A lot of fun, was it? A real barrel of laughs, eh, mate?”

The Einstein crack had hit harder than Bodie would ever let on. “Quite the Dame Margot, Doyle. Going to hit me with your handbag?”

Doyle erupted from his seat like a bullet from a muzzle, storming past Bodie in a rush of white jacket and whiter-lipped fury. Behind him, Bodie smiled deprecatingly at the few rude souls who had looked up at the sudden burst of movement, and then sat there, his expression closed, thinking about what the hell could be wrong with his partner—and what the hell they were going to do about it if Doyle didn’t get his brain in gear by the time they made it to Brighton.

If there had been any stops, Bodie would have been worried, but he knew Doyle was on the train

somewhere, probably fuming. Probably working himself up into a right tizz, or tying himself in knots trying to calm down: it unnerved Bodie that he couldn’t be sure which way Doyle would jump. Doyle, he had decided within an hour of meeting him, was a difficult, contrary little bastard. By the next day, he hadn’t changed that opinion, but had started adding the first of the more positive layers, so that seven months into the partnership, he had not only come to like Ray Doyle, he had actually convinced himself that he understood his bamstick of a partner.

And today just went to prove how wrong a man can be, he told himself without much comfort. Outside, the countryside was its usual lulling image of serene Southern English greenery, the sort of landscape that had been written about by everyone from Shakespeare to Christie, and Bodie watched it as he passed through it, the colours muted and gentle, the land rising and falling softly, harmonising with the rhythmic click and clack of the train, nostalgic as a lullaby.

Something landed in his lap, and he jolted awake, the words out of his mouth before his eyes were fully open. “I’m awake!”

“You’ll be telling me you’re a virgin next,” Doyle said, but without the audible acrimony of—Bodie checked his watch—half an hour before. “Wrap yourself around that—British Rail’s haute cuisine at its finest.”

“Been ages since breakfast, and all I had time for was a bit of toast. Thanks, mate.” He looked cautiously at Doyle, at the set of his mouth, at his eyes, at the backs of his hands, and there it all was, the tension apparent to anyone who knew what to look for. “How much do I owe you?”

Doyle shrugged it off. “You can cough up for dinner,” he said, taking another bite of his sandwich, chewing methodically, eyes staring out the window, although Bodie would bet a pound to a penny Doyle wasn’t paying any attention to the bucolic bliss they were passing.

“Listen, Ray,” he began, waiting until Doyle finally turned and looked at him. “Let’s just forget all about yesterday, all right? Just forget about it, get on with today...”

For a long moment, Doyle simply looked at him, and then his features became a mask. Fully hidden, he smiled brightly at Bodie, his voice so perky he could have found work as a children’s TV presenter. “Yeh, why not? Stupid to get worked up

over a stupid joke, in't it? Consider it forgotten."

Bodie didn't believe it for a second, and the last thing any sane person wanted was Ray Doyle holding a grudge against them. But now wasn't the time to ingratiate himself again, not considering Doyle's innate distrust of those currying favour. "That's great. So—" And what the hell could he talk about that wasn't either brown-nosing or tiptoeing through a mine-field? "Straightforward routine, d'you think, this Brighton job?"

"Boring, if you ask me," said Doyle, only the faintest shadow of an off-note marring his mundane tone. "Just the standard threat against the standard bunch of politicians—get them every year, and nothing ever comes of it."

"Suppose so. Still, some of the nasties were very specific, not just the usual run of the mill promise to blow up the Tory Party Conference."

"You think so?"

"Yeh, bound to be, isn't it? I mean, apart from dirty weekends, name one exciting thing ever to happen in Brighton?"

"See your point," Doyle replied, neatly wadding his sandwich wrappers. Still pleasant, he pulled a can of lager out of his jacket pocket, offered it to Bodie. "Fancy one?"

Christ, but this felt weird. Perfectly normal conversation with Doyle, near idle chat about a perfectly routine job, one they could do in their sleep, and it was about as natural as *The Archers*. It was so predictable, Doyle's every comment sounding scripted, himself answering like a stage prompter. It was so...polite. That was what was wrong with all this. Too polite, too sedate, all the personality and fire taken out of it. More carefully, Bodie took a good look at Doyle and finally noticed some of the signs of strain, small tell-tales that must have been there for weeks, creeping up slowly, otherwise Bodie would have noticed them right off.

Drinking the beer Doyle had not only paid for but actually fetched as well, Bodie sat back, to watch and to think. And unnervingly, Doyle didn't seem to even notice.

The B&B Betty had booked them into wasn't half bad, with a view of the sea—as long as they opened the window, used grappling hooks, got up to the eaves and then leaned round the corner. Still, at least the windows didn't all look into blank walls or dustbins.

"Christ, these beds are fucking pathetic!" Bodie announced, still bouncing on the single bed he'd thrown himself onto.

"Hmm?" Doyle asked absently, drawing aside the net curtain to look into next door's garden. "What'd you say?"

"The beds. They're pathetic. Too soft."

"Oh. Well, you've slept in worse, haven't you?"

That wasn't the point: moaning about the accommodations was an ingrained habit and a source of some good laughs. And anyway, everyone in CI5 knew that complaining about the facilities was in the small print. But there was Doyle, staring out the window like bloody Ophelia, and if he kept that up, then this was going to be the most boring assignment ever.

"Right," Bodie announced briskly, "Time to let the Cow know his favourite calves are here."

He was halfway out the door before it registered that Doyle hadn't budged an inch. "Doyle! Come on, it's time to report in."

"Oh, yeh. Coming."

Bodie looked at him askance, not liking the way all the life seemed to have gone out of his partner. If it came to shooting... Bodie shook that thought off: they'd sort that out later, after they'd seen Cowley. And as soon as that was out of the way, Doyle had better either buck up or come up with some bloody good excuses.

Three hours later, and more windows, doors, access chutes and security checks than anyone would ever want to count, Cowley was finally satisfied—for the time being, anyway. With a grumbled 'on your way', he set them loose for the evening.

"So where d'you fancy going now then?" Bodie asked as they walked down the narrow street.

Doyle shrugged, and for a second, Bodie's concerns of the afternoon came crowding back in, but then Doyle was grinning like his usual self, nudging Bodie, his expression worthy of the dirty old raincoat brigade. "There's this disco Murphy was telling me about this afternoon," Doyle was saying, "and he swears every single bird that goes there is a nympho."

"Now *that*, my old son," Bodie said, "sounds like my idea of heaven. Did Murph say where this Eden was?"

"Down at the shorefront. You know, the other side of the road from the Promenade, a couple of streets up from the Pier, just down from that

caterer Cowley sent us to check.”

“Which means that we turn—” Bodie stopped for a minute, checking his bearings, “right, down here.”

“I suppose you want something to eat before we go in there, don’t you?”

“I’m a growing lad,” Bodie replied with some pathos, steering Doyle towards a pub that had a decent menu board outside. Decent, that is, if a man’s idea of superb food is steak and kidney pie, chips and mushy peas. Doyle, of course, turned his nose up at the culinary delights on display on the chalk board. Of course, such lofty ideals soon paled to insignificance when confronted with a plate piled high with steaming hot food. A stomach that thinks its throat has been cut will defeat the whimpering worries of clogging arteries any day of the week.

Replete, they finally set off for the disco of such instant CI5 legend, and though neither of them would admit it of course, with such pleasant weather, it was actually nice to walk for once.

“Wish we had the car,” Bodie said, taking a deep breath of sea air, stopping for a minute to admire the sea view.

“Yeh,” Doyle agreed without a second’s hesitation, half his mind preoccupied with the amount of skill it would take to paint something like this. “Bloody stupid making us take the train down here.”

“Bet that bunch of layabouts down the garage won’t even look at the motors, never mind give them a complete overhaul.”

“Yeh,” Doyle agreed absently, his attention drifting, and some of Bodie’s unease came back again. But then Doyle shivered, and turned to face Bodie, giving him a blinding grin. “Let’s go pull a pair of birds.”

“Raymond, I’m shocked, absolutely shocked by such coarseness coming from you.”

“So what’d you expect then? Me suggestin’ we visit the nearest philately club?”

“All right, so maybe I wouldn’t go that far...”

The disco was right in front of them now, and Doyle’s expression was positively sardonic as he turned towards Bodie. “Then we’ll leave it at pulling a couple of birds in the hope of a good shag. Okay?”

Now that was the old Ray Doyle of infamous and libidinous reputation, and with the prospect of several days and nights guarding a tribe of Tories,

Bodie was only too eager to put aside any and all worries this last night of freedom. All but shoving Doyle through the swing door, he gave him a swift grope that raised more than eyebrows. “Oooh, Raymond,” he fluted, trying out his impersonation of the poofter on that new comedy programme he liked, “you *are* a naughty boy, aren’t you?”

Their big night on the town turned out to be an unmitigated disaster. Far from pulling a couple of birds, the only thing Raymond Doyle seemed interested in pulling was yet another pint. Or another g&t, or vodka and orange—he’d even agreed to Bodie’s joking offer of a Babycham! Enough to make anyone worry about another bloke, but for Doyle, with his pretensions to a palate that could discern good wine and better champagne—well, the only thing that could possibly be more worrisome than that would be George Cowley himself adding lemonade to a dram.

“When did you get plastered, eh?” Bodie asked ruefully, not really expecting an answer. He’d never seen Doyle quite like this before, Doyle one for getting drunk slowly, measurably, usually stopping long before he was seriously impaired. But tonight—tonight, Ray had gone from pleasantly tipsy to absolutely blotto, apparently in the ten minutes it had taken Bodie to find the loo and escape the aspirations of a dirty old man.

So much for his chances of sex tonight, Bodie thought to himself, not so much resigned as outflanked by Doyle’s bizarre behaviour. Oh, not the getting drunk, although that was ill-considered to say the least, given their duties of the next day, and considering precisely who would be issuing their orders. It was just that Doyle was back to that strange frame of mind from earlier, distanced almost, leaving Bodie feeling as if Doyle really weren’t there.

“C’mon, Ray,” Bodie said, trying to finagle his partner out of his chair. “Time to get you home.”

“Be a long drive,” Doyle announced. “’Cept you’ve forgotten we don’t have a car—not a single sausage. That’s bad, Bodie, very bad,” he went on, still not quite so loudly that any of the club-goers would hear him, but that was thanks only to the blaring music. “Cowley wouldn’t be pleased at you forgetting about leaving your car.” A pause, while Doyle stared up owlishly at Bodie. “Where *did* you leave your car?”

"It's in London, Ray, just like yours, and we meant to leave them there. Now come on, mate, up you get..." Easier to stand water on end than to get Doyle to his feet. "Come *on*, Doyle, get up!"

"Don't want to. 'S nice here." He frowned, thinking. "Bit noisy, mind you, but it's nice."

"Yes, but it's time for all good boys to be in bed," Bodie replied, managing this time to get Doyle out of the chair and propped, after a fashion and after several attempts, against the wall while Bodie fished around looking for the jacket that Doyle had managed to lose.

"Then I'm going to stay up forever and ever," Doyle declared.

"Yeh, yeh, Peter Pan, you, me and the rest of the Lost Boys," Bodie told him, humouring him, which was the only way for Bodie to keep a head on his own shoulders when Doyle was one over the eight: stropo didn't even begin to describe a drunk Doyle in full flight.

"I am goin' to stay up f'rever an' ever," Doyle repeated, leaning heavily against Bodie, one leg braced, the other made, apparently, of rubber, the combination making it exceedingly difficult for Bodie to get himself, Ray and those two conflicting legs out the door.

"Whatever you say, Ray," Bodie agreed, not really listening, concentrating on getting Doyle out that door and headed up the street.

"Never never never never going to go to bed."

"Right, fine, yeh," Bodie muttered, steering Doyle round a corner and wishing he could trim Doyle's sails, or at least minimise the listing to one side. Or contain the listing to *just* one side.

"Said it yourself, Bodie, my old pal." Doyle came to an abrupt and swaying halt, almost over-balancing, Bodie struggling to keep the too-fluid man from tipping them both over into the gutter. "Only good boys go to bed, and I'm not good." A moment of deep thought, the words beginning now to really slur, such helpful warning signs coming too late to be any use at all. "Not a boy either. Not a man." He paused then, his body doing a slow circle, his mind obviously engaging in the same, slow drunkenness. "So if I'm not a boy an' I'm not good..." Eyes almost shut, barely able to focus, words more and more disorganised. "Does that make me a bad woman?"

"It makes you fucking Peter Pan," Bodie said, aggrievedly shoving Doyle back up the street towards their B&B.

"Oh, no," Doyle said with as much firmness as his liquid brain could muster. "Oh, not me, I'm not fucking Peter Pan. He's too young." Doyle stopped again, Bodie only just managing to catch him. "But if what's-'is-face made 'im up years an' years ago, then he's too old. But he's still a boy cos he never grows up. So he *is* too young. I think..."

Well occupied with just keeping Doyle steered in the right direction, Bodie was only just beginning to filter through the drunken nonsense enough to wonder what the hell Doyle was going on about.

Doyle was nearly cross-eyed with the effort. "I think..."

"Yeh, yeh, the poor man's Socrates," Bodie said, tempted to throw Doyle over his shoulder and carry him back.

"I'm going to be sick," Doyle announced loudly.

"Oh, no, you're not," Bodie replied, one hand on Doyle's scruff, the other in the small of his back, hurrying him along the street.

"I am," Doyle said ponderously. "I'm going to be sick..."

"Oh, no, you're not," Bodie repeated, sounding as fervent as a monk at prayer. "No, Ray, you're not. Oh, god, you are..."

Not a pretty sight, and not a pleasant experience, but Bodie consoled himself that it could be worse. He'd come that close to tossing Doyle over his shoulder to carry him up the road: it didn't even bear thinking about.

It was easier to shove him where they needed to go, now that Doyle was just a groaning mass of misery. Desperately trying to be quiet, Bodie found the 'hidden' outdoor key and let them both into the B&B, edging Doyle slowly upwards, one stair at a time. A few stumbles, and that unfortunate moment when Doyle decided this whole thing was incredibly funny, his filthy laughter erupting all like a music-hall joke and Bodie gave up all hope of getting Doyle into their room undetected. He could hear a door opening downstairs, the sound from a television set filtering up the stairs.

"Hurry up, Ray," he hissed, egging Doyle on, all but pushing him up the stairs, trying to get them out of sight before the owners could catch up with them.

Not far enough away for Bodie's peace of mind, a floorboard creaked, and a question sallied forth.

"Who is it?"

"Oh, terrific," Bodie whispered, clamping a hand over Doyle's mouth in case Ray should

decide to answer the man of the house.

"I said, who's there?"

"No he didn't," Doyle hissed, prising Bodie's fingers away from his mouth. "He said who is it, not who's there, why—"

Bodie covered Doyle's mouth again, which didn't exactly help him in his attempts to get the door open without dropping either Doyle or Doyle's jacket, push Doyle inside, stop Doyle from landing on his face and taking Bodie with him—and what's more, accomplish all this without the owner catching them. Funny lot, these B&B people—for some reason, not too many of them took kindly to drunken young men careening up their newly re-carpeted stairs. Might have something to do with what Doyle had the decency to do in the street, he conceded, dumping Doyle on one of the beds, watching in alarm as Doyle turned a rather delicate shade and went a bit green around the gills.

"You're not going to be sick again," Bodie said, more a command than a question.

"Oh, god, don't say things like that," Doyle mumbled, rolling over to bury his face in the bedspread, rolling right back over as the faint hint of disinfectant assaulted him. "God, I'm drunk..."

"You noticed! Congratulations, mate."

It took a few moments, but the question finally came.

"What are you doing, Bodie?"

"What does it look like?"

"Dunno. Can't see that far, and I don't think I want to lift my head."

"You just lie there then, mate, and let me put you to bed. Should just leave you to sleep it off in your own muck though, shouldn't I?" Bodie muttered, peeling Doyle's shoes and socks off him. Normally, that's exactly what he'd do, but Doyle... If anyone had asked him, he'd've said it was because he owed Doyle. At least, that's what he would have said for the record. The truth, though? Definitely owed Doyle a lot, but it was more than just watching each other's backs on the job, wasn't it?

"C'mon, Ray," Bodie said, wry amusement putting paid to what would have been justifiable annoyance. "Don't just lie there doing your Sleeping Beauty, give us a hand."

Slowly, as regal as the Royal Wave, Doyle raised his right hand. With the first two fingers stiffly extended.

"And up yours an' all, mate," Bodie replied, finally getting Doyle's zip undone.

"But you haven't been, have you?"

Typical bloody Doyle, Bodie thought, anger an abrupt sunburst through him. Take a perfectly simple situation, a nice friendly mutual wank, and what does Doyle do? Analyse it to fucking death, make it Sodom, Gomorrah and Babylon all rolled into one. Being rougher than he ought, he pulled Doyle's jeans off him, left the shirt in place, and shoved him out of the way enough to pull the bedspread up over him. "Right," he said, dumping the wastepaper basket by Doyle's bedside, "you're on your own now. If you have to spew your guts up, do it in that. And don't forget the loo's down the corridor, so don't you go peeing in the wardrobe."

"Bodie?"

Even angry, Bodie couldn't ignore that tone of voice. "What?"

"What're you doing?"

"I am going out. To do what we were going to do in the first place before you got plastered. Any objections?"

Doyle closed his eyes, brought his arm up to cover them, and Bodie almost reconsidered. Almost.

"Course not," Doyle said quietly. "Thanks for seeing me back in one piece."

"Don't mention it," Bodie said, switching the light out and opening the door.

"No fear of that," Doyle replied wearily, his form no more than a blur in the dark.

"Right, well, then," Bodie said, fumbling for words, uncomfortably aware that this was about more than Doyle being drunk and Bodie helping him. "I'll be off. I'll see you later. If I get lucky..."

"Then if we're *both* lucky, I won't see you till the morning."

And that was one minefield Bodie didn't want to touch.

Late morning, coming across each other in the room set aside for the plebs to have their meals and snacks, it was as if nothing had ever happened, as if nothing had ever been said—as if nothing had ever been left unsaid.

Doyle lowered his sunglasses for a second, surveyed the pallid Bodie and grinned at him. "See you had a good night last night then."

"Good? God, let me tell you about good. You

should've seen her, Doyle—"

"Why should he be the only one to see her? Go on, Bodie," Murphy parked himself on the arm of the sofa, took a hefty drink from McCabe's coffee that he'd snagged on the way past. "Tell us all about her."

"Gorgeous," Bodie said, hands doing the traditional hourglass in the air. "Blonde—"

"Natural or from a bottle?"

"Definitely a natural. Fair skin, long hair, the biggest tits I've seen in months and her legs—heaven."

"Spread 'em for you, did she?" Doyle asked, the steam from his tea misting his dark glasses.

"Only when she was on her back. The rest of the time..." he trailed off in an artistry of glorious memory.

"The rest of the time," Murphy put in, "she was too busy collecting her money."

"I'll have you know she was a nice girl!"

"Lots of tarts are nice girls, aren't they?"

McCabe said, reclaiming his mug from Murphy. "I mean, look at Murphy's mum!"

Of course, there had to be a good-natured scuffle over that, Murphy's sainted mother notorious for her reaction to her good Catholic son going into CI5.

And through it all, Bodie was acutely aware that Doyle had retreated to lean against the wall, just standing there drinking his tea, watching the shenanigans. Standing there as if he were at a bus-stop, watching life pass him by.

Trying to be discreet about it—everyone knew Cowley had eyes in the back of his head—Bodie gave in to an enormous yawn. Bad enough that this was just a routine baby-sitting job, albeit for an entire crèche of pampered politicians, but this having to hang around listening to the after-dinner speeches was positively criminal. What was worse, he couldn't even catch Doyle's eye. He looked over at his partner again, hoping Doyle would look back, the pair of them indulging in one of those schoolboyesque games of theirs. Chance would be a fine thing. Doyle was standing there with all the personality of an American Secret Service man, just as grim and twice as boring. But at least if his attention wasn't on Bodie, it was on his job, if the other man's tension was anything to go by. Between keeping his eyes peeled for the job, Bodie spent a long time watching his partner, looking at

him anew, appreciating him in a way he didn't normally allow himself. Approved of Doyle's contained, understated power, of the way he moved, easy grace always ready to turn into deadly force. Admired the skill that gave Doyle's close observations and readiness the illusion of being nothing more than a slightly bored man looking for something interesting. Of course, Doyle looked better in his tatty old jeans and that godawful T-shirt of his than he did tonight, all done up like a dog's dinner, but even so, he did look good—would look a lot better if he'd stop fidgeting with his collar. And his tie. And not to mention the cummerbund. Guttersnipe through and through, Bodie decided rather fondly, for all the polish he'd acquired over the years. What they used to be called the salt of the earth, not that Doyle could ever be as bland as salt. Doyle was more exotic spices and pepper.

It was time for another full circuit of the grand dining room, and Bodie paced round the room, attention on all the myriad details of security, common sense wishing for better lighting, a small part of him approving of the flattering glow of lamps.

Returning to his original post, one last survey marking all of his colleagues positioned perfectly, and then there was nothing much to do but stand there, the perfect shop dummy, and watch other people eat. Boring. Dead boring. Still, it was amusing to wonder which one of them was the next Profumo waiting to happen—or, hearing Ted Heath's inimitable laughter rising over the polite chink of crystal, wonder who the next Jeremy Thorpe would be. He made a face at his own thought: Ted Heath, in bed with a bloke—Ted Heath, in bed with anyone. Revolting.

He couldn't have stopped himself if he'd tried: he looked over at Doyle, who sometimes was ugly but who was never revolting. At least, Bodie couldn't think of anything Doyle could do that would disgust him. Case in point: just think about that night after the Smithfield op.

Surrounded by politicians, policemen, CI5 and Cowley, thinking about Doyle that night was undoubtedly the stupidest of ideas, but once the image was there, Bodie couldn't get it out of his head. That had been some night, high on the adrenalin of almost getting their heads blown off, Bodie's arm still painful, burning, a poisoned feeling where the bullet had grazed him, the

bandage feeling too tight, constricting his bicep every time he moved. And Doyle, staring at him like that, eyes big as saucers, genuinely shaken, so close that night, each of them so close to dying, but worse yet, each of them so close to being the one left alive without the other.

When the hell had it become that?

Uncomfortable with his thoughts, Bodie shifted, getting a warning glare from Cowley, and finally, Doyle's attention. For a moment, Doyle stared at him, eyes full of an intensity Bodie couldn't name, and then that was gone, tucked neatly behind the bland indifference that was slowly driving Bodie right round the twist. Especially since he was pretty sure what was getting at Doyle. As soon as this was over, Bodie decided, as soon as they got home, that's when they'd sort it out.

And in the meantime, he had a job to get done.

This time, they made the train with fifteen minutes to spare, settling themselves into good seats—pointing out the window and cackling wickedly as McCabe, Lucas, Murphy and Anson all came tearing up, out of breath and cursing wildly.

"Tut, tut," Bodie said affably as the sweating, swearing crew collapsed into the same carriage and tried to stuff sundry hold-alls and clanking carrier bags overhead, "what would Father say?"

"If you mean about nearly missing the train, he'd just tell us to be quicker in our debriefings. Or get in there before you pair did."

"And if he was asking about the strange and uncanny noises coming from a certain carrier bag," McCabe took over from where Lucas left off, "he'd just grab a tumbler and say his is a big one."

"A big one? Him?" Murphy started, the conversation degenerating into a discussion of tumblers and other acrobats, and the sizes of various people's members.

Doyle laughed in all the right places, of course, but let pass some really golden opportunities—especially considering he was the only man who'd ever seen up Cowley's kilt. Beside him, Bodie listened to what Doyle didn't say, and noticed how much Doyle didn't drink, adding it all up and getting an answer he didn't like one bit. Definitely would have to sort the little sod out as soon as they got themselves home.

With much verbosity and hilarity, it was eventually decided that they should all pour themselves

into the one taxi and go to HQ together, which would save getting up that half hour earlier in the morning to pick up the various cars. Of course, the mechanics, on the premise that while the cat's away the mice will play (according to the agents) or on the grounds that a bunch of maniacs were driving these cars into the ground (according to the mechanics amidst a litter of ruined gear boxes and dented exhaust pipes), hadn't quite finished with some of the cars. A good excuse, Bodie decided, climbing the stairs to Doyle's flat, catching Ray's blue launderette bag before it slipped out of his hand and took the Chinese take-away with it, because this way, it was easy enough to get Doyle to invite Bodie to come home with him, and then they'd have to get this stupid attitude of Doyle's sorted out.

"D'you want the last pineapple fritter?" Bodie asked solicitously, secure in the knowledge that Doyle thought such delicacies to be utterly vile.

"Oh, no, Bodie, you have it, do," Doyle replied, leaning back with his eyes closed, feet propped comfortably on the coffee table.

"You can finish the prawns if you want."

Doyle smiled slightly, his hand going to the belt of his jeans. "If I have one more mouthful, I'll burst."

"Messy little bugger, aren't you?"

Suddenly defensive, arms crossing across his belly, legs crossed at the ankle, a frown darkening his expression. "Yeh, well you don't think I meant to be sick in the street, did you."

No time like the present, or so they said. Bodie leaned back himself until he was shoulder to shoulder with Ray. "Oh, no, Doyle, I thought it was a life-long ambition of yours. Anyway, it's a bit of an overreaction, isn't it?"

"Just don't like making a fool of myself, that's all."

"You mean like dear old Josephine?"

Well, Bodie had never made any claims to tact, which is just as well, otherwise he'd be sued under the Trades' Description Act. Doyle glowered at him, not an auspicious sight.

"Come on, Ray, it was funny."

"Was it?"

"You could freeze the river over with that tone of voice. Look, so it was a bit embarrassing, but you just stop and think about what you'd've said if it'd been Murphy in your shoes. And if it'd been Cochrane, you'd've drawn blood!"

"And what's that got to do with it?"

“Oh, be fair, Ray!”

For a few moments, the only response was one white-trained foot tapping against the other, Doyle’s tension palpable. “Right, fine, okay. I overreacted, you’re right, I’d’ve done the same to Murph or Cochrane, end of subject and can we forget it now please?”

Suspicious as hell, Bodie turned himself sideways, face on now to Doyle’s mutinous profile. It would be easier, he supposed, to let it lie, but still... For all that he was sure Doyle’s current problem was puritanical pratings about that one innocent mutual wank, there was something else going on here: obnoxious though Doyle often was, he was as fair as a summer’s day in Greece, and that sense of humour of his was so twisted, Bodie had every right to expect Doyle to still be laughing over the whole stupid situation. Which reminded him, now that he stopped to think about it: Doyle *had* laughed, like a half-stopped drain, first off. It was only later on he’d gone peculiar over the whole thing. Interesting, definitely interesting, and deciphering Doyle was rapidly turning into Bodie’s biggest hobby. After darts, of course, he told himself reassuringly—and behind pulling birds, and moto-cross.

Comfortable silences had quickly become the norm for them, but this harked back to their earliest days, to the prickliness that had no friendship to buffer it. Any second now, and Doyle was going to bolt from the sofa and tell Bodie to bugger off home, which would put paid to getting to the bottom of this.

“You never shared a wank with a bloke before then?” Bodie said, seemingly unconcerned, fingers crossed that Doyle would be so taken aback he’d forget to storm out of here on his high horse.

“You what?”

“Not deaf, blind.”

“Bodie, what the *fuck* are you going on about?”

“Wanking, it’s supposed to knock you blind, not deaf. And you weren’t hearing what I’d said—”

“No, I wasn’t understanding what you’d said, and this is no time for any of your stupid fucking jokes, Bodie.”

Bodie leaned over, his face only an inch or two away from Doyle’s, so close he could count individual eyelashes, could see every fleck of colour in the moody eyes. “If you don’t want to keep this light, then we won’t. It’s about that wank you and me shared, three weeks ago, isn’t it?”

Doyle withdrew completely, although physi-

cally, he didn’t back down an inch. “I thought you said nothing happened.”

“I said it didn’t matter. I’m not the one pretending it never happened.”

“And you think I am?”

The sudden humour in Doyle’s eyes was unnerving, pulling the rug out from under Bodie’s feet. “Isn’t it?”

“You really think you know me, don’t you—really think you’ve got this all worked out, bet you even think you’ve dotted all the i’s and crossed all the t’s.”

“Two minutes ago, and I’d’ve agreed with you. If it’s *not* the wank—”

“Isn’t it?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, don’t start tying us up in knots. Is it or isn’t it all about that time we lent each other a hand?”

“You tell me, you’re the one who’s got it all worked out.”

“And I’ve just admitted that no I haven’t, so is or isn’t it all about that night?”

“Nothing’s ever *all* about anything, is it? Not really.”

“Fucking hell, I need a drink!” In the end, it was Bodie bolting from the sofa, pouring himself, and on reflection, Doyle as well, a stiff measure. He stood across from Doyle, the coffee table and its Chinese débris between them. He stood there for a while, just drinking, staring at Doyle, trying to pin together all the bits and pieces Doyle had been saying. And the things Doyle hadn’t been saying, Ray’s silences and evasions often more revealing than his so-called true confessions.

“Okay, let’s give it another go. Were you upset about what we did that night?”

“Depends on what you mean by upset, doesn’t it?” Doyle replied coolly, terribly self-contained, so controlled Bodie couldn’t read him at all.

“Don’t make this any harder than it already is.”

Doyle grinned at that, an unpleasant, unhappy grin. “That’s not what you said that night, is it?”

“So you *are* bothered—”

“Did I say that?”

“I’m not fucking sure! Christ, Doyle,” Bodie complained, throwing himself down on the sofa beside his partner, “worse than blood out of a bloody stone.”

“What the hell do you expect?”

“How about a bit of co-operation here, eh? It’s you we’re trying to help.”

“Help? Me? And here was me thinking it was all just prurient curiosity on your part.”

“Get off it, Ray, you’ve got problems and it’s fucking obvious. And before you start, if we don’t get them sorted out between us, it’ll be in to Ross for you, and then where will we be? And don’t say ‘in Dr. Ross’ office’, you know perfectly well what I mean.”

Doyle took a contemplative sip of his whisky, savouring it, perhaps needing its warmth. “D’you think the Cow would fire us if he found out?”

“Dunno. Compared to some of the things blokes in the squad’ve done, I don’t know if shagging your mate is something he’d give a toss over.”

“Yeh, but we didn’t actually fuck—”

Doyle should watch it, Bodie thought almost dispassionately, breaking off like that gives too much away, be a real problem in interrogations. Calmly taking another drink, he ticked off examples in his mind: Doyle’s reaction to his own simple ‘up yours’, the off-comments about not mentioning it, the times he’d completely changed the subject. Obvious, really, he told himself, absently wishing for the cigarettes he’d had to give up when he joined CI5, fingers slowly tearing a carton lid into neat strips instead.

“So we didn’t fuck,” he finally said, very quietly, not sounding half as off-hand as he’d wanted to. “Is that what you wanted?”

“What—us fucking or us not fucking?”

Bodie shrugged, the words getting lost inside the maze of his own inchoate confusion.

“I don’t know.”

Bodie glanced at him, went back to fiddling with the soggy white cardboard. “How about an educated guess then?”

There was no explosion of movement from beside him, just the soft sound of emotion imploding. “Yes,” Doyle said, simply, the answer an unbelievable complexity in their lives. “Yeh, I think I wanted us to actually go the whole road and fuck.”

“So what do you want to do about?” Still very quiet, impossible to tell if this was passive acceptance of friendship’s needs, or patient hunger of a stoat waiting for its next kill.

“What’m I supposed to say to that, eh, Bodie? Take me, I’m yours?”

“But you are, aren’t you?”

There was movement then, Doyle stuttering to his feet, all his grace fled. Pacing the room, one hand on the back of his neck, rubbing, massaging

defiant tension. To the wall, to the other wall, then to the window, each footstep a measure of his freedom, a mark of his captivity.

“That joke you lot were all having such a rare time with,” he finally said, fingers drawing aimlessly interweaving circles in the dustiness of the windows, “gave you a good laugh, didn’t it?”

Bodie wasn’t fool enough to think the joke was the issue. All his own feelings on hold, he sat there and waited, watchful.

“Oh, yeh, big joke, Ray Doyle, taken in by a bloke in drag. I heard all the jokes, you know, every last one of them. Even laughed at one or two. But not one of them was close to the mark.”

Bodie knew what was coming, waited for it, watched it settle down between them.

“Thing is, I knew that wasn’t a bird I was chatting up. I sussed him right from the start.”

“So you knew what you were getting into.”

“Hadn’t the faintest idea,” going on, hurriedly, at Bodie’s half-suppressed disbelief, “well, at least I knew it was a bloke. And I would’ve done it, Bodie, I’d’ve fucked him—might even’ve let him fuck me. That was some of it.” A stare, bright and cutting. “But some of it was just to see what you’d do.”

“Yeh, I realised that. A bit late, but you know what they say.”

For a moment, they just looked at each other, then looked away, neither too sure of what needed to be said next.

“So you really did want to have sex with him?” Bodie asked, and only hearing himself speak the question made him realise just how much he needed to know the answer to that.

A shrug, eloquent, dismissive, depressed. “If I take away your reaction, knowing you were probably going to show up in the pub before he could take me home with him, and it boils down just to the sex—fuck it, Bodie, I don’t even know that, not for dead certain. I thought I wanted to fuck him—thought I *should*.”

“Eh? How the hell could you think you *should* have sex with a bloody fairy queen?” Another pixel of the picture, the answer absurdly simple. “Because you and me’d just had that wank, you wanted more—maybe, none too sure—and if you wanted to have sex with blokes, then who more obvious than a bloke who looks sort of like a woman, that bloody drag queen, right?”

“Yeh. Except I wasn’t too sure I wanted sex with blokes.” Another of those pauses, and then Doyle

continued, voice very deceptive in its casualness. “The only thing I was really sure of was that I wanted to do it with you again.”

If he had an ounce of common sense, Bodie knew he’d get up and walk out now, put this daft conversation down to too much drink and leave it at that. Instead, he levered himself off the couch and went over to stand behind Doyle. He was close enough to see the stitching on Doyle’s T-shirt, the slight bump of the label under thin cotton, the way the hair on his nape swept upwards to disappear into the tumble of curls. That night, the one he’d tried to think about in only the vaguest of terms, he’d wanted to kiss Doyle, just there, in the very slight hollow that cradled his spine between the muscles of his shoulders, the one vulnerability amidst all that toughness.

“It was only a wank,” he said, sounding as if he were keeping things in proportion, feeling like a salmon swimming against the tide. “You know, the sort of thing tons of blokes do with their mates. It’s not as if it meant anything, is it?”

Doyle turned then, to look at him, his expression harsh. “You tell me,” Doyle said, voice tight, “you’re the expert.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Doyle shrugged again, and the incipient argument was tossed aside. “Not much. I suppose you’re right, really. I mean, look at men in prison. Half of them end up doing a lot more than we did. Then there’s the Navy.”

“Merchant and Royal,” Bodie supplied helpfully, more comfortable with the direction this was going now. “And the Army.”

“But not the Air Force.”

“Don’t you believe it, Raymond my old son,” Bodie sounded more like his usual irreverent self. “Right bunch of fly boys.”

“And I suppose the SAS, too, what with all their talk about partners an’ all.”

Bodie winced, eyes shutting for a second. “Oh, I walked right into that, didn’t I?”

“With your eyes wide open.”

“Not half as wide open as my big mouth. All right, all right, you’re not the first fella I’ve shared a wank with—does that keep your face straight?”

A faint echo of the customary filthy chuckle. “If it does, it’ll be the only thing straight round here.”

“Oh, get off it, Doyle, lending a mate a hand doesn’t make you queer.”

“So it doesn’t, does it?”

Those green eyes were disconcerting, digging holes through all Bodie’s defences. “No it does not.” There, firm, to the point, succinctly masculine. That should put an end to it.

“Well, if feeling another bloke’s prick doesn’t make us queer, and if giving another man a hand job doesn’t make us queer, and if lying there all but cuddling afterwards doesn’t make us queer—”

Bodie did not want to hear this. Did not, did not—

“Then does it make *me* queer because I want to do it again—with you? And if all that doesn’t make me queer, Bodie, what does wanting to kiss you make me, eh?”

“It makes you naturally affectionate?” Bodie said lightly, playing for time, trying desperately to escape—something he’d rather not even risk naming.

“It makes me—” Doyle turned away again, to the pattern he’d drawn on the mucky windowpane. “It makes me fucking confused as hell, Bodie.”

“Ray—”

“It’s all right, mate,” fingers enlarging the interlocking device of circles and crosses. “If I can’t sort it out in my own head, why should you sort it out for me?”

“It’s just it being new to you, that’s all.”

“Yeh, you’re probably right. First time for everything and all that.” Self-deprecating laugh, scraping uneasily along Bodie’s spine. “Trust me to turn it into the fall of Western Civilisation As We Know It.”

“Don’t worry about it, Ray, seriously. It’s just...”

“Nothing much,” Doyle supplied, shrugging again. “Well, thanks for dinner. I’ll see you in the morning then.”

So all appearances to the contrary, Doyle actually had been paying attention to all of Cowley’s briefings. And for once in his life, Doyle was letting someone off the hook. Bodie gathered himself, hoping to hell the fact that he was running away didn’t actually show. “Dismissing me, are you then, angelfish?”

“I should be so lucky,” was all Ray Doyle said, none-too-subtly herding the routed Bodie out the door.

Bodie was half-way home before it hit him what Doyle meant.

And it scared the hell out of him.

Life trundling along as usual, routine work,

routine shoot-outs, routine work-outs, routine reports, nothing at all out of the ordinary. Cowley hauled them over the hot coals the usual number of times for the usual sorts of things, Macklin pounded them in the usual way with the usual help from Towser, and everything went swimmingly. Anyone else would lull themselves into a pleasant sense of security, of massive change averted, of disaster headed off at the pass.

Bodie, on the other hand, was no fool, and what's more, he knew Ray Doyle, knew him very well indeed. Bodie was walking around waiting for the other shoe to drop—or for a swift kick in the goolies when he least expected it.

When it finally came, the wash of sheer relief was the only real surprise for Bodie.

They were in Bodie's flat, at Doyle's suggestion, a well-earned evening off adjourned here instead of off to the nearest pub with the most buxom of barmaids.

Bodie sprawled on the sofa, the waiting game finally over, his brief respite of relief fading fast, his laziness masking the way his skin was crawling with tension again.

Doyle was sitting opposite him, perched, uneasily as a devil in a church, on the edge of Bodie's armchair. Doyle looked down at his hands, looked up at the collection of guns on the wall, finally glanced briefly at Bodie, then his gaze skittered away, alighting on something far less unnerving than the impalement of Bodie's steady stare.

"I thought I should tell you."

"So tell me."

A false start, Doyle leaning back in the chair as if he were completely at his ease, neither he nor Bodie fooled for a second. "I'm going to ask to see Dr. Ross for a bit of help."

Bodie blinked, face carefully impassive as he tried to swallow that one. "You what?"

"I said, I'm going to go to Ross—"

"For fuck's sake, Ray, why d'you always have to go and surprise me, eh? I thought I knew what was coming, had it all worked out, I mean, I was ready to cope with everything from you threatening to resign, or tell Cowley what we'd done or anything. Christ, I was even ready to cope with you going down on one knee and confessing your undying love. But this—" the tide of words broke, Bodie having to stop for breath, to catch his scattered thoughts. "Ross?" he asked, unbelieving. "Our Dr.

Ross, the one who pokes around inside you more than Frankenstein?"

"None other," voice light, shoulders drooping.

"But Ross, for Christ's sake! She'll peel you like an onion and then take the leftovers to show Cowley. You can't go to *her*."

"Yeh, well, if I don't go to her, it'll be some mad bastard out there with a gun turning me into mincemeat. So I'll take Ross, thanks all the same."

"It's not that bad, is it?" Bodie asked, mind busy trying to catalogue the differences that should have warned him that Doyle was slipping that badly, panic beginning as not even hindsight could give him 20/20 vision.

"No, Bodie," Doyle said softly, "it's not that bad. Leastways, not just yet. But—"

"Then what the fuck did you go and have to say that for you mad bastard—"

"*But* it was the only way I was going to get you to sit still and pay attention to me, wasn't it?"

Bodie shifted, uncomfortable, convinced he should be furious with Ray, guilty-as-charged enough that he had to stifle the apology dancing on the tip of his tongue.

"Come on, Bodie, every time I've so much as tried to mention it—"

Defensive now, wishing this were already over and done with. "It was only a quick wank between mates stuck for anything else."

"Hark at you! Listen, Bodie, you might be able to go round wanking other blokes, feeling them up, holding their cock in your hand until you've got their cum all over you and then sit around not even bothering, but when I do that, when *I* do that—it gives me pause, you know? I start to wonder why I've suddenly taking to wanking a man, I start to wonder what it all means, why it happened—where it's going to end up."

"Or what's going to end up where, eh, is that the big worry, Ray?" Consoling now, cajoling, the metaphoric whites of his eyes showing as Doyle slowly herded him into the dark corner where truth waited. "Worried that now you've lent me a hand, I'll be after your arse next? Come on, for fuck's sake! It was only a wank."

"No it fucking-well wasn't and you know it! We both know it." A pause, weighted perfectly. "Don't we, Bodie?"

"Look, Ray, it was only a quick handjob, didn't mean anything, we'd both had a bit too much to drink..." Under Doyle's impassive disbelief, Bodie

trailed off, the lies limned too clearly to be ignored. It was coming, Bodie knew, his own words echoing with the desperation of a man trying not to take that final step.

“Why won’t you admit it was more than that?” Doyle asked him.

“Why?” Oh, there were a million reasons why, and all of them would mean the end of life as he knew it. “Which reason d’you want me to give you, eh? There’s the one that’s because I don’t want you making a mountain out of a molehill and fucking everything up. Or how about the one where I don’t want you running out buying us matching hand-bags?”

“Oh, thanks ever so, butch. How about the one that’s the truth?”

“Oh, they’re all the *truth*, Ray.”

“You know what I mean, don’t come the cretin with me.”

“You really want to hear it, don’t you?” Bodie demanded, morbidly curious, watching himself sinking into the quicksand of emotion. “I mean, you’re not kidding, you really do want to hear me say it?”

Doyle gave him a look then, uncertainty colouring his pugnacity. “‘Cept I can’t know that until you say it, can I?”

Bodie just looked at him for that. Got up then, poured them both a drink, sat himself back down. “All right,” he said, picking up the threads, holding them like reins. “All right. You want to hear it, and when have I ever not given you what you wanted?” No answer given, none expected, that another side of their partnership never discussed till now. “I don’t want to talk about it, I don’t want to think about it, I don’t want to admit a fucking thing about it, because if I do, if I do...”

“Come on, Bodie,” the soft seduction of confession offered, “what is it you’re so scared of?”

The truth was a long time coming, bitter and painful and too full of hope for Bodie to want it. “You. It’s you I’m fucking petrified of.”

“Me? Don’t be stupid—” Bitten off then, this not the thing to say, no reason to cause hurt, no reason to chase Bodie right back into his foxhole. “Sorry. So—” trying to make it sound just casual enough, trying desperately not to make it sound meaningless, “—how come you’re petrified of me?”

“Use your head, Doyle. It’s so obvious it’s pathetic.”

“It’s a lot of things,” Doyle snapped back, “but

pathetic’s not one of them.”

“Oh yeh? And what is it then?”

And it was, finally, written all over Bodie’s face, right there, clear as day for Doyle to see. The smile lit up Doyle’s face, brought beauty to his eyes. “It’s wonderful. It’s exciting, and it makes me feel like—” Words failed him, but the warmth in his eyes was clear enough. “If it’s what I think it is.”

Bodie looked away from that. Gathered some more courage, looked back. “Still want to hear me say it then?”

“What d’you think?”

“I think...” He took a healthy swig of his whisky, rolled the smooth glass between the palms of his hands. “I think we’re mad even to consider it.”

“Why? You said yourself, we’ve already done it—”

“We’ve already had a quick wank,” Bodie corrected, “and what you’ve got in mind...”

“What *I*’ve got in mind?” Doyle eventually finished for him.

Facing a cohort of rabid mercenaries would be easier than this. Very precise, very clipped, clutching too frantically at control. “Yes. What *you*’ve got in mind.”

“Oh, yeh, and you’re not thinking anything of the sort, right?”

“Dead right. Pure as the driven snow, that’s me.”

“Yeh, after a few lorries have been through it. You’re as pure as slush so c’mon, Bodie, admit I’m not the only one thinking this.”

Bodie tried, he really did try, but that faint, almost hidden hint of insecurity and desperation finally got him. “Christ, Doyle, what the fuck do you want?”

“Now there’s a question.”

And all Bodie had been asking for was an answer. “Yeh, it *is* a question. So how about answering it?”

“I asked you first.”

“No you did not!”

“Yeh I did.”

“You didn’t—”

“Did—”

Dissolving into grins, an odd edge of shyness tiptoeing between them. “Sound like a pair of kids, don’t we?”

Doyle snorted, inelegant as ever. “You must’ve known some right riff-raff before me. How many

kids d'you know sit around discussing making love with their best mate?"

The words just sort of blurted out, embarrassing both of them, Doyle looking almost apologetic for having actually come right out and said it. "Well," he said, defiant to the end, "it is what we're talking about."

Bodie just took another good mouthful of even better whisky.

"Well it is—isn't it?"

"I don't know what the fuck's wrong with me," Bodie sighed. "I've never had any bother lying before."

Doyle's grin was contagious enough to get him quarantined. "

"So you do love me, then?"

"Oh, come on, Doyle! That's not the sort of thing you just blurt out, is it? I mean, not in the living room, in broad daylight."

"It's pitch black outside."

"But the lights are on in here, you know what I mean."

"You mean," Doyle said slowly, "that you're the strong, silent type."

Bodie beamed. "Got it in one."

"A real relief, is it, me understanding all that? What—does it save you from having to worry about me going out and buying us matching handbags?"

There was a definite edge to that comment. "I was only kidding when I said that, Ray."

"So you wouldn't mind if I let people know?"

That brought Bodie up short. "Of course I'd fucking mind! Are you off your rocker? Oh—I get it. Winding me up, " he tut-tutted like his Great-Aunt Amelia, but with far more goodwill and wagged his finger for good measure, "naughty Raymond."

"And what if I wasn't pulling your leg? What would you do if I let slip to one or two of the lads?"

"Tell that lot? Christ, by the time they'd started on the queer jokes, Cowley'd know about it and he'd have us at Ross' before the lads could present us with his and his towels."

"Bother you, that, would it?"

"Being kicked on my arse off the squad? Oh, and you're saying it wouldn't bother you, is that it?"

"Might be."

"Get off it, Ray. You don't want to be chipped out any more than I do."

And it was Doyle's silence that made him look

twice, and then a third time.

He swallowed hard before he spoke. "When did all this start?"

"About six weeks ago."

"What, you woke up one morning and decided instead of shooting baddies at my side, you'd rather be pruning the roses round the cottage door?"

"You know, it's when you're a fucking prat like this I wonder what I see in you. If you must know, I was getting fed up with the job a bit to begin with, and that's what started me looking at you. You know, what would I do if we weren't mates any more."

"And you realised you'd just wither and pine away without my manly presence."

"Shut it, Bodie, if that's all you're going to say. What happened to the man who couldn't lie any more, eh?" Doyle jeered. "Lost his bottle, has he?"

"Better than losing his mind the way you have."

"The trick cyclists used to call it a mental disorder."

"And is that what you are?"

"A trick cyclist?"

"A queer."

All the fight went out of Doyle again, mood changing more abruptly than the weather in spring. "I told you, I dunno. I've started looking funny at other blokes, ever since you and me... Yeh, well, I s'pose 'love-making's a bit on the Barbara Cartland side of things."

"Prefer good old Anglo-Saxon myself."

"I shall have to bleach my hair blond then, shan't I?"

Bodie nearly smiled at that, his fingers crossed that Doyle's mood had shifted again. "Ooh, petal, you don't have to do that for me."

"And what do I have to do for you, Bodie? Apart from keeping my mouth shut?"

Bodie didn't think this was quite the moment to mention that he was sort of hoping that Doyle would open his mouth, and open it wide, wide enough to swallow a cock Bodie had cause to be proud of.

"C'mon, Bodie, I asked you a simple question. What's it going to take here?"

A dollop of vaseline? Keeping the teeth out of the way? Something, probably his survival instinct, told him these weren't the sort of suggestions Doyle was looking for. "Depends. On what we want."

"I know what I want. Question is, what do you want? You're the unknown quantity here, mate."

Not something Bodie was about to agree with, that was for sure. "What do I want?"

"Yeh. It's not that hard a question, is it?"

"It's the hardest fucking question of the lot!"

How the fuck am I supposed to know what I want, eh? With the way we live, who's got time to want or plan?"

"We'd have time if we were moved down to the B squad."

"This isn't about what I want, is it?" Bodie demanded, everything he'd thought he could depend on slipping away from him like greased lightning. "This is all about what you want, and what it's going to take to get me to give it to you. You want us to leave CI5, don't you, go in for something nice and safe and boring."

"Something non-lethal, that's all I'm asking for."

"Crossing the street can be lethal, for fuck's sake!"

"Yeh? But you don't nip across in front of lorries, do you? And that's what we're doing, Bodie, playing Russian fucking Roulette every time we go out on a job, or come back to our own flat from doing the shopping. Have you any idea how many nutters there are? And how many of them are after *us*?"

"And have you the faintest idea what it's like to live a boring, normal life, suburbia, net curtains and mowing the grass on Sundays? Course, a pair of pansies like us set up amongst all the wives and kiddies would have to put up with the looks and the gossip, but you wouldn't mind that, would you, save you a bob or two instead of announcing the banns in the paper."

"Christ, when did it turn into this?" Doyle asked, weary and worried in equal measure.

"D'you want to hear the funny thing? I came here tonight to seduce you. Yep, get you into bed, fuck like bunnies, and leave it like that."

"But your mouth got the better of you. As always."

"Oh, sorry, I do beg your pardon, for a minute there I forgot that real men don't say a word about anything, just roll up their sleeves and get on with it."

"I didn't mean it that way—"

"Then how did you mean it?"

"To shut you up. For God's sake, Doyle, do we have to analyse everything to death? So we fancy

fucking each other. You've even said you came here to get into my bed, so why don't we do that, eh?"

"And all the rest? Giving up the squad, this being more than just a casual shag, we're just to ignore that, are we?"

"Why not? We can talk about it tomorrow," Bodie said in his best wheedle, getting up to go over to Doyle, knowing that if he could just touch his partner, it would be all right. He repeated it to himself, a talisman against the tangled mess this had become. It'd all been so straightforward at first, nice and easy, and look where they'd got themselves to. It wasn't supposed to be like this, he told himself. It'd all started out so well, and look at it now—slipping through his fingers, sand at the seashore. "C'mon, Ray," he whispered, his breath stirring the fine hairs on Doyle's nape. "Come to bed with me."

"Why? Because you know if I don't do it now, I never will?"

"Because I need you."

And he was scared that Doyle would realise just how brutally honest that comment was.

"Need me? You? Thought all you needed was a compass and a Swiss knife."

Now wasn't the time to tell him that the survival kit for the Ray Doyle minefield hadn't been invented. He reached around and touched Doyle where the jeans were most faded, where his cock always made its presence known. "Like that?" he asked, as the cock under his palm stirred and stretched.

"D'you like it when I do this to you?" Bodie said again, rubbing his own cock against Ray's lush arse.

His answer was Doyle turning in his arms, moving quickly, pinning Bodie up against the wall, his hands in Bodie's hair, trying to grab the short strands, his mouth a gaping wound against Bodie's, tongue pressing, demanding, forcing its way in, invading Bodie's mouth like lust. Again and again Doyle kissed him, hard, angrily, the bitterness like a bad taste in Bodie's mouth, until he was willing to accept the truth.

Doyle loved him. Had loved him for ages, enough to give up the squad. Had loved him enough that the prospect of sharing a room with him down in Brighton on that job had driven him to drink.

The poor bastard.

And then Bodie found himself kissing back, and the anger abating, Doyle melting against him, a puddle of limp warmth, a rigid heat digging into Bodie's thigh. It had been a long time for Bodie, since last he'd allowed himself this with a man. A long time, really, since he'd allowed himself the dangerous pleasure of Doyle's cock heavy in his hand, Doyle so vulnerable in orgasm, all his strength suspended, bursting out of his cock in white streams into Bodie's hand. Bodie wrapped his arms around Doyle, held him tight, his hands going down to press that firm arse, fingers instinctively seeking out the hole.

To think that one day, Doyle would let him in there, would let him fuck him up there—Bodie almost came just thinking about it. Fingers were plucking at his nipples, hips were grinding into his, Doyle's cock suddenly freed from the confines of its jeans, Bodie's own cock struggling free of the clinging cotton of his underwear, Doyle's hands so sure, so steady, touching him just right. Almost without thought, he brought his hands to clasp the back of Ray's neck and pushed him, every so gently, utterly implacably, down, and down, until Doyle's chin and nose bumped against his cock.

Bodie looked down, to find Doyle looking up at him, an encyclopædia of meaning in those eyes. But all Bodie could see was that beautiful mouth not two inches from his cock. The mouth opened, and Bodie sighed as his cock was swallowed, his body disappearing inside Doyle for the first time. This was no polished performance, no gifted display, but the hunger made up for that, and the fact that it was Doyle made it sublime. Doyle licked him all around, and up and down the shaft, taking the head of his cock back into his mouth, sucking on him again. The hands pumping him were no match for the pleasure of the mouth sucking him, and Bodie pushed farther forward, trying to get in deeper, pausing patiently when Doyle gagged, pushing forward again more slowly to let Ray get used to this newness.

Bodie's hands were in Doyle's hair, or caressing his face, his fingertips addicted to the transition between cock and mouth, that line where he and Doyle blurred together.

He had to have more.

"C'mon, Ray," he whispered, "get up. Let's go to bed, do this proper."

Doyle stumbled to his feet, knees numb from their unaccustomed use, one hand rubbing the

aching muscles of his jaw. "Do this proper, eh? Going to bring out the fine china then are you?"

At the threshold of the bedroom, Bodie stopped Doyle, looked him straight in the eye. "I was thinking about bringing out the vaseline."

There was an odd smile in reaction to that. "Who's it for?"

"I don't want to hurt you. You're my mate, for fuck's sake."

"I'm your mate, am I? Oh, and we mustn't hurt our mates, must we? Right, lead on, MacDuff, and fetch the vaseline while you're at it."

Bodie hugged him for that, darting past him to get into the hall cupboard where he knew there was a jar of vaseline somewhere. It took him longer than he'd expected, long enough for the first burst of passion to wear off—normally. But there was nothing normal about this time. It was Doyle waiting for him in that bedroom, Doyle with those green eyes and those legs, and that arse, oh, that gorgeous arse.

In the bedroom, the bedside lamp was on, and that was about it. Doyle had stripped the covers right off, everything lying in a heap at the bottom of the bed, tumbling onto the floor. Doyle himself was lying flat on his back, cock at half mast, legs splayed, and if Bodie twisted just right, he could see it, there, past the soft hair of Doyle's muscular thighs, the darkness that was the entrance to Doyle's body.

"Oh, god," Bodie groaned, "you are a sight for sore eyes. Pretty as a picture and a fuck's sight more fun."

Deliberately, unsmilingly, Doyle stroked his own cock, peeling the foreskin back, the head glimmering slightly in the light. "Come here and suck me," he said.

Bodie clambered onto the bed, plastering himself the length of Doyle's body, his cock rubbing against Doyle's, Bodie's hands overflowing with the delight of palming Doyle's naked arse. His fingertips ploughed their way to the furrow that cradled Doyle's anus, Bodie lifting Doyle up, arching his body, until his finger pressed home, sinking in just a fraction, but enough to make Bodie bite down on Doyle's shoulder to stopper the embarrassing sounds inside.

"Oh, fuck," he breathed, again and again and again, his vocabulary cut to the bone, the only word necessary for what he was doing. He rolled Doyle over on to his side, memories of his own past

guiding him, of how the penetration and discomfort were less and the pleasure more if a man was taken on his side the first time.

“C’mon, Ray, over you go.”

“I’m not going on my hands and knees like a girl or a fucking dog, Bodie.”

“Not asking you to. Here, just lie on your side, like that, shove that leg up out of the way there, that’s it, oh, yeh, that’s it, Ray, open it up for me.”

Finger well coated with vaseline, he slipped it all the way inside, knuckles tense bumps as they forged a path inside. Two fingers now, Doyle relaxing, hips starting to move as Bodie’s fingers found his prostate and massaged him there, every pressure of Bodie’s fingers rewarded with a groan from Doyle’s mouth and a thrust from his hips. Three fingers now, and Bodie couldn’t wait another second, just could not bear not to be part of Doyle. He was generous with the vaseline, his cock slippery, and he pushed it up against Doyle’s body, pushed, harder, until the head slid in, pushed again, another inch, and another, slow and steady, sweat erupting all over his back as his muscles trembled under the toll of not just ramming his cock in as far as it would go. Slowly, and it was getting easier as Doyle’s body adjusted itself, Doyle’s breath shallow pants, the occasional indrawn hiss of breath, and then Bodie was all the way in, pubic hair against the soft skin of Doyle’s backside, balls pressed against the sweet, sweat-dampened undercurve of Doyle’s buttocks.

Bodie withdrew an inch, eased back in, again and again, until Doyle’s body was moving with him, and the two of them had found a rhythm that was eons older than either of them. Bodie heard the sounds coming from his own mouth, couldn’t spare the attention to stop them, stifled them against Doyle’s shoulder, as he clutched Doyle to him.

Perhaps because it was the first time like this for them, it was over far too quickly, leaving Bodie still needy even as his body was satiated, streaming deep within Doyle, the sudden wetness a real erotic thrill.

I just came inside him, he thought, half-dazed, astonished that so simple a thing should mean so much. I just came inside him! He fell back on the bed, one hand going up to cover his eyes against the lamp light, post-coital sleepiness staking its claims on him already.

Movement beside him, registering amidst his sleepiness. He hugged Doyle then, pulling him

close, not complaining when Doyle wrapped Bodie’s fist around his still-hard cock, smiling quite sweetly when Doyle kissed him, a ferocious kiss full of hunger.

“Still need it, do you, angelfish? Must remember to shag you harder next time.”

And complained not at all when Doyle climbed on top of him, sitting astride his belly, cock aimed at Bodie’s face, hand blurring, as white streamers of cum bedecked Bodie’s chest, chin and cheek.

Loved it when Doyle leaned forward, and with pointed tongue and lascivious delight, licked his own cum from Bodie’s skin, the two salts mixed to one sweetness.

“Wonderful,” Bodie sighed, clumsily gathering Doyle to him, “that was abs’lutely wond’rful.”

And he wondered not at all why Doyle, Ray Doyle, of all people, had said not a single word.

Morning. Mouth like a sewer, bladder complaining, back aching.

Bodie smiled the smile of the blessed. It was lovely and warm under the covers: Doyle must have tucked him in during the night. Nice thought, that. He stretched, lay there for another minute, finally opened his eyes.

No Doyle.

He shrugged: Doyle never was one for lying in bed when he could be up and at ’em. Probably in the sitting room with a mug of tea in one hand, the morning paper in the other, feet up on the coffee table, and that slurp of his punctuating every page turn.

Bathroom first, he decided, and then go through to Doyle, when he was worth looking at.

Washed, shaved, dressed even, Bodie went into the sitting room. The morning paper was there, but still folded from being shoved through the letterbox. No sign of tea, not even a bit of heat clinging to the kettle. No sign of Doyle either, unless you counted that lone sock he’d found inside his own shoe from last night. Must’ve landed there when Doyle tossed it off.

Must’ve been in too much of a hurry to get out of there to bother looking for it. Unpleasant, that, wearing trainers without socks, something Doyle hated.

Bodie sat heavily on the sofa, and put his head in his hands. It had gone wrong. Somehow, it had gone terribly, terribly, wrong.

What the fuck was he going to do?

Work, for starters. Not much going on today, so no need for him to be in at the crack of dawn. Maybe that was why Doyle let him sleep.

Or maybe Doyle let him sleep just to see the expression on Cowley's face when Bodie sallied in an hour late. One smooth motion had his keys in his hand and his jacket slung over his shoulder. One thing that had gone well this morning: despite his thumbing his nose at speed limits and the occasional corner, there were no men in blue waiting with flashing lights and sirens.

Still, Bodie felt as if he were driving hell for leather straight to a disaster.

One of those nondescript mornings, not really raining, just a bit of drizzle, overcast, dull. HQ was bright with lights, full of people, but there was no sense of rush, no mad dive to get information gathered or bombers stopped. A quiet day, one the squad relished, a chance to take things a bit easy.

Bodie returned greetings, cracked jokes, and looked over his shoulder, trying to see the axe before it fell.

Where the hell was Doyle?

It just wasn't the done thing for one half of a team to wander around like a lost sheep looking for Bo Peep, so Bodie didn't actually ask anyone if they'd seen Doyle, but Cowley would have been proud of the job he did of directing conversations just so. Not that it helped; no one so much as mentioned Doyle passing.

Tea break, the rest room bursting at the seams with too many young men with too little to do, random acts of minor vandalism breaking out like a rash, bad jokes flying. In the thick of it, Bodie rescued his tea from one of McCabe's overenthusiastic retellings of a tale that grew with every telling, and it was as he was nabbing the last of the chocolate covered swiss rolls he felt it. Wondering when this awareness had happened was a nice distraction from facing the fact that for better or worse, he knew that Ray Doyle had just walked into the room.

"'Allo, 'allo, 'allo," Doyle said, doing the *Dixon of Dock Green* impersonation that usually got Bodie well and truly thumped, "what 'ave we 'ere, then?"

For an awful moment, Bodie thought Doyle was actually going to tell the squad exactly what they had there, right in their macho midst. But after a moment, the harsh edges of Doyle's smile softened, and he was preternaturally cheerful. "Where've

you been all morning?" he asked pleasantly. "I've been looking all over for you."

Which was a lie, but not one Bodie was going to call Doyle on. Treading carefully, eggshell bombs underfoot, Bodie smiled back, panic threatening. "I've been in."

Not, perhaps, the most tactful thing to say, given the circumstances. Doyle winced, theatrically, and shifted, ever so meaningfully. "In where?" he asked, all innocence.

And that was one question Bodie wasn't going to delve into too deeply. "Here, HQ. Down in Files. Where've you been?"

Doyle's smile would've done Dracula proud. "With Cowley."

Bodie nearly choked on his mouthful of tea.

"Yeh. Seems he wanted to update everyone's personnel files, and there aren't many on the squad with the security clearance to go through some of it."

"Rubbish," Murphy said, coming late to the conversation, tossing in his tuppenceworth as he passed by on his way to pour himself another mugful of sludge disguised as tea. "Only reason Cowley picked you was that it was either that or let Anson loose, and he's the biggest gossip known to mankind."

"Unlike me, eh, Bodie?" Doyle asked softly. "It's all right," he went on, "I'm not going to go broadcasting the news all over the place. Won't be ringing the *News of the World* or the Minister or anyone else. You're safe as houses."

Which was probably exactly what the Roman soldiers said in exactly the same tone of voice as they tossed Daniel into the lions' den.

"Right," Doyle was saying, "Cowley's finished with me, so d'you want me get started on getting our reports up to date?"

"Ehm, yeh. Fine. That'd be great."

And Doyle acted as if it were quite normal to have Bodie spluttering and confused and agape. "I'll see if I can make a dent in that report on the drug trail we were trying to follow, then. See you later."

Doyle was half turned away, and Bodie was wondering if he should heave a sigh of relief or heave the largest rock he could find at that thick head, when Doyle turned back, and smiled, not kindly.

"Yeh. Don't you worry about a thing. I'll run off quietly and do the reports. Mate."

And then Bodie knew that relief was the last thing he should be feeling.

Later, the afternoon wearing on, lunch a thing of the past, eaten with a bunch of the lads, Doyle just another one in the crowd, Bodie tracked his partner down in the cupboard known as their office.

Walked in. Sat down. Had no idea what the hell to say. It wasn't as if he could just ask flat out if Doyle's arse was sore after last night, or what the fuck it was he'd done wrong, to deserve this sort of treatment.

"Need to borrow my jacket?" he asked.

"You what?"

"Need to borrow my jacket. To heat up that cold shoulder you've been giving me."

"Cold shoulder? Get off it, mate. You're the one who didn't want me buying us matching handbags. You don't want the rest of the lads guessing you've got yourself a new bumboy, do you?"

"It's not like that! You're no bumboy—"

"No? Yeh, well, actions speak louder than words, isn't that what they say?"

"Look, what the fuck are you getting at?"

Doyle slammed the folder down on the desk. "What d'you think I'm getting at? Oh, yeh, by all means, Ray, let's fuck, but shh, don't tell anyone, mustn't let it show. And oh, yeh, Ray, you're not my bumboy, just roll over and let me shove it in you."

"It wasn't like that, and don't you try to make it sound like that. You didn't exactly argue, did you? I mean, I didn't hear you complaining, did I?"

"No," Doyle finally said, sounding infinitely weary, "no, I didn't, and that's the real problem, isn't it?"

It was slipping through his fingers again, the ground under him as dependable as quicksand. "Listen, Ray, I'll do better," he heard himself say, knew he meant it. Tried to take some of the deadening weight off the moment. "Honest. Cross my heart. C'mon, mate, I'm dead serious. All right, so I don't know what I did wrong, but I can work that out, can't I? Get it right next time."

"Course you will, *petal*," Doyle said, sounding like every mother with every childish dream, "course you will."

The sight of Doyle going through that door scared the hell out of Bodie; he wasn't sure now that there was anything that would stop Doyle from just keeping on walking.

"Ray!"

Doyle poked his head round the door, expression impassive.

"Will I see you tonight?"

"Nah. Promised a couple of the lads that I'd play in their darts team tonight. You can come and watch, if you feel like it."

"So, that's it? I mean, last night, a one off thing, was it?"

"I should be so lucky. No, it's just that with us working with a bunch of blokes trained to suss out a person's every secret, you and me suddenly being in each other's flats every night doesn't sound too bright, does it?"

"True enough. So..."

"We'll be round the Black Swan at eightish, if you want to show face. Might even want to bring that girl you've been shagging."

He'd rather rip his toenails out with rusty pliers.

"See you tonight then," Doyle said breezily as Lucas and McCabe came down the corridor towards them. "Give Sally one from me."

Then he was gone, disappearing along the corridor with the two other agents, being the picture perfect, perfectly straight mate making perfectly innocent plans with his perfectly platonic mate.

The clock on the wall ticked dolefully, but Bodie stayed in the tiny office, doing more paperwork than he normally did in months. Cowley would be pleased. Cowley would be the only one pleased round here.

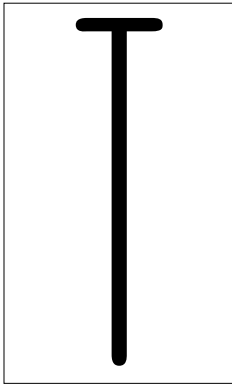
He didn't need to look at his watch to know that a whole two minutes had passed since last he'd looked: almost eight. He should be shifting soon, if he was going to go down the pub and watch the lads from the squad play darts.

Bodie picked up the thickest file of all, and started in on it. The lads, he thought sneeringly, since when has Doyle been one of the lads?

Since you fucked him, he admitted. Since you told him you'd go to bed with him, as long as he swept it under the carpet like a dirty secret.

He read the minutiae of someone else's life, wondered just what an obbo on him would read like. Considered, carefully, that he had been given everything he'd ever wanted: Doyle in his bed, Doyle keeping his mouth shut, Doyle in love with him, Doyle willing to promise to stay with him. Everything, definitely, and handed to him on a silver platter.

But as the loneliness began eating at his soul as he thought of Doyle as 'one of the lads', his 'mate', dark counterpoint to the heaven of Doyle loving him, Bodie wondered how such a feast managed to feel like famine.



Continuing our darker tone, here is Alexandra's story set during the stormy period of 'Wild Justice'. What, she speculates, was really going on between Bodie and Doyle in this important episode?

With thanks to Erzsebet.

he door stood closed before Doyle, taunting him as if it were an extension of his partner—impassive, hardened, unresponsive. Doyle pressed the buzzer again. Bodie was home. He *felt* his presence. He was there, waiting, lurking. *Open up, you bastard.* He'd make a scene if necessary. No more games, no more being shoved aside.

He'd been shut out before, those rare times when Bodie's past had resurfaced. Doyle hadn't cared for

THE KILLER IN ME

ALEXANDRA

Bodie's cold self-sufficiency during those times, but he'd survived his friend's withdrawal. Not this time. Not when Bodie's moods changed so drastically from day to day. Not when, after a tense training session, Bodie pulled a gun on him. It was time for an explanation, and he damn well wasn't leaving without one.

Fuck it. Doyle abandoned the buzzer to pound on the door, hammering the wood with both fists. "C'mon, Bodie—I know you're there!" He delivered a powerful kick to the door which sent a reverberating tremble through his leg. As Doyle paused to rub his thigh, Bodie's voice growled through the intercom.

"What do you want?"

"What do you think? Let me in!"

The door opened. Bodie stood there in slacks and shirt, looking casual, unconcerned. He didn't move aside. "It's one in the morning, Doyle," he

said calmly. "What do you want?"

"An explanation." Doyle tried to push past, and met firm resistance. He glared at his partner. "You want to argue in the fucking hallway?"

Bodie met his gaze, held it for a moment, then stepped out of the way. Doyle shouldered past as Bodie shut the door.

Step one accomplished, Doyle thought as he strolled into the sitting room. *Now for step two.* He made for the drinks cabinet. "You're going to talk to me, mate," he said as he grabbed a bottle of whisky and two glasses. "You're going to tell me what it's all about." He held a glass up.

"No, thanks." Bodie stood in the center of the room, immobile.

Doyle shrugged and fixed a drink for himself. Then he leaned against the cabinet, staring at Bodie. It wasn't going to be easy—it never was whenever Bodie refused to let him past the barriers. But Doyle

was ready to stick it out, prepared to hammer away until he got what he wanted—a reason for Bodie’s unpredictable behavior. And this time, he was going to get the truth. “Talk to me, Bodie.”

“There’s nothing to say.” Bodie’s voice sounded weary.

Doyle swallowed half his drink, sputtering as the fiery liquid blazed along his throat. “No? You don’t want to tell me what’s wrong with you? Why you’ve been fucking up in training, playing stupid pranks? You don’t want to tell me why you pulled a gun on me?” The image from that day, of Bodie’s fierce eyes on him, predatory, burned in Doyle’s mind. There had been a real danger there, something over the edge in Bodie’s normally controlled manner which had shaken Doyle. Was Bodie cracking up? “Well?”

There was no sign of remorse in Bodie’s restrained expression. “It was a joke,” he replied coolly.

“Yeah?” Doyle guzzled the rest of his whisky. “Guess I missed the punch line.” He slammed the glass down and moved in close to the other man. “I’ve had it, *mate*.” He jabbed at Bodie’s chest. “Tell me what the hell is going on.”

Bodie didn’t move; his face remained unreadable. “It’s not your business.”

“Ah,” Doyle nodded, pleased at the chink he’d made. “So you’ll admit there *is* something going on.”

“Leave it, Doyle.” Bodie turned away, but Doyle snatched at his sleeve, pulling him back.

“How can I? If you’re in trouble—”

“I can handle it myself!” Bodie’s mask broke as he shoved Doyle away. “I don’t want you involved.”

Doyle edged in close again, breathing hard. “Why not? We’re partners.”

“This is personal.” Bodie’s voice went cold.

“Personal?” Doyle snapped. “What the hell does that mean? I’m only allowed to help if it’s part of the damn job?” He turned away, trying to control his breathing. This wasn’t working. Bodie just might reveal something if he got angry enough, but so far Doyle had only managed to annoy him. Maybe if he landed a low blow—he turned back to face Bodie. “Don’t do this to me.” He prodded Bodie’s chest again. “Look at the shit you landed in last time you cut me off. Or maybe you’ve forgotten Marikka—”

Bodie batted Doyle’s hand aside. “Shut up.” His

eyes glittered. “I told you I can handle it, now just go.” He pushed Doyle towards the door.

“No, dammit!” Doyle twisted away. “I’m not going ‘til I get a real answer.” He strode back to the drinks cabinet and grabbed the whisky bottle.

“Put it down.”

Doyle heard the edge in Bodie’s voice and chose to ignore it. Whatever Bodie was involved in, there was no reason they couldn’t sort it out together. He poured the whisky into his glass.

He sensed the movement behind him and turned to find Bodie mere inches away, his face flushed. Bodie gripped Doyle’s wrist; the liquid sloshed over the glass rim. “Put it down,” he repeated, “and get out.”

“Let go.” Doyle resisted the grip, holding the glass firmly. He returned Bodie’s stare. “What the fuck is it with you? We’re supposed to be friends, remember? *Best mates*? ‘S a bit one-sided though, isn’t it?” He wrenched his wrist free, spilling more of the drink. “You only let me get close when things are going well.” Doyle quickly drank the remaining whisky in the glass, not taking his eyes off Bodie, who stood glowering at him. “But you won’t let anyone near you when things are bad. It’s okay for me to come to *you* when I’m upset—yeah, it’s okay for *me* to admit I’m not made of fucking stone—but not you. Why not, Bodie? Afraid it’ll make me feel better than you?” Doyle slammed the glass down. “Or are you just too proud to need anyone? Who the fuck do you think you are?” Sick of Bodie’s unrelenting glare, Doyle grabbed his arm and shook it. He felt Bodie shiver. The response puzzled Doyle, but it didn’t distract from his anger. He shook Bodie again, hard. “Come on, you bastard—why the hell won’t you tell me what you’re afraid of?”

Bodie suddenly gripped Doyle’s shoulders, and Doyle’s eyes widened at the fire in Bodie’s gaze. *Bloody hell*, he thought, I got him angry all right—he’s going to thump me one. Doyle felt Bodie’s hands move up to clench the back of his neck, forcing his head forward. *What the hell*—suddenly, Bodie’s mouth was on his, wresting his lips open. Doyle gasped, too shocked to resist. He squeezed his eyes shut as Bodie kissed him, plunging within, fiercely taking without giving, then brutally releasing him.

Doyle swayed, then steadied himself. When he opened his eyes, he saw Bodie striding towards the front door. *Shit*. Doyle tried to catch his breath,

taking deep gulps of air. *Bodie?* It wasn't possible.

Bodie stood by the door, holding it open. "That's why," he said calmly, as remote as before.

Utterly confused, Doyle walked unsteadily to the door, finding it hard to focus. He stopped near the threshold, facing his partner, unable to frame a sensible question. Nothing made sense at that moment. "Why...what did you...do you want—" No, he couldn't ask it—didn't even believe it.

Bodie lifted a hand to brush Doyle's cheek, his gaze fierce. "Showed you what I want, Ray."

Doyle shook his head, twisting away from the touch. He sagged against the door frame, using it to prop himself up. "You can't," he stammered. "You can't want that...not with me—"

"Oh, yes." Bodie's eyes narrowed, then his lips twitched into a half-smile. "You're the only one I do want. Really want." He reached out again, cupping Doyle's face in both hands. Something in his voice and expression kept Doyle from flinching away again. Bodie released him. "Yeah, and I need you. I need you to want *me*."

Doyle couldn't take it in. What he'd wanted tonight had been so simple—to get Bodie to ask for his help. He looked at his friend, expecting, after the bruising revelation of that kiss, to be looking at a stranger. But he wasn't.

Bodie released his hold. "Go home, Ray."

Doyle glanced down the dimly-lit corridor. It would be the safest thing to do...just walk away, get in his car, drive back to his flat, pretend everything was all right...but when had he ever needed to be safe?

"No." He looked steadily at Bodie. Though stunned by Bodie's act, he was also aware that he hadn't gotten what he'd come for. "No," he repeated stubbornly, "not until you tell me what's going on."

Bodie let out an exasperated sigh. "Oh, hell." He rubbed a hand over his face. "What does it take to get rid of you?"

"How about the truth?"

Doyle thought he saw a flicker of pain cross Bodie's face. Then Bodie nodded. "All right," he said dully, "we'll see where that gets us." He pulled Doyle back inside and shut the door, then pushed him towards the kitchen.

His senses reeling, Doyle sank onto a chair at the tiny kitchen table. He warily watched Bodie as he set about making a pot of coffee. *Be careful what you ask for...* the old saying popped into his head. A

shiver ran up his spine. Doyle ran his fingers over his lips, still feeling Bodie's mouth on his, a tingling, shadowy sensation. It was mad. He looked up as Bodie poured the coffee into two mugs. But Bodie wasn't mad, that was the odd part.

"Here you go." Bodie slid a mug over as he sat down. "Drink up."

Doyle sipped at the steaming liquid. "Gonna be up all night peeing," he muttered as he drank some more, glad of the warmth it gave him.

"It's your own fault." Bodie barely touched his mug to his lips, then set it down again. He leaned back, folding his arms across his chest. "I had a friend once," he said casually, "name of Williams. He used to drink my booze uninvited, too."

"Sorry." Doyle frowned; he couldn't place the name. "Where's he from, then?"

"Williams? Special Services."

"Oh."

"He died not too long ago."

"Did he? 'M sorry." Doyle buried his nose in the coffee mug.

"Yeah. He was murdered."

Doyle jerked his head up. He suddenly realized that Bodie was telling him what was happening, was finally giving him what he wanted. He cradled the mug, rolling it between his palms, alert now. "Who did it? Do you know?"

"Yes, I know. Bastard's name is Billy—'King Billy' he calls himself. Head of a motorcycle gang. Just your run-of-the-mill psychopath."

"Okay. So take your evidence to the police—" Doyle paused as Bodie raised his eyebrows. "You don't have any evidence?"

"I've got one eye-witness," Bodie replied.

"Williams' girlfriend, Cheryl. But she's too scared to talk. She hangs out at the biker pubs—and she knows what they're capable of doing to her."

The more Doyle heard, the less he liked it. "Just what were you planning to do, then?"

"Not sure yet." Bodie picked up his mug and took a few sips. "Been keeping tabs on the bastard. He has a fondness for bike races. There's one on tomorrow—thought I'd go out for a look."

"Bodie, it's police business—"

"Police haven't gotten anywhere." Bodie gave Doyle a quizzical look. "You've still got your bike, haven't you?"

Doyle saw the calculating expression. "Whatever it is, forget it."

"Thought you wanted to help, *mate*."

"I do, but—"

"But, nothing, Doyle. I told you, he's a psycho. I've checked out his record. This isn't the first killing he's gotten away with, and it won't be the last." He paused. "Unless someone stops him."

Doyle felt a chill lodge in his gut. "Who made you judge and jury?"

"I did."

It shouldn't have surprised him that Bodie would go so far to avenge a friend. Bodie's sense of personal loyalty had gotten him into trouble more than once on the job. Still, was he really talking murder? "Did Williams mean that much to you?"

"He was a good mate," Bodie replied quietly. "And he would've done the same for me."

"Done what? Kill? You can't do that—"

"No?" Bodie shook his head, a slight smile breaking the hard features. "Have you forgotten who we work for? Or maybe you hadn't noticed that in CI5, the end justifies the means. Isn't it a bit late in the game to be getting moral qualms?"

"It's not a game," Doyle protested.

"Isn't it?"

"Not when you're messing about with people's lives, it isn't! And it's not CI5 business—"

"It's *my* business," Bodie said calmly. "What difference does it make? This is what I do for a living, mate, with or without the fine print."

Doyle shivered. "You don't really mean that."

"No? You asked for the truth." Bodie picked up his mug and drank. "Why don't you come out to the races with me tomorrow?"

Doyle sighed. Trying to figure Bodie out was hard work. "Thought you didn't want me involved."

"You could bring your bike," Bodie went on, ignoring the remark. "Might be fun—get a bit of racing in—what do you say?"

"Why?"

"Why not?"

Doyle realized he'd gotten all he was going to get out of Bodie on the subject. Time to ask about that incredible kiss, which he had a feeling Bodie wasn't going to discuss. "Okay," Doyle said carefully, "I'll come with you."

"Good." Bodie pushed his chair back and stood, scooping up both mugs and tossing them into the sink.

"One more thing." Doyle stayed seated. "You want to tell me what that little scene in the doorway was all about?"

Bodie shook his head. "You know what they say." He moved in close, leaning his hands on the table top. He stared at Doyle with a sweeping, sensual look. "Actions speak louder than words."

Doyle trembled, afraid that Bodie would kiss him again, and even more afraid at the faint flicker of desire that whispered through him. But then Bodie smiled and shifted, moving towards the kitchen entrance. "C'mon, sunshine. Time to go home and get some rest."

Moving slowly, Doyle followed him out to the front door once more. He gave Bodie a searching look as Bodie held the door open, feeling more confused now than when he'd arrived. "What time?" he finally muttered.

"Races start around two—pick you up at noon?"

"Fine." Doyle took a deep breath. "You know I'm only going 'cause I want to keep an eye on you."

"Yeah, I know that." Bodie's eyes brightened as he gave Doyle a warm smile. "Gotta make sure I don't do anything *you* wouldn't do, right?" He lightly punched Doyle's shoulder.

"Right," Doyle replied uneasily, unsure why the sudden confidence in Bodie's face disturbed him. But he'd had enough for one night—no more questioning, no more uneasy answers. He needed to get away, go home, and try not to think about what it all meant, though he knew he would do nothing else. The night was a long way from over.

Doyle walked out of the flat, and heard the door click shut behind him.

COLD air hit Doyle's cheeks as he wrenched his helmet off. He shook his head and looked back at the race course he'd just finished riding, with its bumpy hills and mud-clogged pits. A disaster area. But at least he'd survived it. Barely.

Doyle scanned the race grounds, which were bounded by a group of hills to one side, thick woods to the other. He spotted Bodie near a makeshift refreshment table. Next to him stood Williams' girlfriend Cheryl, a striking redhead. She looked wary, obviously uncomfortable there. Doyle shook his head, still unable to fathom Bodie's reasons for being here, and pissed at being used.

Bodie snatched a bottle of champagne and loped over to where Doyle stood, giving him a hug. "Great race, mate."

Doyle shrugged the arm off. He shoved his

mud-splattered helmet into Bodie's hands. "What the hell was all that?"

"Only a race." Bodie grinned.

"Yeah?" Doyle felt bruised, battered, and exhausted. "Well, 'King' Billy's band rides rough, or didn't you know that?" He wiped at the dirt on his face. "The bastards rode to block me out, dammit. I don't know what you're trying to prove here, but I'm through. You got that?"

"No need to be like that." Bodie punched him lightly on the shoulder, still smiling. "What's it matter? You beat the bastard."

Doyle looked at the dirty, disheveled gang of bikers huddled around their machines. "Yeah, 'bastard' is the right word." He looked pointedly at Bodie. "All around. I'm leaving."

Bodie tossed the helmet back to him. "Fine, have it your way. I think I'll go celebrate." As Doyle watched, Bodie strode over to King Billy's group. He popped the cork off the champagne and shook it up, spraying the foam over the gang members. After listening to Bodie's taunting jeers for a few minutes, Doyle gave up and rolled the bike off to one side.

The gear he'd changed into for the race was soaked through, cold wet cloth clinging to his flesh. Doyle grabbed his regular clothes from their jeep, making sure he retrieved his gun from the glove box. Then he followed the other mud-splattered racers to a washing-up area.

He came out feeling refreshed, with a thoroughly scrubbed body and clean clothes, his gun and holster hidden beneath his leather jacket. But when he looked around for his partner, Bodie was nowhere to be seen.

Doyle took a deep breath. All he wanted was to go home, some place where it didn't smell of petrol, somewhere he could work the autumn chill out of his bones. Where the hell was Bodie...

He heard a hum—then a roar as a bike came to life, and another. More racing? Doyle couldn't see anyone on the track. Then he spotted Cheryl striding towards the engine noise, towards the curve of a steep hill. Doyle ran to catch her up, calling her name.

She started, then cast him an angry glare. "Why don't you stop them? I thought Bodie was your friend—"

Doyle grabbed her arm. "Where is he?"

Cheryl twisted her arm free. "He's challenged Billy to a one-on-one. There." She nodded up-

wards. "That's the Widowmaker."

"Shit." Doyle loped off, rounding the hill. Bodie was on his bike, already driving madly up the steep side, twisting, digging in, roaring upwards, possessed. Doyle stood, unable to move, anger and fear warring within. In a final, reckless burst, Bodie shot to the top as dirt and rocks flew out from the wheels, cascading behind him. He idled the bike triumphantly, then spun it round to make a headlong, plunging descent.

King Billy kicked his own bike to life and attacked the hill, the wheels turning crazily as he viciously twisted the machine up the path. Doyle watched, unable to think of any action to take. He glanced at Bodie, who stared upward, transfixed by Billy's progress; his triumphant expression chilled Doyle. Bodie wanted Billy dead, that was terribly clear. But this way? And if this didn't work—what the hell would he try next?

Doyle started towards Bodie, but stopped at the sound of Billy's bike dying. He looked up in time to see the bike shut off from under Billy, flipping with an ominous *ka-chunk* as Billy was thrown off. The figure tumbled down, his friends rushing to help. Bodie smiled and turned away, calmly walking the bike back towards the parking area. Doyle called out again, but Bodie only spared him one glance, his face blank. Then he moved on. Doyle frowned, hoping the worst was over, but far from sure.

He turned and ran after Bodie, catching up to him as he reached the parking area. Cheryl was there, slumped against the jeep, hands shoved deep in the pockets of her jacket. Bodie ignored her and set about putting the bike away.

"We finally getting out of here?" Doyle dug into his coat pockets for the car keys, anxious to speed things up. He glanced over towards the hill. King Billy and his gang had started back as well, and now they milled near the track, watching Bodie.

Bodie finished securing the bike, and turned to follow Doyle's gaze. Doyle bit his lower lip. *Dammit.* He brandished the keys in front of Bodie's face. "It's time to *leave.*"

Not quite." Bodie looked steadily at Billy's group in the distance. They'd gone very quiet, and were simply standing there, staring back.

"What the hell do you mean, 'not quite'?" Doyle gripped Bodie's arm, roughly jerking him round. "Come *on.*"

Bodie shoved him away. "It's not over yet."

Doyle saw Billy jerk his head at the woods

bordering the track. In response, Bodie nodded. Then he smiled and calmly sauntered off towards the trees.

Cheryl started at the movement. "Where's he going?"

"To hell," Doyle muttered. Then he took off after him.

He caught up with Bodie, matching his partner's stride. "What the fuck are you up to now?"

"Gonna take a leak." Bodie walked on, casual and confident. "That okay with you?"

"Don't lie to me, dammit. You coulda done that back there."

"Maybe I like a bit more privacy." Bodie paused at the edge of the woods to look back. Doyle did the same, and saw Billy and his gang moving across the racetrack towards them. He automatically reached for his gun. Bodie's hand shot out, grasping Doyle's wrist. "No. This is my fight."

"It's not a fight—it's madness."

"Is it?" Bodie held Doyle's arm in a painful clench. His eyes bore into Doyle's, unnervingly calm, yet predatory. Not mad. Resolute, but not mad. Doyle stared back at his friend, not sure if this relentless determination was better than outright insanity, and certain that it didn't make Bodie less dangerous. More so, in fact. A sense of foreboding knotted within him, mingled with anger at Bodie for escalating the danger.

Bodie released him. "You know what it's about, Doyle." Before Doyle could react, Bodie turned and sprinted into the woods, dashing out of sight among the trees.

Doyle tried to follow him. It wasn't long before he became confused. The towering trees blocked the late afternoon light, creating a shadowy world of mist and darkness. He stopped, listening, straining to hear any sound of movement. All he heard was the whispering of falling leaves.

He stood still, looking left, right, checking behind. Nothing. He had to find them. Something, somebody had to stop this.

Doyle heard scuffling sounds. He moved, picking his way through thick undergrowth, trying to pinpoint the direction of the sound. As he worked towards a lighter patch among the gloom, the noise grew louder, and then he heard shouts and grunts. Doyle ran.

He broke through the low brush into a clearing, ringed by tall trees. He stopped to take in the scene. Bodie stood balanced in the center, a long, straight

branch in his hands. Billy and four other men circled him, wary, already sounding winded. Two of them rushed Bodie, who jabbed out with the staff, quickly knocking both to the ground. They didn't get up.

King Billy flashed a foot-long knife whose blade shimmered in the filtered light. The remaining two men were unarmed. Doyle dropped into a fighting stance as one of the men came at him. Doyle kicked out and landed a blow in the midriff, knocking the wind from his opponent. The man doubled over, clutching his abdomen. Doyle moved in, bringing both fists down hard on the back of his neck. He crumpled.

Looking up, Doyle saw that the other gang member was now down, and only Billy was left facing Bodie. Doyle started towards them. Suddenly Bodie whipped round, aiming the staff directly at him. The blow caught Doyle in the gut and he staggered back, stunned and out of breath. *This is my fight...* Doyle shook his head, taking in great, gasping breaths. Bodie's attention had immediately riveted back to King Billy, as if Doyle had been an annoying insect.

Doyle watched them stalk each other, an invisible cord of tension binding the two men. Bodie darted in and out, each movement swift and critical, a controlled but deadly dance. Billy fought with a fierce savagery, desperate and grim, the knife slashing closer and closer. Doyle staggered to his feet. Billy was getting bolder—too close—Doyle cried out as Billy whipped beneath Bodie's guard. But with one agile move, Bodie released the branch and stepped aside. He lashed out with his hand, chopping down on Billy's knife arm, knocking the weapon to the ground.

Bodie followed with a kick to the groin, bringing Billy to his knees. In an instant he was behind the man, grabbing him in a stranglehold, arms locked around his neck. Doyle knew it was a killing hold. He moved—and by the time he reached Bodie's side, his gun was drawn. Heart pounding, Doyle pointed the weapon at the two entwined figures, wavering between them. "Bodie! He's had enough—let him go!"

Bodie looked up at him, a feral glint in his eyes. "He's insane, Doyle. And he's a killer." His grip on Billy's neck tightened.

Sweat trickled down Doyle's forehead. He shivered. "Told you," he said, his voice shaking, "nobody made you judge and jury."

“No?” Bodie’s lips twitched into a half-smile. “And what are *you* going to do, Ray? You going to shoot me?”

Doyle moved closer, only inches away, aiming the gun at Bodie’s head, terrified of what Bodie would do, terrified of what *he* would do. He heard the sharp crack of a broken twig and risked a quick look. Cheryl stood on the edge of the clearing. Doyle shouted her name, and she stepped a few feet forward, then froze. Doyle saw the shock on her face as she took the scene in.

Doyle held his stance, the gun in a firm grip. “She’ll testify,” he said to Bodie, hoping the words would get through. “You don’t have to do this.” He yelled at Cheryl, not taking his eyes off his partner. “Tell him you’ll speak in court! *Tell* him!”

She hesitated. Then she spoke clearly and boldly. “Yes, I will—I will testify!”

Doyle waited, every second agonizing, waiting for Bodie to let loose the death grip. But Bodie just gave a gentle shake of his head and, his voice edged with weariness, said, “They’re only empty words, that’s all.” He stared up at Doyle, the predatory gleam in his eyes fading, leaving only a strange sadness. “Told you before,” he went on quietly, “actions speak louder than words.”

Doyle gazed at the gun in his own hands. A sense of desolation slowly settled into the core of his being. Bodie was right. This was his whole life, right here, right now, this choice. Doyle held the gun steady, knowing he was capable of shooting Bodie. Somehow, he also knew that Bodie would let go. And he knew that it wouldn’t matter what Bodie did. Billy was going to die, and Doyle knew it, as surely as he knew what he was. What they all were.

He made the token statement one more time, detached, suddenly calm. “*Let him go.*”

Bodie’s expression went blank again. “He’s a vicious animal, Doyle.” His voice was as empty as his face. “What do you do with vicious animals?” Then he released his grip.

Billy hurtled upwards with surprising speed, knocking them both off-balance. Doyle stumbled back as Billy snatched up the knife and lunged towards him. Doyle dropped to one knee and fired. The bullet smashed into Billy’s chest. He fell, rolling onto his side, gasping. Doyle rocked back slightly, releasing the muscle tension from firing. He watched Billy’s twitching form, listening to his gurgling chest.

It didn’t take long. The ragged noise in Billy’s throat changed to a ratchety sound, and then he went still, eyes open, unblinking, a trickle of spittle down his chin.

Doyle heard one of Billy’s men moan, and saw him stirring. Doyle tensed, on guard again, and then Bodie was at his side, tugging at him, pulling him to his feet. “Come on—we have to get out of here.”

Doyle carefully replaced his gun in his holster. “Where’s Cheryl?”

“She took off. Let’s just go—she’ll be all right.”

Doyle nodded, still numb. He allowed Bodie to half-lead, half-drag him out of the woods.

THREE days later, on the first day off since the shooting, Doyle woke to a ringing phone. He picked it up—Bodie. He replaced the receiver without saying a word. The phone rang again. Doyle ignored it.

He went out for a walk in the late morning, down to a nearby park. He strolled across the wide expanse of well-trimmed lawn, the grass slowly turning brown, the gold-red leaves drifting from sparse trees. The leaves carpeted the paths and crunched beneath his boots.

Doyle found a bench beneath a tree, brushed the twigs and leaves from its surface, and sat down. He closed his eyes, wishing the cool breeze that touched his face was colder, harsher. It would give him something to focus on, something other than the ache in his heart.

So many times he’d run the scene in the woods through his mind, played it over and over—no matter how he tried to change it, it always came out the same.

They had reported the ‘incident’, and the local police, who were more than familiar with King Billy’s gang, had not been displeased. A simple case of self-defense against a vicious attack—perfectly justifiable. Even Cowley hadn’t given it more than a perfunctory admonition to “stay away from trouble” on their time off. He had given King Billy only a few seconds thought; he had more important concerns.

Doyle sighed. He opened his eyes to watch the other people who had chosen this crisp fall day for a walk. A young couple, arm in arm, ambled along, oblivious to their surroundings. Another couple with two children had set a blanket under one of

the larger trees; the children were busy collecting leaves. An old man and his equally aged terrier meandered from bush to bush. Ordinary people leading ordinary lives. For the first time in his life, Doyle looked not at them, but straight through them. For the first time in his life, they were a mystery to him.

So many times he kept running the scene through his mind... If he had shot Bodie...but he hadn't. If he had, what would he have now? Doyle looked around. There was nothing there that he could make his own.

"Nice, isn't it?"

Unsurprised, Doyle looked up at the smooth, self-possessed face of his friend and partner. He'd been expecting Bodie to show up sooner or later, and here he was, sliding onto the bench beside him. "What's nice?" Doyle asked flatly.

Bodie nodded towards the people in the park. "Them. All the comfortable little families out for their Saturday stroll. Very *nice*." He said it as if it were the most obscene word he knew. "Yeah, it's all quite cosy. Until someone like us comes along and starts rooting around in the garbage." He turned to Doyle and smiled. "Come here a lot, do you?"

"Shut up."

Bodie shook his head. "No, I don't think so. We're going to talk, Ray." He favored Doyle with a long, attentive look. "Aren't we?"

Doyle returned the look. He saw a man he trusted with his life; he saw the one person in his life he couldn't face the world without. He shivered. "Yeah," he replied, "let's talk. Let's talk about King Billy. You knew exactly what he'd do, didn't you?"

"You mean, what he would do if I let him go?" Bodie sat back, relaxed, draping an arm along the back of the bench.

Doyle glanced at him, then looked away. "That's right."

"Well, I did warn you he was mad."

"I suppose you did." Doyle rubbed his hand over his eyes. He found it hard to concentrate. Days of thinking in circles hadn't gotten him anywhere. What he felt right now was a vague sense that something had been lost. And he needed to understand what remained.

He felt Bodie's hand touch his cheek, felt him gently brush the curls against his neck. Doyle turned back, and found a passion in Bodie's eyes

that he had seen before. This time he felt no urge to walk away. Yet something was missing, something was still unsettled.

"Wouldn't mind a drink." Bodie's voice was soft and low. "How 'bout going back to your flat?"

Doyle shook his head. "No." He glanced up as a flurry of leaves blew off the tree above them, shorn by a sudden gust. His mind flashed again to a scene of woods and trees and darkness.

"Ray?" Bodie rested his hand on Doyle's shoulder. "What do you want?"

Doyle took one more look at the perfectly normal park around him. He abruptly stood. "There's somewhere I have to go." He reached over to grab Bodie's arm, hauling him up. "And you're coming with me."

DEAD leaves crackled beneath his feet.

Why here? Bodie had asked him when Doyle pulled the car to a stop beside the race track. Doyle had gotten out and calmly walked towards the woods. *Why here?* Doyle hadn't answered.

Sunlight touched his face. He paused, then turned and moved off again, finding his way by intuition. Bodie was right behind him, a quiet shadow. Doyle wove between the trees, light changing to cool darkness within their concealing shelter. He didn't look back.

Why had he come here...he knew and he didn't know. Rational thought had fled, and all he felt was a compulsion that had drawn him here, unresisting. A hunger. He didn't want to think anymore, not in this place, not now. Here, he felt removed, in neither the clean park nor the dirty streets; in this strange sanctuary there was nothing to distract him from what he was. Doyle listened to the heartbeat of the wilderness. He listened to the pulse of the killer echo in his veins.

Bodie was near. A presence...part and counterpart. One who stood strong and separate, yet one who stood solidly at the center of Doyle's being. He sensed the danger of touching Bodie's soul—feared it, and craved it. Bodie's words came back to him...*I need you to want me...* They were only words.

Doyle broke through the underbrush, broke free of the sheltering trees into the clearing, where afternoon sunshine shimmered down. He walked slowly around the open, leaf-strewn space, remembering. There—where he'd knocked down his

opponent. There—where Bodie had hit him. And there he had held the gun in his well-trained hands. *What have they made of me...* he shook his head. *What I have made of myself.* Would he ever feel the hurt of someone's death again... would this numbing ache inside remain forever... Doyle kicked at the dry leaves, at the spot where Billy had died. There was no sign that anything had ever happened here.

He looked up to meet Bodie's puzzled gaze. "What do you want here, Ray?" The soft voice was a caress. Bodie stepped closer, so very near, and touched Doyle's face, fingertips brushing his cheek, his lips. The hunger in Doyle's heart burned; it had a name. *Desire.*

"Nothing," Doyle replied, a sudden, reckless delirium seizing him. "I don't want, Bodie." He grasped the hand that caressed him, gripping it, pulling Bodie to him. "I need." He drove his mouth against Bodie's, pushing inside, commanding response. As he invaded Bodie's mouth, tongue against tongue, he felt his fingers digging into Bodie's wrist. Bodie wrenched away and stared at him. Doyle saw the uncertainty flicker across his face, and then it was gone, replaced by longing.

"Don't say anything," Doyle whispered fiercely. "Do you hear me? Not one word."

Bodie nodded.

Doyle slipped his jacket off, then carefully began unbuttoning his own shirt, eyes never leaving Bodie's face. Bodie shrugged out of his own coat, unfastened his shirt, and pulled it free. As Doyle let his shirt drop, the cool air hit his chest and back. He worked his shoes off, quickly undid his belt and zip, struggled out of jeans, pants, and socks, knowing Bodie was doing the same.

He straightened and lifted a hand to trace a line across Bodie's lips, then drew it along his throat. Spreading his fingers, he moved his palm along Bodie's smooth chest, holding it still over his heart. Heartbeat of a killer; heartbeat of a lover. Doyle closed his eyes, moaning softly. *Make it your own...* a phantom voice, impelling him, urging him on. He moved his hand lower, stroking Bodie's abdomen. Bodie groaned, and Doyle broke his gaze as Bodie pulled him into an embrace, hands clutching at him as Bodie kissed him fiercely. Doyle felt strength meeting strength, hardness meeting hardness. He pushed Bodie downward; together they tumbled to the ground. They rolled across the unyielding earth, leaves and twigs scratching their skin. They ended side by side, panting, entwined.

Doyle rubbed his hips and thighs against Bodie's, pushing their erections together. He licked at Bodie's throat, lips sucking. His tongue found drops of sweat, he tasted the saltiness. He massaged Bodie's chest and abdomen, taut and smooth, wanting the power there, wanting to take and to give. He felt Bodie's legs against his, and ran his foot along the strong calves. More—he needed more...

Bodie thrust against him in a frenzied rhythm, eyes tightly shut, head thrown back. Doyle ran his hands over Bodie's back and then down his thighs, shoving between them to meet the tight, heavy sac, to wrap around the straining cock, touching Bodie, Bodie touching him—hands, mouths, flesh—not one, not two, but something beyond identity, part and counterpart, obliteration and culmination, separate and whole. In a blinding haze, Doyle came, his mind and body shattering into climax. He cried out, his body jerking, the warm fluid spurting against Bodie's body. Doyle sank against Bodie as Bodie continued to rub hard against him, hearing Bodie's ragged cries and shuddering breaths, feeling him come moments later, the semen spilling over his abdomen. The shaking went on for a long time, and then the world was still.

Gradually Doyle's senses stopped reeling, and he slowly returned to reality. He disentangled himself and sat, drawing up his knees, clasping his arms around them. He rested his head on his arms, his back to his partner. He listened to Bodie's even, slowing breaths.

At last, releasing the grip on his knees, he turned to see Bodie propped up on an elbow, studying him. What was in Bodie's eyes wasn't contentment. Doyle looked at him, a hand on the ground to brace himself. Neither of them smiled.

"It's not love, is it," Bodie said, and it wasn't a question.

Doyle's hand twitched. "Not sure what the word means anymore."

Bodie sat up, shifting closer. He gently brushed the leaves and twigs off Doyle's back.

Doyle stared out across the clearing to the encircling trees. "I just know I need you."

"Yeah." Bodie rested his hand on Doyle's thigh. "There's always that."

Doyle turned to look at him, meeting intense, sensual eyes. "Not just sex, Bodie." There wasn't a word for what they had. He only knew that Bodie was the one person he could make love to without

feeling disconnected.

“No,” Bodie replied. He wrapped his arms around Doyle’s waist, resting his chin on Doyle’s shoulder. “Stay with me.”

Doyle sighed. “Already made that choice.” He felt Bodie hug him more tightly, taking the autumn chill away. Doyle studied the spot where they had just made love; it seemed barely disturbed. In spite of the warm embrace, Doyle shivered.

“You want to go home?” Bodie asked.

Doyle nodded. They got to their feet, retrieved their clothing, and dressed. They found their way

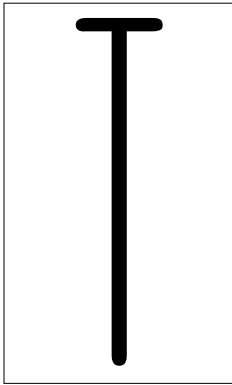
out of the woods and headed back to the car. They climbed in, but before Doyle could start the engine, Bodie reached over to clasp Doyle’s arm. “Ray—”

Tired, Doyle muttered, “What?” He met Bodie’s calm gaze.

“It won’t change me,” Bodie said, voice clear and strong.

Doyle gave him an accepting smile. “I know.” He shook his arm free, and turned the key in the ignition. The car roared to life. He pulled away, driving fast, quickly leaving the woods behind him.

The long trip back to town was spent in silence.



Jane Mailander's story is certainly the most unusual of our Pros pieces, a stirring mix of Bodie and Doyle, Jody and Dil, life and death, modern grief and ancient lament. For those who must know, this is a death story, but for those open to affecting storytelling, this is a celebration of life...

Author's Note: For the purpose of the story, I have telescoped the time a little bit.

he Metro was crowded, but the crowd was silent. The only sound came from the singer on the platform; she had the crowd captivated and she knew it. But she sang only for herself, her heart pouring out of her voice.

Bodie couldn't help but smile as he made his way to the bar; he couldn't have asked for better timing. He ordered a double Glenlivet, keeping his voice low; yet even that small noise seemed to intrude upon

ONE WHO HAS MADE A LONG JOURNEY

JANE MAILANDER

the solitary singer. Bodie turned his back on the bar to give the singer his full visual as well as aural attention, sipping at the neat single-malt and admiring her sleek and beautiful legs. Short tight dress clinging to every line of her, and a body to merit it. She'd hardly changed from the way he remembered her—except for the grief in her face and in her voice, making her private pain a work of art... Bodie's smile faded as he listened to the lyrics she sang: words about loss, the cruelty of love, fate that played games with people's hearts. And in a heartbeat he was back in the ambulance beside the limp, still-breathing remains of his partner—green eyes gone opaque, the pressure bandage unable to stop the red oozing from his temple, oxygen mask obscuring the rest of Doyle's face in as productive an act as sowing seed on the ocean waves—silently begging Ray to die before they reached the hospital.

Ray had been gone the moment the bullet was fired. Would have been worse if they'd managed to keep that thing alive; Doyle could have survived for years, curled in bed like a gangly fetus, fed and oxygenated and cleansed by tubes while Bodie would have fought every court in the land for the right to switch off the cruel machines.

And what would have been the clout of a man's friend and working partner, anyway? After all, wasn't as if he and Ray'd been family—

Again awash in cold grey waves, Bodie downed the rest of his double in a gulp and clenched his teeth as the gold fire blazed a path down his gullet; for a moment the heat drove back the cold. To quickly bank the fires higher, to drown the pain and the singer's words, he let another memory sweep him back to a sunny day and a grassy field...

He had wanted to disappear for a while, to stay away from that bastard Cowley and his traitorous partner for

their roles in his being under suspicion of treason, and in Marikka's murder. He'd especially wanted to get away from Ray; that stupid sod actually thought that some deeper level of understanding would have arisen between them just because they'd started fucking each other. No, better to use this opportunity to wipe the slate, get rid of the baggage, find something new, somewhere new to go.

He hadn't gone far, physically. But it wasn't the sort of hidey-hole they'd suspect, either.

And one hot Saturday afternoon he'd discovered his cricket mob playing in the fields adjoining his flat. He'd thought a match might sweat some of his anger from him, and had inveigled a place for himself in the line-up. Some of the old-schoolers had harrumphed at Bodie's sweatshirt and jeans (when he'd gone to ground, for some reason Bodie had neglected to bring along his white gear), but they knew that Bodie might make the difference between defeat and victory.

Instead, Bodie's team had been soundly trounced by the opposition; none of them had been the equal of Tottenham's bowler. To add insult to injury, the bloke was black as the ace of spades and looked like he weighed a ton—well, blacks were good cricketers, but how the fuck could anyone that size run that fast and throw that hard?

Bodie had been toweling off in a foul mood when he'd heard a soft cheery voice behind him. "You got some good moves there, mate. With a little help you could be brilliant." And he had turned around to face the big black Tottenham bowler.

Bodie wondered if a fight might make him feel better—he needed to do something. "Now why would I want a spade's help?" he'd said coolly.

The rage and retaliation he'd expected never came. There had only been a deep pain in the man's face, the kind of wounded expression Bodie had never seen on a man before and that suddenly, if briefly, had given Bodie the ludicrous urge to apologise.

"Because I'm a hot-shit bowler, that's why you might want it," the man had said softly. "Come on, mate, give us a chance. You're too good a bowler not to want my help."

Bodie'd had to smile at that one; the man's lack of false modesty about his talent was very familiar.

"And I've got to pass it on to someone before they ship me out on Monday." The man's face tightened in reaction to that thought.

Service man. Bodie had thawed a bit at that, mentally elevating the man from arrogant-black-bastard to fellow-soldier. "Branch?"

"Army. I enlisted. Was a job, wasn't it?" The man

had laughed with no humour.

"Where?"

The man's face had stilled. He'd whispered two syllables like a shroud flapping in the wind. "Belfast."

Bodie had felt his own face lose expression. The last of his resentment evaporated before this word that had suddenly bound them together. His mouth had opened and his belly rumbled. "I did a tour in Belfast. With the Paras."

"You've been there?" The man had stared at Bodie, amazed; his "and you're still alive?" had trailed after, not needing to be spoken. "You're a soldier, too?"

Funny how these things worked out. "Tell you what, mate," Bodie had said as if he'd been contemplating this idea all afternoon. "Teach me that spin of yours, and I'll give you a few tips for surviving *The Sow that Devours Its Young*."

The man had smiled at that, as cheerful and friendly as before, and had stuck out a hand. "I'm Jody."

Bodie had taken Jody's hand. "Bodie."

They'd stayed out on Spitalfields until the dark had fallen; then Jody had invited Bodie to "this hot little bar" for a few beers...

Applause intruded, and Bodie blinked; he started clapping also as the singer gracefully descended the small platform and the canned disco music kicked in again. Once again the Metro was a place of laughter and loud talking and clinking glasses.

The singer took her place at the bar next to Bodie and nodded at the bartender, who began to concoct something—no doubt a margarita, Bodie thought fondly, and took the opportunity to see what the handful of years had changed.

Not much change. Her hair was different; a higher, shorter bob than the dramatic black locks he remembered, as if she had shorn herself in mourning. But now there was a pain in her beautiful face that Bodie would feel himself—if only it could get past the indifferent grey lead wrapping him inside.

It had been nearly three years since he'd read the account of Jody's kidnapping by the IRA, and the fucking stupid way he'd been killed—squashed under the treads of the Saracen that had roared to his rescue. John Wayne escaping the Indians only to get trampled by the cavalry. Well, that's war—most of the deaths are stupid ones. Stupid as your best mate getting shot in the head and not knowing when to die, so you ride with him to hospital trying to figure out what to unplug to make him stop breathing—

Fucking stupid way to die. Maybe that's why

I'm here, now.

He opened his mouth and spoke.

"Hallo, Dil. Remember me?"

Dil's eyes seemed intent on the bartender's gestures as he prepared her order. But, "Col," she said in the soft-rough voice that curled warmly in Bodie's gut-level physical memory, "tell Bodie I remember him."

"She remembers you, Bodie," the cheery-faced bartender repeated, still blending the concoction.

Bodie nodded, playing along with the bizarre chaperone. "Col, why don't you be a good lad and ask Dil if she'd allow me to buy her that drink you're making?"

"Be all right if Bodie bought you this drink?" Col asked Dil, who rested her chin on her fist and cast a sloe-eyed glance Bodie's way.

"Tell him I'd like that, Col."

"She'd like that, Bodie," Col said, his face as impassive as a good bartender's face should be.

As Bodie pulled a tenner out of his wallet, the battered card beside it was jostled partway out. Bodie rolled with the pain as he pushed the card back in and paid for both Dil's drink and a refill on his Scotch.

"Col, ask Bodie whatever happened to that bitch he was with that night," Dil said after a tentative sip at the margarita.

"Tell her I don't know and don't care," Bodie replied without the benefit of Col's intervention. He mentally chalked one up to Dil. Deedee—Deirdre?—had been ill-favoured in everything *but* the looks department. Bodie had picked her up here, that night, to make a double-date with Jody and his bird, and in defiance of that bastard Doyle's hold on him. But then he had seen Dil in the spotlight, singing, and the allure of the shrill blonde on his arm had faded before Dil's radiant beauty and sexuality, and before that husky voice that had been the sound of sex. Dil had joined Jody at their table afterward; all that evening Bodie had been acutely aware each time Dil and Jody had kissed and/or felt each other up—and he had sensed an absence within him like an aching tooth every time they'd looked at each other.

That absence was back full-force now, a cold wind aching all the more because he had known life without it.

"She said," Col emphasized, and Bodie blinked, realizing he'd missed the line, "why are you here now?"

Sloe eyes held Bodie's as transfixed as they had been that night, years ago; dark sorrowful eyes that glowed with an inner pain, that had been nothing but sparkling and wild when she'd been with Jody. But for their colour and warmth, Bodie might have been looking into a mirror.

Mirrors. She was the Knight of Mirrors, demanding truth. And it was truth that came out.

"Col," Bodie said without breaking contact with that magnificent misery of eyes, "tell Dil that my soldier is dead, too."

He wished he could take back his words the second he saw their impact in that face. It would have been kinder for him to gut her.

"Tell 'im I'm not a fuckin' charity station, Col!" Dil snapped in a high harsh voice and jerked her head away from Bodie to glare into her margarita.

"She's not a fuckin' charity station, Bodie!" Col snapped, still cleaning a glass; his face was still blank, but his eyes bored into Bodie with an unreadable expression.

Bodie blinked. That backlash of anger had acted on him like a slap in the face or a drench of cold water, lifting him away from his grey thoughts. He stared at Dil, who did not look back.

This was not the Dil whom he had seen that night with Jody. Not the Dil who'd said such gut-splittingly funny, vicious and true things about DeeDee's intelligence and probable hair colour that she'd stomped out in a high screech while Bodie had sat helpless at the table, rupturing in silent hysterics at Dil's witticisms. Not the Dil who'd agreed with Jody that the bereft Bodie might like to come back to their place for the evening.

Not the Dil who, with Jody, had spent that night teaching Bodie the difference between better-than-your-right-hand, wanking-with-a-good-mate, and sex.

Even now the recollection of that night licked at Bodie's insides, warming him with a memory unadulterated by the cold: sucking at those tiny tits of Dil's as she had bared herself; the chuckle he'd given out as his suspicion about Dil had been verified; Jody's big hand in the small of Bodie's back as he'd embraced them both together; the world turning white behind his closed eyes as Dil's incredible mouth sucked him dry while Jody buried himself in her arse, groaning in bliss.

It had been sweet and wild and fierce and tender, and it had frightened Bodie in a way he had never felt before in any bout between a pickup's

legs, male or female. Dil and Jody had been making their goodbyes to each other; it should have been private. They were both men, scarcely monogamous; their sexual arrangement should have been devoid of romantic bliss. And yet their feelings for each other, their sexuality, their innermost selves—their natures—had been generous to overflowing, cheerfully accepting and admitting an acquaintance to share their bond and their sexuality for a night.

Their refusal to leave their powerful emotional rapport out of the bedroom and their ability to read how Bodie was feeling all night long had inspired him. Jody and Dil had left Bodie a lot more than pleasant memories and a cricket pitch.

Bodie had wanted to find something new, somewhere new to go; and that night he had found it. That strange path he had set foot upon with his two guides had led him back to Ray, but via a different route than the one he had always trodden. What he had learned that night had, for the first time in Bodie's life, given him the courage to return and change a bad situation rather than run from it.

He had gone back to CI5 and Cowley within the week. Back to Doyle that first night back. They had spent that night in short talks and long silences, the air reverberating between them in the comfortable wordlessness of their working partnership, no longer rattling emptily from an inability to traverse emotional territory. And when they had parted, they had kissed at the door—the first kiss they had ever shared out of tenderness instead of passion. And, for a moment, Bodie had seen in Ray's eyes and had felt in himself the look that Jody and Dil had shared.

Things had been better between him and Doyle from that time on, stronger; he had felt their rapport reverberate within him every time he and Ray had looked at each other or held each other. He had not known what emotional intimacy could do to sexual compatibility. For the first time he had begun to imagine a future for himself, a life with Doyle after CI5, a permanent place for both of them to live, work they could do together after they'd been demobbed—

Folly. *Vanitas vanitatis*. Nothing like a good swift dose of death to kick you in the teeth with reality, was there?

The look in Dil's eyes told a similar story; one that Time had aged and ripened. But Dil's sorrow was not the dead flat grey that filled Bodie's insides; in her eyes was something that had tem-

pered the pain—something living and green in the middle of a dead garden.

From across the memories, the two survivors warily eyed each other now. There was a taut pride on Dil's face, a tight-lipped glare that dared anyone to think that she needed anyone looking out for her.

"Don't want a fucking charity station, Dil," Bodie said mildly, hiding the fact that just maybe he had come to see her for precisely that reason. "I want..."

What Bodie wanted was presently rotting under six feet of soil. But better that, oh so much better that, than rotting under a white sheet and tubes and needles and machines—and *then* rotting under the ground, while Bodie rotted in prison for performing one last act of kindness for a friend...

Bodie lowered his head to stare into his refill. "I want a friend," he said simply, and took a long swallow of the friend he had left, letting the liquor firefall its way down and once again burn out the grey, for a moment.

But his days with a friend were over, weren't they? He was back to pubcrawls with working mates where everything they said to each other not job-related was shouted in a drunken haze of sentiment, forgotten the next day in the blaze of hangover and the tonic of violent action. Back to sex as a scratched itch; birds and prostitutes and the occasional blowjob in the cottages.

Back to wondering if anyone besides Cowley would pause long enough to throw a handful of dirt on his grave when he finally died. Or if anyone would care enough about him to spit on it...

"All right," Dil said, exasperated.

Bodie looked up, pulled away from his self-absorption, to see Dil descend her stool.

"Well, come on," Dil said without looking behind her.

Bodie watched her leave the Metro. Then he downed the rest of his malt and got off the stool to follow her.

A big hand closed on his upper arm; Bodie turned, ready to blister the hand's owner, and found himself the object of piercing eyes in an expressionless face.

"You do right by 'er, mate," was all Col said in a neutral rumble before he let Bodie go. But the look in his eyes promised what he would do if the other thing happened.

Bodie did not spare Col a second glance as he

left the Metro and saw the briskly stepping figure halfway down the street.

“Dil—”

“Just leave it, Bodie,” she said fiercely, not looking beside her as she strode along, Bodie’s gait easily keeping up with her. “Just don’t say another fucking word.”

So he didn’t. Not one word while they ascended the stairs to Dil’s flat. Not one word while she turned on the lights and made her way to the marigold-gauze curtains surrounding the bed. He followed her after making sure of the locked door.

Dil flicked on the rosy bedside lamps and gave Bodie a look that indicated that he should stay there, and vanished into the prosaically white bathroom abutting the curtained and gold-coloured seraglio atmosphere of the bed-chamber.

Bodie looked around at the flat he had been in once before, three years earlier. The hangings were the same, the bits of bric-a-brac that loaned an exotic flavour to the place.

But now he was being watched by a dead man. He was surrounded by snapshots; shots of Jody, of Dil, of Jody and Dil. One framed shot of a beaming Jody in his cricket whites, perched over the dresser, overlooked the bed itself. And there, at the room divider, hung Jody’s cricket whites.

Dil had turned the place into a fucking shrine. All that was missing were the votive candles—

And what did Bodie have? A card in a wallet, memories of blood and blank eyes.

Here were all these smiling faces. He remembered those smiles. Remembered those mouths on him, those hands...

His cock was starting to stand at the memories. Sweet memories, from a time completely before the leaden wall had crashed down upon him, memories he could treasure for their own sake.

Bodie began to undress. The suit coat first. Then the holster, and the heavy grey metal weight it cradled under his left arm, quickly rolled up in the coat and deposited on the chair seat. If Cowley knew that Bodie had brought the piece along on his leave...But his partner was gone, now he had to watch his own back, take care of himself...but not here. The need was not the same here.

Bodie had just removed his shoes, seated on the edge of the bed, when Dil re-emerged, clad in a filmy robe of some kind; she was beautiful, exotic, and unreachable behind those dark eyes. Sexuality twined round her limbs and hung like Spanish

moss, like the clinging folds of her shift.

Bodie stood up and went to her; he took her in his arms and kissed her. She responded with equal passion, and Bodie could do nothing but respond.

Together the two of them divested Bodie of the rest of his clothing; he stood, feeling every shift and catch of the silken material of Dil’s shift on his bare skin, his lifting cock getting caught in a trailing edge of material. Dil smiled and took hold of the shift in both hands to stroke its silkiness along the silken heat of Bodie’s cock, drawing it across its breadth, pulling it gently to press against the silken smoothness of Dil’s thigh, the cloth going round as if to bind Bodie’s cock to Dil’s leg. At Bodie’s moan of passion, Dil laughed in her throat, and knelt, stroking Bodie at the hips, down the smooth white flanks, digging her nails into the tops of his thighs.

Dil’s eyes met Bodie’s then, dark and shining and flat of anything save passion; his eyes meeting hers were the same. Bodie saw only Dil, felt only Dil against him as his knees buckled and he fell across the bed with Dil following him down, sucking, sucking the marrow from his bones. Sucking out his reason, his mind. The world whirled and tilted around him as one hand stroked Bodie’s chest, his throat, his jaw, where his tongue captured Dil’s fingers and drew them in, sucking wetly on them even as her mouth worked on him, calling up the wild memories, bringing on the white burst of a supernova.

Bodie became vaguely aware that Dil was hovering over him; he blinked his eyes open to find her mouth millimetres from his own; her breath warmed his with the smell of lime and tequila, the essence of his own cum. “Like starting that way don’t you?” he mumbled blearily.

“I always say, Bodie,” and her eyes gleamed, “if you’ve got a good head you should give it.”

“Mmm,” he agreed muzzily, eyes closing again. “Shouldn’t do that, you know. Not polite. Ladies first.”

Dil curled against him, stroking the silken shift material against his smooth bare skin. “There’s time, Bodie. We have all evening.”

Bodie nodded and closed his eyes; his breathing slowed. Dil stroked his chest and cheek, ruffled his hair. She stroked lower, curled her hand round the swollen damp cock where it lolled on a sticky thigh, dozing as peacefully as its master. She bent down to engulf the swollen organ again and suck out the last few little spurts of cum.

It was like an eagle striking. Big broad hands, wide-spread, clapped down on her ribs from behind and hoisted her away from the suddenly-moving body she had been molesting. Dil shrieked in pure startlement as Bodie's weight bore her into the covers. "Gotcha," he hissed, digging his fingers in a little as his body lay down on top of her. "Forgot that, didn't we?"

"You bastard," she wheezed, "can't possibly be that alert after—"

"You can if you learned where I learned." But he had learned in a climate where to be un-alert meant death; it was a survival reflex. Survival—

Bodie flung the shift over Dil's head and pinned it down, baring her back from neck to ankles, blanking his mind of anything save physical sensations. His big hands held her firmly at the waist, gripped...Oh, and how she shivered and gasped at his warm wet open mouth in the small of her back, his tongue delineating each vertebra and rib, himself as slow as she'd been quick to suck him off. He smiled a little before continuing; he'd remembered this particular like of hers correctly. His hands moved to her buttocks, lean, spare little things...he shuddered once as the grey lead wall clanged down, shook his head hard, once, and his hands quickly moved down to her upper thighs.

Beautiful silken thighs, spread open from behind, parting the dark cleft, the hint of the dark pouch beneath. Bodie lowered his head toward the beginning of the inverted V beneath Dil's small skinny arse, burrowing between her legs, under the slight plumpness of the buttocks' cleft. Her body was hot to the touch, soft-skinned, wiry and strong; her own unique musk billowed in the dark place as Bodie reached with his tongue to lick Dil's small velvet sac up into his mouth and engulf it. He felt her moan rather than heard it; gripped her as she writhed beneath him as he supped on her again, sucking her testicles from behind, his head splaying her thighs wide open. She clutched and cursed and twisted, unable to move while Bodie's mouth held her paralyzed.

Finally Bodie let her balls slip free as he raised his head, just enough to seize her arse open with both hands and then to lay waste to it with his mouth. Dil kicked and hissed "oh *shit*, oh *shit*" and arched against the firm hands clamped at her buttocks, but nothing stopped the inexorable push of the wet tongue sliding into that moist, musky cavern redolent with spices...Dil had scented

herself there, in preparation for him.

His cock was interested again, still wet from her mouth and his cum, lifting eagerly to the arse that had made Jody moan so hard, the arse that was nothing like the one he would not think about now. He was with Dil, only with Dil; it was Dil he was mounting now, chewing at her shoulders and neck, hoisting her arse into position...exhaling in long exquisite judders of breath as he slid into her moaning body.

He quivered a little in her, gathering himself; she squirmed deliciously, gasping as he thrust himself to the sinews in her hindquarters. "Oh fuck, Bodie you bastard, you fuck like...like, oh fuck..." She sucked in a long breath and splayed her legs wider.

Bodie's hands were busy on Dil even as his cock kept filling her arse; they stroked silken shift and silken flesh indiscriminately, gripping and pulling taut nipples; fingers wriggled into the tight space between flesh and bedclothes to seize hold of the thick protruding cock and pull firmly.

Dil humped and squealed beneath Bodie, who laughed in lust and fucked her into the bed again. "Bitch," he crooned in her ear, fucking. "My sweet cunt." He pulled her cock hard, again. "So good to fuck, you're so wet, so big for me..."

Dil's response was a wordless wail as her body gathered beneath Bodie's in a rising mound.

Alive. She was warm and supple and alive; her blood pulsed through beautiful flesh, her cock thickened in his hand, her body clutched at his. She was Dil. She was his. She was—

He arched back as Dil bucked and howled beneath him, spraying his gripping hand, as his own lifeblood exploded from him.

He and Ray were in the safehouse at the trainyards, firing out the windows at the faceless army surrounding them. Cowley had turned their location in, had deserted them. This was an Operation Susie; there would be no help for them from any quarter. Unbidden, he remembered the last frame of the film—Butch and Sundance running straight out into the gunsights of an entire army—

Now Ray was the one who was shouting, panicking at being cornered, screaming that they'd best just run out and get it over with quickly, get out now, now!

And Ray was outside, running through the trains, between the bullets being fired at him, and he was after Ray, running, shouting at him to get down, to lie low, his mates were coming to save them.

There, rumbling through the trainyard, toward the men firing at them, a phalanx of his SAS squad, guns out, missiles firing, tanks charging.

Charging straight at Ray, running straight toward them, heedless.

He screamed Doyle's name just as Ray vanished beneath the treads of a Saracen. The tank rumbled on, leaving Ray motionless in a spreading puddle of blood.

He reached Ray's side and turned him over. There was no mark on him but a bleeding mess at his temple, the white of bone and the yellow of brain showing through. Ray's eyes blinked up at him, stared. Begging.

He nodded to those eyes to show that he understood. He drew his gun and slid the barrel into Ray's mouth. His finger squeezed once.

His own head flew apart.

His eyes snapped open and took in the unfamiliar location instantly. He sat up with a silent curse, shaking his head once, and swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

The rosy bed light was still on; Dil still slumbered beside him. His body reverberated with the memory of the sex and the unraveling of physical tension.

It didn't matter. He shouldn't have come here. All he'd done in coming here was to get his rocks off—and all he'd succeeded in doing was to add another gruesome twist to his dreams; Jody's death, now, that turned Doyle into a mess of blood and brains and begging eyes...

There was nothing for him here, it was a mistake to have come. He'd better leave, now.

He dragged at his pants where they were carelessly draped over a chair, ready to get dressed and leave before Dil awoke. The weight of his wallet tumbled from the back pocket into his lap.

Blood, brains, begging eyes...

He fumbled the wallet open like a parched man fumbling off the cap of a canteen. He pulled out the card and stared at the living Doyle.

Ray's I.D. photo wasn't much of a picture; Doyle had hated getting photographed. Staring straight ahead, a grim 'let's get this over with' expression, the curls Met-short, the black-and-white photo giving no indication of hair or eye colour—it didn't look like any of Bodie's memories of Ray's face. It was all he had, and it was already acquiring a battered, frayed look. Dil's flat, plastered from one end to the other with snaps, only emphasized the poverty Bodie held in the palm of his hand.

"Your soldier," Dil's voice came from over

Bodie's bare shoulder.

Bodie nodded, not turning around to acknowledge her. Not caring that his hasty escape plans had been thwarted, and not wondering why he didn't care. "Just a regular dangerous day. Just another villain's bullet finding its mark, just another man down. Nothing special about it. The job got finished with just the one fatality on our side and the one who did it's in custody now." He carefully replaced the worn I.D. card in his wallet and tucked the wallet back into his crumpled pants. "The op was successfully concluded. The goal we sought was achieved. It's over."

Dil rested her chin on Bodie's shoulder and turned to look him in the face; she made no other body contact with him. "You're sorry the gunman didn't kill you too."

Bodie waited a moment for that truth's impact in his leaden center to die down before shrugging. "Doesn't matter." Nothing mattered; nothing could touch him inside now. He couldn't even warm himself with the rage of revenge; Cowley had immediately had Bodie put on 24-hour observation, keeping him from the accused until the man was transferred out of the basement. The old bastard had had a point, Bodie had been forced to concede; it *would* have been a black mark on the organization if they'd tried to explain that the prisoner had hanged himself in CI5 custody after cleverly sewing his own genitals into his mouth.

Dil eyed him very closely. "I wanted to die," she said softly, eyes turning to fall on the immaculate cricket outfit hanging by the room divider. "It was all over. I couldn't even bring myself to hate the man who did it. I wanted to kill myself."

"What stopped you?" Bodie was genuinely curious. He'd spent a night or two himself sitting on the edge of his bed in this fashion, staring at his drawn gun in his hand, feeling none of his involuntary revulsion at the thought of suicide, feeling nothing at all...

"Fergus." Her voice was low, remembering clearly. "The man who'd killed my Jody. He saved my life."

Bodie blinked; turned to stare into her eyes.

He knew the name. Fergus, Fergus...Hennessey, that was it. Yeah, Hennessey had gotten seven years for tweeping one of his old cell-mates. Bodie remembered some of that two-year-old case; he remembered discussing it with Ray, saying that he wished that Hennessey's behaviour would become

a trend. That had turned into a big verbal fight between them over Bodie's cold-bloodedness; as a result, he had wound up telling Ray more about his stint in Belfast that night than he had ever told him before. But he had never told Ray about Jody or Dil; Ray had never learned that one of the people responsible for the change between him and Bodie had been kidnapped and killed by Hennessey and the rest of his bastard friends.

"I love him," Dil said quietly.

"You can't." It was not a question or an accusation Bodie made; it was a statement of fact.

"He came looking for me. Jody had told him about me. Hadn't told him everything about me." Dil's face went blank for a moment, shutting out her pain at what that phrase revealed. "But Fergus took care of me. He tried to keep me safe from his old friends. And when I learned the truth, all of it..." Her eyes blazed, briefly, then were dark and shining; full of tears. "I couldn't bring myself to kill him. I had his gun on him, and he just stood there and waited. But I couldn't pull the trigger." She nodded to the dresser, to the large framed photo of Jody in his cricket whites beaming at her. "He wouldn't let me do it."

Bodie stared into the dark happy eyes of the dead man. No, Jody wouldn't want any death dealt in his name.

"So I decided I would join him," Dil whispered, tears spilling. "I put the gun in my mouth. But Fergus pulled it away and told me to leave. He saved my life.

"He went to gaol for killing that bitch who tried to kill us, the one who used her tits and her cute little arse to get my Jody. He's there now. I visit him. And when he walks out I'll be at the gate waiting for him. He knows that."

Bodie turned and deliberately took hold of Dil's upper arm with one hand, making her look at him.

"Bodie, you're hurting me—"

"You listen to me, Dil," Bodie said softly, something cold bubbling up inside him. "I tried to warn Jody. Now I'm warning you. A lot of those IRA bastards are baby-faces who pour on the charm—and they're the ones who blow up most of the old people and kids, because no one suspects 'em. Dil, don't go near that *fucker* again, ever." He shook her, once, glaring into her wide wounded eyes. "And don't let him sweet-talk you into thinking he's mended his ways. The only way you can reform Ulstermen is the way they 'reformed'

your Jody. Of course Hennessey wanted to take care of you. Pass up a chance to fuck his prisoner's bird? Another victory for the Glorious Cause—"

"That was *after* he saw what I looked like naked!" Dil shouted, yanking her arm free.

Bodie stared, stunned into silence.

"I blew him, before, when he thought I was a woman—but he wouldn't touch me after he'd undressed me, not then or after. But *that* was when he saved me, Bodie—after he'd learned the truth!" Her dark eyes, still tearful, were blazing into Bodie's. "That was when he told me he loved me. That he'd do anything for me."

Couldn't be. Good Irish lads were raised to think mother-killing was less sinful than sex—and that was if the sex was church-sanctified baby-making. Well, all right, so Fergus got a quick lesson in what a walk on the wild side looked like—

"Dil, please. Don't trust him. Don't trust anything he says to you. Ireland is a sow that eats its young. They're scorpions, every man Pat of them, it's in their nature to kill—"

"Scorpions," Dil's face froze, eyes wide, and Bodie stared at her suddenly wild look. "Why did you say that, Bodie, *why did you say that?*" The savage look on her face held Bodie immobile.

He blinked, bewildered. "Just, just a story I told Jody out on the cricket field that afternoon. Heard it when I was in Africa, comes from there. There's a scorpion and a frog. The scorpion wants to cross the river—"

He was stopped by a sight and a sound that should not have been made. But Dil was, indeed, shaking with laughter.

"Dil?"

She only shook her head and laughed harder, louder. She fell back onto the bed, her arms clasped about her flat chest, head rolling back and forth, tears of mirth pouring from the corners of her eyes, laughing louder and louder.

Bodie raised a hand to slap her out of her hysteria, only to have his hand caught and held in both of hers, gripped hard. "Wait, wait," Dil gasped, still shaking. Bodie stared at her; what the hell did this mean?

Finally she stopped shaking and was able to speak. "Now...now I know where Fergus heard it," Dil gasped, weary from her laughing jag. "You told it to Jody. Jody must have told it to Fergus. Fergus told it to me. And now you've returned to close the circle."

Bodie stared, incredulous. Now he understood her laughter. The irony of it all turned up the corners of his own mouth. "Small world," he said wryly.

Dil raised one languid hand and stroked Bodie's side from the bottom of the ribcage to the hip. "All of you, that same story. It must be in your natures to tell it."

He smiled at that too.

"Fergus told me that story, Bodie. I've seen him every visiting day. My Jody died in his custody. But I truly believe, now, that it is not in his nature to kill."

"You believe that." Again, it was not question or accusation.

"I believe it. As surely as it is in *our* natures to survive."

Bodie's smile faded. He looked away. She'd pegged him just that way, when they'd first met. "It was my nature to survive," he said. "It was never a problem before. But now I don't trust myself back on the streets. I just—don't care enough to worry about my life."

And he wondered why he had just said that out loud. There was no one he could have told that to. Ross suspected, of course; Cowley too. But he could not tell them what he had just told Dil. Why her?

He wasn't going to fool himself. He knew he'd never again let himself get as close to someone as he'd gotten with Ray Doyle, knew he'd never again try to reach beyond the matey camaraderie of those who faced death together. All he wanted was to find a reason strong enough to make him want to survive, that was all. All he wanted was something that would drive out the leaden indifference and keep him from that split-second slowdown that would make the difference in his next shootout. That was all he wanted or needed, any more.

"Why me, Bodie?" Dil's voice, level and husky, carved through the layers of cotton wrapping his mind to echo his own thoughts back to him. "Why did you bring the story back to me? Why did you come here?"

The weariness brought on by the sex and the dream and the candor caught up with Bodie. Words fell from his mouth again. "I think...I came here to see...how *you* can live with it." He paused, gathering words together as if they were berries on a picked-over bush, few and far between. No sound intruded on his gathering; Dil did not need to have "it" explained.

Bodie did not look at Dil; instead, he kept his eyes on the large framed photo of Jody overlooking the bed, his beaming expression one that could only be described as complete and utter love—for life, for Dil, for sex, even for his bloody cricket. It was a wise look and a forgiving one, a benevolent guardian that seemed to understand the turmoil in human hearts. Jody's presence in this room had been strong enough to keep his lover from shooting his murderer—

Bodie looked away and glared at the floor, his heart congealing like an alcoholic's liver. Jody was dead, gone forever, rotted into a mess of bones and corruption in a worm-eaten wooden box, and a mountain of photographs wasn't going to change that. In a few years, Ray would look just like Jody, Ray was gone, there was nothing left of Ray, not even such a photo that seemed to hold a fragment of the dead man's personality intact, it was time Bodie stopped this useless sentiment and faced that and got on with his life—

If he could only remember how.

From such thorns and flowers and brambles, Bodie found the words he needed. "I've lost mates before," he said matter-of-factly, turning to look at Dil, "in every mob I've been in. Good mates. I've seen two people I loved shot point-blank right in front of me, before this happened. One of them was the reason I was in Spitalfields that day." There was some small noise that might have been the sheets shifting on the bed. "I got over them both. I survived." He shook his head. "I dunno. Just, can't make myself care about what happens next. Used to be good at that. Can't bounce back this time.

"Tried," he whispered after a long silence. "Tried everything. Worked till I dropped. Fucked myself blind. Made myself not think about it. Everything that used to work before." A short sharp breath escaped him in what would have been a laugh, once. "Now it's Cow's-milk. Maybe that'll help." Single-malt fire in his belly. Golden oblivion. Death in a bottle, just like his old man. If he was lucky...

"Dil, what do *you* do?" he said, unaware of how pleading his voice was at that moment. How had *she* scaled the grey wall and escaped?

"I just live with it, Bodie," Dil said fiercely. "Day by day, by day. By day. That's how I do it. A day at a time.

"I don't do it alone. There is someone else who loved Jody, as I did. Someone who is *not* a scor-

pion,” she said defiantly, glaring into Bodie’s eyes. “Someone who loved me enough to save my life, and to—to save me from something I did. Someone who thought my life was worth preserving. Someone I’m waiting for. I visit the prison and count the days to his freedom.

“In the meantime, I work. I sing at the Metro. I have a margarita.

“And when the pain is too much, I cry. You can’t cry, can you?”

Bodie looked away, lips pinched tightly together. He was sick of every fucking bastard telling him that watery eyes would magically restore his equilibrium and make him feel better about what had happened.

The voice behind his averted head was only a sorrowful understanding. “No. It’s not in your nature to cry, Bodie. You’re the soldier my Jody never was.”

“He was a fucking idiot,” Bodie snapped. “Thinkin’ soldiering’s a job like anything else that pulls a paycheck. You don’t deal with gun-toting zealots in a factory!” He turned and glared at Dil who was now sitting up in bed, brown and naked and beautiful, slim legs drawn up to her chin, sloe eyes on his. His eyes shifted to the beaming gentle face in the big framed photo. Again, unbidden, the memories of those big hands embracing his and Dil’s bodies together, that incredible mouth on him, the soft husky voice that had been a perfect mate to Dil’s timbre and that had been created to voice the raw sounds of human sex... Bodie’s cock twitched and filled, lifting as if to gaze at the photo that had caused its reaction. At all the photos.

All those photos, and not one of Jody in his uniform. Dil was right; Bodie had been right in his assessment that night, so long ago. Jody had never been meant to be a soldier. All that sex, all that life and love and generous carnality—wasted, all rotted away to worm-food in useless, wasteful death—

“He should have stayed home, the stupid shit! He should have stayed down when I told him to!” Bodie’s eyes squeezed shut as the deepest, blackest pit inside him was breached. “He shouldn’t have made me want him dead,” he whispered.

No more. No more death.

He had made love to Nbeli. And to Marikka. And to Jody and to Dil. And when he’d come back from his exile to Spitalfields, he’d stopped fucking Ray and had started making love to him.

All of them were dead now, except for Dil. How

had someone he’d made love to survived? What spark of life did Dil have that would keep death from stealing any more of Bodie?

Sex was to make life, and all Bodie could do was to make death. His cock, his gun, they were all the same, bringers of death. It was all he’d ever been good at, making death.

And Bodie found, very simply, that he didn’t want to make death any more. No more death.

No more death. No more death...

Gradually Bodie became aware that he was huddled on Dil’s bed in a fetal position, his face buried in his knees, and that a strange high voice was coming from him, repeating the same three words over and over. And that Dil’s arms were around him.

Even after the words melted into a wordless high keening sound, Dil did not let go of Bodie. She said nothing. She only held him as a long, tearless, wordless cry unrolled from him; it was the first sound of grief Bodie had made since that day. The first sound of grief he had made since long before that.

The grey lead wall unreeled from around him in a long ribbon of sound, as if it had been loosened by the warmth of Dil’s arms to peel away in a sound of pain.

There, where he’d come from, he could say nothing; what he had loved had been forbidden. But here—

Here, in this shrine that honoured the life and love of a dead man and in which his memory lived yet green, and in the arms of a lover who had let him share her love long ago and who had absolved the man who’d caused her greatest grief—here, he was safe. Here was a place for emotional pain. Here was a place to mourn the death of love.

This was why he’d come here.

Tears, warm and wet, spilled down Bodie’s shoulder and side. Dil had laid her head against Bodie’s bowed head, kissing his ear and temple and shoulder; the tears were hers. Perhaps the anguished sound had triggered them; perhaps they were caused by memories of her own lost soldier; perhaps she was even sorry for Bodie.

Like blood returning to a frozen limb, the leaden numbness inside Bodie began to vanish before the blossoming pain of grief. His voice caught on the pain mid-keen, and continued its wordless lament.

Ray—partner, best mate and best-loved at one and the same time. Three people lost at once. Two

deaths, one after the other: one on the street and one in the ambulance.

And at the end, he'd wanted Ray to die. He'd wanted death.

No more death. Let Ray be the last death he made.

No more death.

"I can't go back," he said quietly, staring into the steam wafting into his face from the teacup wrapped in both hands. Dil, clothed in a light shift and curled in a chair opposite the bed, busy peeling an orange, said nothing. His voice was hoarse from its long cry of anguish. "I can't go back and do what I did. That part of my life is over." He drew in a long hot mouthful of fragrant tea, flavoured by the scents in the air of oranges and buttered toast, and let it warm him to his very core.

The morning light poured onto the bed, golden through the gauze curtains. Bodie felt the warmth against his bare skin, almost as strong as a human touch.

The pain was fresh as a new-minted penny, and as bright and clear-cut; the greyness that had enwrapped him ever since Ray's death had been altered by the alchemy of this place, changed from lead's silent cold indifference into the warm bright resounding copper of grief. He was as grateful for that pain as Cowley must be for his; every twinge of his bad leg reminding him that it hadn't been amputated after all.

It had been the nature of his work that people died. It was in his nature to be a soldier. But it was no longer in his nature to stop feeling when people he loved died.

Perhaps a scorpion could change its nature. Perhaps one who lived with scorpions was not necessarily scorpion by nature, after all. Perhaps he and Fergus were alike.

Dil finished eating all of the orange before speaking. "What will you do now, Bodie?"

He had been thinking of nothing else since before the sun had come up. He'd already rejected the idea of accepting the post as Cowley's aide—that would only mean that he would order people to their deaths. He wanted more; he wanted to repudiate death rather than simply stop dealing it.

And yet it was his nature to be a soldier...

His eyes roved the room, as if looking for an answer. They fell on the chair that still held his clothes. The outline of his wallet was clearly visible

in the pocket of his crumpled trousers.

His wallet, and what lay within. Lifeless gray picture with that glare—

That angry *green* glare.

Bodie started, stared at nothing, his heart thumping wildly once.

He had just *seen* him, wild rust-coloured curls, angry eyes and all. He'd *heard* him—

Bodie, you stupid shit, think!

And there it was. There it was.

Dazed, he stared into his teacup as if reading his own fortune. Then he laughed weakly, weary from the unfamiliar emotional territory he had traversed that whole long night with his guide.

One branch of the service he hadn't tried yet...

Two syllables, a tattered flag raised to flap in a light breeze.

"Oxfam."

And once he said it, it became clear before him.

Get an engineering degree under his belt and he could be abroad again, building dams and bridges instead of bombing them. Helping people feed themselves better; that would lessen the number of starving peasants who turned to terrorism and sniping to fill their children's bellies.

A soldier, who brought life.

Cowley would be upset at his resignation—but not nearly as upset as he would be at Bodie's death on the job caused by apathy for his work and carelessness for his own life.

The studying would give him something to think about, something to focus on, something to work for; something that would occupy him and give his grief sense and meaning.

Oxfam.

That was the sort of solution Ray would have come up with.

Bodie was used to acting once he'd made a decision.

He put his teacup down and stood, stretching, sunlight bathing his naked body from top to toe, feeling cleansed from the inside as well. A quick shower, find his clothes...

Dil stood and approached him. Bodie reached for her, smiling; he caressed her upper arms and kissed her, tasting orange and honey, feeling love for what she and Jody had done for him long ago—and what she and Jody had done for him the night before.

Three years ago they had shown Bodie how to love Ray. Now they had shown him how he could

live without Ray, in a way that would remember and honour him.

The dark sloe eyes that met his were dark and quiet, accepting. He realized that he could see the reflection of his own eyes as well, and that his own eyes were the same way at last.

“Think you were right last night after all, Dil,” he murmured, kissing a strand of her hair and embracing her. “Was a fucking charity case, wasn’t I?”

“I’m a sucker for fucking charity cases, Bodie,” Dil said softly. “Wouldn’t fight them otherwise.”

“M grateful you believe in fucking charity cases.”

“If the charity case is worth fucking,” she said with her best Mona Lisa smile.

He smiled back. “I loved Ray,” he said softly.

“I still love Jody,” Dil replied serenely.

Bodie’s urge to start back home right away faded before a stronger urgency.

As he pulled Dil against the length of his bare body, he saw Ray in his mind’s eye; for the first time since Doyle’s death, Bodie’s vision of blood, brains and begging eyes vanished before stronger memories of Ray dynamic, alive, flashing the ugly chip-toothed grin that always flattened Bodie with its charm, light dancing with evil intent in sparkling green eyes.

And there was Jody on the dresser, smiling, full of love and life.

Something blossomed green inside Bodie, piercing his warmth inside with the pain of tender thorns.

There was nothing dead in this room. There was

no death here. He held love in his arms, and in his mind and his heart.

There was no need for him to hurry back to tell Cowley his plans for the future. No hurry. For now, there was only the present.

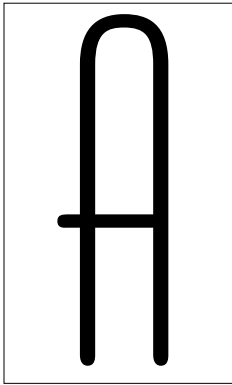
He pulled Dil back onto the bed with him and kissed her curly hair, hands busy stroking the sleek body beneath the light shift. She moved under his hands, covered his mouth with the taste of honey.

Jody beamed at his lovers as the morning light poured golden and warm through the gauze hangings to embrace them both.

Then Siduri, the goddess of the vine, said to him, “If you are that Gilgamesh who has done mighty deeds and whose strength is like no other man’s, if you are he who passed through the land of the Scorpion-Men, why are your cheeks so starved and why is your face so drawn? Why is despair in your heart and your face like the face of one who has made a long journey? Why have you traveled here?”

Gilgamesh answered her, “And why should not my cheeks be starved and my face drawn? Despair is in my heart and my face is the face of one who has made a long journey. My friend, my brother who was very dear to me and who endured dangers beside me, my brave comrade who came to my aid in times of danger and who never deserted me, death has taken him from me. I raged like a madman; I wept for him seven days and nights, and would not give him up to burial until the worm fastened on him. Since he went, life is nothing; that is why I have traveled here.

—Written in cuneiform on clay tablets in Sumeria, approx. 3000 B.C.



Our final Pros piece comes from the fertile and fevered brain of the Glaswegian. But fear not you Pros fen who would turn from a gut-wrenching tale with a black and bleak ending: 'The High Road' is not such! The setting is Glasgow, the time is Christmas and New Year's, and the problem to be resolved is recognizing the gifts bestowed on one Mr. W. A. P. Bodie...

re we all sitting comfortably? No? Well, we'll wait for you. Come, and join us, there's plenty of room for all. Don't sit so far away, pull your chair up closer to the fire to keep the winter's chill from your back. Right, is everyone all settled now? Then let us begin...

Once upon a time, long ago in a country not so very far away, one year was drawing to an end, the new one yet to begin. Like a variation on the old jokes, there was this Englishmen, pseudo-Irishman and a

THE HIGH ROAD

M. FAE GLASGOW

Scotsman, all of them in the same car, all of them heading in the same direction, all of them going ostensibly to the same place. As *deus ex machina*, we of course know that this isn't true, that nothing entertaining is ever so simple.

Mind you, the Scotsman, George Cowley himself, was doing nothing more complicated than going home, to see in the New Year, to have himself a wee wallow in the tastes and smells and sounds of what would always be 'home', no matter how far away and for how long he lived somewhere else. As for Bodie and Doyle, ah, well, yes, they were there as minders, sent along to baby-sit a man neither one of them could imagine as anything less than a Sergeant complete with barking orders and cowering corporals. But even the powers that be are given to fussing over a usefully dangerous man when threats against him have been made, and so George Cowley was stuck with his pair of

baby-sitters. In a perfect world, Bodie and Doyle were the best agents a man could ever wish for. In the real world, Cowley looking at them askance, they could bear an unnerving resemblance to Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee. And then argue over which of them was which.

But the thing is, and the whole reason for telling this tale, is that while it was a simple enough journey for Cowley, there was an entire universe more to it for Bodie and Doyle—and for once, we're not the only ones aware of it, who know that something's coming, something bound for change. There was a tension singing in the air between Bodie and Doyle, not enough for it to be from a real danger, a real threat from outside, but—something. Neither one of them was given to airy-fairy notions, but still, there was a nagging, whining sense that there were things in this life that were going to change beyond recall. Sitting there in that car,

either one of them would be hard pressed to know just exactly what he thought might happen, or what the other would do. But there it was between them: the knowledge that everything had changed, for all it seemed to have stayed the same.

So, it was a journey then, of physical distance and emotional vastness. A journey, then, for us to watch.

And there they are, making their way along a motorway, their car a red blur on the tarmac, rigid steel cutting them off from the flow of the world around them. But this is a tale, a story, so unlike everyone else in their world, we can see inside that shiny shell of metal, we can see them, the softness inside the hardness. We can come in closer and closer and closer, circling them like hawks with a rabbit, until we are near enough to see their every detail, and nearer yet, until we are amongst them, until we are a part of them: until, at last, we can see through Bodie's bright blue eyes...

Outside, the road lay in front of him as if it had heard all those descriptions of roads winding away like grey ribbons amidst the green copses of trees and the gentle rolling of hills. Overhead, the sky was a wash-day blue, the sun an oblique glow of lemon brightness, the clouds scattered and few, punctuated by the dark specks of circling birds. All in all, it was a picture perfect scene, the sort of thing you would find lurking on postcards in the tourist shops of quaint, half-timbered villages. There were even, Bodie noted with considerable disgust, sheep grazing on those gently rolling bloody hills. Cows as well, although Bodie had more than enough of that sort of thing sitting comfortably in the back seat.

Bodie sneaked a peak in the rear-view mirror. Yes, sure enough, there was his own personal sacred cow, George Cowley, serenely flicking through the pages of yet another report, supremely oblivious of everything and everyone around him, for all the world as if he were alone and this car of his drove on automatic chauffeur. Cowley, sitting there as smug and sure as the vicar's wife at Sunday tea, as if all was well in the world, death threats not worthy of the slightest recognition. Just like the two men sent to guard him. So self-contained, so self-assured, so sure of Bodie and Doyle that Cowley, of all people, could relax into civil servant calm. Or into a well-fed cow chewing the cud.

It was enough to make Bodie break into a

scatologically rousing chorus of 'Old MacBodie had a farm'. Well, maybe not actually *enough*, but bloody close. And getting closer with every single pretty farm and hamlet they passed.

The road was still doing its poetic license bit, unwinding itself away into the distance, hiding itself round yet another rolling hill or picturesque stand of even more picturesque trees. To add insult to saccharine, there were even lonely clouds wandering aimlessly over all those vales and hills. All it needed, Bodie decided sourly, was a host of bloody golden daffodils and at least Wordsworth would be happy.

Now there was a poet Bodie had always hated. Writing poems to a bunch of flowers or a bit of sky—stupid, if you asked Bodie, not that many people thought he was the sort you could parse poetry with. I mean, if Bodie came bursting through your front door, all black polo-necks and aimed guns, would you take the opportunity to discuss the finer points of English poetry with him? Well, there weren't many who would.

Expression far more thunderous than those little nursery-white clouds could ever be, Bodie continued his visual evisceration of the oh-so-green and pleasant land, trying to see what the hell could inspire real poetry out of all this nicety. No, in Bodie's considered opinion, Wordsworth was a boring old fart who wrote infantile rhymes about bloody stupid topics—and what was more, Wordsworth never gave a word its worth. Waste of bloody time, making Bodie think of stultifying Wednesday afternoons in stuffy classrooms, bowdlerized books boring him to sleep. Stuff Wordsworth. Give him Donne, or Milton, or even Byron.

Go on, Bodie said to himself, admit it. Right now you'd even put up with warbling old Wordsworth if it'd give you a break from all this.

All this. Good euphemism, that, taking in the pleasantries of England's greenness, George Cowley's abstraction and Ray Doyle's presence. But we know, even if Bodie can't admit it yet, that 'all this' was really 'all Doyle', the other man the source of Bodie's unsettledness. Bodie snaked a poisonous glare at his partner who was sprawled there in his usual abandon, a tousled mess that looked as if it could do with a good wash.

Well aware of Ray Doyle's temper, and knowing that Doyle was in no mood for a joke, Bodie resisted the temptation to sniff.

Not that Doyle was anywhere near as unkempt as he appeared. Bodie knew that Doyle, the rotten sod, would be as sweet smelling as he was foul tempered. In fact, Bodie thought glumly, gazing out the window at the bucolic bliss surrounding him, Doyle probably smelt of all those outdoorsy things, the sort that came ready made, bottled to match the expanse they were driving through. Disgusting, if you asked him.

Of course, if we asked Bodie any such thing and that was the answer he gave us, we'd know he was lying, wouldn't we? As would anyone who ever caught the way Bodie looked at Doyle. As would Doyle himself, no fool he.

Drawing attention to himself, Doyle shifted then, as if anyone that sprawled could actually manage another atom of comfort or could honestly need to stretch like that.

Bodie, stuck behind both steering wheel and the granny in the car in front, was not amused. Typical, wasn't it? Here was Bodie, relegated to driving from one end of the country to the next, and did Doyle do anything to help him? Oh, no, not *that* sodding bastard. Doyle just sat there, dozing on and off, relaxing to within an inch of his life, while Bodie was the one who had to deal with learner drivers and grannies brought out for an airing.

Life, Bodie decided, just wasn't fair.

And the countryside was still about as interesting as a bowl of gruel. About as useful too. Africa, now there was a place with scenery, not to mention a bit more life to it than sheep and the occasional stray rabbit. God, the things he'd seen and done in Africa! Half of it enough to straighten Doyle's hair, and the other half was still enough to bring Bodie a blush of nostalgia. He could remember all of it: the enormous expanse of the sky, the vastness of the land, the magic and mystery of the people, the beauty of the women, the heart-stopping excitement of actually seeing a lion—

And behind him, Cowley closed another file with another tidy little snap, and with another controlled motion, put that file neatly into his conservative brown briefcase and took out yet another orderly file that looked exactly the same as all the other ones.

Bodie was going to scream.

When he hadn't laughed outright at the mere superstition of it all, Bodie had always thought hell would be a place of fire and brimstone, tortured souls and screaming.

Well, if something didn't happen soon, this car would be full of screaming, and Bodie certainly felt like a tortured soul. So that just left the fire and brimstone.

In the back seat, Cowley tut-tutted, so probably some poor bugger was going to really cop it for nothing worse than bad spelling. Bodie looked quickly at his boss, and grinned at the nasty expression frowning across Cowley's face: well, that took care of the brimstone.

And not two inches from Bodie, Doyle moved again, legs splaying a little wider, denims pulling a fraction tighter, Doyle's mouth a breath more inviting than life itself. That, Bodie conceded, took care of the fire. Fire hot enough to burn the fingers off anyone stupid enough to touch. Fire hot enough to make Bodie want to squirm, or make Doyle writhe under him, impaled, penetrated, made no longer an island, inviolate—

And if Bodie kept on thinking like that, he wouldn't last to the next service stop and God knows what he'd do to Doyle if a lay-by offered itself.

Stop it, Bodie told himself sternly. Just because Ray—

He broke that thought off too, with a nervous little peek at his boss. Thinking about what Doyle had done last night was begging trouble, even if Cowley weren't half as much a mindreader as the Squad was convinced. Time, Bodie decided, to concentrate on the driving, think about that, focus on that...

And we all know what happened the first time he had to change gear, hand on the smooth round hardness of the gear shift, fingers warmed by the too-close press of Doyle's denims.

The car swerved, a manoeuvre Bodie always swore blind was deliberate, nipping neatly between an articulated lorry and a tour coach on a day run. Just in time, slewing onto the off lane with not much to spare, the car docked in front of the service café before Cowley had chance to do much more than question Bodie's age, mental health and ancestry.

Doyle, you won't be surprised to hear, just sat there, and grinned. Like the cat about to get the cream.

Bodie swallowed, visibly, and muttered, inaudibly, fumbling in his haste to get out of the car. Or really, in his haste to get away from Doyle, and that smile, that mocking, knowing, wicked smile.

Doyle knew what he'd done last night.
What Doyle had done.
What Bodie had done.

Bodie's hands were trembling as he stood in front of the urinal, his need having nothing to do with the physical, or at least, not this particular call of nature. He couldn't think about last night. Didn't dare. Couldn't face Cowley or Doyle until he had that single, searing memory properly filed and locked away, until later, when he would be decently alone and could take it out and look at it.

Beside him, someone else had taken something out and was looking at it. And was looking at what Bodie had taken out. At the shaking of Bodie's hands. At the movement of his body. At the way Bodie was so stoically—or was it so nervously?—staring straight ahead.

Of course, we all know what was coming, don't we? Bodie, on the other hand—literally, in this case—nearly jumped out of his skin when the man touched him. For a second, it was a toss-up between murdering the sick bastard, or taking him into the nearest cubicle and fucking him into oblivion, giving this stranger what Doyle was taunting Bodie himself with.

Sanity, in the form of a complaining Cowley, came to Bodie's rescue.

"You're worse than a two-year-old, Bodie—it's not an hour since we stopped the last time."

"Sorry, sir," Bodie said calmly, tucking himself away and zipping up, making very sure that he did *not* look at the man who had been right beside him and was now several feet away, as innocent as the day was long. "Must've had too much tea while I was waiting for Doyle this morning." Waiting for Doyle, in his kitchen, pretending nothing had happened, nothing said, nothing done, keeping up the façade even while Doyle had wandered round his own kitchen in gaping dressing-gown, white terry parting to show what was on offer. Temptation personified, an incubus to haunt Bodie by night, a devil to tempt him by day, that was Doyle.

And that there behind him was Cowley, staring at him with frowning concern, the repetition of his question hanging in the air.

"No, I'm fine, sir."

"I'm not so sure—"

"No, listen, I'm fine, all right?" Bodie interrupted, sounding more annoyed than was wise with Cowley. "Really," he added, much more reasonably. "Just a bit of a headache." That didn't

seem to go down too well, and Bodie could kick himself for coming up with that old chestnut, especially since he wasn't a week from his last concussion. "I was over at Doyle's last night, had a bit more than I should've." And let the old man think he was talking about having a bit too much to drink.

"The night before a drive like this—and you were up to all hours boozing? Och, Bodie, after the amount of money I've spent on your training, you should know better—"

Quite comforting, really, to have Cowley droning in the background, a cross between a headmaster and an irritated uncle. "Yes, sir," Bodie muttered where appropriate, and with the appropriate mix of obedience and regret, interspersing his automatic responses with the occasional, "you're absolutely right, sir," just to make it sound as if he was listening.

Of course, the only thing he was really paying any attention to was what had happened last night, and what had not happened last night, and then there wasn't room in his head for even that, for there was Doyle right now, leaning against the car, jacket just long enough to make a statement of his arse.

Oh, god, Bodie thought, how the hell was he supposed to get through this? Bloody hours more in the car, and there'd still be no relief: just over eight more days with both Cowley and Doyle, and not a second to himself. Not devils with pitchforks then: his own personal hell was going to be all fire and brimstone. And judging by the smouldering gaze levelled at Bodie by Doyle, it was just going to get hotter.

"Since you seem to be in such a good mood, Doyle," Cowley said drily, making both his subordinates wonder just how clearly he could read them, "you can do the rest of the driving."

Doyle, needless to say, didn't bother commenting, simply walked round the car, brushing against Bodie with every appearance of pure happenstance, his casualness a work of art.

Even now, sitting in the car, the road stretching out in front of them again, Bodie could still feel the pressure of Doyle's body caressing him for that moment. He took the tactile memory out and played with it, reliving it, Doyle's every move, every look, that unmanaging, inflammatory knowingness lingering in green eyes. Bodie might want to call it purest seduction, but there was no

hint of purity to the way Doyle had looked at him, nor the way he had moved. Impure seduction, then, utter seduction, supreme seduction—

And all the litanies of all the words in the world weren't going to change the fact that Bodie was sitting there, his cock hard and aching, his heart far too soft and aching all the more. Bodie wanted, quite desperately, to look at Doyle, but from the passenger seat, he couldn't see Cowley in the rear view mirror, so God only knew what the old bastard was doing. Going over the way Cowley had looked at himself and Doyle, Bodie very nearly shivered, as if someone had walked over his grave and that would be more than just an old adage if Cowley ever found out what his two top agents had done last night.

Just thinking about it—well, judging by the way Bodie fidgeted in his seat, even just thinking about it wasn't a good idea. Just thinking about it made him want to stop the car and get out, to run and run and run. Like Wordsworth's bloody cloud wandering lonely over vale and hill, moving and moving and moving. Anywhere, as long as it was in the opposite direction from Doyle. A long way away from that luscious body, and a mouth that was an engraved invitation.

RSVP: as if poor Bodie had any choice, the way his body was tying itself in knots. Sitting there, too close to Doyle, too close to Doyle's heat, too close to the night before.

Bodie crossed his legs, and began running his mental checklist of all items required to maintain the weaponry and ensure the survival of an entire deployment of SAS men. It didn't help, much, but he kept his hands to himself, and his eyes firmly focussed on the bland road ahead. Best of all, he did nothing at all to feed any of Cowley's speculations and wonderings. The question is, though, if Bodie's fine act of evasion doesn't stop you and me from guessing what was going on, would it be enough to fool Doyle? We can watch and wonder, but Bodie wasn't going to risk so much as glancing at Ray Doyle.

Hours had passed, the motorway transitions made, the border crossed, the gentle hills giving way to more vigorous landmarks, mountains rising purple and grey in the ever diminishing distance. In the back seat, Cowley was sitting up that bit straighter, eyes brighter, the beginnings of a smile hovering round his lips, the entire effect changing

him from the blandly dangerous Whitehall civil servant into a man coming home.

"See that?" Cowley said suddenly, pointing ahead into the faded and discoloured distance. "See that mountain? That's the first mountain I ever climbed."

Bodie did finally look at Doyle then, secure that all he'd see was his own amusement and bemusement mirrored back at himself.

"Is it, sir?" Doyle said blandly, not one twitch betraying his humour as his boss' accent grew stronger. "Fond of mountain climbing, were you?"

"Hated it with a passion," Cowley replied. "It was when I was in the Boys' Brigade, and it didn't do to argue with Mr. Skilling about the climbing of mountains or anything else."

"So that's where he got it from," Bodie muttered almost soundlessly, barely audible to Doyle, decorously discreet enough for Cowley to ignore his insubordination. "Always knew he must've had a role model."

Not many people would have realised that Doyle was verging on outright laughter, but Cowley would have been one of them, if he'd been paying the slightest attention to Doyle as opposed to the verdant land around them. Keeping his face perfectly straight, Doyle asked: "Did you do a lot of outdoors activities in the—what did you call it?"

"The Boys' Brigade," Cowley replied. "Oh, aye, climbing mountains, gardening for old folk, helping on farms, going doon the watter, dances with the lassies from the Women's Institute."

Talk about being spoiled for choice?

Visions of kilts dancing in his head, Bodie said, "Dances, sir?" at the same moment Doyle said, "Doon the watterr?"

The accent had receded by some ten years, chipping the never perfect Home Counties veneer, but the laugh was as dry as ever. "One at a time, one at a time. Dances, Bodie, aye, and in full Highland dress, right down to our skean dhus. And doon the watter, Doyle—paddlesteamers down the Clyde, on summer afternoons with the wind in my face, and hot pokes of whelks on the shore afterwards."

"Pokes?" Doyle asked, while Bodie contemplated the mental image of Cowley in a kilt swinging round the dance floor.

"You're an ignorant lot, aren't you?" Cowley was saying, more or less rhetorically. "Pokes, as in paper bags."

It was more than Bodie could resist. With a sly look at the former policeman sitting beside him, he said: "As in a pig in a?"

"Aye," Cowley replied with just as sly a look. "As in a pig in a poke. Mind," he added almost absently, actually craning his neck to see if he could see any more memories from years long past, "the pair of you had better get used to a fair few new words if you want to understand what folk are saying to you." He looked at them sharply for a second, then added, only half joking: "Or maybe you'd be best left in ignorance of *that*."

"Not to worry, sir," Bodie said smugly enough to get right up Doyle's nose. "The natives'll be friendly to me. Unlike Doyle here, I'm not really a Sassennach."

"Don't you kid yourself, mate," Doyle said darkly. "They don't like us lot up here, and they'll eat you up for breakfast."

"And then spit you out again afterwards," Cowley added with equal measures cheerfulness and mendacity. Any second now, and he'd start telling them all about hunting the haggis.

"Nah, they'll be nice to me," Bodie was saying, then deliberately dropping the southern accent cultivated so painstakingly: "Up here, they don't mind a bloke being Liverpoolian, but. They won't have owt against me for coming from Liverpool."

Cowley replied drily, "It wasn't your home town I was thinking about."

"Yeh," Doyle added cheerfully, "it's your big head and big mouth he's worried about."

There were a million witty comebacks to that, a thousand things a man could say, and Bodie would've said all of them, but Doyle, sly and wily as always, chose that moment to scratch, indelicately.

Bodie could swear those bloody jeans actually got tighter after that rude little pretence at scratching, and he knew for a fact that his own trousers were tighter again, arousal stinging him.

Christ, but he was in a bad way! Determinedly, Bodie forced himself to concentrate on what was outside the car, not what was inside it. In the background, he could hear the cheerful sound of Doyle enjoying himself, and the warmth of Cowley's voice as each new landmarked memory revealed itself. Could almost feel the warmth of Doyle's body itself, reminding him of when they'd swapped the driving, harking back to last night, and what they'd done.

And of course, knowing Bodie as we do, none of us are going to be surprised by the way he avoided that particular thought like the plague.

The city itself was in sight now, spires and steeples and towering blocks of flats reaching skyward over the low mass of tenements, red and gold sandstone catching the light, black and dark grey tile roofs devouring every atom of brightness. Random patches of green interrupted the dourness of the roofs and played off the richness of the cleaned sandstone. In the back seat, George Cowley had shed half a century, peering out the window as excited as a seven year old.

"Would you credit it?" Cowley murmured, more awe in his voice than even the Queen herself could inspire. "Would you take a look at *thon*."

Even Bodie couldn't resist that. He turned, looking at Doyle, who met his stare longer than a driver ever should.

"Changed a bit, has it, sir?" Bodie asked casually, the better to hide the unnerving embers of warmth Doyle's eyes had woken in him.

"A bit? It's scarcely recognisable! Here, Doyle, get off here—"

Yes, well, Doyle could 'get off' anywhere, anytime, any place, but Bodie was willing to concede that Cowley was probably referring to getting the car off the M74, though that didn't stop Doyle from giving Bodie a sidelong, suggestive, glance.

"Here, sir?" Doyle said with enough innocence to make Cowley suspicious, always supposing Cowley hadn't been so enraptured with the rediscovery of his own city. They were in the city proper now, Doyle deliberately choosing main streets instead of cutting through on new roads that hid half the city. Cowley was drinking in the view like whisky, and the finest single malt at that.

"See that?" Cowley was demanding, pointing at an elegant curve of red sandstone buildings, their carvings ornate and their windows elegant. "Last time I was here, thae idiots in the Council were threatening to pull that down."

"Thank God they didn't, then," Doyle said fervently, half an inch from both blasphemy and outright cheek. "Would've been a tragedy."

"Ach, you young yins, no sense of history, that's your trouble."

It wasn't Bodie's trouble, not by a long chalk. His problem was a bit more basic than that, and he for one would quite happily have erased all past

history, his and Doyle's for choice.

Which leaves us wondering, yet again, just what had been going on between these two. Wondering what could have Doyle so mocking, and Bodie thrown so badly off balance. And going by the expression on Cowley's face, the lure of architecture might yet fade in favour of working out what the hell was going on with his two favourite agents.

Somewhat unexpectedly, it was Doyle who came to Bodie's rescue, making it obvious that this was indeed a rescue, an unobtrusive notice that Cowley had nothing to worry about, that Doyle and Bodie were still a team, still partners. Of course, if Doyle thought that was going to put Cowley off the trail for good, then he was too damned stupid to be in CI5.

"Is it along this road, sir?" Doyle had asked with spurious naivety, glancing at Bodie as he did.

"Considering the pair of you were given a map, I should think either one of you could answer that, Doyle." Still, Cowley seemed content enough to let Bodie's abstraction pass, and to ignore the obvious tension between Bodie and Doyle. But he gave the pair of them another questioning glower before dismissing them from his gaze, his attention immediately flowing outwards, to where shops and tenements and churches were an ever-changing backdrop to the people crowded on the pavements.

It didn't take long before Bodie had his recalcitrant body under control again, and it took even less time before the new one-way system had Doyle threatening to completely ballistic. Bodie could make out enough of his partner's mutterings to hope that George Cowley couldn't decipher a single word.

"No, no," Cowley said aggrievedly on their third by-pass of what had once been the fanciest Co-op in the city, "it's not along here. I thought you were supposed to have read the map, Doyle, not wasted your time just looking at the pretty pictures."

"Chance'd be a fine thing," Doyle murmured, echoing some of the pithier comments made about the so-called picturesque beauties of the city. "Yes, sir," he said more loudly, trying yet again to see if it was possible to get there from here, finally conceding defeat and taking the long way round, traffic more of a threat than foreigners after Cowley's blood.

"Up here, up here," Cowley suddenly said,

pointing, such uncommon animation enough to make even the most hardened agent snigger.

"Always supposing the stupid one-way system'll let us," Doyle said quietly to Bodie, ignoring the fact that gentrification hadn't finished strangling this particular area yet, the tenements here still blackened stumps standing monument to an industrial past clung to with something akin to nostalgia, and the streets then still a warren of people and cars following the natural path they'd taken since before Cowley was a child. "And always supposing Myer hasn't left any little presents for us."

Automatically checking the street for safety even as he took in the soothing symmetry of the buildings under their layer of murk, Bodie only nodded, absently.

Doyle almost missed a parking place, he was so busy doing a double-take at Bodie's quietness. Anyone else, confronted with a Bodie gone quiet—with anything other than temper, that is—would have at least enquired if Bodie was all right. But all Doyle did was leave Bodie to stew over whatever was troubling him, and then lean against the side of the car while Bodie gathered up all the luggage. Bodie distracted by both thought and deed, Doyle took a good, long look at his partner.

Sharper eyed than us, it would be impossible for Doyle not to notice the awkwardness crowding Bodie's limbs into atypical clumsiness. It would be impossible for anyone but the legally blind to mistake that look of careful control, and the way Bodie wouldn't, quite, look directly at Doyle. And it was very telling, the way Bodie would glance, quickly, oh, just for the scantest second, when Doyle moved, just so, and posed, just so.

Only those with something to hide would ignore the way Doyle was standing there, and Bodie's looking away told Doyle a good half of what he needed to know and that sharp mind of his was well up to the task of working out the rest.

"You're here to mind me," Cowley said sharply, giving Doyle an even sharper look, his glower excoriating Doyle's lissome pose propping up the car, "not pick up customers. Stand up straight and button your shirt before the local polis arrest you for soliciting."

Now that got a grin from Bodie, one commensurate with Doyle's frown.

"You heard him," Bodie said, sweetly sarcastic, even though he still wasn't looking any lower than

Doyle's chin, "you'd better clean yourself up, you little strumpet."

"Strumpet?" Doyle said, climbing the stairs behind Bodie. "That's a bit old fashioned."

"Tsk, tsk," Bodie tutted a bit breathless, struggling up the second flight of stairs like a sherpa up Everest, "you young yins, no sense of history, that's your trouble."

"Oh, that's brilliant, that is," Doyle replied, pausing on the half landing so that Bodie could catch up, "can you do a Scottish accent?"

"Not round here I can't. Not without having a lobotomy first to make me stupid enough to try it on the natives."

Whatever snappy reply Doyle came up with for that, we'll never know. George Cowley might have a bad knee, but he hadn't had to bother with luggage, or locking cars or anything but making his way up stairs he was willing to bet had steepened in the years since he'd been here last, so he had reached the top flat before poor Bodie could lug everything up the stairs and was shouting down at them before Doyle could unleash yet another witticism.

"Are you two planning on showing face up here, or are you just going to have yourselves a wee bit holiday for a week?"

"Coming," Doyle shouted upwards.

"Running," Bodie gasped, "all the way."

"Sir," Doyle finished for him, generously taking Cowley's briefcase to lighten Bodie's load by all of a couple of kilos.

Top flat, thin, cool sunlight streaming through the huge skylights, whitewashed walls brightening the stairwell, black door with brass handle, gleaming name plate, "Cowley" engraved on it in the stylised formality of Charles Rennie Macintosh, the letters softened by decades of polishing and wear.

Behind the double door, they could hear vague noises, and Doyle, both out of habit and because they were supposedly here to protect Cowley, slipped his gun into his hand, keeping the weapon discreetly out of sight but still ready for use.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," they heard, and a door opening, this flat retaining the old-fashioned solid outer door to guard the stained glass inlays of the front door itself. Heavy locks turning, and the heavy black door finally opened.

Well, of course you'll have guessed who it was Cowley was coming to see, won't you?

"If it's not George," old Mrs. Cowley said, "and

his two young men. Come away in, boys, come away in."

"Is that gingerbread I smell, Mum?" Cowley was saying as he went through the door.

"Mum?" Bodie mouthed at Doyle.

"Mum?" Doyle mouthed right back. "Suppose even the old bastard had to call her something," Doyle said quietly, dropping Cowley's briefcase on top of the suitcases.

"Yeh, I know," Bodie said, taking a good look round the square hall, gauging any vulnerable spots, marking areas of good defensibility, only then being pleasantly surprised by the robust plants and delicate lace covering the hall table, heavy winter coats hung on mahogany coatstand, black umbrella in burnished brass urn. "Just think, there was even someone he called Dad."

"Not him—" Doyle said, carefully quiet, "I told you he was an old bastard."

"Actually, laddie," a stern voice snapped at him like a whip, "he's neither, although if you use language the likes of that in my house, you'll be out that door so fast your head'll spin."

"Always said he was like something out of *The Exorcist*," Bodie said cheerfully, turning his charm on full for the benefit of the white-haired woman and for the annoyance of his partner.

"And that'll be enough of that an' all, laddie," Mrs. Cowley told him in no uncertain terms, voice only slightly undermined by age. "Away and wash your hands, and then come on ben the living room, and you can have yourselves a nice wee cup of tea."

"Yes, Mrs. Cowley," Bodie said, feeling just like the obedient schoolboy his teachers had wished he would be.

"Yes, Mrs. Cowley," Doyle repeated, sounding just as close to insubordination as he usually did.

As even the most minor of one-upmanship was too good a game to be avoided, Bodie slipped past Doyle, grinning at his partner as he claimed the bathroom first. Washing his hands with soap that smelled of lavender, Bodie cursed his treacherous mind that had so blithely 'forgotten' that Doyle would just come in behind him, the two of them crowding into the small room with its jumble of claw-foot tub, old-fashioned high cistern toilet, wash-handbasin, small table and upright wooden chair where the towels were piled, yet another source of lavender.

"Nice," Doyle said, innocuously, but in the

mahogany rimmed mirror Bodie could see Doyle, could see the lasciviousness in those eyes, could work out where those eyes were looking, and it wasn't at the muslin bag of lavender sitting on those towels.

"Give over," Bodie snapped. "Get your brains out of your balls and back in you head where they belong, Doyle, or I'll—"

"Or you'll what, Bodie?" Doyle asked silkily, pressing close enough that Bodie thought now would be just the perfect moment to escape to the other side of the room. "Come on, Bodie, what'll you do to me?"

And the answer to that was what Bodie was scared of. "Oh, just shut up," Bodie snapped unpleasantly, this taking his fear out on Doyle so much better than looking inside himself. "Come on, get a move on, Mrs. Cowley's waiting for us."

Silent now, Doyle leaned back against the sink and simply looked at Bodie, the knowingness in his eyes proof that when it came to Bodie, Raymond Doyle didn't need anything as clumsy as words. Gracefully, his body an epic of poetry in motion, Doyle straightened up, and came closer, step by step, to a Bodie frozen in place by the knowledge in Doyle's eyes and the fear in his own.

"Fair enough, Bodie," Doyle said quietly, his breath touching, tinglingly, on Bodie's cheek. "You just let me know when you're all grown up and ready to face the world, all right?"

Bodie didn't nod, wouldn't even concede that much to Doyle right now, refused to admit that much to himself. What they'd done last night was crowding him, cowing him, and all the certainty and truths in Doyle's eyes were like nails in his coffin. Bodie knew he should deny all this, make it into a figment of Doyle's twisted imagination and warped worldview, but he couldn't lie that much. Not to Doyle, who already knew the truth. Not to himself, who feared the worst.

"Weird, isn't it?" Doyle was saying, his breath smelling faintly of the After Eights they'd picked up on their last stop on the way up, and Bodie was waiting for Doyle to bring out all the sordid details of the night before. "Yeh, weird," Doyle said again, his voice a sigh. "We've got our boss sitting there waiting for us, and it's his mum who's got us doing what we're told."

"Probably just the shock of it," Bodie said, not really thinking about what they were saying, too concerned with what was remaining unsaid,

annoyed with himself for floundering like a teenager, "you know, discovering that even the old bastard has a mum like the rest of us."

Mrs. Cowley's less than dulcet tones ricocheted through the flat, something about were they in there washing their hands or using up Niagara Falls.

"At least now we *really* know where he gets it from," Doyle said, pushing past Bodie, sparing Bodie a sympathetic smile.

"Yeh, yes, I suppose we do," was all Bodie said as he followed Doyle, his attention consumed by the clench and flex of the most delectable arse he'd ever seen.

It was a thought and a knowledge he couldn't escape: he could have that arse if he wanted it. Not, perhaps, the best thing to be thinking when going in to have tea with the boss and the boss' mother, but Bodie could no more put all thought of Doyle from his mind than he could stop breathing.

Mrs. Cowley had already plied her son with tea, and apparently subscribed to the opinion of mothers throughout the world: her boy needed feeding up. Poor Cowley, sitting there with a cup in one hand, a slab of gingerbread and butter in the other, and a tea plate on his lap, the mountain of impressively thick sandwiches threatening to come down like an avalanche.

"And you, laddie," Mrs. Cowley was saying, to Bodie, looking at him as if she could see right through him to every dirty secret he'd ever had, making him squirm. Expecting the worst, hearing instead only an innocuous: "You'll be hungry yourself, won't you?"

Well, of course he was: fear and tension always made Bodie hungry. "I am a bit peckish," he told her, giving her the benefit of his most charming smile, hiding those self-same dirty secrets behind the sweetness of his smile.

"A bit peckish?" she said, a wealth of disbelief in her voice and in the way she looked at Bodie's solid frame. "I would've thought famished would be more like it for a growing lad like you."

And you could take that any way you want to, Bodie thought, sucking his stomach in, not quite checking to see if Doyle was looking at him.

"It's all that energy he uses up, Mrs. Cowley," Doyle said, passing Bodie the plate with the sandwiches. "He needs to keep his strength up."

Christ, but he wished Doyle would stop doing his 7th Cavalry bit, putting Bodie ever deeper in

debt and making him ever more uncomfortable. Why couldn't the bugger be pissed off with him like any other decent human being would? Or, Bodie reconsidered, why couldn't Doyle just take it out on him like any other decent human being, instead of coming over all nice and unnerving everyone. Especially Bodie, who had good cause not to trust Doyle when Doyle was doing his impersonation of the classic Barbara Cartland hero; Bodie, after all, had seen Doyle in action with everyone from birds in pubs to yobbos on the street.

And that, in a nutshell, Bodie thought morosely, still stirring his cup of too-strong tea, is the problem. He *had* seen Doyle in action too many times for either of their good—just look at the way Doyle had been with Anne Holly. Now there was an experience designed to instil confidence in anyone.

“Are you deaf?”

It dawned on Bodie that the question, as well as the stares, was aimed at him.

“Sorry,” he said, “I was a million miles away.”

“So I see,” Mrs. Cowley said tartly, rescuing his cup from the ravages of his stirring spoon. “Here, have one of thae sandwiches Raymond’s given you.”

Raymond? Already? God, Bodie must have been farther away than he thought if Doyle had weaseled himself in on first name terms already.

“And if you’re going to sit there like a doolally-dip, at least give the plate to those that want some.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cowley,” Bodie said, wishing the old woman didn’t have quite such a talent for making him feel like a five-year-old idiot. “I’ll have a couple of sandwiches myself,” he added, determined to gain the ground he’d lost to Doyle, “and that home-made gingerbread looks great. You must be a good cook.”

All that got him was a twinkle in amused blue eyes and a glimmer in eyes that were the same colour, only less faded by the years.

Who would think that tea could take so long? Who would have thought that sitting here on a sofa, not ten inches from Doyle, could be so uncomfortable? Or that it could ever be so difficult to think of a single harmless word to say with those green eyes ready to turn and look at him?

It would have been more entertaining watching paint dry, and a lot less awkward, but finally Mrs. Cowley was satisfied that not only had they all eaten and drunk their fill, but that no-one could

fault her hospitality. With a briskness almost equal to her son’s, she started on the table, piling dishes up, her hands shaking a little as she lifted too heavy a load.

“Mum, Mum,” Cowley said, “why for are you doing that when you’ve got me here and I’ve got two of my lads with me? Here, Bodie, you take them from my mother, and Doyle, you can check all the arrangements.”

Doyle was on his feet immediately, all lithe grace and reassuring smiles aimed at Mrs. Cowley, and beside him, Bodie felt like the proverbial bull in the china shop.

“I’ll be in through the kitchen in a minute, Bodie,” Cowley said, looking at him levelly, Bodie feeling ever more out of kilter. “I’ll have a word with you then.”

Carrying a stack of good china and crumbs into the kitchen, Bodie knew how Daniel had felt walking into the lion’s den. Maybe if he was quick enough, he’d get the washing up done before Cowley had finished settling his mum or doing whatever the hell he was doing. The kitchen, obviously, had been modernised far more recently than the bathroom, all mod cons here, so it looked to Bodie as if Mrs. Cowley had decided what she wanted done to her flat and public policy could just go whistle. The sink was made of all modern materials, but its design was old-fashioned, reminding him of his own Gran’s house, and that had had the same smells of lavender and baking, and the same strength of female voice ruling the roost, making this place both oddly like home and all the more alien in contrast to his own early abode. He rooted around, found the washing-up liquid, and set-to with a will: if he was quick enough, he would actually manage to get out of here before Cowley came in after him, could postpone whatever the hell it was Cowley was going to nail him with. He was on the very last tea plate, two minutes from being home free, when the kitchen door squeaked, and we all know who just had to walk in, don’t we?

Wrong. It was Doyle again, examining the window latch, leaning out the open glass to see if there was a convenient drainpipe or anything else that someone could climb up. “Small wonder Cowley wasn’t worried about staying up here,” Doyle remarked. “It’d be easier to get into the Tower of London than get in one of these windows.”

Ah, blessed relief: they could talk about the job.

“D’you think there’s much chance of that lot really coming after Cowley?”

“Hard to say, really,” Doyle replied, going through the kitchen drawers, noting where sharp knives, pepper and other possible weapons were. “I mean, Myer was a maniac—”

“No, really?” Bodie said, wide-eyed and breathless. “Who ever would’ve guessed!” he exclaimed, expression wry as he referred back to the German terrorist Bodie had captured, literally single-handedly.

“Yeh, amazin’, innit?” Doyle replied, doing a credible impersonation of the befuddled and impressed Man on the Street. “Turns out Myer’s brother is even more of a loony than Myer, and when someone like that says he’s out to get his revenge for Cowley getting his brother jailed for life...”

“You do what the Minister tells you, take along protection, and while you’re at it, you kill two birds with one stone by making sure that the protection is the bloke personally responsible for nabbing Myer in the first place.”

“Which is why we’re stuck here in the wilds of Glasgow for Christmas and New Year,” Doyle said, going through the cupboards with scant regard for privacy, training taking over where good manners should leave off. “Worst thing is,” he went on, voice muffled from being in the cupboard beside the fridge, emerging to fix Bodie with a pointed look, “baby-sitting Cowley’s really fucked up my plans.”

Scowling, Bodie picked up the nearest plate and started scrubbing at it, never mind that it was good willow-pattern china nor that he’d already washed it once.

“Come on, Bodie,” Doyle said, right beside him, pushing just hard enough, able to see as clearly as we that Bodie was close to erupting into honesty. “What’re you getting yourself so worked up over?”

“Oh, that’s great, that’s fan-fucking-tastic,” Bodie said, stung, temper getting the better of what little common sense he had where Doyle was concerned. “You turn the world upside down, and then you complain because I’m just the least bit bothered because my partner’s just announced he wants me to fuck him, and then he wants to fuck me after. Oh, no, nothing in that to make a man angry, is there?”

“Might be,” came the carefully moderate reply, Bodie’s temper enough to make even Doyle wary.

“Might make some other bloke angry, but that’s not your problem, is it?”

It was a wonder the tea plate didn’t crack, the way Bodie slammed it down. “No,” he all-but snarled, voice rising inexorably with every word, “my fucking problem is standing right here beside me trying to have a heart-to-fucking-heart with our boss in the next room with his *mother* for Christ’s sake!”

“There’ll be none of that language in this house,” Cowley said coldly.

Typical, Bodie thought. Bloody typical. Doyle starts it and I get the blame.

Of course, if he hadn’t had his voice raised, they might have heard the door creak, and then they wouldn’t be standing here worrying just how much and precisely what Cowley had heard.

“I could hear the pair of you through a closed door and two rooms away,” Cowley was saying, Bodie and Doyle eyeing each other nervously, both suddenly back on the same side in this dispute. “And if I could hear you, then so could my mother.”

Which still didn’t tell them how much Cowley had heard: just their voices, the occasional word, or every damning syllable?

“There’ll be no blaspheming or foul language in my mother’s house, d’you understand that, the pair of you?”

Cowley barely waited for their agreement, continuing on, lashing them with the sharp edge of his tongue. “And you, Doyle, I thought I had given you a job to do, or are you planning on becoming a gentleman of leisure?”

“Almost finished, sir.”

“Almost isn’t going to keep Herr Myer from coming through that window, is it?”

Now didn’t seem the propitious moment to point out that he had, in fact, already checked that window.

“All right, all right, you know as well as I do that Myer hasn’t even entered the country—at least as far as Customs are concerned. And aye, we know perfectly fine well his threat is probably nothing but a bag of hot air. But I’ll not have my mother put at risk because the pair of you are in here arguing like a matched set of hysterical fairies.”

Bodie and Doyle didn’t dare betray themselves by so much as glancing at each other, although they were both thinking the same thing, going through

the same nervous churning of their bellies. At best, this was a warning that Cowley was on to them and they had best be careful. At worst, this was a warning that as soon as they were safely back in London—or as soon as replacements were sent up from London—they'd be out on their ears, fired as security risks. They both stared straight ahead, giving nothing away.

"Right, you, Doyle, get on with earning your pay. And you, Bodie," Cowley said as the door swung shut behind the departing Doyle, "I want a word with you."

Oh, joy, Bodie thought, half expecting to be chucked out on the spot. He wants a word with me.

"Now, I don't know what the blue blaze's going on between you and Doyle, but you've been wandering around all day like a wet weekend in Largs. Either that, or you've been so quick to take offence, everybody else is walking on eggshells. Well, I'll not have it, Bodie. Sort yourself out, or the only woman you'll be seeing when we get back to London will be the lovely Dr. Ross."

"Yes, sir," Bodie replied, pacifying Cowley by standing at military ease, the pose offering Cowley respect and Bodie camouflage, neither of them commenting on the incongruousness of the tea towel draped round Bodie's waist like an apron.

"Then get on with it."

"Yes, sir," Bodie muttered, offering Cowley's exit a two fingered salute. "Right away, sir. On the double, sir."

But still, while he was putting the dishes away, he was running it through his mind again and again and again: just what had Cowley heard, and just what the hell was Doyle playing at?

And what the hell was Bodie going to do about it?

An hour later, the car left parked in front of the close, any semblance of warmth vanished with the watery sunlight, they were walking through the same streets that had once seen George Cowley still in short trousers.

"You young yins," Mrs. Cowley was saying to her son, her voice carrying clearly through the crisp, cold air, "no sense of history, that's your trouble."

"Oh, but come on, Mammie, you have to admit, that flat's ancient—"

"I've been decanted twice when they've

modernised it, my lad, and I'm not leaving it again until they come and take me out in a box to plant me."

"But all thae stairs—"

"What d'ye think keeps me young—sitting around on my backside all day?"

"But if you came down to London—"

That brought her to a complete halt, and Byres Road traffic would just have to go round her whether they liked it or not. "And what for would I ever go down to London? What is this, Geordie?"

Geordie? Bodie and Doyle thought, getting yet more practice in not bursting out laughing, efficiently manoeuvring Mrs. Cowley out of harm's way, car horns yelling all around. Looking suitably casual about the whole thing and not missing a single second of any of it, they managed to cling on to the disinterested air of the professional minder.

"All it is is me wanting you where I can keep an eye on you—"

"Keep an eye on me?" Such perfect incredulity and offence: Doyle was quite envious, especially seeing the effect it had on his normally despotic boss. "Since when did I need a keeper, George David Cowley? You—keep an eye on me?" She had come to a halt again, and now it was the thronging Saturday afternoon shoppers parting round her like the Red Sea, and she far more impressive than any Moses. "Are you forgetting who changed your nappies when you were a wean? And who was it who mended your clothes and blew your nose when big Billy MacWhirter gave you another doing?"

Billy MacWhirter beating Cowley up? Nigh near impossible to imagine, but just feasible enough to make keeping a straight face harder and harder, the refuge of professional minder more and more desperately clung to as they moved her on again, doing a perfect job even as mouths clenched shut over laughter and eyes widened in delighted disbelief.

"Aye, Mum, aye, I know. I'm not saying that, I'm just saying—"

"Ach, you're no' saying a thing, you're just havering. You've been down South too long, Geordie my boy, and you've gone soft. Thinking I need a child minder," Mrs. Cowley said, dripping contempt, speaking to the head of C15 as if he were naught but a wee boy with skint knees and runny nose. "You'll be putting me in an old folks' home next, leaving me there to sit in a chair until I turn

into a cabbage like the rest of the old yins.”

“But Mum—”

“Don’t you but me! I’m not moving, and that’s final.”

“Definitely where he gets it from,” Doyle murmured, nodding towards Cowley’s mother as she went storming off up the street as fast as her age would let her, her son at her side, their faces matching images of stormy tempers.

“Small wonder he ran off to join the army,” Bodie replied, grinning happily as Cowley’s mother started up again, regaling her unintended audience with tales of George Cowley in short trousers and scraped knees, dirty face with tear streaks showing white, miserable with measles, and suffering from mumps with his face swollen up like a camel’s humps.

“Only question now,” Bodie whispered to Doyle, sharing the gleeful pleasure, “is if we can get her started on him chasing the wee lassies.”

Doyle’s tone of voice was odd, almost inflectionless. “Unless it was laddies he chased.”

“Are you saying he—” Bodie broke off. Of course Doyle wasn’t saying that about Cowley, the bastard was just harking back to what was slithering between them.

“Come on, Bodie,” Doyle said, dunting Bodie in the side. “It’s not as if I suggested anything we haven’t done before.”

The two Cowleys had turned the corner, heading towards a red-brick school of truly startling ugliness, the younger Cowley retreading his old stomping ground with his mother’s nagging like the old fashioned reins of childhood.

Doyle followed his boss, close enough for Cowley’s security, but not anywhere near distant enough for Bodie’s sense of security. Doyle wasn’t letting up on this, not giving him an inch. “Bodie!”

Bodie barely resisted the urge to belt Doyle one. “Keep your voice down, for fuck’s sake!”

Mockingly now, whispering, Doyle playing the villain in a Victorian melodrama. “Bodie! You will confess all.”

“That’s right, make it a joke.” Which is what Bodie himself would normally do, but for once, just this once, he couldn’t find his sense of humour anywhere. This was too much like losing his woman to Krivas in Africa, too much like losing Marikka to Willis in England. Too much like Doyle, all set to marry Anne Holly and getting over her in a matter of days.

“Why not make it a joke?” Doyle demanded, stopping several feet behind his boss, Bodie and Doyle watching the windows and doorways of the buildings around them as Cowley stared at the looming darkness of his old school, his mother’s reminiscences reduced now to the uninteresting pride of a parent in her child’s perfectly respectable accomplishments. “It’s not as if it’s the end of the world, is it?”

Speak for yourself, mate, Bodie might have said, if he’d been willing to lay himself that bare. “But it’s not a walk in the park either. We could get chucked out for what you’re suggesting.”

“Yeh, and we could get chucked out for what we were already doing,” Doyle threw the gauntlet right back in Bodie’s face, “so it doesn’t matter a toss, does it?”

“It’s different,” Bodie muttered, defensiveness stealing all his eloquence.

“I had noticed,” Doyle replied sharply.

Bodie hushed him, a fervid nod reminding Doyle that their boss wasn’t five feet from them. They’d always said Cowley had eyes in the back of his head: now wasn’t the time to discover he had hearing like a bat.

“Later on, when we’re on our own,” Doyle said very, very quietly, “you and me are going to sort this out. Right?”

A lifebelt to a drowning man, the proffered respite snatched at greedily, Bodie desperate to avoid a scene. Voice easy and calm, betrayed by the tension round his mouth and the frown between his eyes, Bodie murmured: “Fair enough.”

And that was all that was said on the matter for what little was left of the day. Not a word was uttered on the topic while they had their dinner in a surprisingly nice restaurant round the back of Byres Road, and not a thing was said about it over coffee, nor even while they walked back to Mrs. Cowley’s flat.

But Doyle was a past master of body language, and his body spoke volumes. Every single move seemed calculated to turn Bodie on, every expression, every smile, even the way Doyle ate his food. All of it a symphony of suggestion, sexual delights orchestrated until Bodie was at fever pitch, uncomfortable, needing to either run a mile in the opposite direction or rape Doyle where he stood.

Probably not a good idea that, considering Cowley’s reaction to blasphemy in the kitchen. We can only guess what his reaction to buggery

on the stairs would be.

One hand trailing along the cold tile lining the lower half of the stair wall, Bodie climbed at a pace dictated by Mrs. Cowley, slow and steady, taking her time. Taking too much time, giving Bodie more than enough chance to watch Doyle preceding him. To think about Doyle, and that arse, and what Doyle had suggested. And what Doyle had done.

Into the flat at last, Mrs. Cowley more tired than she'd ever admit to her fussing son, George Cowley gone to bed in the spare bedroom that had been added during the last renovation, the walls between the old single-ends knocked down to turn what had once been the cramped space of near poverty into the roominess of middle-class indulgence. Bodie and Doyle were setting up camp in the living room, moving the coffee table as quietly as they could, shifting chairs out of the way, Bodie always careful to keep a couple of feet between him and the too inviting Doyle.

"Don't put your sleeping bag all the way over there," Doyle whispered, "put it beside mine." That chipped tooth grin, the hell-bent invitation, temptation personified. "We won't have as far to come then."

"Oh, ha, ha," Bodie replied. "If you think I'm going to have a wank with Cowley—"

"Have a wank with Cowley? Don't be disgusting, Bodie," Doyle whispered, coming up behind Bodie, wrapping his arms round Bodie before the other man could move away. "If you're going to have a wank, it'll be with me. Course, we don't have to stop at that, do we?" Doyle whispered, voice throaty and low, shivering through Bodie like arousal through his cock. "There are a lot of other things we can do, aren't there?" Doyle rubbed his groin against Bodie, his erection pressing so hard Bodie couldn't ignore the image it conjured: Doyle, pressing against his arse like that, but with no clothes to get in the way, nothing between them, just Doyle hard like he was now, pressing, pressing. It would be so easy, to let Doyle do it. To let Doyle penetrate his body. To let Doyle push them that last step of the way.

Doyle was plastered all down his back, Doyle's hands roving all over his front, unfastening shirt buttons, undoing zips, slipping inside to stroke his cock the way they had been for months now. And then Doyle did something else, did what he'd done the night before and scared the hell out of Bodie. Doyle came round in front of Bodie, and held him

tight, and kissed him.

Bodie was out of there like a bat out of hell, across the room, standing behind the chair, breath panting in what other people might call panic.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Doyle hissed, unable to raise his voice even for this, but his fury obvious for all that. Doyle was toweringly angry, and Bodie saw the price he was about to pay for all of Doyle's understanding last night and tolerance today. Doyle was still spitting with unleashed temper. "A fucking pricktease, Bodie, that's all you are. I already asked you—what the fuck are you playing at?"

"What d'you think, Doyle, eh? You're not talking about a matey wank between friends, are you? I mean, this isn't just something we do to ease the pressure of the job, or convince ourselves we're still alive."

"Oh, and is that all it ever was? And you really believe that? Christ," Doyle muttered, running a hand wearily through his hair, "what a fucking idiot."

Looking at him, Bodie wasn't sure which of them Doyle was calling the idiot, and right now, it didn't much matter. "I'm not stupid enough to—"

"Not stupid enough?" Doyle sneered. "You're not clever enough to tie your own shoes. You're not clever enough," his voice was rising, and he reined it in, but the anger and the contempt were still there, unharnessed, threatening everything with ruin, "you're not clever enough to pee straight."

"Just because I don't want to let someone shove his cock up my bum, you think I'm stupid?" The image flooded his mind, and all his hard-won male pride began to slink quietly away, threatening him with leaving him alone with the thought of Doyle inside him, up him, owning him— "Oh, for fuck's sake, why can't you just leave me alone? Just because you walk around begging every bloke in a mile's radius to fuck you up your wiggling arse doesn't mean I'm stupid enough to want the same thing."

Doyle's response to that particular piece of bravado was choice and earthy enough to turn the air blue. Under the brunt of Doyle's answer to Bodie's own attack, Bodie's temper uncoiled like a snake from hibernation, heat rising, self-righteous fury keeping him nice and warm, every word of Doyle's another weapon to be turned round and used against him. And then Doyle did it, that

unconscious gesture that always gave him away, hand running through his hair, a fraction of pain seeping through the concealing anger to change his face, just for a moment.

But it was enough, it was more than enough. It hit Bodie like a ten ton lorry, only all the damage was out of sight, but certainly not out of mind. Even we, knowing him as we do, would never be able to see it on his face. He had a lifetime's practice of hiding things, years where the only survival tool left him was the stiff upper lip. So nothing showed on his face, even as he guddled around for a moment, reeling, stumbling over things he should have seen, or had seen but ignored. Reluctantly, he pulled his head out of the sand.

Somehow, shocked perhaps, by the sight of feelings he had thought belonged only to him and not his too-sure of himself partner, Bodie had pulled himself together. Had stopped simply reacting, and started thinking. Bodie began by looking at Doyle, really looking at him, ignoring the explosion of intemperance the way he usually did. Other people were taken in by Doyle's fiery outrage, but Bodie had known him for too long to be fooled by that. Usually. Shameful, really, that he had come so close this time.

Standing there watching his friend, Bodie finally readmitted a horde of memories, things Doyle had said, things Doyle had done. Especially some of the things Doyle had said and done last night.

Looked anew at the stupidity of Doyle chancing his arm with Bodie, here, in Cowley's mother's house, with their boss within shouting distance. Thought about what must be driving Doyle to make him willing to take a chance like that. Tried, Doyle's pithy comments hissing across the room at him, to look at this through Doyle's eyes, to see it from Doyle's point of view.

Recognised something he wasn't sure he wanted to see.

Conceded the existence of something that could give them the only chance of real happiness they had.

Or destroy them both.

Even adrift in an emotional limbo that was all the protection left to him, Bodie had to admire the courage it must've taken Doyle to do all this. And what had Bodie himself done in answer to this insane courage? Thrown it back in Doyle's face, hurled Doyle's love back at him like a weapon. Now here was Bodie in his turn, watching his best

friend hurl hatred at him because he was prohibited from anything else.

It wasn't pleasant, it wasn't something Bodie wanted, this being the focus of all Doyle's wealth of fury. With Doyle still calling invective down on him, Bodie finally admitted it: he had fooled himself for god knew how long, because as long as he denied its existence, he'd thought himself safe from commitment and emotional scenes both. Oh, yes, and what a success that strategy had proved itself to be.

Doyle was still spitting fire, now prowling the room, cutting stares disemboweling Bodie, who sighed: life had been so much more pleasant when viewed through blinkers, or dark glasses that dimmed the sharp edges of reality. Much easier, to go through life dealing with the problems as if they always belonged to other people, as if they could simply be walked away from. Easier still to blind himself to the truth that had been staring from Doyle's eyes for how long now? Bodie had no idea, couldn't remember ever sitting down and saying, right, from now on, I'm going to pretend I can't see anything in Doyle.

But he must have done that. It was the only excuse—the only reason—he had for not seeing what was as plain as the nose on Doyle's face.

Of course, he was still hanging on to those blinkers, still pretending he hadn't noticed, not really. After all, if he gave it no name, then it might still only be a figment of his imagination, right?

Doyle was staring at him, as if defying Bodie to not see what was so imperfectly hidden. What had been so subtly revealed the night before.

Right. A deep breath, squaring of shoulders. Admitting it, giving it admittance. So his best friend loved him.

That was easy enough to deal with. Doyle loved with the same ease that he hated: dogs, his mum, spaghetti bolognese, Velázquez. Quite reasonable, really, for Doyle to love his best friend, if you looked at it like that.

Of course, if Bodie looked at it like that, then he was never going to get anywhere was he? He'd just blithely go off into merry delusion again, putting the sex down to all mates together, lumping Doyle's loving him in there with Doyle's affection for his younger brother. And if he did that, then the next time Doyle kissed him, Bodie would run like a scared virgin again.

"Okay, okay," Doyle was saying, flopping down

onto the sofa. "If you're going to do your Sphinx, I'll admit defeat." Mechanically, he kicked off his shoes, clothes being dropped without care onto the floor. One last look at Bodie, the incomprehension in Doyle's eyes like nails dragging down the bones of Bodie's spine. "You're a sad bastard, aren't you?" Doyle asked rhetorically, fitting himself into his sleeping bag, pulling the edges right up over his head. "Wake me when it's morning," he said, "or when you find your tongue, whichever happens first."

"Ray," Bodie began, uneasy about this, Doyle going to sleep like this too much like them parting on an argument.

"What?"

"I..." He paused, just not sure of what to say next, there being no training course to teach a man what he could say when he found out his best friend was in love with him. "I..."

Doyle turning to look at him, his visible disappointment more painful than if he'd hauled off and hit Bodie. "And that's it? Oh, for fuck's sake—" Breaking off again, running his hand through his hair again. "Look, if that's all you've got to say, you can just shut up and let me sleep."

"Ray—"

"I said shut up, Bodie."

Clipped, curtailed, Doyle sounding as if he were unwilling to spend even half a breath on Bodie. Not that Bodie could really blame him: wasn't every day a man put his neck on the chopping block only to find that Madame Guillotine had a helper in the form of his best friend. Must be a lovely feeling, that, Bodie thought cynically, his belated self-honesty a painful thing. Quietly, he undressed, relieved that the threat from Myer was vague and distant enough that they didn't have to stand night watch. After the last couple of nights, Bodie wasn't up to keeping himself awake. Nor of sitting there, with nothing to do but wait for possible assassins and watch Doyle sleep.

There was nothing to be said. Not until he knew what Doyle really wanted. Not until he knew what he wanted himself.

It was a long time coming, but finally Bodie fell asleep, which left only Doyle to lie awake in the dark, thinking.

Of course, when the noise awoke him, it was still pitch black outside, which meant it could be any time before 8.30. Bodie did brief battle with the

folds and furrows of his sleeping bag, finally managing to extricate his wrist. Half past fucking five? he thought incredulously. He was going to annihilate Doyle.

"What possessed you to get up at this time in the morning?" he demanded *sotto voce* as his partner carefully stepped over Bodie's sleeping bag on his way to his own.

Doyle shrugged, not quite so elegant in the dishevelled cold of morning. "Couldn't sleep."

Which could mean only one thing. Bodie suppressed a groan, and accepted the proffered cup of tea, making a face because it was, of course, made to Doyle's preference. "All right," Bodie said, half relieved that Doyle was willing to talk to him again, half terrified of the very same thing. Knowing from past experience and despite the current lure of total cowardice that it was best to just get these things over and done with, he asked: "What were you thinking about?"

Doyle shrugged again, reached out, took his tea back from Bodie. "This and that," he said.

"This and that," Bodie repeated drily. "Nothing much, just this and that."

"I thought you wanted to ease up on all of this?" Doyle asked him, settling himself back into the warmth of the sleeping bag, risking drowning by having a good slurp of tea. "Anyway, I had a bit of a think, and it's all right. You've nothing to worry about."

"Apart from Myer's brother getting past Customs, that is," Bodie replied. A pause, a cautious glance, then Bodie continued: "What don't I have to worry about?"

Another of those artistically casual shrugs that were fooling Bodie not at all. "You don't have to worry about me coming on strong to you again. I've got the message loud and clear, and I'll leave you alone."

"And pigs'll fly backwards."

When Doyle turned to look at Bodie, his eyes were strange, an odd expression in them that Bodie decided he probably didn't want to decipher. "I've just told you, Bodie, I'll leave you alone."

Several heartbeats, and then Bodie shrugged in his turn. "Fair enough," he said, sounding more as if he meant 'I'll believe it when I see it.'

But believe it he did, and see it he did.

"Right then," Doyle said far too brightly for such an ungodly hour of the morning, "that's that settled then. Back to normal, the old daily grind. Want to

finish the tea?" Passing the mug to Bodie, sliding down into the dark womb of his sleeping bag, putting an end to something that hadn't quite begun.

For a long time, Bodie sat there and watched him, this apparently sleeping bundle of contentment that could have fooled the world. The mug between his hands went cold, and still Bodie sat there, listening as the street outside came to life, hearing the first stirrings of Mrs. Cowley getting up, water running, toilet flushing, even the quiet click of the electric kettle being switched on. And all Bodie would allow himself was the blunted edge of curiosity, waiting to see what would finally force Doyle to admit that he was awake.

Not that he should have bothered. Tousled, unshaven, the stubble unexpectedly sexy, Doyle finally surfaced, and it would have been so wonderfully easy to pretend that the last two nights—the last several months—had never happened. But there was the darkness under Doyle's eyes, and the shadows lurking within.

Mrs. Cowley bustling in unannounced, Cowley not five minutes behind her, neat and tidy as a new pin—or a well-behaved son. Then breakfast, a huge, traditional Sunday breakfast that should have been manna from Heaven, and would have been, if only Bodie had been able to put aside what they'd done. What he knew. And if he could only stop worrying about the demands Doyle was sure to make on him, despite all promises to the contrary.

But for the next three days, Doyle was as good as his word, leaving Bodie well alone. Doyle never touched him, made not a single *double entendre*, dropped no hints, didn't even prop up walls in his usual interesting manner. Made only friendly jokes, avoided all personal comments and all innuendo. Doyle became, in fact, the model colleague, professional, distant and polite.

And it was like living in hell with the fire gone out. Bodie hated it, far more than he could have ever imagined—if he'd ever allowed himself to think about it.

Which we, of course, assume was precisely Doyle's intent, but Bodie had no way of being sure. He couldn't see inside Doyle's head, had no idea what was going through Doyle's convoluted mind—and found out just how much it hurt to not know if Doyle did love him. Or if Doyle had severed that love the way he had severed himself

from Anne Holly.

And so it was, in the cold darkness of winter nights, with Doyle cocooned in sleeping bag, it was Bodie who lay awake, thinking.

Christmas, and what a day that turned out to be. For Bodie, Christmas Day was an exercise in not screaming out of boredom—and of not screaming out of frustration.

Clouds scudding across the sky stole what little warmth the watery sun could offer and even the richness of the sandstone was battered into dreariness.

"Christ, this wind cuts like a knife," Bodie muttered.

Doyle looked at him, almost as cool as the weather and twice as cutting as the wind.

"Oh, yes, Bodie," Bodie went on, still under his breath, but he knew that Doyle could hear him as clear as a bell, "cuts like a knife. Yeh, you're right, with a jacket as short as this, I'll be lucky not to end up singing soprano, the way this wind's cutting through me."

Doyle smiled, politely, as at a stranger, didn't rise to the jibe about his short sheepskin-lined jacket. He just scanned the winter-scoured streets, as if skeleton trees held far more interest than the bone-head walking at his side.

Mood darkening to match the sky, Bodie dug his hands deeper into his pockets, searching for a hint of warmth.

They had passed few enough people on the street, but the church was fairly full, the pews filled by some tacit social register, with families given pride of place and the solitary, the old and the nondescript keeping to the back. The Cowleys sat amidst Mrs. Cowley's cronies, navy blue hats nodding greeting, sharp old eyes taking note of the prodigal son returning and the odd young men he had brought with him.

Under normal circumstances, Bodie would've turned to Doyle, sharing the amusement of the gossip they were causing, of the aspersions that would be cast on Cowley's—*Cowley*, of all people!—character. But he'd lost all that, somehow, in trying not to fuck everything up. So this morning, Bodie kept his eyes front and centre on the great brass pipes of the organ, the gleaming wood of the walls, the simple elegance of leaded windows, the careful embroidery of the cloth. He could make out a word or two of the murmurings going

on so discreetly around them, even managed half a smile at the thought of the stories and speculations that were going to grow and prosper over steaming cups of over-strong tea.

He glanced, then, at Doyle, and as quickly looked away, refusing to admit that it just might be pain, plain and simple, that he felt when Doyle wouldn't look at him like that. That he wasn't just angry at Doyle cutting him out like a cancer.

No. Two could play at that game, and anything Doyle could dish out, Bodie could take—and return, with accumulated interest. Oh, yes, Doyle had obviously loved him. Just about as much as the unfeeling bastard had loved Ann Holly.

And there wasn't a snowball's chance that Bodie was going to admit that the emotion this new-found pity for Ann Holly was replacing was simple, ugly jealousy.

Songs of praise, a sermon of surprising simplicity and eloquence, more hymns and psalms, and then it was the worst gauntlet Bodie had ever faced: the blue-rinsed set of Mrs. Cowley's friends.

"Millie," a hawk-faced woman chirruped, "and who's your young man?"

"Och, are you going senile on us, Mrs. Cruikshank?" Mrs. Cowley said with all the vitriolic smoothness her son had learned so well. "Surely you'll not have forgotten my boy George, him that went away down to England to—"

"—be a civil servant," her 'boy' interrupted smoothly. "A happy Christmas to you, Mrs. Cruikshank. How's your daughter—it's Australia she's in, isn't it?"

"Aye, aye, Melbourne, in fact. But your job in London—"

"Isnae any of your business," a blunt voice put in, the fecund accent making a mockery of Mrs. Cruikshank's pretensions of grandeur. "Are you coming round the bingo Tuesday night, Millie?"

"Not this week, hen, not with my son up visiting," Mrs. Cowley linked arms with her venerable and vital friend, the two of them flowing smoothly past the obviously despised Mrs. Cruikshank, the entire operation showing a well-practised and frequent ease. Barely out of earshot, and nowhere near out of hearing-aid range, Mrs. Cowley started up again. "See that woman, she's awful—I can't stand her, not a bit of her."

"Aye, noseyn't the word for that yin," the rotund crone took up, the head of CI5 and his two top agents following like ducklings behind the

waddle of her black coat. "See her, she makes me sick, so she does, with all her talk of her daughter in Australia, making her out to be some sort of big-wig with the government there and we all know fine well she's nothing but a glorified secretary with big aspirations—"

"Oh, is that what they cry them these days?"

Behind them, Bodie rolled his eyes, bored to tears by the old biddies' particular brand of humour. Not, it turned out, a wise thing to do to the boss' mother when the boss was looking right at you.

From one sermon straight into the jaws of the next, and this one entirely more concerned with the meting out of punishment. Getting back to the flat took at least twice as long as it ought, or at least Cowley's lecture made it seem nigh near beyond endurance. Still, listening to Cowley going on and on and on was better than listening to Doyle, who wasn't saying anything. Wasn't doing anything. Wasn't even taking malicious pleasure in Bodie's dressing down. Wasn't being, well—Doyle. Between nodding fervently and obediently at his quietly thunderous boss, the yakking of Mrs. Cowley and whichever old biddy she was traipsing along beside, Doyle's quietness was...disquieting.

Mrs. Cowley's friend left them at the corner, which meant, at long last, that Cowley left Bodie to rejoin his mother. Vengeance was, as they say, sweet: no sooner had Cowley caught up to his mother than she started in on him, a tongue-lashing acid enough to strip paint.

"Where are your manners?" she demanded, grabbing him by the elbow, tugging at him as if he were still a lad in short trousers. "Ignoring Jeanie MacIlvain like that! Is that what living in London's taught you? How to look down at other people just because they don't have your fancy camel hair coats and posh shoes?"

"Mum, I wasn't ignoring her, there was something I had to say to Bodie—"

"See, there you go again. What *you* had to say was too important to put off just so you could be nice to Jeanie MacIlvain—and her the woman you stayed with when I was sick with your baby brother!"

Baby brother? So they had a brother to look forward to meeting as well? Better and better, Bodie thought, glancing at Doyle.

Worse and worse, Bodie conceded, his glance sliding off Doyle's impassivity like a lance off a

shield. Oh, this was turning out to be just a wonderful day.

And to make it perfect, the sky opened and the clouds emptied, with most of the rain going straight down the back of Bodie's neck. Perfect, he thought, turning his collar up in vain attempt at comfort. Absolutely fucking perfect.

And one more look at Doyle confirmed that beyond his bleakest nightmares.

If you'd asked Bodie on the drive up if it could get worse, he'd have said no. Ditto for last night, this morning, on the way to the church, inside the church, on the way back—but lo and behold, it could get worse, and it did. The afternoon was a case in point. Traditional food, of the sort made traditional by thin purses and midwinter lack of choices, a gourmand reminder of Bodie's own past, of a childhood as chilly and unloving as Doyle's unyielding eyes. The only sweetness was the trifle, and that lacking the barest hint of even sherry. Then tea, of course, with biscuits and madeira cake—but no madeira in that either. *The Sound of Music* on television, and over and under it all, the incessant rise and fall of George Cowley and his mother, reliving the past, rehashing old arguments about the future, and reweaving a family bond that was warming to see. In and out of the music their voices went, the accent rich and ripe, staccato bursts punctuating soft liltings, rising and falling, in and out...

It was the kick that woke him. On his feet, hand reaching for gun before his eyes were clear of sleep, to be presented with the seriously unnerving picture of Ray Doyle staring at him.

"What'd you go and do that for?" he snapped, anger so much easier to show than the hollow fear that was killing him inside.

"Cowley's phoning London to check on Myer."

"And you just couldn't wait to share such exciting news with me, could you?"

The look Doyle gave him was very level, and only someone who knew him very, very well would recognise the reproach in it. "Funnily enough, I thought you might not want the boss to think you were in the habit of sleeping right through being on duty."

The bastard definitely had a talent for making a man feel as guilty as sin itself, which wasn't bad, considering Bodie was an avowed atheist.

"Thanks," he muttered, metaphorically kicking himself as Doyle turned away and Cowley came in.

"Have yourself a nice postprandial sleep, did you?"

Oh, if only the weather were so dry! "Yes, sir. Means I'll be able to stay awake all the better to guard you tonight, sir."

Well, flattery had at least been worth a try. And judging by that expression, the lecture on the way back from church was going to seem mellow and positively roseate in retrospect.

Saved, but by nothing so dulcet as a bell.

"George!"

There were no two ways about it, Cowley had learned that bellow at his mother's knee.

With a last glower at Bodie, Cowley turned towards his mother's voice. "What is it, Mum?"

"Send one of your boys ben here—they might as well make themselves useful."

Bodie didn't even bother waiting to be asked.

"Yes, sir," he said, not realising just how listless he sounded. "Running all the way."

She was in the bedroom, balanced on a chair her doctor would probably kill her for climbing up on to. "Here, take this book from me and put it on the bed."

"Where is it you want it? Over here, is it?" Bodie asked, choir-boy innocent, the book poised to land, dustily, on the highly polished chest of drawers with its crocheted topper of roses and vines.

"If you're trying to stop an old lady from killing herself getting things down from the top of the wardrobe, then why don't you just say so?"

He grinned at her, put the dusty book down on the floor where it wouldn't do any damage. Then he bowed, deeply, before offering her his hand. "Mrs. Cowley, there's nothing I would like more than stopping this lady from killing herself."

"If only because her son'll kill you if I hurt myself when there's a great strapping lad like you around to do the donkey work."

"Got it in one." Still, as he helped her down, neither one of them could pretend that her bones didn't seem brittle, that she wasn't the age she felt inside the agelessness of her own head, but the age where it didn't take much to break something.

Bodie decided not to rub salt in her wounds, took his time climbing up onto the chair instead of just jumping up the way he normally would.

"Now, what is it you wanted down from here?"

He was sneezing by the time she had her fill of photo albums and report cards, diplomas and plaques, the floor and half the bed covered in the

flotsam and jetsam of George Cowley's discarded pride.

"If you'll just give me a hand through the living room with these—"

At the doorway, she stopped, for a moment, and looked at Bodie as if there were some answer there in his face for her to read. He squirmed, feeling even more like a naughty schoolboy caught cheating instead of a full grown man tactfully helping an elderly woman—god help him if she ever found out some of the things he *had* done!

"Aye, well," she finally said, "it's not something you can ask, is it?"

So that was where Cowley had learned the fine art of leaving people dangling.

What the hell was it she couldn't ask?

But at least she still had some doubts—the way Bodie was feeling, he wouldn't have been surprised if there had been a tattoo on his forehead, complete with tacky art, declaring his feelings for Doyle and listing the things they'd done.

Of course, if all that had been tattooed there, Bodie would've been glued to the mirror. He wouldn't half mind knowing how he felt about Doyle. And seeing if what *he* thought he'd done with Doyle matched what Doyle seemed to think they'd done. Or not done. Or perhaps just thought about doing...

The chaos of confusion on his face was enough to make even Doyle's resolve weaken. But not for long, and not enough. Bodie followed Mrs. Cowley into the living room, his eyes automatically seeking out his partner, his stomach automatically tightening at the lack of response Doyle gave him.

Wonderful, Bodie repeated to himself. Absolutely fucking wonderful.

"Aw, Mum, you never! Not the photos—"

"Photos?" Doyle asked quickly, and Bodie couldn't tell if the alacrity was due to the simple but great joy of poring over old pictures of their boss or if Doyle needed distraction himself. If Doyle was finding this...nothing between them as difficult as Bodie.

"Aye, Raymond, all the old family photos," Mrs. Cowley was saying, unloading the memories cradled in Bodie's arms, laying the dusty books on the coffee table. "We've everybody in here from Geordie's grandda—d'you mind him, Geordie, you were still gey young when he passed away—to George himself when he went into uniform."

Uniform? Bodie could see the wheels turning as

Doyle ran that one word through his mind and relished the connotations. "Which regiment was that, sir?" Doyle asked ever so politely.

"The HLI, of course," Mrs. Cowley butted in before her son could so much as open his mouth. "Did he not tell you? Oh, aye, the HLI, and he was so grand in his uniform. Not that the war uniforms were all that good, mind you, but still, in his kilt..."

Definitely something Bodie wanted to see. He also wanted to look at Doyle, share the whole situation with him, taking in everything from the expression on Cowley's face to the glee of being able to tell the rest of the squad all about it when they made it back down to London. But he didn't bother: even Pavlov's dog had learned eventually, and Bodie had got the hint, the loneliness ambushing him suddenly.

"Here," Mrs. Cowley was saying, opening the first book, "here's Geordie when he was still in his pram."

Sure enough, there was a picture of a chubby baby in an ancient black pram, the infant's face screwed up against the sunlight, one fat curl escaping his knitted bonnet. And then, on the next page, a toddler clutching the hand of a man he now so closely resembled, the same fair hair, the same chin, the same build.

The album was angled across the coffee table so that they could all see, and Cowley's expression softened as the past came back to cradle him.

Head to head, Bodie and Doyle bent over the pictures, Doyle seeming for all the world interested in nothing else bar the photos, commenting and joking and appreciating every one, asking all the right questions at all the right times, while all Bodie could do was stare at the snapshots and try to keep his hands off Doyle, try to keep from turning his head that fraction so that he could see Doyle, could kiss him—

Ingratiating little bastard, Bodie thought, frowning fiercely as he stared hard at the group of children romping naked on the sand, the sea a moat threatening their castle.

"Mum, you can't show them that!"

"Why not? D'you think they don't realise you have a wee willie under that expensive grey suit of yours? How much did that cost you anyway?"

Wry, tolerant, affection unexpectedly blatant as Cowley half-smiled at his mother. "Not half as much as that picture's going to cost me."

"If you can't trust them with this, then how can

you trust them to keep you safe?"

"It's not the same thing, Mum—"

"No," she said, very gently, her stern façade crumbled away to nothing, "there's no-one you can go round trusting with your vulnerabilities, is there, my boy? And it'll be many a long year before you can take sic a chance."

"It's all right—"

"When has it ever been all right, eh, Geordie?"

They fell silent then, the two similar faces staring at each other, until Mrs. Cowley reached out a hand knotted with arthritis and blued with veins under the pale, thin skin, and cupped her son's cheek as she must have done a thousand times when he was but a tiny bundle of helplessness.

Doyle looked at Bodie then, and Bodie wished he hadn't, that cold accusation cutting him to the quick.

"I'll put the kettle on," Bodie said, doing the right thing and leaving the Cowleys alone with whatever this unspoken truth was between them. Almost at the door, and he did the right thing again, above and beyond the call of duty, coming back to glower over Doyle. "And you'll help me, won't you, mate?"

But what had been intended as a politely nasty reminder to Doyle about manners and sensitivity came out as something unmanfully close to a plea.

"Will I?" Doyle asked him, quite pleasantly over the rusted steel of his glare. "Of course I will—mate. It's one of the things I'm here for, innit?"

And at that, Bodie beat an unabashedly hasty retreat, unwilling to untangle that particular bed of snakes. He almost preferred the polite and distant Doyle.

Until honesty kicked in again.

In the kitchen, taking an inordinate amount of time to make a pot of tea, giving their boss and his mother some sort of privacy, Bodie and Doyle circling each other like tomcats round the same bit of ground. No outright fighting yet, not even a snarl, but careful body language, warning, warding off, Doyle back to his patent unconcern that didn't even fool Bodie now.

Which made it even worse, somehow.

"Look, Ray," Bodie started, "do we have to be like this?"

"Like what?" Doyle asked with all the innocence of a professional virgin charging extra per deflowering.

"Like this! All polite and careful, minding our p's and q's—"

A frown of quite exquisite confusion, enough to make Bodie's fists twitch hungrily. "But we've always got on well with each other. Why on earth should we start to argue now?"

"Because—"

Was that a flicker of hope in Doyle's eyes? Or was it triumph?

Bodie's good intentions flew the coop leaving only the wolf behind. "Because all these good manners from you is as suspicious as hell and Cowley's startin' to sniff around you. And if he susses what the problem is—"

It was supposed to be a dramatic pause, a meaningful trailing off, but Doyle looked at him then, with an acuity Bodie was surprised to find he'd almost forgotten.

"If he susses the problem," Doyle said very, very quietly, making Bodie strain to hear, "then he's a better man than you or I."

"Speak for yourself!" Bodie said automatically, even as unhappiness knotted his stomach into a tighter mess. Christ, Doyle was the one who worried things to death, who picked them apart until he could put them back together again. Doyle was the one who could and would decipher people and emotions and situations, leaving Bodie to his own forte, strategy, going in there and dealing with problems, acting on what needed to be done. But it was Doyle who was willing to think about the inner motives, to unveil the truths. To sort out where they stood.

And Doyle didn't know what the fuck was going on either.

Christ, it just couldn't get any better than this, could it?

Misery settling into the marrow of his bones, Bodie made the tea, saying not a word, filled the plate with chocolate biscuits and didn't steal a single one.

If Cowley had seen it, he'd have been worried sick and packed Bodie off to Dr. Ross immediately. But Doyle was the one who saw. And Doyle just smiled.

For what felt like a lifetime, Doyle had kept his word: he was leaving Bodie alone. Totally, imperceptibly, coldly.

And Bodie had never been so miserable in years. He even took to making digs at Doyle, slugging

him off, winding him up, doing all the things that would normally get Doyle from simmer to raging boil in a matter of seconds. What did he get now? Polite requests to stop it, unanimated, polite responses, and not so much as a flirtatious eyebrow, not a smile, not a sway of the hips, not a surreptitious touch under the Christmas table. Nothing at all. For all Doyle interacted with him, Bodie might as well be on his own. The job, what little of it there was, got done, and with their usual competence. But there weren't even any jokes to fall flat, Bodie unwilling to offer even that small opportunity for Doyle to cut him dead. Nothing made any difference, and the minutes and the hours and the days passed, and still Doyle kept his word, giving Bodie what he had so insanely asked for.

Bodie was getting to the stage where hara-kiri was beginning to look quite nice. Doyle was, without doubt, contrary. Or perhaps it was simply that Bodie hadn't realised how important Doyle was until his toy had been taken away from him.

There had been one disaster that had come close to making hara-kiri unnecessary due to Bodie's sudden demise at the hands of his ever-so impersonal partner: going up the stairs again, this time the endless flights leading up from Knightsbridge subway, Doyle once again right in front of Bodie, and Bodie didn't want to resist temptation for another long day. It was as close to an admission of defeat that Bodie could bring himself to make, and he reached out to palm Doyle's denim covered buttocks. For a bleakly short time, he had Doyle's living warmth in his hand, and then it was gone, Doyle striding ahead, looking over his shoulder to draw Bodie an inimical glower. Even the most amateur of Doyle-watchers could have read that stare for what it was: hands off, don't touch, no trespassing.

They came up out of the subway station to the massing hordes thronging Great Western Road, university students too short of cash to go home for the holidays and old age pensioners down from Partick to do a bit of special shopping for Hogmonay, a brace of soldiers in uniform, some boys coming home from pipe-band practice, a group of girls laughing over the stupid clothes in the shop windows, a family with twins screaming in their double pram. The cacophony of sound was familiar, welcoming to those who had always lived in cities, some shield against the sudden breathless-

ness of bitter cold air. Cowley was walking ahead of them again, this time with a man from his old regiment, a man he'd known off and on since primary school. Doyle was ranging alongside, stormy eyes restless, mouth set and angry.

For the first time since Marikka, Bodie began to realise that turning away from love could be as painful as falling in love and then losing someone.

As painful as losing Doyle was proving to be.

It would have been easier to cut his hands off, or to pluck his eye out because it offended him, seeing things too late, and understanding too little.

Miserable, shoulders hunched against the cold, the amorphous threat of the absent Myer no longer enough to keep his attention on the job, Bodie trudged on in their wake.

What a pity it is that Bodie couldn't see what he could see, that moment on the stairs when he touched Doyle again for the first time in days. Had he but seen the expression that flooded Doyle's face, then perhaps Bodie would have had the courage to try again.

More time passing, in no hurry, slithering by like a snail across salt. In the living room, surrounded by dark wood tables and white lace doilies, seated carefully on the good, solid three piece sofa, Bodie and Doyle had nothing to do but stare at each other. Cowley was in bed, nursing a cold, or so he claimed, but his two agents knew that it was likely the aftereffects of a truly prodigious pub crawl the night before. Mrs. Cowley was out at the hospital, doing her weekly round of visiting the lonely in the long, sterile wards. Which left Bodie and Doyle, face to face, with nothing to say, and not enough said.

Face giving nothing away, Doyle picked up yesterday's *Daily Record*, flicked through it page by page. Discarded it in favour of *The Scotsman*, and went through that, page, by page, by page. Bodie was fit to scream.

"Why don't you say something?" Bodie asked, the words driven from him by inchoate need.

Doyle looked up at him briefly, blandly, using the face he had perfected years ago as an objective policeman listening to both sides. "Not much left for me to say, is there?"

The answer erupted in Bodie's brain with all the force of knowledge long suppressed: You could say you love me. For an awful moment, he thought he'd actually spoken out loud, said the damning

words right here amidst the potted geraniums and crocheted antimacassars. But Doyle was sitting there, staring at the crossword in last week's *Sunday Post* as if he had every intention of filling in the blanks.

As you can well imagine, there were a few blanks Bodie wouldn't mind having filled in. Such as how he felt, why he felt that way, why the fuck it hurt so much to have Ray withdraw from him. After all, it wasn't as if he was in love with the bastard, was it? Oh, all right, he would concede that he was fond of Doyle, but given their line of work, that was to be expected, wasn't it? It didn't make him queer, didn't mean he was in love with Ray the way he had been with Marikka. Didn't mean anything at all really.

But Doyle had wanted them to do more than just share a wank like good mates. Doyle had offered him too much more. And Doyle had kissed him. As if he were a girl.

Didn't mean anything, he told himself a bit more desperately. Just because Doyle kissed him—

Yes, but what about that one detail Bodie hadn't yet faced? What about the fact that Bodie had enjoyed the kissing? Was that nothing? That he enjoyed being kissed like a girl? That he had felt a surge of heat that was only partly lust?

Bodie leaned back against the seat, closed his eyes. He could remember how he'd felt when Doyle had kissed him. Could remember, too, the first time he'd kissed Marikka.

Oh, god, he was in trouble, in right over his head.

Unwillingly, Bodie compared the two, thinking about Marikka, thinking about Doyle. Putting himself back in time, up on that gas tank again, and wondering, if he'd had to choose between Doyle and Marikka, which one of them would he have saved?

Bodie opened his eyes again, staring at Doyle. Cool, calm, collected Doyle, who could be ice one second and conflagration the next. Doyle, who could burn with passion while his heart was as cold as a witch's tit, the way he had been with Anne Holly. Madly in love, so he'd said, looking at rings and houses, and how long had it taken Doyle to put Holly behind him?

That was the crux of it, that, right there. It was the way Doyle could love, and still walk away, if his conscience or need dictated it, or if the love should prove false. And what the hell would Bodie

do if he took this chance, only to have Doyle walk away from him one malicious summer's day?

What would Doyle do if Bodie took this chance? Tacit it might be, but Doyle had issued an ultimatum nonetheless, leaving Bodie to choose between a distant, efficient stranger or a no-holds-barred lover.

Lover.

The very word was enough to send shivers up and down Bodie's spine. The problem was, not all of the shivers were from desire. Or was the problem that not all of them came from fear?

Could he? Take that leap of faith and trust Doyle to be there to catch him as he fell in love? Could he gamble his life on faith, faith in Doyle not walking away from him one day?

Could he?

Should he?

Well?

Well?

What do *you* think?

Cowley's cold had passed with a speed that would have had the medical profession regarding him as a miracle, that speed reinforcing his agents' conviction that it had been the result of too many fine single malts downed with too much enthusiasm rather than some virus making itself at home.

The metaphor was Bodie's, home a thing very much on his mind. He was no farther forward than he'd been this morning, his head swirling with all the sickening dizziness of a Ferris wheel, Doyle the hub of this confusion. Should he take the chance and let himself love Doyle?

He heard his partner in the kitchen, helping Mrs. Cowley, couldn't stop himself from smiling, a pang of pure affection impaling him as he listened to Doyle laugh at an old lady's rambling jokes. Not many people would ever believe Ray Doyle capable of such kindnesses, not unless they'd had our privilege of seeing him when he thought himself away from public eye. Bodie had seen him like that many a time. And again, that was the nature of Bodie's problem, knowing Doyle both too well and not well enough, knowing his good and his bad, all his faults, all his virtues, and not knowing which scared him most.

He wanted to take that chance, to love Doyle.

Heard again the laughter from the kitchen.

All right, and the weight lifted from his soul, his

surrendering finally to the truth a relief in and of itself. All right, he told himself again. Admit it. It's not taking the chance and falling in love with Doyle. It's telling Doyle what you've already done.

Himself, in love.

It seemed strange, an unnatural thing, some creature living within him, like a parasite or a baby growing inside him. Love. From him, for Doyle.

Totally bizarre.

And he was no more convinced by these posturings than we are. It wasn't bizarre, it wasn't even strange, or new. It was something that had been there a long, long time, quietly, making no fuss, just taking root, slowly, gently, without him even noticing it was happening.

But Doyle would have noticed.

Cowley, for certain.

Which brought to mind the strange conversation Cowley had had with his mother over the photo albums, and the odd way Mrs. Cowley had looked at himself and Doyle. Odder still, the way Cowley had said nothing, even though it was obvious something was going on. Something very particular, very singular, not to mention unmistakable. Well, at least to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear, and Cowley was as far from the three monkeys as a man could get.

It's tempting to go up to Bodie and slap him, tell him to stop distracting himself, to stop going round in circles, but all we can do is observe, watch and listen as the story unfolds, and keep to ourselves our fervent wish that Doyle would do the sensible thing, come into the living room, kiss Bodie hard and then fuck him into next year.

But of course, Doyle does no such thing, staying in the kitchen with Cowley's mother, getting the food and drink ready for midnight, when the church bells would ring in the New Year and mourn the passing of the old.

Bodie wasn't about to mourn the death of 1978. Roll on '79, that's what he'd say if we asked him. But why ask, when we know he's only going to lie to us, with cheerful grin and bright eyes?

Roll on '79, a blank slate to write on, if only Bodie could come up with a single word.

"First footing?" Doyle asked, only half joking.

"Don't you come the ijit with me, young fella-me-lad," Mrs. Cowley said, pallid cheeks ruddy with the warmth of a good sherry. "We want someone tall, dark and handsome to be the first

foot to cross the threshold, and carrying a bottle of whisky—"

"To warm the cockles of your heart," Bodie said, quoting the next door neighbour in Liverpool who'd kept up her family's old traditions.

"And black bun—"

"So you'll never be hungry." Doyle looked at him, and Bodie's heart skipped a beat, before his jaw tightened: pathetic fool, to be so thrilled because Doyle had deigned to look at him! No, keep cool, stay cool, don't let it show—

"And coal—"

"So that your home will never lack for warmth."

How the hell did Doyle manage to sound so sexy saying that? And sound so much like the promise of Heaven on Earth?

And then look so cold, as if he'd never said a word, never given Bodie what Bodie bitterly regretted asking for, never, ever kissed Bodie with lips that had been perfect—

He was not—not—going to start the year with an erection just because Doyle had spoken to him. Not a chance. He wasn't going to fawn over Doyle, or pant over him, or anything else incredibly bloody stupid.

He simply was not.

Never mind that he was in love with Doyle and Doyle in love with him, and with both of them refusing to admit it to the other. Oh, no, they weren't going to do anything stupid, not them. Aye, and pigs'll fly backwards.

"A quarter to twelve," Cowley was saying, switching on the radio, making a long-suffering face as his mother switched it right back off again, turning the television on instead.

"Living in the past, Geordie?" she said, smiling at an old joke that ran between them like a lifeline.

"And would I ever do a thing like that, Mum? But it's still nigh near twelve, so Bodie—"

"On my way, sir."

"Oh, I think for the occasion we can get onto first names, don't you?" Mrs. Cowley again, looking keenly at the three men in her living room, and none of them was willing to venture a guess as to what was going through her mind. "George, you stay here with me, and Bodie, you go out the front door."

Bodie started taking the various symbols from Doyle's arms, doing his best not to touch the warm flesh, skin bared in the central heating of the flat, soft hair lying over the faint rem-

nants of summer's deep tan.

"And you, Ray," Mrs. Cowley was saying, "you can go with him. To make sure he doesn't come in before the bells."

He was being paranoid, he was sure of it. But there, in the way she was looking at them... Bodie dismissed the thought from his head. The woman was Cowley's mother, in her eighties, a different generation, born in a different century for god's sake—the Gay Nineties, wasn't it?

He refused to think about it.

One thing at a time. Himself, alone, with Doyle. Here on the stair landing, with skylights open to the night overhead, frost sparkling on the windows like stars come home to roost. Almost completely dark, the overhead bulb burned out, something they'd have to take care of for security's sake.

But it was sort of nice, here, in the dark, with Doyle standing beside him. Bodie could smell Doyle's aftershave, faintly; either that, or memory served him well enough for him to imagine the smell of Doyle's skin in the morning, fresh shaven, coming back to bed for them to lie close together, skin on skin, hands on cocks, Doyle's mouth open against his shoulder, tongue laving—and all the times Bodie himself had done that to Doyle, his mouth tasting Doyle's skin, leaving lovebites to darken the flesh.

Fucking hell, small wonder Doyle had kissed him. And smaller wonder Doyle hadn't exactly been expecting Bodie to run away.

It was easier, somehow, in the dark, with the diamond glitter of the stars looking down on them. "Ray," Bodie said, quietly, "what the fuck are we going to do?"

No pause, not even a hint of hesitation. "Wait till we hear the church bells, then we knock on the door."

Shame rose in Bodie, threatening to strangle him like the lump in his throat. He was a hard man, a real tough nut, he wasn't supposed to get a lump in his throat and tears in his eyes. Didn't, normally. Amazing what depression and rejection could do for a man, really.

"Is that it, then?" he asked, defeat showing, shoulders slumping.

"Don't see why not."

"No second chances?"

"Oh, you've already had a few of those, Bodie."

"Yeh, but..."

"But what?"

"But I didn't realise then, did I?"

Even in the dark, Doyle's eyes gleamed, catching the faint glimmer of the stars, a ghostly echo in the night. "Didn't you?"

"No."

"And you do now?"

"I wish to hell I knew."

"That makes two of us."

"You mean we agree on something?"

"We always do. Only problem is that sometimes we can't admit it."

And could he ever? Admit it, say it out loud? Letting those words out would mean letting other words in, and if he granted those words admittance, then where would his life be?

Where it had always been.

In Doyle's hands.

Doyle's hands.

Those hands, splayed against his chest, playing with his nipples, sliding down lower, and lower, fingers going through the hair on his belly, down to there, grabbing him, just right, not too rough, not too gentle, the way he liked it, perfect touch, perfect—

Christ, but he couldn't go back inside like this! His cock was pressing against his trousers, so hot, the rest of him so cold, his jacket no proof against a Scottish winter's night. And there, right beside him, silent as the tomb, just as still, waiting like eternity, was Doyle.

Whom he loved.

"Oh, fuck, Ray—" he breathed, dropping tradition's burdens, coal and cake falling unnoticed along with Bodie's barriers, the bastions finally breached.

"Ray, come here, I need you—"

And then his arms were full of Ray Doyle, and his hands were cold against the heat of Ray's shirt, the peaks of Ray's nipples so hard under his palms, and his own cock was pressing against Doyle, feeling the sudden springing hardness rising up to meet it. His mouth was open, devouring, consuming, tasting Doyle, invading his mouth, their tongues touching, moving, smooth and wet. Deeply, he kissed Ray Doyle, and felt his heart break for having denied them both this, and felt himself suddenly cut adrift, all the ties of the past gone, ruptured and sundered.

The freedom was enough to make him giddy, but the real cause was the surging rush of lust, of need, driving him against Ray Doyle, his hands

everywhere, cupping ripe buttocks, running through the coarse curly hair, fumbling at leather belt.

Being pushed away, shoved, the bottle of whisky a cold, smooth weapon against him.

“For fuck’s sake, Bodie, are you mad? We can’t, not on the landing, with Cowley just inside! What the fuck would you’ve done if he’d come out?”

Honestly? Probably not noticed, but Bodie said nothing, forehead fevered against the coldness of plaster over stone. He was struggling for breath, passion still ruling his body, need burning him up from the inside out.

It didn’t matter that Doyle was being sensible. Didn’t matter that George Cowley and his mother were waiting inside for them, that this was one time when they couldn’t be a minute late.

In the background, Bodie heard the death knell of the old year. Ask not for whom the bell tolls, he said to himself, half-hysterical with unreleased lust and unrequited love. He was glad of the dark, for the dark hid both his weakness and his temptation: in other words, he couldn’t see Ray Doyle.

Doyle, for what it’s worth, was having troubles of his own, not least of which being jeans that were now several sizes too small, gelding a distinct possibility.

One to each side of the door, the pair of them propping their heads against the high-gloss paint like bookends with encyclopædias, their breathing two distinct, and too distinctly, ravaged rhythms.

It was Doyle who pulled himself together first, stepping forward reluctantly, knocking on the door as if it were the gates of hell.

Satan opened the door, glower and glare intact.

“Happy New Year,” Doyle said, and if Cowley noticed the edginess, then he ignored it in favour of flaying Bodie with the most cutting of looks.

“Happy New Year,” Bodie muttered, coming forward, embarrassed as hell because he knew he was flushed, knew he was flustered—knew that Cowley would notice, and once noticed, would comment.

“The same to yourself,” was all George Cowley said, abstractedly, automatically reaching out for the various gifts, his mother coming into the picture, her eyes sharper yet than her son’s, missing nothing.

“Come away in, boys,” she said, beginning a running dialogue that left no pauses for anyone to fill, and no gaps to make Doyle and Bodie’s

silence blatant.

Glasses charged, the toast spoken, and Bodie for one downed his drink in a single draught, the rudeness of shoving his glass forward for a refill paling to nothing against his embarrassment and his turmoil.

Chairs were taken, and if the television were to be believed, there was quite a party going on everywhere in this city bar the Cowley home. George Cowley took a well-savoured sip of his whisky, and then sat there, staring at his agents. Storm clouds couldn’t be more blatant harbingers than that expression on Cowley’s face.

But before the first Intifada could be lit with Bodie as its fuel, Mrs. Cowley spoke up, her face alight and aglow with a fire of enthusiasm that made Bodie tired just looking at it. “Right,” she said, “are we away then?”

Bodie actually dared glance at Doyle, was met with an equal measure of ignorance.

“Away where?” Doyle asked, looking now at his boss, none of this being part of the plan.

“There’s aye a big do at the HLI Club,” Mrs. Cowley said, getting carefully to her feet, her voice trailing behind her as she went out into the lobby to get her coat and hat. “Not that I’ve been much one for going to it these days, but I thought, with George,” her voice louder now, back in the living room, wrapping a hand-knitted scarf of good lambswool round her crêpe-de-chine neck, “back for a wee bit, it’d be awfy nice to go and see all his old cronies.”

“And I said it was gey cold for you to be going out gallivanting at this time of the night—this time of the morning, Mum. You shouldn’t be—”

“I shouldn’t be, should I not? I’ll tell you what I shouldn’t be, Geordie my boy, I shouldn’t be spoken to in that tone of voice by my ain son. Don’t you take that attitude to me, young man, you can save that for your agents and your subordinates, but you’ll watch your mouth around me, young fella-me-lad.”

And it was almost worth all the pain, hurt and sexual discomfort just to see George Cowley standing there, fuming impotently, as his mother put him in his place, a place he’d outgrown half a century or more before. “Mum—”

“I’ve already tellt you—don’t you ‘Mum’ me! Now, get your coat on, and don’t forget a scarf. I’ll not have you coming down with something nasty while you’re back under my roof.”

Cowley's face was a picture, Bodie and Doyle the appreciative gallery audience, as expressions and emotions flittered across it mutinously. But finally, there was a wry humour there, the acknowledgement that the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. "Aye, Mum," he conceded, with a smile that must have come from his father, "we'll go. But only for a bit, mind."

"Gettin' auld, are you, Geordie?"

"Compared to you, Mum, I feel like Methuselah."

"You look like him an' all. You need feeding up, George, and you need a holiday. An' before you say it, no I do not mean a fortnight in Glasgow. I'm talking about the Canary Isles or—"

With the invocation of sunnier climes falling on them like rain, they set off for the club, Bodie driving, the two generations of Cowleys in the back seat still bickering back and forth with underlying warmth, and beside him, hot as sin and twice as tempting, sat Ray Doyle.

Shifting gear was a torture, and an exercise in self restraint that would have made the saints proud. All it did for Bodie was make matters worse, the deflating of passion a receding hope, as Doyle fidgeted, his leg brushing Bodie's hand as they took a corner, his legs spreading a little wider to accommodate the arousal Bodie could both see and feel.

"Now I know how the people of Pompeii felt," he whispered.

The eyes that were turned on him were heavy, the pupils large, reflecting Bodie back in the intermittent street lights. "Question is, d'you want to hang around for the eruption, or are you going to bugger off where it's safe?"

Bodie concentrated on his driving, stealing a few seconds to think, to try to impose rationality on the hungers of his body. And of his heart, he admitted, stung to honesty by the sudden remembrance of how Doyle had looked in Mrs. Cowley's living room the night before, and the pain in his eyes the night he had dared kiss Bodie.

They were at the club before he realised he was out of time, and by the time he'd eased the car into a parking space, Doyle's face was shuttered and cold.

Not a good sign, and Bodie sighed. Bloody typical, he thought, I never could keep up with the moody sod.

They were enveloped in light and music, their

coats whisked away by someone laughing at a remembered past shared with Cowley. Drinks pressed into their hands, hands slapping them on the back in welcome and approval, their boss enfolded by people he hadn't seen in years, and every single one of them had a joke to tell or a story to relate.

The threat of Myer was more distant than ever, amorphous at best, absurd now, ensconced in a horde of old colleagues and older friends. Over it all was the music, old and new mixed indiscriminately, a joyous rill of music that incited dancing. Under it all, was Doyle's deathly silence.

If Bodie had thought Doyle cold and distant a couple of days ago, he was going to have to develop an entirely new vocabulary to describe this stoniness.

Surrounded by merriment, Doyle at his side like a black hole, Bodie sifted his options.

He could let Doyle be convinced that those few minutes on the stairs had just been him suffering from testosterone poisoning, that he wasn't willing to risk his job after all.

Or he could close his eyes, take a deep breath, and plunge in head first.

Think about it, he told himself. Loving and being loved. Commitment. All the old words of the ancient ceremony, cleaving only one to the other, crashed around him like so many driverless cars, smashing into him. Is that what he wanted?

Simply, helplessly: yes.

Was it what Doyle wanted?

A quick glance at the tight-lipped spectre at his side, banshee wail scarce contained.

Yes. Doyle was like that.

But for how long? Ann Holly whispered, her manicured nails and polished hair reflecting Doyle back at him.

Simpler still, more helpless than he had ever feared himself to be: for however long Doyle stayed.

He looked again at Doyle, and caught his boss staring at him in his turn.

Oh, shit, was all he could think. Cowley knew. The old bastard knew.

Which left him—where?

Cowley knew they were lovers, even though they weren't—really. So it couldn't be any worse, could it?

Cowley came towards him.

Oh, yes, it could indeed be a lot worse.

Bodie edged closer to Doyle, and began rehearsing his resignation speech.

And as his boss' mouth opened, so did the boss' mother's, her voice cutting through everything like a hot knife through butter. "George! Leave thon lads alone, let them have a wee bit fun—they've no had so much as a night off since you brought them up here. Away and don't annoy them, you can come here with me and see Mr. Skilling—d'you mind him from school?"

Another respite before Cowley began the Scottish Inquisition, another bit of time for him to get a grip on himself—he almost groaned as his own mind sabotaged him with a graphic image of what else he wanted to get a grip on, and who else, the way Doyle's face twisted as orgasm took him—

He supposed that it showed just how good the training was; afterwards, he could recite the names and positions of those present, the councillors, the Provost's assistant, the police big wigs, the ordinary old soldier. But at the time, all he was aware of was Cowley disappearing off into the distance, the crowd closing round him like the sea, and Bodie was standing there with Ray Doyle. A silently thunderous Ray Doyle who was making a point of looking at everyone but Bodie.

He could, he supposed, leave it until they were back at the flat. That would, after all, be the sensible thing to do. But look at the droop of Doyle's mouth, the sagging of his shoulders, the misery that darkened his eyes under the surface temper. How could common sense be proof against that?

Bodie had no idea; all he knew was that he had to tell Doyle, and tell him now, before Doyle locked him out and threw away the key.

"In here," he hissed, doing his best dramatic under-cover voice. 'Here' was a half-blocked stairwell, far better lit than the other one they'd been on already tonight, and nowhere near as private.

As if his hand burned him where it touched his partner, Bodie let go of Doyle as soon as they were out of sight of the celebrants.

Doyle put his empty glass down on the windowsill, leaned against the wall, crossed his arms, his deliberation a taunt, and then he just stood there, waiting.

"Look," Bodie began, sickeningly aware of just how difficult—or impossible—this might be, "in the car..."

"What about in the car?" Doyle asked, sounding

bored as he examined his fingernails.

"When you asked me if I wanted to hang about for the eruption..."

"Yeh?"

"I'd like to hang about a lot longer than that."

"Would you? That's interesting." He didn't sound interested, though, still not looking at Bodie, restless hands fiddling with picking nonexistent lint off his trousers.

"Look at me, Ray."

Doyle looked, once, impassively, and went back to the lint.

"C'mon, Ray, there's no need to go in a huff about—"

"No need? No fucking need? And what am I supposed to do, eh? You've been jerking me around like your own personal fucking Pinocchio, and you think all you have to do is condescend to hang about for a while and what am I supposed to do, eh? Lie back and think of England? Get down on my knees for you? Or am I supposed to just bend over and touch my toes?"

"For fuck's sake, Ray—you're not the virgin martyr in this! We've both fucked up—"

"Have we?"

"Yes we fucking have and don't you even think about denying it. You're so busy flying off the handle, you're not giving us a chance to even try."

"I gave you chances."

"And I want one more."

"Greedy bastard, aren't you?"

Bodie stepped forward then, rested his hand, palm down, on the rising and falling heat of Doyle's chest, crisp cotton a barrier between them. Doyle met his eyes, and Bodie refused to look away, took the final plunge and let his own feelings show. Nearly lost it when the feelings leapt up and demanded his attention, did lose it when Doyle grinned at him, and reached for him, and then Bodie was wrapped in Ray Doyle, mouth open, Doyle's tongue in his mouth, Doyle's hands on his arse, Doyle's cock hard against his own.

Pausing to catch his breath which was busy running away with his passion, Bodie rested his chin on Doyle's shoulder, his tongue unable to resist the temptation of Doyle's neck so sweetly within reach. "We're a right pair of sad bastards," he murmured, showing his talent for romantic chit-chat now that the feelings were sincere and not a means to getting his end away.

"Sad? If this is misery, then they can keep

heaven," Doyle said between the kisses he was peppering Bodie's face with.

"I just mean," Bodie thrust his hips forward, Doyle groaning in pleasure, "that we're sad bastards, if we're this turned on by a few kisses."

"So just think what it'll be like when I can get you between the sheets, naked—I'll show your prick what a few kisses can do for it then."

Much more of that, and Bodie would end up with a very embarrassing stain all down the front of his crotch. "Give over," he muttered, resisting the urge to get down on his knees here and now and show Doyle himself what a bit of sucking could do. "If we don't pack it in now, we're going to end up doing it right here, in a public place, with Cowley and his mum not a million miles away."

"Don't suppose that's too brilliant an idea, is it?"

"Wish you'd tell my cock that."

There was a wicked glint in Doyle's eyes as he started to slowly slide cock-wards, until common sense and the sound of drunken feet stumbling on the stairs overhead stopped him. By the time the boozy bluster had stumbled down to their landing, there was nothing to indicate that the two of them had been that close to having sex. Nothing, that is, as long as you were drunk, half blind, and with your glasses hanging uselessly from one ear.

"Hullo there, lads! How's it going? You havin' a grand time, are you? I am, amn't I, hen?" the over imbiber asked, his questions wandering as queasily as his eyes, taking in Bodie and Doyle and the bottle cradled so lovingly in the crook of his arm. 'Hen', being just a dimpled bottle, didn't reply, a fact which bothered the man no more than did Bodie and Doyle not replying. He reeled on to a tune considerably different from the one currently heuching away in the main hall, a blast of laughter and conversation coming through the door as he went out.

Not silence, far from it, but diffidence had set in, awkwardness the aftermath of reality's intrusion.

"We're mad, doing that here," Bodie said.

"Asking for it," Doyle said, hand involuntarily going to rub at the zip of his jeans as the double meaning caressed him. "I mean, asking for trouble."

"Christ, Doyle, stop touching yourself like that! You'll have me on my knees next if you keep that up."

"Don't know how not to keep it up," Doyle replied, wry humour inset into the huskiness of

lust. "You really pick your moments, you know that, don't you?"

"Natural rhythm," Bodie said, turning discreetly away to rearrange himself in his trousers.

"You haven't gone modest on me, have you, you great prat?"

"Listen, what chance do we have of getting out of here without being arrested, if I stand right there where you can see, and stick my hands down the front of my trousers?"

"Good point," Doyle conceded quickly, deciding that the paint on the wall really was fascinating and well worth studying for the next few moments. "You know what I want to know? How the fuck did we get ourselves into this state?"

"Because you kissed me and—"

"That's right, blame it all on me."

"And I was too fucking scared to admit what I wanted."

It was Bodie's turn to be studied now.

"And what is it you want?"

Bodie could, he supposed, get away with saying all he wanted was his best mate, and a good fuck. But that had been love in Doyle's eyes, before, and that had been love Doyle had had the balls to show, before. And no-one, least of all William Andrew Philip Bodie was going to say that Ray Doyle had more guts than him.

He shrugged, wishing he was better with words, wishing that he had the brass neck to actually do something as pathetically soppy as quote poetry that could actually say what he wanted to say. "Everything, I suppose," he finally said. "Everything, for as long as you want it, too."

Doyle's eyes narrowed in a way Bodie knew all too well, and he almost looked over his shoulder to see where the rest of the interrogation team was. "You think I'm going to walk out on you, don't you? You think I just want to add you to my scalp collection, fuck you, satisfy my curiosity and move on, don't you?"

"Well, yeh, if you're going to put it like that..."

"You, Bodie," Doyle jabbed Bodie in the chest for added emphasis, the tone quite wonderfully gentle in contrast, "are the biggest wally I've ever met. D'you think I'd take chances like this for the sake of a fuck? Even with a bloke—have you any idea how many blokes have offered, over the years?"

No, he hadn't—but he did have a sudden, overwhelming urge to track every single one of the

bastards down and beat them to a pulp.

"If it was just sex, d'you honestly think I'd risk the job, everything, for a bit of sex? D'you think I'm as stupid as you?"

"So does this mean you love me?"

"Oh, no, it's just that I'd worked my way through all the other blokes in the squad and you were next on the list. What the fuck d'you think?"

He thought the sun was shining, the birds were singing, and the rivers were flowing chocolate.

"And you can wipe that silly grin off your face as well—Cowley'll take one look at that and he'll know."

That was enough to wipe the grin off anyone's face, but Bodie's smile lingered, breaking through like sunshine in rain. "I hate to tell you this, but I think Cowley already knows. In fact, I think he knew before we did."

"You noticed as well, did you? Shit, I was hoping it was just my imagination."

"No such luck. So what d'you think we should do?"

"Same thing we do with our expenses chits."

"Lie through our teeth?"

"Any better ideas?"

Retire to the countryside, move to France, Italy, Greece, even. Anywhere they could get away with it, just the two of them. "Not really, no."

"So we'll lie to him. He'll know we're lying, and we'll know he knows, and we'll all pretend it's the truth, and officially, he won't have to do a blind thing."

"Apart from pretend he's blind, of course."

They stood there for a minute, and Bodie was very low-voiced when he finally broke the silence. "All that talk and practicality hasn't helped, has it?"

Doyle grinned, the same smile that could get him into trouble in a convent. "I still want to fuck you where you stand," he said, softened, added, "or kiss you for a month."

"Don't," Bodie groaned, turning away. Twice, tonight, they'd courted each other and disaster. Third time the charm, so the adage went. Third time and they'd be up to their...necks in trouble.

"We should go out there and mingle."

"Myer?"

"Safety in numbers. People would notice if I tore the trousers off you."

"Our timing's lousy, abso-fucking-lutely lousy. Why'd we have to choose being stuck up here right

under Cowley's nose to realise—"

"To realise what?"

But neither was quite willing to put it into words. Not quite yet, when they'd had so many near misses getting here in the first place.

"You know what," Bodie said gently.

"We both do," Doyle replied. Took one look at the open feelings on Bodie's face, and went for the door, and safety in numbers.

Almost back into the crowd, and Doyle suddenly grabbed him, pushed Bodie back into the dangerous privacy of the stair well, and had him up against the wall, sandwiched between the coldness of the wall and the heat of Doyle's body. Doyle kissed him once, hard, a kiss overflowing with promise, and lust, and love. And then he was gone, swallowed up by the revellers and the music and the light.

More slowly, Bodie followed, one finger straying to his lips, to where Doyle had kissed him.

It dawned on him, the words coming full-blown into his mind. He was in love, he thought, half dazed, half expecting it to show on his face for all the world to see. He was in love, and Doyle loved him back.

Maybe the world wasn't such a bad old place after all.

He spent the next hour dividing his time between watching his boss and his partner, the latter far more pleasant a task. Almost two A.M., and people were beginning to trickle out, the party only showing the very first signs of winding down. He caught Cowley's signal, rounded up coats and scarves and hats, bundled everyone up and out into the car, unable to stop himself from grinning happily, not quite daring to allow himself the luxury of looking at Doyle. Try and keep quiet about it then, he thought: one look at Doyle, and it'd be so obvious Cowley couldn't pretend ignorance, and then where would they be?

And he grinned all the more broadly when he realised that he didn't give a toss. Tomorrow, maybe, he'd care, but not tonight, when the words sang through his blood like a hymn through a cathedral, echoing and soaring and filling in all the empty spaces. Doyle loved him. Ray Doyle loved him, Bodie. Loved him enough to want everything with him. Everything.

Everything.

His trousers were too damned tight again.

Back at Mrs. Cowley's flat, Mr. Cowley giving

him funny looks, and all Bodie could think about was how they were going to be able to find an hour or two alone, he and Ray, so that they could, so that they could...

Make love.

Not the sort of euphemism he normally would be caught dead using, but for once, it wasn't just a euphemism. He and Ray, alone, even if it were just for an hour.

They'd be going back to London tomorrow—this afternoon, he corrected, the hall clock striking two. They could be alone then, as soon as they'd dropped Cowley off. As soon, he amended, as they'd sat through Cowley's lecture and/or interrogation, and made good their escape. Then it would be back to his flat, or better still, Doyle's, with its lovely big bed and thick duvet, central heating going full blast so they could be naked without freezing their balls off. Yeh, Doyle's flat, stop off for food on the way home so they wouldn't have to go out again...

"I said," Cowley repeated himself pointedly, "we'll be leaving at about three this afternoon, so make sure everything's ready."

"Oh—yes, sir, absolutely, sir. Three o'clock, on the dot. We'll be ready." Walking funny, if he didn't get to take the pressure off, but ready nonetheless. Leave at three, get back to London, get rid of Cowley—oh, god, why couldn't they just leave now? Who really cared about breathalyser tests anyway?

Mrs. Cowley was looking at him, patiently, and he wondered how long he'd been lost in his own pleasant fog.

"I'll make you a proper breakfast before you start off, and maybe we'll even have time for a late dinner as well. And I'll make up a wee bit picnic for your tea later."

"That'll be great," Bodie said, wondering why the hell she'd chosen two o'clock in the morning to discuss meals with him. Tensed, as she looked pointedly over at Doyle.

"I'll chap on the door," she said, "afore I bring you your tea in in the morning."

Floored would be too mild a term to describe how Bodie felt. She couldn't mean what he thought she meant.

"C'mon, Mum," Cowley was saying, "it's past time you were in your bed."

"What have I tellt you about telling me what to do? In one ear and out the other, that's what it is,

ayeways was, wasn't it? Never—"

Their voices faded, the closing door cutting them off.

"She didn't—" Doyle said.

"Couldn't've," Bodie agreed with more hope than certainty.

"Yeh, not a woman of her age."

"Wouldn't even cross her mind."

"Course not."

And then they had run out of words. In Mrs. Cowley's sitting room, surrounded by the smell of furniture polish, lavender and old age, they just stood there for a minute, and stared at each other.

"Well."

"Right."

Both words at the same time, both men looking away together.

Neither spoke, neither dared give voice to the need tangling the ground between them.

"Best get to—best get some sleep," Bodie said, being practical.

"Sooner we're asleep, sooner it'll be time to get ready to leave."

"We'll be in London before we know it."

And the look Doyle slanted at him acknowledged how little comfort that was.

Efficiently, they cleared a space on the floor, spread the sleeping bags out, not too close together for virtue.

"Not long before we're back in London," Doyle said, one foot kicking miserably at a hapless sleeping bag.

"Not long at all."

But it felt like a lifetime.

Ablutions and necessities completed, they lay in the dark, each in his condom of a sleeping bag.

It was always easier to say things in the dark.

It was Doyle who spoke first.

"We could always say that we want to get petrol for the car, get it a quick once-over before we drive back."

"Where's going to be opened, in Scotland, on New Year's Day?"

Silence.

Bodie's turn. "We could always say we'd had a tip off, or wanted to check a possible source—someone we'd met at that party tonight."

"And I can just imagine the report we'd file. 'We proceeded to the site named by our source on the night of the 31st, whereupon we proceeded to fuck like rabbits.' Oh, yeh, that'll go down a treat."

Silence.

Doyle again. "It's stupid—us lying here like Cowley's maiden aunts!"

"Better than us bonking and Cowley coming in to hear what all the racket is."

Pause, rustling of nylon sleeping bag on skin, Doyle raising himself up on one elbow, his hair a tousled halo in the dim light slipping in through the window. "We didn't make any noise that time we did it on that obbo over Smithfield's, did we?"

"Yeh, but that was only a wank, really."

"And who says we have to do anything else this time?"

Me, thought Bodie, half amused that he wanted so much for this to mean something, to be different enough that he could always point to this point in his memory and say, see, that's the date, never forget it, been forty years to the day...

"Me," he said out loud. "If we're going to do anything with Cowley and his mum just couple of rooms away, it's going to be worth it."

"D'you want to?"

"Christ, Doyle, want? Want? I 'want' a cup of tea, I 'want' a pint—you I fucking need."

A whirlwind of muffled sound and stifled movement, and then Doyle was on top of him, struggling to pull the zip down, the noise quite disgustingly loud for surreptitious sex. The nylon was shoved aside, heat replaced by numbing cold, that replaced immediately by the clamber of limbs over his own, warm skin, tense muscles, strong hands holding his head still for Doyle's kisses, Doyle heavy on him, hard too, muscle and bone and cock pressing down on him, digging into him, Doyle holding him tightly now, arms wrapped around him, Bodie hugging back, grabbing him too hard, murmur of complaint, slight easing of pressure, and then Bodie rubbing up against him, hips moving, Doyle pressing down.

Deep kisses, every moan and murmur swallowed by the other, taken deep inside, substitute for what they knew would happen soon, each inside the other as best they could, trying so desperately to be quiet, more desperate still to be part of the other. Bodie felt Doyle's hand on his cock, groaned into Doyle's mouth, palmed Doyle's buttocks, his finger finding the tight knot of muscle that would, soon, oh, soon, open to him, the small hole that he would push his cock into, making Doyle his own, marking him, on the inside, where only the two of them would know.

To think he'd been scared of this—small fucking wonder, he thought, his hands and arms and heart filled with Ray Doyle. It was all consuming, everything in his world concentrated into this experience, into this man he was holding onto so tightly. Bodie spread his legs, wanting Doyle to touch him there, the way he had Doyle, and was rewarded not by the dry press of finger, but by the wet slickness of cock, Doyle's cock rubbing him there, threat, promise, pleasure, pain, but most of all, commitment, and confession.

He wanted to say it, actually speak the words aloud, but didn't dare: if he said it at all, he'd scream it from the rooftops, loud enough to wake the dead and make the angels jealous. He made do with bringing his legs up so that he had Doyle scissored, their cocks pressing together now, rubbing, and rubbing, the hardness a joy, Doyle's strength a delight. His breath was shorter now, great heaving gasps that he breathed into Doyle's open mouth, the groans stifled by kisses and love. The rush started, flooding him, erupting from him, their bellies and cocks suddenly wet and slick, sliding together exquisitely.

Subsiding, Doyle still tense above him, Doyle's hard cock stabbing at him, frantic with need. Eyes open, trying to see Doyle in the near dark, Bodie covered Doyle's mouth with one hand, brought the other to his own mouth, sucked the fingers inside. Their wetness caught the faint light, glimmering, addicting Doyle's gaze to their implication. Slowly, Doyle's tongue wet against his palm, Bodie brought his right hand down to Doyle's rump, to the richness of flesh. One finger, only one, but a part of him, his body, entering Doyle, joining them. Doyle's teeth were sharp, biting him, containing the sounds of his impalement, Doyle's eyes closing in ecstatic pleasure, as Bodie fucked him with only his finger, and Doyle came, hips thrusting forward one last time, his cock pulsing against Bodie.

And then it was over, Doyle limp atop him, the two of them entangled, but separate, Bodie no longer inside Doyle, the passion satiated. But something else had been awakened, and they lay there for a long time, saying nothing, sharing small kisses, caresses touching each other in telling affection.

Sounds from the kitchen, Mrs. Cowley up and about, the two of them separating reluctantly, grinning at each other as the state they were in made its presence felt. Doyle retreated to shove on

track suit and socks, heading for the bathroom, real life back in full force, the night before reduced to pleasant memories and contentment.

The red car heading southwards this time, weaving its way through countryside that had been deluged with wind and rain in their absence, a steady, pedantic rain falling still. The windscreen wipers whished back and forth, back and forth, the sound hypnotic, and in the back seat, the papers were no longer shuffling efficiently, slower, slower, until finally that small noise stopped, Cowley's breathing heavy and deep.

"Some party, last night," Doyle said very quietly.

"Looks like it," Bodie agreed, looking at his partner, wondering if he himself looked half as sappy. "Really was quite a night, wasn't it?"

"Nothing on the celebration we're going to have when we get back to our own flat."

Our. Such a small word, and with such a weight of meaning. The rain didn't matter, the cold didn't

matter, whatever Cowley was planning to say didn't matter. Nothing mattered at all, not really. Not when Bodie compared it to the reality of Doyle at his side, with him, the two of them together, and the sweet anticipation of what they were going to do tonight, or tomorrow. No rush, not now.

He looked again at Doyle, catching his partner already staring, smiling, looking—

Yep. No doubt about it: Mr. Miseryguts was looking happy. Cocooned in their car, surrounded by the grey of rain and the steady passage of miles, they drove on.

And for us, this is the end. We leave them as we found them, in their car, but this time our last memories of them are the warmth in Doyle's eyes, and the happiness in Bodie's. We can disperse now, each of us going our separate ways as for once, at last, those two have found a single destination. We depart now, leaving them once more, that bright spark of red amidst the dull grey of dank weather, the road stretching out before them like a promise.