



PÆAN TO PRIAPUS



IV

AN ANTHOLOGY OF MULTI-MEDIA SLASH FICTION

VOLUME FOUR

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

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HIS MASTER'S VOICE

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Having folded his underdrawers on the bedroom chair, Jeeves had scarce picked up his dressing-gown before he heard a mewling cry come trickling from the main bedroom. The dressing-gown was a rather magnificent creation and would have been quite the silliest thing on a lesser man than Jeeves. However, Jeeves would never permit such considerations to colour his actions and the exquisite dressing-gown was donned with its owner's usual calm efficiency. Being of the efficient sort, it took the merest of moments for those two rather large, very pink beneficiaries of excellent pedicures to be snugly ensconced in slippers. Some poor sheep was undoubtedly shivering on a Welsh hillside, but Jeeves was snug as a bunny, if one can mix one's metaphors with such gay abandon and complete disregard for all the efforts of one's Masters at school. Jeeves glided down the main corridor to the bedroom occupied by his employer, a certain Bertram Wooster, called 'Bertie' by his friends and 'that dashed young fool' by those who knew him rather better than they cared to. The bedroom, or so it seemed by the ululating racket emanating from behind the door, was also occupied by a rather spoilt little boy of approximately five summers.

"Jeeves!" came the peevish cry. "It's doing it again!"

Bertie was all alone, the plaintive infant's cry belonging to him and him alone, much to Jeeves' relief, for he was, after all, a valet and enormously unsuited to nannying. In fact, Bertie had once observed the excellent Jeeves in the presence of a

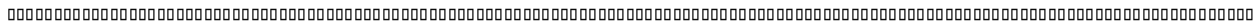
child and thereafter spent the next fortnight delightedly trumpeting the tale of How Jeeves Shuddered. Jeeves pushed the door open and entered the bedroom whilst another high-pitched whine was reverberating, rather piercingly to the old ears, around the room. "It's been and gone and done it *again!*"

"May I enquire to what sir is referring?" Jeeves asked in his usual plum velvet tones. He would have sounded quite natural and appropriate if he had been in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot, that is, rather than standing at the foot of a disgracefully untidy bed that contained an appallingly dishevelled man.

"This!" Wooster shouted. One could perhaps, if one were of a less than truly charitable nature or unkindler still, if one were a close acquaintance of Sir Roderick Glossop, one could even describe it as an hysterical shriek. One is, however, neither uncharitable nor a friend of Sir Roderick Glossop, so one will simply state that Bertie Wooster was sitting upright in bed, bed-clothes clenched in his raised hands and his voice raised even louder as he shouted for his man.

"Would sir be so kind as to clarify what 'it' is and precisely what 'it' is doing 'again'?"

Bertie blushed, quite prettily for a girl, but as he was a long way from a girl, both in geography and anatomy, the blush was not pretty, but as red as a flag to a bull. He mumbled in a manner that, if he heard such unmannerliness, his dear old Pater would tear the few remaining hairs from his pate and weep over all that money mis-spent on tutors



and schools and the like.

"I do beg your pardon, sir," Jeeves murmured, for Jeeves rarely merely spoke, "but I failed to distinguish the words of your pronouncement."

"Oh, dash it all, Jeeves, must I really say it? Must I really permit the filthy words to pass these pure lips?"

"I really do not think it my place, sir, to comment upon the purity of your lips. However, if I am to render you assistance, then I must respectfully request some additional information. As Shakespeare once wrote, 'a little knowledge—'"

Bertram made a sound authors most commonly, and common authors invariably, render as 'pshaw!'. "There is a time and a place for everything, Jeeves, and my bedroom is no place for Shakespeare!"

"I shall attempt to keep him in the parlour where he belongs, sir. Will that be all?"

"Yes—NO!" Bertie cried once more, bestowing a morose stare upon the offence taking place under the bedcovers. "There is still this matter. Oh, do help me, Jeeves. You always have an answer for everything, you winkle me out of every scrape I have ever landed myself in, please, don't let me down on this!"

"I shall endeavour to render sir every satisfaction," Jeeves responded, blissfully unaware that he was being more than usually prophetic, even for a man of his enormous talents. That last, however, is even more prophetic than Jeeves was to dear old Bertie. Enough of such banter, let us continue with the story.

"I don't know what satisfaction you can render with this thing," Bertie said, sighing gustily. "It does this quite often, every bally morning, I must admit. It usually sorts itself out, if I ignore it for a long enough time and simply pretend that nothing exists below the old belt-buckle. Although perhaps that's not the word I'm looking for. Perhaps I mean that I pretend that nothing exists below the old pyjama ties, because it usually does this every morning. Before I awaken, there it is, ready to ambush me the instant I open my eyes. Quite terrified me the first few times it happened, I don't mind telling you."

Now, all Society knows what a treasure Jeeves is, and all Society knows that Jeeves knows everything there is to know, and all Society knows that Jeeves sees all, knows all and says nothing. All Society would still, I put to you, be shocked at

what Jeeves was presently knowing.

"I believe the event to which you refer is a normal physiological function of the male member, sir."

Bertie turned redder than a sunset at sea and his mouth gaped wider than a caught fish. "That's silly, Jeeves. How can it be normal?"

"I am merely expressing the opinions of several learned men who are leaders in their field which is medicine and the human anatomy, sir."

"But still, it seems deuced odd to me. Anyway," Bertie shrugged as best he was able with his hands still lifted on high with the bedclothes wrinkled over them, "Nanny told me all about it, and when was Nanny ever wrong? Hmm? Go on, Jeeves, tell me one instance, just one, when Nanny was wrong?"

Jeeves, impressively well-mannered, made no comment. "I am quite sure I could not do such a thing, sir. May I ask the occurrence that precipitated Nanny's pronouncements?"

"Must I?" Bertie whimpered.

Jeeves, ruthless in his search for knowledge, nodded.

"Oh, very well," Bertie sighed. "It was when I was but a lad. One night, I was awakened by the most peculiar sensation. At first, I thought the earth had moved under me, but not another soul was up and about. Oh, I listened, but there wasn't a single sound, apart from some dratted squirrels or bats or some such creature scuttling around whimpering and moaning."

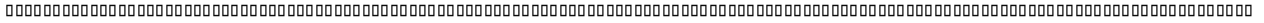
Once more, proving what a sterling fellow he was, Jeeves offered no comment. It was not, in that worthy's opinion, his place to shatter the innocence of his master by drawing his attentions to truths of a somewhat carnal nature, if one can forgive the use of such language.

"Anyway, in the morning, after the chambermaids changed the linens on my bed, Nanny called me up to her rooms."

"Then you were no longer in her charge, sir?"

"Of course not! I was far too old for that! But you know how it is with Nannies. One grows very attached to them, and she had been in the family for years."

This gave rise to another opinion which Jeeves preferred not to utter. It smacked too much of disloyalty to comment that if Nanny, whom he had met on several less than auspicious occasions, had been with the family for years, then that fact



would go a rather long way in explaining why the entire Wooster brood was a trifle odd.

“You were saying, sir?” Jeeves prompted, still preferring not to do anything so commonplace as speak.

“Oh, yes, where was I? Up in Nanny’s rooms, with her giving me some lecture in botanics. Is that the word I need, Jeeves? Botanics, or something that covers flora and fauna. Or is it something else entirely? Are bees fauna, Jeeves?”

Jeeves drew himself up to his full and impressive height, tucked his hands behind his back and took a deep breath. This was a pose everyone, and most particularly Mr. Bertram Wooster, was familiar with as being Jeeves’ lecture pose. Bertie raced hurriedly into speech. “Not that it matters too terribly much, I suppose. So there I was and there she was, and she was rabbiting on about birds and bees and needing to shave and going blind. Well, as you can imagine, it took me quite a bit of time to sort all this jumble out, and Nanny, being a dear, took pity on me and explained it all to me again.”

“May I enquire as to the details of this explanation, sir?”

“I’m surprised that you need me to tell you all about it, Jeeves. I thought you were quite the man of the world. But a man can’t leave his fellow man wallowing in ignorance, so I shan’t spare my blushes. Well,” he lowered his voice and whispered, so quietly that Jeeves couldn’t make out a word of it until Bertie patted the bed and gave him permission to sit thereupon. “As I said, Nanny told me about how it, you know, that thing down there, sometimes rises up. Well, that’s because it’s an instrument of Satan and we all know how often the Bible tells us Satan’s instruments of Evil will rise up and smite the good?”

Jeeves nodded, far too stunned to make any comment on this, which was rather a pity, for he had thought of another substitute for ‘said’.

“It turns out,” Bertie mused, using the word Jeeves had been saving for himself, “that *it*, one’s *membrum virilis*,” he broke off there to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Dashed difficult work, this explaining all this and having to actually utter the naughty words. “*It* rises up and when it does, one must not, absolutely must not touch it. You see, if one were to touch it, then one would be aiding Satan by spilling one’s seed on the ground. And we all know what a sin that is.” He sat back,

rather puffed up with pride at having delivered such a difficult lecture so well.

Jeeves said nothing for quite a few moments. In fact, so many moments passed that Bertie was beginning to wonder if Jeeves would need to borrow a thesaurus before he opened his mouth again. But then, at last, Jeeves postulated: “However, I believe that the continuation of this situation has become an ever enlarging problem for you, sir.”

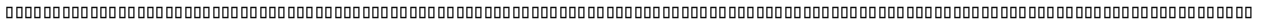
“And never a truer word was spoken.”

Jeeves winced at such a banal and simple verb being applied to his prestigious pronouncements, but being of a generous and forgiving soul, he immediately reminded himself that this was, after all, Bertie Wooster speaking and certain allowances should therefore be made for the dear, sweet thing. “If I may be permitted, sir,” Jeeves continued, not by one flicker of a hair revealing any of the thoughts racing round his mind, and certainly being far too subtle for Bertie to uncover his secrets, “there is, I believe, an honest and moral solution to this increasing problem.”

“I was hoping that you, of all people, Jeeves, would come up with something just the teensiest bit cleverer than *that* old solution. I suppose there’s nothing else for it.” He heaved an enormous sigh, dropped the bed-covers whence they immediately formed either a small mountain or a very large molehole (depending on one’s point of view and list of comparative experiences) over his lap. With an expression of pathos upon his handsome features, Bertie stretched his hands out in front of himself and remained in this odd position, apparently not only waiting for Jeeves to do something, but expecting Jeeves to know that that something was.

Faith in one’s abilities is always flattering. However, it can be somewhat bemusing when that faith is blind to the point of obscuring the issue so thoroughly that one is hard-pressed to have even the faintest idea of what is expected of one. Fortunately for Bertie Wooster, Jeeves was not as the rest of us mere mortals, but a man of singular intelligence and more importantly, a considerable acquaintance with Bertie’s mental machinations.

“I assume you are indicating, sir, that Nanny was in the habit of placing either mittens or boxing gloves on your hands when you retired for the evening?” Jeeves presumed in a very understating voice.



the answer to many a prayer of his own.

“Snuggle up, Jeeves,” Bertie pleaded as soon as they were both under the covers. “No need in making this any harder than it already has to be. Yes, yes, I know, it’s not exactly the done thing for a valet to lean on his master so, but I really don’t mind. After all you’re doing to help me, I’d be a cad to complain about a bit of indecorousness, wouldn’t I? Now, what is it we must do?”

“If you will permit me, sir, I will do what’s necessary and if you would be so kind as to echo my movements, I’m sure that we will find that to be a most satisfactory solution to our dilemma.”

“Oh,” Wooster erupted in surprise as his problem rubbed against Jeeves moral dilemma, “I think you’re right as always!”

“Thank you, sir,” Jeeves gasped, somewhat distracted by the solving of their mutual distress to their mutual satisfaction. “It is always my intention to please you.”

He was certainly succeeding in this laudable goal, as witnessed by the breathless sighs and high-pitched moans coming from the throat of his master.

“Oh, Jeeves,” that worthy sighed, “I would never have believed that sacrificing oneself could bring such joy. Is this,” his voice broke as he copied a particularly effective blow against Satan’s rising power, “is this what the books call an ecstasy?”

Jeeves was pressing his advantage home, and much to his relief, Bertie was matching him stroke for stroke. “Oh, yes, yes, yes!” Jeeves ejaculated.

Bertie lost no time in echoing him in this either, although his ejaculation owed nothing to the verbal and everything to the physical.

“You know, Jeeves,” Bertie murmured sleepily, moving readily as his valet mopped those regions requiring the attentions of a damp cloth and some rather extraordinary attentions from his devoted manservant, “I believe we must, as the Bible charges us to do, be ever vigilant in this battle.”

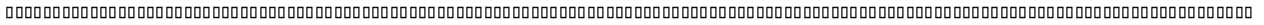
“Indeed, sir,” Jeeves agreed, smoothing his master’s pyjamas into place and retreating a slight distance to don his own pyjamas and exquisite dressing-gown before returning to his master’s side.

“Hmm, yes. In fact, I think we need to make absolutely certain that we practice every day.”

“A very wise move, sir. Also, if I may be so bold, I believe it behooves us to wage an ever increasing campaign, instigating new techniques at frequent intervals,” Jeeves finally merely said, too worn out by his earlier ejaculation to bother with verbal variety.

“What a brilliant plan, Jeeves, dear chap. I couldn’t agree more.”

Sanguine, though less spunky than usual, Jeeves was impassive as he politely disported his master in bed. Not by one flicker of an eyelash did Jeeves reveal his self-congratulation, which was probably for the better. For, unbeknownst to Jeeves, Mr. Bertram Wooster was not quite as great a fool as the world supposed him, which is hardly surprising, for a rock is not so stupid as the world supposes Bertie to be. Gosh, Bertie thought as Jeeves tucked him in again, that bally book I found in Mr. Johnson’s back shop really was a treasure. I wonder what other ideas I’ll find in there...



“Obvious, innit?”

Doyle, in Bodie’s opinion, not only came up with the oddest jokes in Christendom, but he also had the worst comedictiming since Larry Grayson. “What’s obvious?” he asked with a patience that would have tried a saint.

Doyle slanted a glance at him. “Bent old bugger like him, stands to reason he’d be perfect for golf. All those men holding their long, rigid shafts of iron, chasing after their balls...”

Bodie, in Doyle’s opinion, could turn such an interesting shade of puce if you told him the right joke at the right time. Especially if you’d timed it so that they were within hearing distance of their boss...

“Bodie!”

“Yes, sir?” Bodie managed, albeit sounding strangled.

“If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a hundred times. No eating your damned sweeties or sandwiches or anything else whilst we’re on the links.” He glowered, yet again, at a Bodie whose eyes were streaming and whose Adam’s apple was bobbing frantically. “Choking, are you? Well, serves you bloody right.” Then the flint-hearted old sod turned his back and returned, with the smoothness of a spiv, to ingratiating several thousand more pounds out of the new Minister.

Behind his back, Bodie gave his boss an elegant, if two fingered, salute. Which made the Minister wink conspiratorially and smile in what was probably an attempt at friendly seductiveness, but came across as more of a bend-over-and-spread-’em leer.

“In fact,” Doyle said as soon as his partner could breathe more or less normally, just for the pleasure of seeing Bodie turn puce all over again, “you could almost say it’s right up his alley because all the men pocket their balls.”

He might be half-choking, but by God, he hadn’t gone through SAS training without learning something. Manfully, he regained control of his breathing and straightened himself to proper military bearing—if we’re willing to ignore the decided list to the left caused by a well-stuffed golf-bag—and started to give back as good as he’d just got.

“Yeh, suppose it would suit the old sod to a tee—you know, a game where the winner is the one who takes the fewest strokes to score.”

“I thought they scored at the end,” Doyle said

perfectly calmly, years of being a policeman even more useful than SAS training for some things. “But then again, the winner’s the one who sinks his balls into the shaft first, isn’t he?”

“Actually,” Bodie had gone very posh, toffee nose in the air, and being acrobatic, standing on his dignity while he was at it, “it’s not a shaft they sink their balls into, it’s the hole.”

Doyle gazed admiringly at his boss and his boss’ boss. “Gosh,” he said, as goggle-eyed as Biggles, “and at their age! I thought the old balls shrivelled up with age.” Back to his normal self, close enough behind Bodie to land Bodie right in it without revealing a whisper of what he himself was saying, “Which goes to show, I suppose, that Cowley’s a bigger arsehole than we thought.”

Bodie hoped that coughing would be less wrath-mongering than choking. Needless to say, he was wrong.

“Are you sickening for something?”

“No, sir,” Doyle said chirpily with a truly evil smile. “He’s just sickening.”

“Thank you for your opinion, Doyle. If I ever want it again, I’ll be sure to ask.” Mr. Cowley left his Minister to ‘tot up’ the score cards—politicaese for ‘cheat’—and managed to corner his two agents despite the fact that they not only outnumbered him, but there wasn’t a corner in sight. Minor details, neither of which stopped Bodie or Doyle from feeling like rats caught by a large ginger tom. “Now, there’s something I’d like to know,” Mr. Cowley asked with considerable charm, another one of those details that made Doyle’s bowels feel weak and Bodie’s bladder threaten a deluge.

“Yes, sir?” Bodie asked, edging closer to Doyle for moral—or immoral, he wasn’t fussy when he was facing Cowley—support.

“D’you like your job?”

Bodie glanced at Doyle.

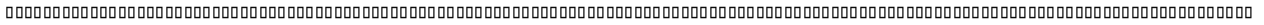
“Yes, we do,” Doyle answered, an idea of where all this was leading sneaking up on him, until he realised it was only Bodie crowding him as usual.

“So you’d say you enjoy your work? Enjoy having a job, a regular pay-packet, a car and flat provided, ridiculous expenses?”

Not even Doyle thought this was the moment to mention that their expense allowances really were ridiculous—ridiculously poor, that is.

“Yes, sir,” Bodie said, in absolutely no doubt where this was all leading.

“Aye. An’ if the pair of you want to have jobs to



bum of Doyle’s tight jeans to notice the look he was being given. Unfortunate, that. If he’d looked up at that particular moment, he might have had an inkling of the rather interesting turn his life was about to take.

But in truth, the only turn Bodie noticed was the angle that took them back onto the fairway, and in his books, that wasn’t interesting at all. A fact more than noticed by their boss, whose temper was fraying round the edges. “Bodie! Wake up, man, you’re not on leave yet. Here, give me—” Mr. Cowley took one look at the expression of total—real or feigned, either one was equally annoying—ignorance on Bodie’s face and reached in for the club of his choice, that being quicker by half than waiting for Bodie to finally condescend to get it for him. “Och, never mind, I’ll get it myself. You do realise, don’t you, that the game would be over that wee bit faster if you actually did what I brought you here for in the first place?”

As the Minister chose that moment to squeeze Bodie’s nether cheeks, our Mr. Bodie rightfully decided that silence was the better part of valour. Cross-eyed with the effort to refrain from shoving a number nine iron up the Minister’s hole—head first, and the handle bent, just for good measure—Bodie manfully bore his burden of being a mere sex object. A rôle, by the way, he more than enjoyed usually, but being pawed by a creep tended to take the blush off things somewhat. He could just imagine waking up afterwards, turning over in the afterglow, to be confronted by those too perfect teeth floating in a glass by the bedside. Or worse, the dentures coming loose at the wrong moment, a thought that gave him the sudden, almost uncontrollable urge, to cross his legs and cover his balls with his hands.

Cowley was digging through the pouches of his golf-bag, his back turned to the other three men, and the Minister was taking advantage of this fortuitous situation in more ways than one. While Cowley’s attention were focussed on pocketing two white balls, the Minister was trying to dig through Bodie’s pouches, showing great interest in palming Bodie’s balls, which were also firm and round but not designed to be handled quite the way the Minister seemed to think. With considerably more grace than Bodie was usually accused of, he side-stepped the amorous golfer with the enormous handicap and hastily put Cowley, Cowley’s golf-bag and Doyle between

himself and the Minister that he didn’t dare offend too seriously. After all, were he to outrage the Minister and buggery up the budget allocation, then Cowley would have his balls. And Bodie wouldn’t put it past the Cow to simply offer the Minister Bodie’s balls on a silver platter—and probably still attached to Bodie. Silver service with a difference.

“What’s the matter, Bodie?” Doyle was whispering. “Wrong time of the month?”

Bodie did a glare that Cowley would have been most jealous of. “Ha bloody ha. How’d you feel if a bloke was poking you in the bum and trying to get his hands down your trousers?”

Doyle, who’s brain had been going nineteen to the dozen while the Minister had been copping a feel of eggs that usually only came in pairs, answered, face impassive but the rest of his body deliberately transmitting sexual allure. “That would depend on the bloke doing the poking, wouldn’t it?” He paused long enough for Bodie’s ears to convince his brain that he really had heard what he thought he had just heard, and then added, as he turned away and bent over to pick up the golf-bag, his damp jeans etched across his arse, “Never complained when it was you, did I?”

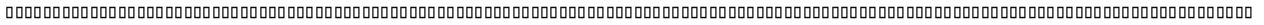
At which point, Bodie could have been excused for falling over in a dead faint, if not because of what Doyle had just said, but also because someone, and not the Minister, had put his hands on Bodie’s hips. Oh my God, he wailed to himself, not fucking Cowley an’ all! Then he realised he was being shifted, quite innocently, out of his boss’ way.

Mr. Cowley, a man of prescience as well as presence, read the expression on Bodie’s face. “If my mother were here,” Cowley said very, very quietly, “she’d have a bar of carboloc soap in your mouth before you could blink.”

Bodie managed a sickly smile, mind too busy bouncing around the farcicality of this entirely too surreal trip to the golf-course.

Cowley, taking this for yet another example of Bodie’s army training—dumb, and therefore unpunishable, insolence being an art form in some regiments—really got his dander up. “What d’you take me for? I’ll have you know I went to Edinburgh Uni, not bloody Cambridge!” And with that, in dudgeon almost as high as his dander, Cowley stalked off, so annoyed that he forgot to slice his drive and the ball flew true—and for bloody miles.

Bodie took the driver silently, stuffed it back



disappointed, she said!—when Ray had dropped out of art school to join the police, so maybe she wouldn't be bothered if her son... He dredged his memory and deep in the murk of his brain, he found verbatim snippets of a conversation that he'd had three weeks ago when he'd literally bumped into Ray's mum on Dawes Road. And Doyle never had explained how come his mum had recognised Bodie. Funny, that was the day Ray'd actually come up with two girls, the first time they'd ever double-dated. Hindsight was making that look more like distraction than entertainment, now. And if Doyle were willing to fork out a small fortune—'my idea, my treat', he'd said, which should have set Bodie's alarm bells ringing, Doyle far outreaching Cowley in the tight-fistedness stakes—to distract Bodie from—

"Earth to Bodie, come in Bodie."

Bodie blinked, but enthusiastic as his cock was, he was a long way from coming in anything. "What?" he asked.

"I see you're still your usually scintillatingly brilliant self as always," Doyle said dryly. "But if you don't get your finger out, Cowley's going to blow his top."

Bodie wished Doyle wouldn't use words like that right now. Not when he was trying to think and his balls were conspiring with his cock to prevent anything resembling cogency from entering his mind. "What's he after now?" he grumbled, strolling over to meet Cowley half-way, a gesture that was entirely lost on a boss whose temper was not so much frayed as disintegrated.

"What the hell is the matter with you today? I asked you for my putter and you're standing there catching flies—"

The putter now gainfully employed in missing an easy shot, Bodie turned to examine the only flies he was interested in at the moment. Doyle was standing a more than decorous distance from the Minister, the golf-bag strategically placed between them. "Your shaft, sir," Doyle said, all innocence.

"Thank you very much," the Minister replied, all frustration.

Bodie actually found himself sympathising. He wished there was somewhere nearby where he could slip away and adjust himself before his Y-fronts cut his circulation—and other, less fluid but no less pulsing, parts—off forever. There wasn't

even one of those little wooden huts anywhere in sight, just flat grass, sand bunkers and a very unwelcoming water trap.

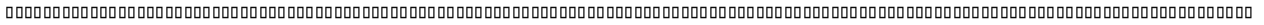
Doyle, meanwhile, had noticed Bodie's predicament, and was enjoying himself enormously, so to speak. With a very calculated roll to his walk, he strolled across the obsessively smooth green and bent from the waist, bum presented for the admiration of the world, to retrieve the Minister's ball from the cup. Still walking as if he had something wonderful and hard up his rear, he went over to Bodie and dropped the ball into Bodie's right hand. "There you go, mate," he whispered, "you can hold my balls for me."

And then he turned and walked away.

At that moment, Bodie seriously considered dropping the golf-bag, balls and shafts and all, and tackling Doyle to the ground, where he could grab balls and shafts and all, not leastly Doyle's delectable rump which was twitching in front of him, flanks hollowing and rounding with every step, the jeans drying until only the crease down the middle of Doyle's arse was still wet. The dark line was so pronounced, so like looking at the shadowed cleft between Doyle's buttocks, Bodie was hard pressed to control himself. A panted groan from the Minister told Bodie 'hard pressed' wasn't a purely metaphoric turn of phrase. Hurriedly, and with a supremely quelling glower at the Minister, budgets be damned, Bodie lifted his hand from where it shouldn't be and put it where it should. Golf-bag once more over his shoulder, Bodie caught up with Cowley, not coincidentally putting Doyle out of his immediate vision and certainly out of his immediate temptation. Frowning fiercely in his concentration not to ravish Doyle right here in the open, Bodie accepted his boss' jacket, not even hearing the complaint about how hot it was and how he could use a drink.

He may not have been able to see Doyle, but he could hear him. Staccato words cutting the Minister off at the knee, but Doyle was careful how he phrased everything: the only way the Minister could complain about anything Doyle said would be to mention the fact that said Minister of Her Majesty's Government had just propositioned a member of Her Majesty's Security Forces. Needless to say, Doyle was having a whale of a time.

"You certainly put Casanova in his place," Bodie murmured as Cowley lavished praise on the Minister's rather feeble tee off shot.



expression was a masterpiece of disgust, and the way he ‘accidentally’ bumped into Bodie was a masterpiece of subterfuge and seduction combined. Amazing, really what can be done in plain view when one is picking up a golf-bag, isn’t it? Grabbing Bodie by the wrist and dragging him along, all of which was a very convenient excuse to rub his thumb along the racing pulse on the tender inner side of Bodie’s wrist, Doyle started them off in pursuit of two now-distant figures who were showing disturbing signs of coming back to get them. An unnerving prospect, to put it mildly.

“So you’re not just after a quick fuck?”

“Oh, I want that all right, but I want slow fucks and long fucks and you to suck me and me wanking you off in the bath...”

Bodie wondered if the rotten sod had done it on purpose. The recitation had barely ended when they were in full view of Cowley and the Minister. And it wasn’t only the view that was full: Bodie’s underwear was in a very similar predicament, one that Bodie knew was all too apparent. Not too many things he could do about that...

“Bodie, is that any way to carry my good jacket?”

“Sorry, sir,” he muttered, but smugly, secure in the knowledge that Cowley would have liked the view even less if Bodie had *not* been carrying the tweed jacket clumsily in front of himself like that.

“Daft as a stick today. Sometimes I wonder what I was thinking when I signed you on. Here, let me have that club.”

Then Cowley was off putting about with the Minister, and Bodie and Doyle were left to their own devices. Or vices, as the case may be.

“Where were we?” Bodie asked, distracted by the discomfort of being too big for his breeches.

“Wanking you in the bathtub,” Doyle said with remarkable aplomb, considering that his breeches weren’t faring any better than Bodie’s.

“Christ, Doyle!” A deep breath, a wiggle and a wriggle, and while it didn’t come close to solving the problem, at least that reinforced seam wasn’t digging into him any more. “But d’you mean it? You want more than just a quick fling?”

Doyle had a wonderful joke on the tip of his tongue, but then he noticed the bead of sweat on Bodie’s upper lip, and the sternly clenched expression on the face. Oh, well, there’d be other chances to use that punchline. “Course that’s what I’m saying. You were the one who wanted us to be

serious, and then there you go, rabbiting on as if all it would be is a quick wank in the bushes. Typical, bloody typical. Listen, I don’t know about you, mate, but I don’t mess about with someone my life depends on.”

“No,” Bodie said, a beatific smile wreathing his face. “No, you wouldn’t, would you?”

Doyle looked at him askance. “You aren’t expecting a ring and me down on one knee, are you?”

“Don’t know about you, mate,” Bodie imitated him cheerfully, “but I find it’s easier if you go down on both knees, less chance of losing your balance that way. And it’s so much more reassuring for the bloke whose delicate prick you’ve got between your jaws.”

Doyle grinned back at him, but any comment was forestalled of a very chuffed Minister and a grimly sycophantic Mr. Cowley.

“On to the next hole,” Cowley said innocently, preferring not to know what puerile reason his two agents had for turning beetroot and sniggering. He had a fairly good idea, and that was more than enough for him. Especially since joining in wouldn’t exactly fit with the image of the dour, canny Scot he was cultivating with the Minister. The things he did for CI5! All that, and losing at golf too. Life, sometimes, was a bitter row to hoe.

This, however, was not what Bodie and Doyle were thinking.

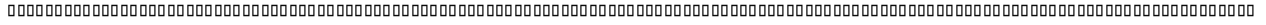
“Interested in sports and games, are you?” Doyle asked with spurious innocence, as if he were simply making idle conversation, for they were still well within earshot of the other two men who were consulting over the score cards. “Golf appeal to you?”

Bodie edged them a bit farther away from their boss. “The only physical activities with balls and men running around scoring that appeal to me, angelfish, can’t be done in public.” There, he thought, nicely seductive, and that should put Doyle in the hot seat for once.

Doyle, unfortunately, hadn’t been made privy to Bodie’s plan and therefore not only didn’t do as he was supposed to, he turned the whole thing on its head. “Can’t be done in public, eh? Says who?”

Horrifying suspicion dawning, Bodie answered: “The laws and the courts and Cowley and the rule books and—”

“Since when have you gone by the book?” It was all too obvious what Doyle was doing,



And then Doyle kissed him. Which put paid to all rational thought. He'd been on heat for too long today to simply shrug off the tactile contact, even a stranger would have been grabbed voraciously, but this was Doyle, who was doing a bit of voracious grabbing himself. Bodie reached down to the bum that had been the apple—or should that be apples?—in his Eden all day long and smoothed his hands over the lean arcs, fingertips finding the dampness where Doyle had landed so ignobly but so satisfyingly on the wet grass.

Doyle pushed his hips forward, canting them until he was plastered to Bodie, and could feel every detail of Bodie's body. Naturally, the fabric was a real nuisance, and Doyle scrabbled at it, fumbling with Bodie's trousers and underwear until the best bits had been exposed. He filled his hands with Bodie's cock and balls, and felt the leap of arousal under his hands. "You going to just stand there?" he demanded, light fingers playing with Bodie's balls, strong hand stroking Bodie's prick. "Get these fucking jeans out of the way. I want you to touch me, come on, Bodie, hurry!"

Bodie, for once in his life, did precisely as he was told. He hurried and then he touched Doyle, hot heat in his hands, hot tongue in his mouth, hot hands on his own cock. Enough heat, in fact, that he didn't notice the decidedly cooler breeze around his exposed assets. He was consumed by and consuming Doyle, completely forgetful of the delicacy of their situation, of the risk of being caught, seen by strangers.

Doyle hadn't forgotten, not at all. In fact, even as he kissed Bodie to within an inch of their lives, he was listening, listening, for the sounds of footsteps or voices, for encroaching danger, for the added high of discovery. His lips encountered a particularly appealing morsel of Bodie's neck and he fastened his teeth to it, biting and sucking, vampirically feasting on him. He let go of Bodie's cock, and stifled the moan of frustration by pressing his groin against Bodie's, Bodie's hands trapped between them, so that every move of Bodie's hands on Doyle's cock was as if Bodie were wanking himself as well. Doyle was trying to get his hand in Bodie's pocket, which Bodie wondered about fuzzily, but then Doyle's mouth fastened on his earlobe, and a tongue slid inside, and then there were kisses all down his neck, and Bodie basically gave up thinking as a useless pastime.

"Got it," Doyle announced breathlessly.

As neither of the hands on either of their cocks belonged to Doyle, Bodie begged to differ. Until he saw what it was Doyle was laying claim to. And laying suddenly became a very important and pertinent verb indeed.

"Sun-tan lotion?" he said, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"It's wet and it's slippery and it's the best we can get our hands on," Doyle answered, filling his cupped palm with the lotion and slathering it on Bodie's cock. "You're going to fuck me," he said. "Right here, up against this tree."

"What if someone sees us?"

Doyle kissed him deeply, his hands working magic down below. "Then you'll have to make sure you make it hard and fast then, won't you?" Another kiss, and then he was turning, his jeans lowered just enough to expose his arse, shirt tucked up under his armpits. Eyes half-closed in his arousal, he watched Bodie near him. "We can do each other slow and easy later. But I want you, Bodie, and I'm not going to wait. C'mon, Bodie, fuck me, get it up me—"

His voice melted into a groan as Bodie began the slow push inside him. There was no pain, Doyle too experienced for that, only an exquisite pleasure that spread from his arse to every inch of his body. His back was bowed as a saddle, a concave hollowed out by pleasure of having Bodie inside him and he leaned forward to give Bodie a better angle—and discovered one of the 'joys' of sex in the great outdoors that no-one ever mentions. Tree bark scrapes worse than five o'clock stubble, especially when it was a man's tender cock meeting the bark. Doyle didn't quite bark, he more howled, but it was enough to register with Bodie. "Here," he said, shoving something at Doyle. "Put that between you and the tree. Nice and thick, take care of it for you."

It was nice and thick and it was taking care of things for him—the jacket was helpful, too. But it was Bodie Doyle was concentrating on, Bodie inside him, Bodie's hand up inside his shirt, twisting his nipples, Bodie's hand down low on his belly, stroking his cock. A thrust inward, and Bodie pressed down on the base of Ray's cock, so that Doyle's belly was compressed by the hardness of his own cock without and the hardness of Bodie's cock from within. Deep in his arse, the heat from Bodie's cock spread up Doyle's spine, exploding in his brain.

Doyle's curls were a real nuisance, getting in Bodie's mouth, an unwelcome distraction, so he buried his face against Doyle's shoulder, mouth open and tasting skin. The pressure was building in his balls, and his cock was purest pleasure, a focus for all the good feelings in his world. He was close, and wrapped his arms around Doyle's waist, anchoring his friend as he fucked him, hard enough that Doyle was up on his toes every time Bodie buried himself in Doyle's arse. Against his forearm, he could feel the occasional brush of Doyle's hand as Doyle blurred caresses onto his cock. It was heaven, pure, unadulterated Heaven.

And then they were cast out, by the sound of a muffled but still obviously irate Scottish voice.

"Christ!" Bodie groaned fervently, torn between the necessity of stopping and the driving need to go on.

"Cowley!" Doyle corrected, pushing back, taking Bodie all the way inside himself again. "C'mon, fuck me, do it, Bodie, fast, fast, before Cowley finds us, come on, oh, yeh, that's it..."

He couldn't help himself, Doyle made him do it, by the simple act of sheathing Bodie in lush flesh. He thrust, hard, fast, and all the while, he could hear Cowley coming closer. But closer still was the stifled cries of his friend, Doyle fucking them both, inflamed by the joy of Bodie inside him and the excitement of Cowley threatening them with exposure. Faster, Bodie thrust, in a race to see who would come first: them or Cowley. Bodie fucked the clinging arse, until Doyle came with an aching groan, his spasming arse milking Bodie into tumultuous orgasm.

Cowley's voice, too close, too near, barely time to catch their breath, the aftereffects of sex still rippling through them, their hands shaking and trembling as trousers were pulled up, zips were re-zipped and shirts were tucked neatly away along with spent and limp cocks. Nothing to give them away, but flushed cheeks and a seeping dampness inside Doyle's jeans.

That, and a drying stain on the jacket Doyle had used. He looked at it in sheer disbelief. "Cowley's?" he squeaked. "You gave me Cowley's jacket? Fucking hell, Bodie, I thought it was yours!"

Dumbstruck, Bodie stared at the jacket in abject

horror. He had been beyond thinking, and Doyle hadn't even opened his eyes when the jacket had been shoved at him. Not the sort of excuse he fancied giving to his boss to explain how they'd managed to ruin his jacket with cum of all things.

And Cowley was coming closer and they were standing there with that self-same cum-stained jacket. They looked at each other in horror for a long moment that wasn't long enough, for now Cowley was only a tree away. Quickly, Bodie dropped the jacket and stood on it, grinding it into the undersoil, hoping to hell that it was the stained spot that was getting covered in concealing grime.

A second later, and Cowley came round the tree in time to see, not his two agents fucking themselves brainless, but Doyle looking detached and sullen, his mouth swollen and his face flushed as if he and Bodie had had a scuffle. And Bodie was standing there looking relieved and smug and just as flushed, which meant there had, indeed, been a scuffle and Bodie had won. It was then that Cowley saw what was in Bodie's hand, and saw the very large stain on the silk lining of his best jacket.

"BODIE!" he roared.

"Yes, sir?" Bodie answered with the sort of bland innocence that always raised Cowley's suspicions.

"What have you done to my jacket? And while we're on the subject," Cowley asked none too sweetly, golf-club held rather threateningly in hand, "where exactly is my golf-bag?"

Good question, that, and Bodie had some vague memory of abandoning the hideously expensive pair of golf-bags at the same time as he had abandoned all his common sense and inhibitions.

"Well?" Cowley snapped, literally hot under the collar.

In unconscious, sympathetic reaction, Bodie lifted his hand to own collar with well-loved neck below, and remembered at least part of what Doyle had done to him.

"Answer the question, Bodie!" Cowley barked.

And that, for all who wish to know, explains why, with Doyle sniggering in the background, Bodie was left to contemplate that Cowley's bark truly was worse than Doyle's bite.

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FIRST

KISS

oo

Here are four tales set in three different universes, all exploring the general theme of first kiss. We begin with a bitter *Professionals* tale from the Glaswegian and end with a slightly more upbeat Bodie/Doyle piece from Tallis. In between are Jane Mailander's sweet story of Avon and Vila, and M. Fae's look into coming out. This story, "A Public Display," focuses on Detective Sergeant Wield from the Pascoe/Dalziel mystery novels. It is set in approximately 1992—about where the series currently stands—and remains faithful to the characters as they have been presented in the books.

was Cowley? Not like the old man to keep some-one waiting out of petty spite. Of course, it would be just like Cowley to make him cool his heels while Cowley got his temper under sufficient control to actually speak to him without degener-ating into the gutter. Doyle felt a sudden chill then, a shiver of apprehension: there was another possible explanation for Cowley’s continued ab-sence. There could be questions being asked, en-quiries being made, a net being cast wider, catching all sorts of minnows in its mesh. Willis was paranoid about queers, a definite crypto-queer basher, and if one of his pet policeman had told Willis that CI5 had a man in custody for having gross indecency in a public place...

If that was where Cowley was, then Doyle would consider himself lucky to get out of this office with his head still firmly attached to his shoulders. He went back to the chair, sitting down slowly this time, as if all his life had been lived and he was an old bundle of arthritic bones. One thought had been chasing him through his mind, trying to catch him and trip him and demand its answer.

What was Bodie going to do?

Doyle didn’t know, but he had his fears, more than a match for his hope. Eldritch imaginings crept over him, as he envisioned what his partner might say, what his partner might do. No, he told himself firmly, get a grip on yourself. He hadn’t been fired yet—and look at Cowley’s reaction over that gay youth organisation oppo. And all the A squad swore Cowley knew how often they changed their socks, so surely the old bastard must have known about the other side of Doyle’s life? That was it: Cowley must have a report on it somewhere, names, dates, places, and a notation that as long as Doyle remained discreet, his ho-mosexual tendencies would not provide a security risk.

As long as he remained discreet. Not a word that immediately sprang to mind to describe a man caught loaning a man the use of his throat in a cottage. Doyle wanted nothing more, at that moment, than to simply get up and run far, far away, to skip the dreadful scene he was sure was going to hit him any minute now. And if he were to run away now, he’d be able to avoid Bodie and the gut-rending fear of Bodie’s friendship proving too insubstantial to survive such a revelation.

Footsteps, loud in the deserted silence of the

corridor, then the door handle was turning, and Doyle was turning, to look his fate in the eye.

“Sir,” he said, getting to his feet, showing more respect than he had in all his years at CI5.

Cowley barely glanced at him, going round to take his customary place, ordering the files on his desk, ignoring Doyle consummately.

“Sir,” another voice said, and Doyle had whirled around, meeting blue eyes that he was nowhere near ready for. Coldness raked him, and then he was dismissed from that gaze also, as Bodie handed a triple whisky to Cowley and sat down with his own glass.

Doyle was not about to make any joking com-ment about not getting his fair share. He sat down then, quietly, biding his time, trying very hard to gather his anger and his sense of injustice round him, a hard shell to cover the vulnerable softness of his underbelly.

“The charges haven’t been filed yet, I’ve done that much for you,” Cowley said to the plain manila folder on his desk. “But that’s all I’ll be doing for you, you realise that, don’t you?”

No, Doyle thought, he didn’t stand a chance. But when had he ever given up without a fight? And when had he ever kept his mouth shut over an injustice? He stared, insistently, at his boss, and began to fight. “Even though he approached me?”

He was looked at then, and immediately wished for Cowley to look away. “All you had to do was say no.”

“Oh, come off it, sir!” he half shouted, fanning the flames of his protective anger, using the heat to stave off the chill of Bodie staring at him with such winter cold. “He was all over me—”

“I,” Cowley said, very, very soberly, “have no desire to hear the sordid details of your... dalliance, if it were a dalliance as you say and not the heavy-handed come-on the constable accuses you of.”

“D’you honestly think I’d be stupid enough to come on to someone in a public—” He broke off, the words crashing headlong into the stone wall of Cowley’s sour-faced distaste.

“I believe lavatory is the word you’re looking for. Or would you prefer public convenience?” Cowley sipped from his glass, the unhurried movement of the man who refuses to yield to the urge to gulp whisky down until it numbed him beyond feeling or thought. “You may have noticed the important word there is *public*.”

“No, the important word here is *unfair*—not to

mention *lies*. He came on to me, sir, he was the one who started it all, and he let me—”

The voice was even quieter, low enough to stifle Doyle’s shout. “I’ve already warned you. I am not interested in hearing the dirty things you claim happen.” There was scorn there now, and the first glimmer of an anger that went beyond even Cowley’s stern control. “As if it would make it any better if you really *had* had sex in a public toilet.” He was shaking his head, in disbelief and dismay, and, Doyle was quietly, secretly, horrified to note, betrayal. “Is that supposed to ingratiate you to me? Is it supposed to make it ‘all better’? That you weren’t guilty of asking a man for sex, but you *are* guilty of performing lewd acts with him, in a public place, with no thought as to who he might be, nor the consequences of your stupidity? Well? Is that supposed to make you pure as the driven snow?”

“It’s supposed,” Doyle said, forcing himself to sound calm and reasonable and to keep his voice from wavering, “to make you think twice about chucking me out, sir. Come on, Mr. Cowley, you’ve always been fair before—”

“Have I? That’s not what I seem to remember you saying on many an occasion.” A pause, just long enough for Cowley’s gaze to assess Doyle and find him lacking, and for that flicker of betrayed trust to wash Doyle in acid. “I’d not taken you for a boot-licker before.”

Bodie shifted, minutely, in his chair, his silence speaking loudly: Doyle could almost hear the familiar voice say ‘maybe not boot, sir, but now we know all about Doyle and arses’. But Bodie didn’t actually say a single word. He didn’t need to: his silence said it all.

“Look, sir,” Doyle ploughed on, trying to ignore the Himalayan disapproval sitting not three feet from him, “being homosexual is not a criminal offence—”

“Aye, but committing homosexual acts in public is!” Cowley snapped at him. “It’s the stupidity of it I can’t believe. To do it in a public place, in a bloody toilet—” He shook his head, and Doyle got another demoralising glimpse of the older man’s disappointment. “For God’s sake, man, there are discreet clubs for the likes of you—and ‘escort’ services, and a dozen other outlets.” The older man stopped, paused for a moment, then went on, total bemusement filling his face. “What possessed you to do it in a *toilet*?”

There were a wealth of unspecified questions behind that one plaintive cry, but how the hell was Doyle supposed to explain it all, when he didn’t have an adequate answer for himself? Nervous, uncomfortable, he picked at a loose inch of thread on the inner knee of his jeans, concentrating on Cowley, devastatingly aware of Bodie’s stony silence and lowering glare. “I honestly don’t know.” He fiddled with the thread, glanced up at Cowley, looked away again, his gaze skimming over Bodie’s slick iciness, a sickening hollow of loneliness emptying his stomach. “I wasn’t even thinking about it—sex, I mean—and then he came and stood beside. Started touching me and next thing, there I was—”

“Ach, don’t play me for a fool! D’you honestly expect me to believe that you didn’t know the sort of place you were going into? It’s been a cottage for over thirty years!”

Doyle’s voice was very tight, his eyes narrowed. “But I’ve never been into that way of doing things, so I wouldn’t know that, would I?”

“And I’m hardly the type to frequent homosexual sex areas myself, but even I knew.”

“Are you calling me a liar? Sir?”

“I’m calling you a fool. And a liar forbye, if you think I’m going to swallow a fairy tale like that.”

The comment dropped, malodorous as vomit, between them. The anger was back in Doyle now, festering with his pain, poisoned by the glower in Bodie’s eyes. “Interesting choice of phrase, that. An’ is that what you think I am? A fairy?” He was in a fine temper now, the anger explaining away the glister in his eyes. “D’you think the minute I’m off the job I turn into a lispng pansy who’ll bend over and touch his toes for any man that asks?”

Cowley’s anger was a match for Doyle’s, his voice rising along with the colour in his cheeks. “I won’t tell you again! I don’t want to hear any of your filthy little details.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” He was on his feet again, running his hands through the tangle of his hair, stalking the perimeter of the office, anything to put some distance between himself and that gimlet stare of Bodie, who was watching him still, and with all the affection of a gardener uncovering a slug amongst his roses. “Look, it’s not as if me being queer is new—”

He felt, actually felt, that statement cut into both men, the admission, the actual saying of the word, burning every single bridge behind him. Too late

now, too much already said for him to retreat back, to claim the unsafe sex as momentary madness or confusion brought on by a job that turned morality on its head. Well, he'd said it now, he wasn't going to crawl away with his tail between his legs, apologising for what he was, for what he had always been. "Anyway, it's not as if it's new, is it? I've been like this all my life..."

He waited for Cowley to say something, to admit that it was all on file somewhere, safely tucked away until it had been pulled out tonight, and the dust blown off it. But nothing was said, no lifebelt was thrown to him; Cowley wasn't going to give him so much as a straw to cling to. Doyle laughed, an ugly, painful sound. "Oh, come off it, you're not going to claim you hadn't the faintest idea, are you?"

Cowley sat back, his emotions wiped from his face, impassive professional bureaucracy a mask for him to hide behind. "Regardless, I'm telling you not another word of CI5 business."

"In other words, you've known from the start, and ignored it as long as it didn't interfere with the job, is that it?" Doyle voice was a shout shot through with hoarseness, and the hurt of having Bodie sit by silently whilst he fought his last desperate battle with Cowley. "You know the names of every woman I've ever slept with, including some that I'd forgotten, so how the fuck can you pretend you didn't know about the blokes as well? Can you tell me that much at least, or is that all covered by the Official fucking Secrets Act an' all?"

"We're not here to review CI5's security checks, we're here to get you to do what little you can to make up for the damage you've done."

"The damage I've done? The damage I've done? What did I do? Oh, yeah, sucked some bloke's cock in a toilet. Not the cleverest thing ever, I admit, but at least I didn't trick him into it just to bugger his life up. All I'm guilty of, *sir*," and the last was a sneer, such an agonised sneer, all the tearing and rending of this ugly end twisting his voice and his face, "is being taken in by a pretty face, and I'm not the first man in this department to to that, am I?"

"No," cold, damning, "but you are the first to do it with a man."

He leaned on the desk in front of Cowley then, the battle long since lost, nothing left him but the dregs of revenge. "Don't you mean that I'm the

first one to get *caught* doing it with a man. Sir."

Doyle had the briefest of satisfactions: Cowley looked away. But then Bodie shifted behind Doyle, and without thinking, new habits not yet learned to break the old habit of trust and friendship, Doyle turned round, and was impaled by the bleakest distrust.

"The statistics aren't what matter, Doyle," Cowley was saying, the unexpected use of his name calling Doyle back to his boss. "What matters is that we can't afford the scandal. The Minister's already had to answer to the PM, and to head off a full-fledged investigation of Departmental security, he promised her that you'd be out on your ear before morning."

"Before Fleet Street get to hear about it, isn't that what you mean?"

"Aye, it is—and before the Opposition get their hands on it, and before the budget makers get a whiff of it, before the do-gooders can use it to bash us over the head with more accusations of corruption and moral turpitude."

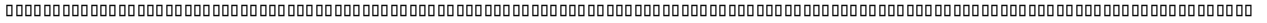
Doyle sat back down again, all the fight gone out of him, his belligerence shown for all the bombast it was. "In other words, I'm to be made an example of. Nice to know how special I've been to you all these years. Glad to've been able to risk my life—"

"For God's sake, man, can't you see?" and Doyle did see, for a moment, the conflict in Cowley's eyes, the distress that all this mess was causing him. "We're CI5. The Untouchables, incorruptible, never outside the law, never above the law, but beyond the law. And beyond normal human weaknesses and temptations, because we're the only ones that can't be bought or blackmailed. We're the last defence, Doyle. We're the only ones who are beyond reproach, lily-white and perfect."

"And smelling ever so faintly of roses? As long as you don't scratch the surface, that is."

"Aye," Cowley said, sadly, fingers flipping through page after page of Doyle's file, exemplary reports glowing upon exemplary reports. "Aye, as long as you don't scratch the surface and expect to find Eden before the Snake."

Then, eventually, to fill the emptiness of Cowley staring so bleakly at so many years of excellent service and even more years of aborted promise, Doyle spoke, grasping at straws: "So because of one thing about me, just one thing, you're going to



turn on me? You're going to write me off as worthless because I'm not poker straight?"

Cowley wiped his hand across his eyes, his face abruptly etched with every second of his age. "I'm going to write you off, Doyle, because you're no use to me with a stain the likes of that against your name. And for being so bloody stupid, I have to write you off as a bloody bad risk for the department."

"So nothing I've done matters, compared to one moment of weakness today? That one thing is going to change how you see me that much?"

There was silence then, angry, bitter, furious, from Bodie, old, cynical and sad, from Cowley, and the immobile silence of defeat from Doyle. An ending, then, and one he'd known would come from that first lurching instant when his handsome young stranger had said, so blithely cheerful, 'you're nicked'.

"Is there anything I can do?" Doyle asked, not hoping, knowing too well the politics that hounded CI5 and the politicians that hovered like vultures over Cowley. "Anything at all?"

Cowley shrugged, looking at the words written about Doyle's past instead of at Doyle himself. "There's only one decent thing you can do."

Doyle laughed again, and this time, looked straight at Bodie when he spoke. "Why, do blokes like me still shoot themselves?"

Bodie blinked, slowly: yes.

"You—" Doyle started, hot anger burning through the pain. But what was there to be said? Nothing, with Cowley sitting there, and the truths too caustic to be heard.

Cowley was speaking again, coming between what had become a former partnership. "Will you do it, Doyle, or are you going to force me into a very public and very messy dismissal proceeding?"

There was an echo of the old gleam of Doyle's smile. "Do I have a choice?" He answered himself, as he began going through his pockets, keys and ID and security tag piling on Cowley's desk. "Haven't had a choice since I bollocksed things up this afternoon, have I? D'you need it in writing?"

Unspeaking, Cowley edged a small pile of printed forms across the desk to him.

"Always prepared, eh, sir?" But for all his attempts at joking, his hand wasn't entirely steady as he signed his name, in triplicate, often enough to sever all ties. His fingers fumbled, going to unbuckle a gun that wasn't there, unworn because

off duty, and then, because arrested, and now, no longer his to claim.

"I know a car's out of the question," Doyle was saying, his voice exceptionally steady, only the very placidity of his expression betraying his utter turmoil, "but how long do I get before I have to get out of the flat?"

Cowley, for the first time in all the years Doyle had known him, looked ashamed. "The Minister..."

"The Minister?" Doyle prompted, resigned even to this, knowing that CI5 took care of its own, and losing CI5 meant losing everything.

"It's to be immediate. The Minister's adamant that you should claim all small personal effects immediately, furnishings and the like by the end of the week."

This was already Thursday—no, Friday by now, morning too short a time away. "The Minister," Doyle muttered, "should fucking apply for a job as fucking Santa." He was digging his house keys out of his pocket, tossing the metal in his hand, looking at it instead of Bodie's arctic presence.

"Your pay will be docked for the usual expenses. I'll make sure the wages clerk gets his skates on." A pause of awkward delicacy. "You'll be in a hurry to get your money?"

Doyle smiled a little at that. "Oh, don't you worry yourself about me, sir," Doyle said, the bitterness in his voice flailing Cowley. "It's all right, I don't need a loan. Anyway, the only thing you can do safely is spit on me, isn't it? Wouldn't do to let anyone get the wrong idea and think CI5 cradles queers to its macho bosom, would it?"

It was getting worse, too much coiling round them all, entangling them in things they should say, hanging them with words that should never have been spoken.

Doyle got to his feet, the keys clattering too loudly as he dropped them onto the desk: relinquishing control of Government property, handing them over to be taken by whichever escort Cowley gave him, now that he was no longer CI5. "D'you think it would compromise CI5's pristine image if I used your phone to get a taxi?"

Cowley was obviously reigning himself in, had, perhaps, decided that he deserved far worse than Doyle was throwing at him, the vitriolic joke no subtle reminder that Doyle was supposed to be rushing to leave before he soiled the department any further. "Bodie'll take you back to your flat

unofficial duty to lend Doyle as much a helping hand as Cowley could manage.

“You going to wait here, or’re you going to go and sulk in the car?”

In answer, Bodie went over to the sideboard and poured himself a very healthy measure of whisky. Sidestepping Doyle with ostentatious indifference, he sat on the sofa and began, slowly, to drink.

Doyle went through the bedroom quickly, stuffing enough clothes for a couple of days in his hold-all, grabbing shaving kit and essentials from the bathroom, hurrying through it all before the real impact of what was happening hit him. Back then, to the living room, where Bodie, with glass still in hand, was sitting in the light from the hallway and the faint glow that spilled in through the windows. Another hint: Bodie usually only drank this much either at parties or when he needed to get drunk. And that bespoke pain. Which meant, Doyle metaphorically crossed his fingers, that there really was something under this furious indifference.

A click of the light-switch, and the brightness made them both blink. “That’s better, innit?” Doyle murmured pleasantly as he began to gather a few things to fill his old blue suitcase. His mind was only half on the job, not really paying any attention to the records and tapes and books he was packing. Guardedly, he watched Bodie, choosing his moment with care.

“You know, for a grown man, you’re being a right spoiled brat about this.”

Slowly, Bodie turned to look at him. “And what d’you think would be the mature way to handle this? Blow your brains out and put us all out of your misery?”

“But I’m not miserable, Bodie.” That was too much a lie for him, even given the current circumstances. “Well, I wasn’t miserable, before today. Yesterday, now, I suppose.” Barely acknowledged, tiredness scoured him until his muscles were aching and his head pounding. It dawned on him that it had been a long time since last he’d managed to get some food down him: stupid, that. He should have eaten what was offered him, kept his energy up, staved off this terrible feeling of weakness, this horrible desire to just give up. But he wasn’t going to give up without one last battle. Instead, he dragged his reserves together, turned them into a smile for

Bodie. “I wasn’t exactly in seventh heaven either, but life was all right.”

“Until the truth came out,” Bodie said, harsh and flat, a blunted edge of betrayal still there, if you knew where to look to find Bodie’s secrets. As Doyle had thought he had known, until tonight, when he was gambling on secrets as yet uncovered. “Your dirty little secret.”

“Yeh, well, I didn’t think it was that much a secret.”

“What?” Genuine amazement, Bodie’s face an absolute picture. “You weren’t just having Cowley on, you honestly thought he knew?”

Doyle drew in on himself, defensive. “Be reasonable, Bodie. He knows everything else, so why shouldn’t I think he knew that and was just turning a blind eye to it?”

“Because being a poofter isn’t something you can turn a blind eye to! It’s not something you can just ignore.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Abruptly, his own bitterness was back, outreaching anything Bodie could display.

“So if you couldn’t ignore it,” Bodie was saying, looking at the way the light scintillated across the surface of his drink, “then why didn’t you say anything about it?”

“Because,” Doyle answered in simple honesty, “I thought you knew.”

Bodie nearly dropped his glass. “Don’t be so fucking stupid! If I’d’ve known, what was I doing camping it up with you?”

Christ, it seemed so stupid now, and he wondered how he had ever illuded himself into believing it. “Thought you were being nice.”

That stopped Bodie dead in his tracks. “Being nice? How’d you work that out?” Suspicion drowning out everything else, and Doyle noticed the way Bodie’s face grew pinker, and the way he licked his lips in something akin to nervousness, and the guilty start that was immediately subsumed into casual indifference. Oh, yes, Doyle told himself, desperate to believe anew, Bodie had something to hide.

“I thought that, seeing as how you knew I liked blokes even more than I liked women, and seeing as how you and me were friends…” He shrugged, made it lighter than it was, giving Bodie an illusion of safety. “Hell, Bodie, I thought you were giving me a bit of a treat, feeling me up like that.”

“A bit of a treat?” Bodie’s voice rose, a crescendo

be it?"

"You do one thing for me, and yeh, that'll be us even."

Bodie was thinking about it, his gaze never leaving Doyle. "How can I trust you?"

"You what?" Doyle couldn't believe his ears. "I've risked my fucking neck for you and you—"

"Yeh, and you lied to me, Doyle, you lied to me for years, pretending to be one thing when you were the opposite. I trusted you, and you fucked me over royally. So yeh, I think I'm entitled to ask how I can trust you."

"Suppose you've got a point there. Look, I wasn't deliberately lying to you—Christ, I thought I was being sensibly discreet. And I honestly thought you knew."

Bodie's expression was a *magnum opus* of disbelief.

"For fuck's sake, Bodie, you met Simon once, outside that pub!" Doyle shouted and watched, interestedly, as that hit home.

"Simon was one of your..."

A hellbent grin for that one. "Don't know what to call him myself. Boyfriend sounds a bit limp, and lover's a bit grand for what we were, so... Well, anyway... I've never broken my promise to you, have I?"

"No, don't suppose you have."

"Then I promise you, do one thing for me, and that's us finished."

Bodie was still watching him, measuring him. "One favour then, and that's it, that'll be us quits?"

"All I'm asking for is one thing. And it's not something impossible, either."

The tension abruptly left Bodie, and Doyle caught his breath when his partner smiled at him for the first time in far too long. "So you want me to get hold of some of my old mates, get you a job, get you an in somewhere—"

"Oh, no, I can stand on my own two feet, mate, thanks all the same for the vote of confidence. I'll find my own way when it comes to jobs. Anyway, I've given you my promise, you going to give me yours?"

"I'm not the one who fucked up here, Doyle."

Hard-eyed, wild and demanding. "Promise me, Bodie."

"Always after more, that's you, isn't it, Doyle? Greedy, demanding little bugger. But to shut you up, you have my word as an officer and a gentleman."

"And d'you give me your oath as an SAS man?"

Bodie shrugged, honour not a matter of degree with him. He had already given his word once, he couldn't go back on it anyway. "I swear on anything you like, Doyle. Right, you've got my promise, so what is it then, this huge favour?"

A silence then, as Doyle volunteered nothing, and Bodie refused to ask. Time stretching, tension building between the two men, an almost tangible bond.

"Come on, Doyle, I've not got all night. What is it you want?"

Still no answer, just Doyle looking at him with knowing eyes and half smile. Then Bodie went to walk away, as if the conversation were over, as if the reckoning had been met.

"Bodie."

Bodie turned, slowly, more unnerved than he cared to admit by that odd timbre to Doyle's voice, and held his peace, not participating, so that he could pretend, later, that it was all Doyle's fault that things had gone so sour, all Doyle's fault for being a queer and lying to him.

"You knew what I wanted the minute I opened my mouth."

A laugh, nervous; eyes, wary, and Bodie was still trying to run away, even as he stood facing Doyle down. "Don't be daft—how could I know what was going on inside that mop-top?"

"Because you've known from the very start, haven't you?" So bland a voice, so disassociated from the fear that was running down Bodie's back, so unrevealing of the terror in Doyle that he might lose.

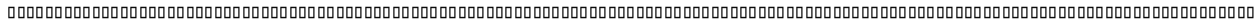
"Don't know what you're going on about—"

"Don't you?" Doyle said sharply, killing all attempts at levity. "Never took you for that much of a fool, Bodie."

"You're the fool, Doyle, sucking a fucking copper off in a toilet. Christ, what got into you?" A sudden redness on the pale skin, then almost stammering: "Apart from the obvious, that is. Look, will you just cut the crap and tell me what the fuck I have to do to get rid of you?"

Eyes warm, gaze flickering over his ex-partner, Doyle smiled, and his voice was very gentle when he spoke. "Bodie."

So little. Just his name, but turned into a caress, which made it the greatest threat Bodie had ever faced. "Ray?" he whispered.



That is a completely inaccurate and insulting depiction of my function and abilities—

“That’s right, you can’t make toast, can you? Completely useless, then.” Vila pulled the key off Orac to save himself a spectacularly blistering reply from the little computer.

At least there was one advantage to having played chess with Orac and losing four times in a row. Now the silence of the flight deck was peaceful and pleasant, not empty and lonely. Vila strongly suspected the machine of taking lessons in public relations from Avon.

“Vila,” Avon’s voice reported briskly from the intercom, as if realizing that Vila was thinking of him. “I need to be teleported back.

Now.”

“Avon?” Vila leaned over the speaker. “What about the others?”

“Now, Vila. Teleport me now.” That was the tone of voice only Blake argued with—and not very often.

“Let me get to the controls, then,” Vila replied, and scooted off the flight deck, wondering. Had the others disappeared? Had Avon lost the others? Had he gotten hurt? That would explain his curtness, if he was in pain. *Maybe he just wants to go to the loo...*

He certainly wasn’t expecting a table. At least it looked like a table, at first, when it materialized beside Avon in the teleport chamber. “Help me carry this to my quarters,” Avon snapped.

Found a piece of furniture down there he wanted? Then why be so abrupt about getting it up here? And why the hell didn’t he ask Blake to help him lift it? Vila asked himself the latter question again as he hoisted one end of the heavy awkward thing and staggered with it back to Avon’s quarters, urged on by the tech’s snapped comments about his clumsiness—but not as he set down the object in Avon’s room and took his first good look at it.

No wonder it was heavy; it was made of real wood, good wood, beautifully smoothed and polished to a dark glossy finish—and for that reason alone it would have cost Avon a small inheritance. It was not a table, though it bore a superficial resemblance to one; it was narrower and shorter than a table, and the legs splayed in an inverted V, longer in the front than the back, decorated with long strips of brown leather. The top was contoured for concavity, and covered with a fine even cushion of padded burgundy

velvet. An oval hole near the lower part of the device appeared in the center of the concave surface; the wood around the hole was also smooth and polished, the velvet padding neatly finished all around the hole. It was a beautiful piece of furniture.

Vila recognized it from visits to brothels that pandered to a wide variety of customer tastes—but had only seen them made out of synthewood and plastic padding before. The customer lay in the concavity of the long “table” with his cock and balls dangling through the oval hole, and was tied to the stool’s legs while he was beaten by the dominatrix (or dominator), leaving his genitals free to whatever torments or delights he wished from the professional he had hired.

No wonder Avon had wanted immediate teleportation rather than have one of the others help him with his purchase. At Avon’s demand, their sexual relationship was kept a secret from Blake and the crew. Blake, clean-cut defender of peace and freedom that he was, might not be open-minded enough to accept the fact that his cold, arrogant computer expert liked being verbally humiliated and beaten by someone he gave every indication of despising.

Avon was glaring at Vila—or icily appraising his reaction to the thing he had bought on Tolin.

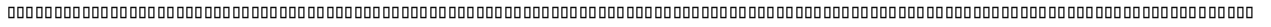
Vila told the truth. “It’s beautiful, Avon. Never seen a finer looking Berkeley Horse.” He quelled the ache inside him. If it was what Avon needed...

“Then your education is not as limited as I had previously assumed,” Avon replied tartly. If he felt any anticipation about trying out his new toy, he covered it completely. “Now teleport me back to the surface.”

“Say, Avon,” Vila said as they strode back to the teleport, “there’s nothing really happening up here in orbit right now. Orac can handle the teleport and keep an eye out—well, a tarial cell out—for anything suspicious. I’ve never been to Tolin. Like to see if the stories are true, I would. Once in a lifetime chance, innit? ’D I tell you I’ve never been to Tolin...?”

The subtle hints fell on deaf ears; Avon stepped into the teleport chamber and stared until the thief worked the controls in an ill-humor, and sat in the empty room. “It’s not fair,” he muttered for the forty-fourth time.

Well, on the bright side, he could get back at Avon tonight...the way he got back at Avon every



night. Whether he wanted to get back at him or not.

Vila rested a cheek on his fist and unhappily contemplated the empty room, thinking about the beautiful wood-and-velvet device in Avon's room. Beatings, verbal abuse and pain...the only way Avon could have sex—or was it the only way the tech would allow himself to have sex with a man? The only way he'd known how?

As a collector of fine things, Avon would certainly appreciate the bench as an improvement on his makeshift clinging to the bed. Probably a genuine antique. Vila mused on its graceful lines, the sturdy legs, plush padding, and the long leather straps.

Vila straightened up at the thought that casually strolled in after that final observation. He looked at it. And he smiled.

Once the landing party had accomplished its purpose—contacting a rebel connection who sold machine parts as his cover—all teleported back, obviously at Blake's command alone, for Jenna was complaining vociferously about having to leave so soon; even Cally questioned the need to hurry away. Vila took a little pleasure in not being the only one who wanted to explore Tolin for non-rebellious purposes. Avon was the only non-complainant as the flight deck filled again; but as he kept to himself so much to begin with no one noticed anything unusual. How he had gotten away from the others, found and purchased the bench, and secreted it aboard the *Liberator*, was simply one minor mystery joining the cloud of mysteries buzzing around the enigmatic tech.

The *Liberator* left orbit, and Zen was ordered in a direction based upon the information gleaned from their Tolin contact. Vila didn't care much—only that he knew it would be dangerous, possibly deadly; he remembered Gan, but kept his ache to himself. Nothing would stop Blake from finding Star One—not even Avon could sway the driven man. All he could do was keep himself as safe as he could. Avon would do the rest.

Avon always kept him safe; had smoothly stepped into the terrifying void left by Gan's death without a word. Of course he had ulterior motives—Vila would have been extremely suspicious if Avon had professed to having none. Avon had a sexuality he would entrust to no one—except someone who owed him too much to hold it over

him for blackmail purposes, someone who was not a threat to him.

In private moments Vila wondered, fleetingly, if Avon felt anything else for him. It was a thought at which he warmed his hands once in a while—the thought that he might be considered different from the others in a special way to the tech, thought of with pleasure or with liking because of the service he provided. But not even in his deepest thoughts did Vila hold the notion that he might be loved. And he was grateful; people who said they loved him hit and hurt him the most: his mother (he was grateful there had been no father around to add to the welts she'd given the boy); a few boys he'd known in the Domes; nearly everyone bigger than him in and out of prison.

Gan had almost changed his mind; the man had been gentle and kind, and the two of them had looked out for each other. Then Gan had been killed, and had at last managed to hurt Vila.

No, it was better this way. Avon protected Vila for the value of his talents, in and out of bed. He didn't hit him, and he didn't like him either. A perfect balance. So what if Avon's version of a mutual sexual pact left Vila aching and lonely every night?

"Vila," the object of his thoughts cut in sharply. Vila started and looked up at the tech, who was standing by his station. The heavy-lidded brown eyes stared at the thief almost expressionlessly; but they shifted to the flight deck's entrance once and returned to him. Their code—Avon's code, to be precise. Letting Vila know his services would be required in Avon's cabin that night.

Vila responded in the usual way: a curt nod. Avon turned and strode back to his station, for all the world having simply cowed Vila out of a daydream.

Dreams of happiness. Dreams of desire...

Vila glared defiantly at the retreating tech. *You bought the bloody thing—I'll show you how to use it.*

Vila made his way to Avon's cabin without being seen. Another one of Avon's rules. *As if he believes that Fed crap about "subversive desires." If the Feds 're so dead against men doin' it with each other, how come the cellkeepers looked the other way every time I got passed around?* Vila shook off the bitter recollections with the ease of practice—most of his memories were now a merciful blur.

Avon's door was locked, as usual, and as usual

Vila bypassed it in seconds.

“No one saw you?” Avon snapped.

“No one saw me, Avon,” Vila said, exasperated at the tech’s usual warm greeting. “I don’t *get* seen when I don’t want to be seen.”

“Which would explain why you disappear every time there’s work to be done,” the tech sneered.

“Wasn’t hired on to lift boxes and kill people, was I?” the thief responded tartly. He walked over to the mahogany and velvet birching stool and gave Avon a leer. “I’m here because of me magic fingers, eh? The way I have with opening things?”

“Then get to it and stop wasting my time,” Avon snapped.

Vila deliberately turned his back on the tech and strolled to the bed, stretching out comfortably on the coverlet, lacing his fingers together on top of his stomach and inspecting Avon from half-closed eyes. He set his teeth, and his expression changed, became harder, colder: the face of the abuser. “Strip, you little shite,” he snapped.

Avon visibly relaxed as soon as the familiar roles were assumed. He turned his back on Vila to undress, setting the boots together near the bed, folding the layers of leather clothing and laying them neatly over the chair at his desk.

“Stop!” Vila barked when the naked man started toward the horse. “Haven’t seen you yet, have I? Want to see what I’m going to be soiling meself with.” He dropped his voice into a menacing range. “Turn around.”

The man turned around, head lowered, eyes averted so as not to trigger aggression by a full-on stare. Avon couldn’t see Vila’s own eyes close in a rush of feeling that began to distend his cock. It was the accepted and allowed vulnerability of the man that aroused Vila, not the pale flesh, exposed genitals or the power-game, as he assumed Avon thought. It was a promise of delights other than a hard hand and harder words. “*You’re a nice-lookin’ little piece, ain’tcher?*” he said sarcastically, playing his role with accustomed ease. “Eh? Say something when yer spoken to!”

“I have nothing to say, sir.” The quiet, even, small voice of a frightened boy.

They beat the hell out of you in school, didn’t they? You’d be small, good-lookin’—ah, kids’re cruel, Alpha or Delta. You learned, didn’t you? Like I did. You snarled till they left you alone; I gave in till they despised me and left me alone. Whatever works. They still leave

us alone, for the same reasons. Oh, you know how much we’re alike, Avon—that’s why you’re so mean to me!

“‘Nothin’ to say sir,’” Vila mocked, imitating the quiet voice. “‘Nothin’ to say sir?’ Oh, you’re a nice ‘un, all right. Think you can say whatever y’like, don’tcha? It’s a good thing you got that bench—not goin’ to let you get away with a crappy answer like that, am I?” Vila waved an arm at the man who was already starting to come to erection. “Get on it. Assume the position.”

Full erection; seen just for a second before the back was turned, Avon draping himself into the luxuriant lap of the birching horse, carefully aligning himself as he settled in. Fitting himself through the hole. Grasping the legs of the bench, near the binding straps.

“Good, good,” Vila purred. He walked up to the prone figure and loudly slapped one buttock; the crack echoed in the room, and the body jolted, gasping. “You know your place, don’t you, little cunt?” Another smack, to the other cheek.

“Yessir,” gasped the little voice. The hands gripped the horse legs tighter, moving enough to catch Vila’s notice.

“Well, I’ll just make sure you don’t get any ideas of your own,” he hissed, squatting down to secure Avon’s wrists to the bench legs with the leather straps, nimble fingers tying an elaborate-looking knot. He tied Avon’s ankles in the same fashion.

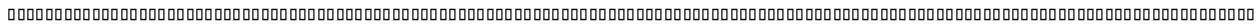
There. Oh, there...

For a moment Vila was terrified of the power he held. He considered backing down. Because once he started, Avon would say...

Nothing. Avon would say *nothing*.

Vila strode to the bed and from underneath it pulled out a small locked metal box. Avon had a small supply of illegal sex toys, painstakingly acquired piece by piece. They were completely safe in there, because there was no key to the box. In seconds Vila had it open, and he pored over the cache. *Enough here to send us all to Cygnus Alpha on perversion charges alone. Think it’s eight months in solitary just for ownin’ the cockring...* Vila selected a padded leather gag, remembering how carefully Avon had saved a torn black leather tunic after a disastrous planetfall, dirty and bloody as it was; he’d managed to turn his shirt into several ingenious devices. He also gathered the leather belt out of Avon’s discarded tunic.

Stay in character...



And he kept up the stream of language that was a vital part of his role in their conjoinings. This one was slightly different than his usual spiel...

"I've thought about this for a long time, Avon. I've wanted to treat you with gentleness, and show you I can do more than hit and curse you. I know you like the other, I know it, and it's all right, really. I like it too, sometimes. But I've been getting bored. This is what I like to do. You never asked, did you? This isn't just for you we're in this room together right now." More kisses, outlining each shoulder blade, firm gripping of the ribs. "Don't worry, Avon," he whispered intensely to the whimpering man. "I'm going to fuck you, like I always do. I love fucking you, I really do, and you trusting me enough to do it means a lot to me. The difference is," and he squeezed the man's ass hard, knowing how good that felt at just the right moment, "you're not going to feel any pain at all. Let's see how brave you really are, Kerr," he whispered. "Let's see if you can take me fucking you without hurting you. And if you can, you get your reward." This with one brisk, tantalizing pinch to one buttock, eliciting a deep groan. "Promise, Avon—no little sick-making names from me tonight. No endearments. No love. Just two blokes having a good time."

Gradually, the knotted body relaxed under the expert fingers and lips, the flow of words...

"You know how sexy you look in your leathers. Don't just wear 'em cos they're warm, do you? My favorite's the black outfit goes right up to your neck as if it's your outer skin. The times I've wanted to just jump you right on the flight deck when you were wearing that, and peel you like a banana..."

"I like the way your hair curls in at your neck, just there. Very sexy." And he kissed the nape of the neck, sucking on the damp ragged fringe of brown hair.

"You have lovely feet." Vila sat on the ground near the strapped ankles and worked the tension out of each bound foot, careful not to tickle. "I like the way your toes are all lined up nice and neat," he continued, thumb and finger rolling each long straight toe before taking it between his lips and darting his tongue into the sensitive skin at its base. "Mine are all crooked. I suppose that sounds a bit silly but I really do like the way your feet look." He leaned in and kissed the hollow of an ankle just above the leather binding, following

that with a long lick up the curve of the calf to the soft skin at the back of the knee. He stayed at that tender spot for a long time, tongue and lips ravishing the area, gathering essence of Avon like a greedy bee tonguing up pollen.

Perhaps it was Vila's imagination that the sounds coming from the gag were changing in quality. It wasn't his imagination that Avon's entire body seemed to be shivering constantly.

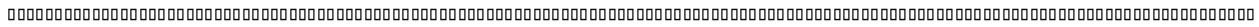
He looked under the bench, where Avon's cock and balls protruded from the soft-mouthed hole as if emerging from a mahogany-and-velvet vagina. No wonder Avon was trembling. He was hard, swollen so badly he wouldn't be able to withdraw from the hole without serious injury to himself. This evidence that Avon was not repulsed by Vila's tenderness was like a series of fireworks going off inside the thief. He grasped the cock firmly and gave it a good pull. The squeal that came from the gag was not out of outrage or pain. "So, what shall I suck first? Your cock or your arsehole?" Vila shook his head and gripped Avon's shoulder. "No pain tonight, I said. First things first." He scooted under the stool—of course, it allowed plenty of room beneath its surface for just such activities—and sat with his legs crossed tailor-style, contemplating the swollen penis jutting out in front of him. The organ was thick and throbbing, the head bright red and flaring, the tightly-drawn balls well-defined through their velvet pouch. He let free an appreciative whistle. "Avon, for shame—keeping me away from this for so long. Shouldn't be hiding this in the bed-clothes just so's I can see your pretty arse. You're hung like a donkey."

The gurgled comments were angry ones—but now the timbre was of impatience not outrage.

"Right, get to it." But first Vila buried his face in the genitals, rapturously taking in Avon's perfume with every pore, open mouth drawing in the fragrance just before lips caressed the softly-haired balls. He stroked the side of the swollen cock with his cheek and lips and the side of his nose. He exhaled in rapture; the penis and testicles quivered at the feel of his hot moist breath. "You're hard as a rock," he breathed. "And the skin is so soft. Delicious. Can't wait to eat this all up."

The sound from the gagged man was not one of pain.

Vila gripped the sides of the stool for leverage as he moistened his lips. Then the angry hard flesh



white. The whiteness clung voluptuously to the softening anus as the wet fingers went in, touching Avon open as easily as an unlocked door, touching him just *there, and there, and—*

The sounds from the gag were frantic, choking. *Can't let him suffocate, worth a few nasty words flung at me for—* Pausing only to wipe his damp fingers along one cheek, Vila reached over and untied the leather gag, pulling it free of Avon's mouth.

Avon spat it free and glared at Vila.

"God damn you," he snarled. "*Don't stop now!*"

And he heaved, thrusting his rump as high in the air as he could.

Vila didn't even stop to reply—was back at his task before Avon could settle. He took more of the dragonsilk, moistening Avon inside and out, silking both cheeks of his ass, tracing one wet finger down Avon's spine to let the man's body heat bring out the fluid's odor of musk and animal sex. Then himself, eager cock sliding through both hands, wallowing in the precious fluid that trickled onto the quivering, tightly-drawn balls. To hell with saving any of it—past the wild lust and passion of the moment was a cold tiny grain inside Vila that whispered that this would be the last time for him with Avon. He was going to make it magic.

He paused, poised over the splayed rump and welcoming orifice exuding dragonrut, fitting himself, mounting the whimpering, cursing Avon. Then there was only soft moist sounds of flesh joining flesh, slowly, luxuriantly, to echoing groans of passion wrung from both.

Vila clung to the sides of the birching horse as if aboard a rocking sea-going vessel as Avon writhed and twisted in his bonds, plunging deep and pulling back, cock held snug in twisting bolts of silk, belly riding a silken ass.

"Fuck," Avon gasped, "oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh fuck." He strained at his bonds, hauling hard on his wrists, and now desperation was in his voice as he wailed breathlessly "free—free me—freeeee—"

Amid sensation, billowing odor and heat, Vila heard the distress and leaned forward all along Avon's length, hands groping for the leather ties to Avon's wrists. Two single tugs, one on each side, and the elaborate knots melted away. Vila gripped the horse, ready for an attempt to fling him off now that Avon had partial control back.

Avon gripped the sides of the Berkeley bench and carefully lifted his upper body up and away from the plush velvet padding, groaning like

splintering wood as he pulled free of his velvet cockring—and suddenly arched his back, sealing both men together from shoulders to knees in a split second. "Now fuck me, idiot," he snarled hoarsely, heaving backwards; his freed cock swayed wildly. "Fuck me. Finish it!"

Vila didn't ask questions. With Avon's arms bracing both of them against the bench, his own arms went around Avon's freed upper torso, both hands immediately seizing the orphan cock. His open mouth fell on the side of Avon's neck; his hindquarters drove forward into satin fire. He felt the cry through his body before he heard it. "You love it," he exulted, pumping and pulling wildly. "Love it, don't you? Tell me you love it, Avon!"

"Yes!" came the gasping cry from the man he was coupled to. "Yes yes yes..."

"This is good too," Vila grunted out between thrusts. "You can get fucked without getting beaten and like it too. Something for me too!" He pushed forward, harder. "Promised..." he grunted, eyes rolling back, toes curling, "thrashing of your life...turn that sweet arse red—*Avon!*" he shrieked, body bowing backward. His hips pistoned forward one final time, cock scraping against the hidden prostate; the world turned white as Avon's head arched back against Vila's chest, a cry sounding from the bottom of the man's gullet as orgasm possessed him as well.

Vila collapsed between the spread, still bound legs of his lover (*lover lover first time it feels right usin' that word with you Avon's me lover*), utterly demolished. The floor rose up to cushion his spinning head; one leaden hand maintained just enough presence of mind to tug loose the slipknots on Avon's ankles before sinking into sleep.

He stretched and yawned luxuriously, nestling deeper into the lovely warm bedclothes. A few more hours of sleep in Avon's bed was just the thing after a night like—

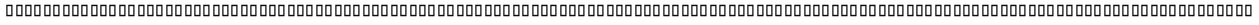
Avon's bed.

Vila sat bolt upright. He was in Avon's bed, a rumpled sheet tossed over him.

The Berkeley horse was still where it had been the night before, innocently obeying the laws of gravity and profoundly unaware of the sea-change that it had catalyzed the previous night.

Avon was conspicuous by his absence.

Then again, Vila thought wildly, glancing at the chronometer, the hour was late and Avon was an



Which was all a lie, of course. He didn't see himself as being one of them, part of this group. As for all his high-minded reasons for coming here, well, if he were to be honest... If he were to stop lying, then he'd admit it: he was here because this pub was that bit safer than cottaging, and not only from the AIDS point of view. There was—impossible to ignore—hanging over him, a cloud of purdah, the simple fact that he was a copper, and there were some things he simply could not risk doing. Cottaging, for one. Rent-boys, for another. Even though a rent-boy had an appeal greater than this pub. After all, if it were a straight—he smiled at his own poor pun—business transaction, then there was no risk of him being turned down, was there? No risk of another one of those pitying looks he was getting from the barman. No risk of no-one wanting him.

He'd grown maudlin the first time he'd come here as well. Bad habit, that, but one that was going to be far too easy to fall into, given the way he was about as welcome here as Garry Bushell in full bigoted flight.

"Well," he said, out loud to no-one in particular, "if I'm going to be maudlin, I'd best enjoy it." He beckoned the barman over, smiling nicely, although the barman, just like the rest of the world, didn't notice that he had anything but his usual carved and graven expression. "I'll have a double whisky," he said. Then, in a sudden wash of indulgent self-amusement: "And make it the best single malt you've got." No two ways about it: if he was to end this evening as miserably misfit as the last one, then he was bloody-well going to enjoy himself doing it. And the amber glow of good booze was the best anaesthesia he knew.

He was picking up his change—a fiver didn't go far these days, did it?—when a figure appeared in his peripheral vision. Expecting the worst, Wioldy turned, to be greeted by a friendly smile and an apparently sincere: "D'you know, your eyes are the most amazing colour?"

Wioldy narrowed those eyes and stared at the very handsome man standing in front of him. Automatically, he catalogued him: 5'10" or 11", about 11 and a half, 12 stone, hazel eyes, brown hair, curly. Straight nose and nice teeth, very pleasant smile. Decent musculature, broad shoulders—definitely a swimmer—and a slim waist. Crotch veiled by pleats, but just enough revealed to be interesting. Good clothes, not too flash, but showing off the well-kept body without screaming 'available'. Very fashionably old-fashioned shoes, lace-ups, well polished. Respectable, Wioldy decided, and definitely not on the game. Which begged the question: why the hell was a man as good-looking as this one

chatting up someone as ugly and old as Wiold?

"Oh, aye, lad?" he said with some hostility, being baited a too-familiar part of his life. "And what's the punchline then?"

"Punchline?" The nice face frowned, the man obviously really taken aback. "Christ, that's the last time I pay you a compliment! Look, I couldn't help but notice that you've got eyes that are a really unusual colour and they're nice." A sharp look, a tightening of the mouth. "A hell of a lot nicer than you, as a matter of fact."

Wioldy looked at him for a minute, completely at a loss what to say. For all he wasn't one for following instincts—too haphazard for his taste, and something reserved for those with the rank to back their hunches up—there were times when experience combined with an indefinable insight: this man was telling him the truth. If this were a murder investigation, he'd be willing to bet his boots on it, and although an outing into gay life was a bit more serious and a hell of a lot more personal for him than any investigation, he was still willing to trust his instinct on this one. It was, he thought with stunned amazement, the first serious compliment he'd had on his looks since he'd gone through the windscreen of that car, and that was more years ago than he cared to remember. It suddenly dawned on him that he was sitting here gaping like a roast pig waiting for the apple in its mouth. "Buy you a drink?" he asked, feeling clumsy and tongue-tied and completely out of his depth.

"If you promise not to bite my head off every time I open my mouth," the man said, perching himself on the next stool. "I'll have a Guinness, please."

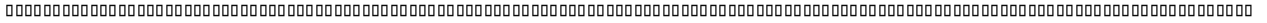
Wiold called the barman over again, ordered the pint of Guinness and another pint of bitter for himself. What he really wanted was a nice stiff whisky so that he could knock back that and his double in one long blur of Dutch courage, but better that he be nervous than plastered. Drinks ordered and paid for and put in front of them, he had no excuse for not talking to the other man. Only question was: what the hell was he supposed to say in this situation? 'Do you come here often?' Or, 'Who do you fancy for the Cup?' Or, mebbe, 'Fancy coming round my flat for a quick fuck?'

Bright, curious eyes were watching him, puzzlement and surprise lurking, but the comment was innocuous. "The name's Keith, Keith Rankin."

"I'm Wiold."

Keith grinned at him. "Just plain Wiold?"

"Well, some of my friends call me..." 'Mac' was on the tip of his tongue, but that was a name used only by



“How could I not? Quite a character, our Ms. Pascoe,” Keith said, smiling. “Nice, though, but I wouldn’t want to get in her bad books. I take it you know her as well?”

A question he could answer, a conversation he could keep going. Perhaps there was a God after all. “Know her through her husband, mainly. Peter, he’s my Inspector.”

“You work for Ellie’s husband? God, I meet two policemen and they know each other. Incestuous bunch, aren’t you?”

He pricked at that, ready to snap.

“Keep your hair on,” Keith butted in. “I wasn’t implying anything like that.”

He could kick himself and would, later. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right. But he seems a fairly decent bloke, her husband.” A wicked smile, something remembered. “Even if he does have a talent for putting his foot right in it.”

And that was it, they were off and running. Mutual acquaintances and shared tales of Peter Pascoe putting his foot in it. Which led, naturally, to funny stories of disasters in teaching and absurdities in policing. Two hours later, last call being sounded, and Wielder realised he had done more talking in one evening than he usually managed in a week. Or maybe a month. But now it was the last drink, chipping out time, and all his words ran away and hid. He knew what he wanted: to invite this man home with him, and spend the night with him. Sex, glorious sex. A surreptitious glance, and he added a bit of affection to his list of wants.

How did you ask someone home these days? Flat out, blunt, or circuitous, flattering? And how did you establish limits? This bloke wasn’t the youthful type he usually went for; closer examination showing him to be early thirties, so he wasn’t likely to just lie there and let Wielder be boss from start to finish.

And then there was the not-so-small matter of AIDS.

He had a box of condoms back at the flat, so it wasn’t a problem from that point of view. But he would want to know, before he did anything, before he considered certain things, just what the situation was.

Keith beat him to it. “It’s been great talking to you,” he said, sounding hesitant for the first time all evening. “Listen, if you’re not doing anything Friday night...”

Wielder almost laughed out loud. So that’s how it was done these days! Going out with each other like straight teenagers, all awkward requests and fears of rejection. “I’ve got plans that night,” he said. “Or I will have, as soon as you tell me where we’re going.”

“You’re a bastard, you know that, don’t you, Mac?” Keith said good-naturedly. “I thought you were going to give me the brush-off there. Or confess that you were on a bloody stake-out.”

“Not me, lad,” Wielder replied. “It’s the pretty ones they put on duty in places the likes of this. So did you have anywhere in mind for Friday, or are you open to suggestion.”

The comment invited sex in and made it at home.

“And if you’re open to suggestion,” Wielder said carefully, “you’re welcome to come home with me tonight.”

“I...” Keith swallowed, visibly, and licked his lips, his gaze involuntarily going to the soft woollen trousers that draped so beautifully across Wielder’s groin. “Oh, don’t tempt me, Wielder,” he said. “I promised myself I’d be careful...”

“It’s all right, sweetie,” Wielder came back, “I promise to pull out in time—”

The old ‘I won’t get you pregnant’ joke fell flat, a tangible miasma of unease between them. It wasn’t just pregnancy all those enthusiastic little sperm caused any more, was it? “Friday, then,” Wielder said, and the discussion of details kept them distracted all the way to the car.

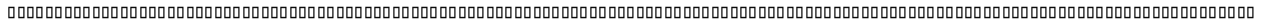
He snatched another quick look at his watch.

“Christ on a crutch, that bloody watch had better be a self-winder on its last legs, or I’ll shove it down your bloody throat!” Chief Superintendent Dalziel positively roared. Fat Andy’s opinion was that if he had to deliver briefings and receive debriefings, then by God and Andy Dalziel, his officers were going to have to sit through them as well.

“Sorry, sir,” Wielder said, fidgeting, which was an unusual sight in and of itself.

“What’s the matter that you’re in such a rush to get out of here and can’t sit still while you’re waiting? You got piles or summat?”

That was the sort of question that Wielder was never quite sure how to answer. Not much point in looking to the only other person able to squeeze into the room with himself and Dalziel: Inspector Pascoe wasn’t going to be much help, not when Fat Andy was in one of his moods, anyroad. Still, Wielder had an almost irrational desire to bless Peter Pascoe for being the bridge to what Wielder hoped was going to be a beautiful friendship. If he could get out of here in time. If Fat Andy didn’t keep him late. If his car didn’t break down. If, heart plummeting into the pit of his stomach, if Keith showed up at all. If Dalziel didn’t rip his head from his



This time, even Wielder's blushes were visible.

"Oh, get on with you," Dalziel said. "Go get your crystal slippers on."

"The report?"

"It'll keep till morning. Oh," as Wielder was opening the door, "unless something other than you and your new chum come up, then I don't want to see your ugly mug before ten."

Wielder grinned at that, too pleased by both the extra time and the acceptance to be offended by Fat Andy's legendary crudeness. Right behind him he heard Pascoe start to apologise, until Dalziel put paid to that.

"He's a big lad, Peter, and I don't think he needs you holding his hand and giving him pointers on where to stick it. You can bring your pretty face back in here and explain what the fuck happened with Hacclesford."

Door shut before he could hear the start of that minor war, Wielder was whistling as he got out of the building in record time.

He had half an hour, less if he wanted to be sure of not being late. All right, all right, so it was considered fashionable to be late, 'cool' to show a veneer of unconcern. Wielder was more interested in making sure Keith didn't get bored. Keith had been very understanding about changing tonight's arrangements from meeting at the restaurant to Wielder picking him up, but having messed Keith about once, he didn't much fancy doing it again. Seven, he'd told Keith, and seven it would be. Splashing water on to get rid of the last traces of shaving cream, Wielder paused, his attention caught by his own reflection.

As Dalziel had implied, why the fuck was Keith interested in him? He made the back end of a bus look positively roseate with beauty, and although he was fit, his body wouldn't exactly give Arnold Schwarzenegger a run for his money. Getting his belly wet on the edge of the washhand basin, he leaned forward, peering at himself in the mirror. His eyes were a nice colour, but not something you'd expect to be noticed in a pub full of luscious young men on the prowl. Good teeth as well, but as it wasn't a horse Keith was buying, he thought ruefully, pulling his y-fronts away from his body and staring down at his very average endowments. Wouldn't give Arnold a run for his money in this department either!

"You," he said to his reflection, "are an idiot. Bad as a spotty schoolgirl. Anyone'd think you were going out with your first boyfriend."

And that stopped him dead. He paled, visibly, and his hands trembled faintly as he ran them over the

close-cut crinkles of his dark hair. Christ on a crutch, he thought, I am fucking going out with my first boyfriend! Helplessly amused, he started laughing, and the self-mocking humour kept him going long enough that he was dressed and in the car before his nerves ambushed him with a vengeance. His palms were sweaty on the steering wheel and he wiped them, one at a time, on the soft grey wool of his brand new trousers.

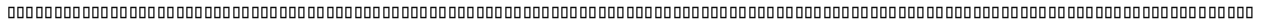
"Bad as a schoolboy," he said aloud, to practice a voice that threatened to squeak embarrassingly. "Keep this up, and you'll end up as stern as the bloody headmaster."

Which of course led to more thoughts of Keith, and the unmaning worry about Keith and Ellie Pascoe sitting together in the staffroom discussing Wielder over a cup of coffee and a chocolate biscuit, as if Wielder weren't important enough to warrant the cafeteria at lunchtime, never mind a private discussion later.

"Pack it in!" he said, rather startling the dear old lady on the pavement next to him, who was waiting for a bus. The lights changed and he was on his way again, never having even noticed that he had stopped the dear little old lady from lifting the businessman's wallet. Ellie Pascoe, he reminded himself, wasn't the type to gossip—well, not maliciously, anyway. And she was a friend, one of the very few people who ever even mentioned him being gay. She wouldn't be unkind, she wouldn't laugh at him.

It was the not being sure of Keith that made him miserable. How the fuck did he know that Keith wasn't setting him up for something? Mebbe it was a bet, one of those dog-parties he'd seen in that film with the ever welcome Tom Cruise. He didn't know, and that was the problem. Years on the Force had him so that he could find his way anywhere, even about the one-way system round Keith's flat. There weren't many cars parked round here, not that he would expect there to be in an area best known for its bedsits and short-term rentals. He was stopped now, parked right outside the right door. He should get up and ring the bell, say hello, keep it light and breezy, and even if it did end up being fodder for elevenses, well, at least he'd have had a night on the town with a handsome man. There were, he told himself, worse ways of finding your feet in the ways of the gay world.

Still, he wished he hadn't changed his mind about partaking of the gay life. It had been so much more comfortable to pretend that he didn't want any of it, that he'd rather stay as he was, nice and safe and secure in his little bubble. But he'd refused to be a coward any longer. He had promised himself. Had sworn to take



the chance, even if it meant having his fingers burned a few times.

So why was he still sitting there like a shop dummy?

A tap on the side-window, and there was Keith, grinning, making daft faces at him. Wielder leaned across the car to unlock the door, his uncertainty and surprise turning into a scowl.

Busy with seat belts and buckles, Keith hadn't noticed the expression yet. "And there's me, even picked my dirty socks up off the floor for you." The belt was fankled round, his voice muddled as he twisted in the seat to get himself sorted out. "I expected you to come in, but I suppose you were waiting to be issued a warrant."

"Nah," Wielder said, mood lifted by the presence of this man and the easy comfort of him, "Fat Andy would kill us for being that soft. We just kick the door in, beat up a few citizens and then bugger off home for a nice cuppa."

"Fat Andy?" Keith asked, not surprisingly.

"Ah, Fat Andy," Wielder said, cracking open his vast store of wicked, insubordinate and absolutely true stories about his superior. "Also known as 'That Fat Bastard', 'That Mad Bastard' and 'That vicious bastard'."

"Or 'Bastard' for short."

The last Bastard Tale, as they'd been christened somewhere between the shopping centre and the new church, still had Keith in stitches by the time they reached the restaurant. It was a nice place, nothing particularly fancy, but the food was good, the service better, and best of all, no-one turned a hair at the sight of two men having dinner together. At least, that was the reputation it had.

Didn't stop Wielder from being nervous as sin when they walked in.

"What is it?" Keith whispered as they waited to be seated.

Not looking at him, Wielder didn't say anything, simply shook his head. He'd always been taciturn, a trait worsened by the need to keep so much of himself secret, but Keith wasn't used to the old Wielder, he was becoming accustomed to a very different man from the one colleagues knew.

"There has to be something," Keith persisted as they draped napkins over their laps and Wielder hid behind his menu.

Nothing.

A heavy sigh, and Keith leaned back in his chair, making it clear that he wasn't going to play any of Wielder's games, whatever they might be. The atmosphere, to employ the perfect cliché for the occasion,

was fraught. In between deciding over the French Onion Soup (a distinct possibility, now that it looked as if he wasn't going to have much chance of kisses later) or Brie en Croûte and weighing the relative merits of Bœuf Bourguignon or the basic Coq au Vin, Wielder kept a wary eye on the other diners. He wasn't expecting anything, not really. But still, for all this place's reputation, all the couples he could see were the standard one of each. Even speaking to the waiter, he couldn't help but notice one or two looks coming his way, and he didn't know how to take it. He was well used to having people look at him—he had that kind of face—but he wasn't sure if it were only that, or if it were because he was sitting here with a man and a dirty great big pink triangle stuck to his forehead.

"I'm sorry," Keith said out of the blue.

"What for?" Wielder asked, knowing full well that when it came to apologies due, he was very much in arrears.

"I'd forgotten," he leaned his elbows on the table, which brought him close enough to make Wielder glance around nervously.

"Forgotten what?" That he didn't really fancy Wielder, that this was all a joke—what?

"That this is all a bit new to you."

Wielder became engrossed in tearing his dinner roll into the tiniest of shreds. "To tell the truth," he began, then stopped, swallowed, began again, feeling as foolish as a virgin. Pathetic to be this unsure at his age. "Well, it's not a bit new. It's sort of, well, completely new."

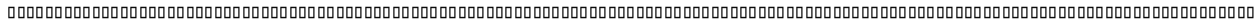
Fortunately, their wine hadn't been poured yet, because Keith came close to choking as it was. "You mean, you've never done it with a bloke? Fucking hell, I knew you weren't exactly a Gay Gordon, but I never thought—"

"And you don't have to," Wielder snapped, his male ego more than a touch bruised by the implication of complete inexperience. "I had a lover of more years than I care to mention, but we were both in the closet, so we had to be a bit on the careful side."

"With you a policeman, I'd've thought it was a bit on the paranoid side."

"Aye, well, that and all," Wielder said, smiling against his own intention to be stern and butch over the slur to his manhood. He was too charmed and too infatuated by Keith to hold onto any sort of annoyance, not when those brown eyes were smiling at him, and the lips were parted, just a little, barely enough to show the glimmer of teeth and the moist pinkness of tongue.

"Are you still with me?" Keith asked, but nicely, flattered by the effect he was having on Wielder.



“Sorry,” Wioldy answered, trying not to embarrass himself farther by actually panting over his companion. “Was thinking...”

“Nice thoughts?” Soft, seductive, welcoming as a light in the window.

“Very nice thoughts.” He cleared his throat, more to stopper the words than anything else. Oh, you’ve got it bad, haven’t you? he said to himself, uncaring of whether or not this was desperation or lust at first sight: he was in serious danger of falling for this lovely man with the wonderful laugh and the best bum in the Western Hemisphere. “But as I was saying,” before I almost kissed you right here in front of everyone, “I’ve had sex with blokes,” and he was so proud that he’d actually come right out and said it, flat out, the way he’d never dared before, “but I’ve only just come out...”

“Yes, I thought I could smell mothballs. Oh, don’t look at me like that, I was only kidding and you know it.” A pause, while the waiter fussed over food and plates and glasses. Then: “Look, I’ve never even been in the closet, so I never had to come out—”

“But what about your family? Your mother?” It burst from him, driven by memories of his chapel-going mother and strap-wielding father. “How did she feel when she found out?”

“She didn’t find out, Mac,” Keith said gently, slowly realising how carefully he was going to have to handle this man, “because it was never a secret. I’ve known all my life, and it never even occurred to me to not tell Mum and Dad when I had my first crush.” He stopped then, continuing when he saw the longing in Wioldy’s eyes to hear more about something so wonderfully foreign. “They didn’t bat an eyelash. Accepted it the same way they accepted it when my older sister came home and told them about her first boyfriend. Although,” dimples appeared, inviting Wioldy to share the humour, “they didn’t tell me how not to get pregnant. How did your parents take it when you told them?”

“Never did tell them. They died years ago,” his tone very off-hand, so that it was impossible to tell if he were sad or glad over it, “so it’s only me and my sister now. She’s in Canada, moved there with her family a while ago.”

“So how did she take it?”

Wioldy finished his Brie, sipped at his wine, fidgeted about a bit. “You know,” he finally said, “you’ve got a brilliant interrogation technique. You’d make a great copper.”

“Was hoping I would, tonight.”

Wioldy knew that he had suddenly developed a most fatuous expression, but he was too delighted to care. “I think that could be arranged.”

“I think so too, so go easy on the booze. I don’t mind you relaxed, but I don’t want brewer’s droop getting in the way of my plans.”

All set for a discreetly libidinous chat, Wioldy was very put out indeed when the waiter, all efficiency and smarmy smiling, chose that moment to start them on their main course. By which point, Keith was back on one track Wioldy would happily forget.

“You were telling me how your sister took you coming out.”

He mumbled his answer round a tender chunk of beef.

“Pardon?” Keith asked, not taking the hint.

Wioldy chewed, swallowed, accepted that sex with—and was that really all he was hoping for?—this man was worth being vulnerable. “I haven’t told her.”

Keith simply stared at him. “Let me get this straight, if you’ll pardon the pun. You’ve come out, but you haven’t told your family? What about your friends.”

“Not in so many words, not really, no.” His confession to Fat Andy didn’t count; benign that mad bastard might be, but friend was pushing it. “Anyroad, I tend to keep myself to myself.”

“All the better to hide yourself.”

Shame crept up his spine. “Suppose you could put it like that.” If you were feeling vicious, he wanted to add, not realising that he was, for once, visibly upset.

“Christ, but you’ve had it rough!”

The unexpected sympathy made him jerk his head up, startled him into looking at Keith. “Not as bad as some,” he said, a lifetime of not complaining too ingrained to let sympathy pass.

“But not half as easy as it’s been for me.” A slight shake of the head, barely enough to move the thick, straight brown hair. “There’s a lot you need to tell me, Mac, isn’t there?”

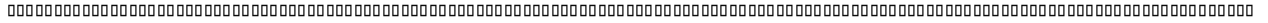
“What? You mean, do I like whips and chains and all that sort of thing?”

“No. I meant why you could never come out. You’re no coward, that’s obvious from what Ellie and Peter have said about you, so it must be something else.”

But the caring comments were lost, drowned out by that one reference. “And what have Ellie and Peter been saying about me? And when did you speak to them?”

“Tut, tut,” Keith said, “you haven’t even read me my rights yet.”

“Suppose I did come on a bit strong there, didn’t I?”



It's just..." How could he explain it without sounding weak-kneed and looking as if he had a yellow streak a mile wide?

"It's just," Keith said, being quite casual, making an effort to make all this a bit easier for Wield, "that this is probably the first time you've ever been open about...well, about having a boyfriend, and you're not comfortable having them talk about it."

"Not comfortable? Scared fucking witless!" Christ, he thought, this honesty business could get out of hand. "Mebbe that's a bit strong an' all, but thinking about my friends talking about me behind my back..."

"And I suppose none of the straight people you know ever mention where there going of a Friday night, or mention that they're going out with someone that they all know?"

Put like that, it did seem a bit off to feel betrayed, didn't it? "I hadn't thought about it like that." He thought about it like that now, and when he smiled, Keith wasn't the only one who noticed the change in the craggy features. "It's actually nice, that, isn't it? In fact, that's grand!"

"See? Coming out doesn't mean having to pick up your bell at the door."

Wieldy pondered that for a minute. "Keith, what the hell do you mean?"

"A bell. As in lepers." He did a twisted impersonation of every sorry leper in every cheap television saga, half the restaurant turning to look at him. "Unclean, unclean."

"Actually," Wieldy confessed, greatly daring and leaning half-way towards Keith, "mebbe I should get one of them bells. My mind's not too clean, you know."

Keith simply grinned at him and was tactful enough not to comment on what was, for Wieldy in a public place, boldness. "Going to prove that, are we?"

"Oh, aye, lad," Wieldy said to the man not so much younger than himself. "Oh, aye, I'll prove that tonight."

Dessert was ordered and consumed in something of a haze for Wield, all the sharp details blunted by the melting surety that he was going to have sex with Keith tonight. Have sex? he questioned himself. Or was it already sliding into something a hell of a lot more serious? He always had been one for leaping into commitments, loyal to a fault and faithful. Funny, wasn't it, how a disease had brought all those old-fashioned traits back into the height of fashion.

The bill was brought on a discreet silver saucer, tucked into a quiet leather folder. Automatically, Wield reached for it, and met Keith's fingers already there.

"Let me." Keith was obviously getting very good at

reading Wieldy's battered features. "Oh, go on, it's the first time you've been out like this, isn't it? So let me treat you, make it a real date."

"Doesn't sit well, letting someone else pay for me." Truculent, not about to yield at all.

"Then you can treat me next time we go out."

He was so busy floating on cloud nine over that, he didn't give a damn about so-called pride. This wasn't going to be a once-off, he thought, thrilled more than he ought to be, intoxicated less by wine than by the slow seeping in of hope. There was going to be a next time!

Unless he wasn't any good in bed, he thought with worry plummeting to the bottom of his stomach. What if Keith thought he was rotten in bed and didn't want to see him again? After all, what did Wield have to offer? Too many years with Maurice, where they'd done everything under the sun, but all that technique was based on what Maurice and he had liked together. Then there was Cliff, and he'd been more experienced than the French Foreign Legion, but all Wieldy had had to do to him was fuck him; Cliff had done all the rest of it.

And what if Cliff had been doing it only because Wieldy was putting him up and giving him the occasional tenner?

In the car now, driving, too skilled for any of his distraction or dismay to show in the way he handled the motor. But Keith was watching him, and Keith, it seemed, honestly did see beyond his surface ugliness.

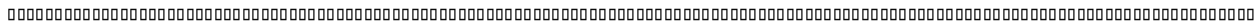
"Nothing to be scared about, Mac," he whispered. "I've been tested, and I was negative, and I haven't done anything dodgy since then." A small, very sad laugh. "In fact, I've been so fucking monkish, I have to shave my palms these days!"

What had he been thinking about honesty earlier? They were on the steps now, front door locked behind them, and there was only half a flight between them and Keith's bedsit. "It's not that I'm worried about. I, em, well, I brought condoms with me for starters, and I thought we could, you know..."

"Leave off the fucking till later?"

There it was again, that blithe and exhilarating assumption that there would be a later, that there would be a next time. "Aye, that's about right, I think. Plenty of things we can do besides fucking," he said, thinking about all the times Maurice hadn't wanted him like that and it had been little more than a mutual wank. Especially towards the end of their relationship.

"Well, here it is, home sweet home. Until I can find something permanent," Keith was saying, chattering away as he put on lights and hurried over to the



scullery alcove. "Coffee?" he called over his shoulder, ignoring that they'd had excellent French coffee in the restaurant. "As I was saying," he went on as Wielder followed him through, "this is only a temporary set-up. I want to buy a place of my own, but I decided to try the area for a bit before I actually signed on the dotted line. I quite fancy a proper house, you know, with a garden and all that crap and—"

Wielder came up behind Keith and slid his arms around him. "It's all right," he whispered softly, feeling absurdly happy that this mattered to Keith as much as it mattered to him. "No need to be so nervous. Anyroad, thought that was my line. It'll be fine, honest. I'm no virgin, and I've got a fair idea of how the plumbing and everything works. I'm not expecting Don Juan, Casanova and Errol Flynn all rolled into one neither!"

"I'm just..." Keith leaned back until his cheek was against Wielder's and his back was pressed against Wielder's chest. "I like you," he admitted, making Wielder smile all the more. "You're a nice bloke, Mac, and you've a sexy body and you're funny when you get started. I don't want to fall down on your expectations, that's all."

"And as I've got more to go on than these bloody sex novels, you shan't. Do you really want another coffee?"

"Course not. Didn't want to jump you and put you off."

"Didn't want to hurry the poor novitiate, is that it?" But he was amused, touched by the way Keith had cared enough to even think about it. "Don't worry, you couldn't be too quick for me."

Afterwards, they lay together for a while, doing nothing more than exchange lazy caresses and sleepy kisses. Not thinking at first, content as never before in the warmth of this other man, Wielder drifted on the sensations. Then thought intruded, and he looked at Keith. "I don't suppose you want me to go home, do you?" he asked, confident now after the way Keith had reacted to him.

"Just try it, and you'll have Peter Pascoe in here arresting me for kidnapping a police officer."

"Like that, is it?" Wielder asked, voice as dreamy as his kisses.

"Could be. Would you mind?"

"Mind? Christ, I'll be joining you."

Long minutes, embraces fading into unabashed cuddling, Wielder wrapped around Keith, slowly falling asleep. Then a chuckle, and Keith tickling him. "What?" Wielder demanded, never too sunny when being tickled.

"D'you think we should have a race? See who's

going to fall in love first?"

A longer pause, then, incongruous in the gentleness of night. "What do you see in me? And why'd you come up to me in the pub in the first place?"

"Honestly?"

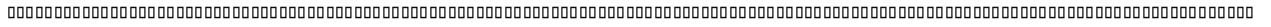
"I'd rather have the truth now than find it out later." When it would hurt more. When the pain just might be unbearable.

"I don't really know. At the pub... Felt sorry for you, a bit. You looked so miserable, and then when I really looked at you, I noticed your eyes. Not often you see someone with eyes the same colour as Liz Taylor. And you had a nice body, and I liked the way you were dressed. And..." Keith shrugged, Wielder's arms automatically tightening around him. "And I like a man who's all contained power, the way you are."

Fair enough, he could believe any of that. At least there hadn't been any praise for his pretty face, nor had Keith lied and said he wasn't that ugly. Because he was, and he knew it. But if Keith didn't mind, well then who was Wielder to complain?

In that case nothing else needed to be said, and Wielder allowed himself the luxury of sinking into sleep, entwined with a beautiful man it would be very easy to love.

Back aching, head pounding, stomach reminding him that not only was it six hours since last he'd eaten but that the last meal had consisted of a greasy pie and a pint of bitter, Sgt. Wielder sat alone in his cubby-hole of an office, staring down at the report in front of him. It was his usual pellucid product, but that wouldn't cover the fact that even after a solid week on it, he had no idea on how to solve this case and that meant Fat Andy was going to have his balls for breakfast. He sighed, as he'd been doing a lot that afternoon, and re-read the pages hoping that he'd find something that was a plus. But there was nothing. It would have taken a stroke of pure, blind luck to unravel this before the robbery had actually been committed, but Dalziel wouldn't see it that way. Christ, he'd be hauled in front of the fat bastard and his skin would be flayed from him by a sharp and wicked tongue. Miserable, that's what tomorrow was going to be, when Dalziel came back in and found out that Wielder had got nowhere fast, and expensively at that. Wielder winced at the total at the bottom of his expense chit, but stapled it to the report anyway. He was going to be hung; might as well get his money back anyway. He stretched then, trying to ease some of the ache from his spine, but the smallest thought of what tomorrow was bringing with it was



enough to make him stiff with tension.

The phone rang, and he seriously considered not answering it. The last thing he needed was Dalziel on the phone to him. But he was still on duty, technically speaking, even if he was useless.

“Hello?”

“Hello, love,” a voice said, and Wielder grinned happily.

“Hello yourself,” he said to his lover of almost two months.

“Thought I’d give you a ring, because you’ve been saying work’s bloody awful all this week. Any better today?”

“Worse,” Wielder said, although today was suddenly really very nice. It meant something, something quite wonderful, to have someone who cared enough to phone just to cheer him up a bit. “It’s a lot better right at the moment, mind you.”

“Should think it’s perfect, considering I’m talking to you. But I have an ulterior motive for ringing you as well.”

“Oh aye? What d’you have up your sleeve this time?” Time before last it had been back to the Gay Galloper, and drinks with his handsome friend for all the world—all the local gay world—to see. Last week it had been a single red rose delivered anonymously to him at the office. Embarrassing as hell, that, but worth it. Very much worth it.

“Ellie and I were talking about you and Peter, so we thought it’d be nice if we all had dinner over at their house tonight. Ellie’s a brilliant cook, and you know little Rosie will be ecstatic to see her Uncu Mac. And Uncu Mac will be ecstatic to romp with little Rosie, won’t he?”

He would, Peter and Ellie Pascoe’s daughter the closest thing to his own child as he was likely to come. She couldn’t manage ‘Wielder’ and it had seemed so natural to have her call him Mac. “What time should I be there?” he said, already tucking the report into its folder.

“As soon as you can, according to Ellie. I think she wants you to mind Rosie while she does dinner.”

“I’ll be there in,” a quick glance at his watch, “about half an hour.”

“Right you are. It’ll take me a bit longer, I’ve got papers to mark, but I’ll be there soon. Em, Mac...”

Not often Keith was diffident about anything. “What?”

“Is Rosie really as god-awful as Ellie says she is?”

“Oh, you know how these mothers are,” Wielder said. And then, over Keith’s sigh of relief. “So besotted

with their brats they think they’re perfect.”

He was laughing as he hung up the phone. Let Keith suffer a bit of trepidation before he met delightful little Rosie. Would serve him right for all the slagging he’d given Wielder for being such a big softie for kids.

And it wasn’t until he was sitting on the Pascoes’ sofa in the Pascoes’ living room, with Peter handing him a drink, a crabby Rosie perched precariously on his lap and Ellie shouting hello from the kitchen, that it dawned on Wielder just what he’d let himself in for. He and Keith had been practically inseparable since they’d met, were even quite seriously considering buying a house together, but for all that, the only places they’d gone together had either been anonymous restaurants or cinemas, or the safety of an all-gay milieu like the Gay Galloper or the Jolly Roger. Now here he was, in the home of the people who had become his best friends, with his adopted niece on his lap, and his lover about to arrive. He knew what Keith would do the minute he walked in as well: come right over and kiss him hello the way he always did. But here, in front of people? In front of his Inspector, a man he worked with, day in, day out?

And if Keith didn’t kiss him? How the hell would he feel then? Relieved, in a way, and terribly let-down as well.

Then there was always the question of how Peter and Ellie would react.

He was distracted at that moment by Rosie opening her mouth and screaming.

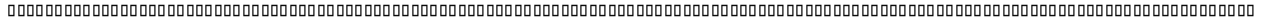
“Oh, Christ,” Peter said, putting his drink down. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing personal. It’s the latest phase: she screams for a year or two before she’ll give in and fall asleep. I thought we might have a night off with you here, but no such luck.”

“Sorry. Listen,” as Peter made to lever himself up off the sofa, “d’you want me to settle her for the night?”

An expression of profoundest gratitude settled over Peter’s face. “Would you? Thanks, Mac, I really owe you one for this.”

Half way up the stairs, Rosie still screeching at the top of her lungs, it registered what Peter had called him. Mac. So much, he thought happily, for keeping the two halves of my life separate!

Making faces and singing her silly songs, he soon had Rosie quiet and then it didn’t take long before she was asleep. He lingered for a while, stroking her hair, gazing at the daughter he would never have. A family was something he would have liked, but there wasn’t much chance of that. At least he had Rosie: all the



and walked briskly toward his agent.

"Well, sir?" Bodie inquired. A grim look on his face, Cowley shook his head economically, words unnecessary.

Damn, thought Bodie. This would tear it with Doyle. "Well, I'm not goin' to be the one that tells him," he answered as they got into the car and pulled away into the wet night.

Weaving through traffic, Bodie kept his eyes on the road and off of Doyle. Was acting a bit erratic, his mate was. A bit over the top, threatening to push a kid like Tony over the balcony to get information the poor sod didn't even have. Just wasn't like Doyle to be that adamant without real provocation. Something must really be eating at him, more than just Benny.

Ignoring Tony cowering in the back seat, he asked, "What's got into you, Doyle?" sparing a quick glance at the man beside him. Traffic was heavy for this time of day. "Normally have to pull me off. Is it this bird or something?" He checked the side mirror as he passed a car. "It's not just Benny is it. She not coming across.?"

"Knock it off!" Doyle grumbled, his anger permeating the air like smoke, transparent but definitely there.

"Or maybe she is." Doyle would not look at him. "Next thing you know you'll be tellin' me you're goin' to marry her," he half-joked, trying to steer things back to calmer waters. But they were the wrong words, the wrong approach. Instantly he wished them unspoken.

"Yeah, well I might just do that."

No. He had to be kidding. Had to be. But something in Doyle's tone told him he meant it. Bodie's hands gripped the wheel, knuckles white, face staring straight ahead. He was afraid to look at Doyle, afraid to see the truth of the words if he looked at the face he knew so well. No, this wasn't supposed to happen. Ray was too complicated a man, too addicted to the rush of adrenalin and the heat of power to want to settle down with some little society woman. Bodie understood his needs and his actions, but someone else wouldn't. Someone like Ann couldn't.

Bodie eyed him cautiously as traffic slowed to a crawl. "Ray...?"

"Sod off, Bodie," Doyle snapped. "I told you, I don't want to discuss it." Silence curled up around them like a chill, making him hunch his shoulders

to the cold.

Long minutes later, shaking off the self-imposed brume, Ray said quietly, "You don't understand. 'Sgetting to me. All of it. Benny's dyin' was just the capper. 'M tired of fighting, Bodie. I want to get out." Bodie shot him a glance, keeping his face carefully neutral while he clenched his fingers tighter still around the steering wheel. "Ann's been offered a position in New York. I was thinkin', maybe..."

What? New York? Was Doyle off his nut? He couldn't possibly, couldn't really be thinking... Bodie shuddered, a physical reaction to the sudden sickness he felt. It was one thing to contemplate marriage, something else entirely to run halfway across the world. To run away from Bodie. He determined not to let it show. "You don't mean it, mate. You're in too far, too long. Wouldn't know what to do with yourself, you wouldn't." Or without me, he thought. "Once a copper, always a copper."

"Yeah. Maybe. I don't know." Ray looked tired and, mentally pulling away from Bodie, fell into another long, uncomfortable quiet.

Their relationship had always been filled with companionable silences and bickering interspersed with bursts of genuine anger and banked-down passion, the rhythms of their lives keeping in step. Though they never discussed it, both knew that was why they worked so well together, able to anticipate each other's thoughts, actions and leaps of faith in the field; able to provide for each other's needs off the field. They were infamous for their rapport, working together as one mind to pull the scattered pieces of a puzzle into a coherent whole. But what the rest of CI5, except perhaps Cowley, didn't know, would never know, was how that rapport, that deep-rooted understanding of each other, spilled over into the bedroom, or the kitchen, or any other suitable spot, and how that rhythm built and crescendoed and consumed them in its wake. Since Ann though, Bodie thought ruefully, they'd been just that half-beat out of sync.

Exhausted from long hours tramping round the peaceful suburbs, setting up surveillance and then showing the evidence of the Holly household's comings and goings to Cowley, Bodie entered his dark flat, the chill damp hitting him immediately. Banging the door shut, throwing his jacket at a chair, he wrenched the holster from his shoulders

something more meaningful, something more intrinsic to his life. But he had to keep the upper hand, he reminded himself, keep in control. To show weakness was to lose an equal amount of control and he had to have that: control of his life, of his emotions, of his passions.

“Too involved? Look mate, it’s none of your business how involved it gets,” Doyle said from the doorway.

“But it *is* my business, lover.” Bodie said harshly as he grabbed Doyle’s arm and started to propel him into the sitting room. “When you decide to dump me for some cold bitch, then it becomes my business.” His business to keep Doyle from making the biggest mistake of his life. His business to keep Doyle.

“You bastard,” Doyle growled and tried to pull away as Bodie manhandled him. “Where do you get off callin’ ’er a bitch? And what the bloody ’ell do you think you’re doin’? I told you I’m on my way out. Gerroff!”

Bodie released him, but he stayed his ground, unmoving, a mountain of strength Doyle would have to battle to get past. “I don’t give a fuck what your plans are, you’re going to listen to me *now*,” Bodie said darkly. “She’s a cold bitch and she’s all wrong for you.” And now, he thought, is our moment of truth, our reckoning. He knew then precisely where this conversation was leading, inexorably and inevitably: it was what they had become.

“Oh, and you’re all perfect for me, eh?” Doyle sparked, looking at the smoldering fire behind Bodie’s eyes and wondering what the hell was going on.

“Yeah, I am, sweetheart. I know you. I understand what motivates you, what gets you going. She doesn’t.”

“Oh, come off it, Bodie. It’s different with Ann.”

“Oh, I’m sure it is.”

“Look, I’ve got to go,” Doyle sighed. His voice had lost its belligerence, the tones sliding out smoothly, patiently, as if to calm an unreasoning child, a petulant Bodie. the muscles of his body, too, relaxed; he seemed about to step around Bodie.

“*No!*” Bodie thundered, moving towards him. Doyle looked startled, perhaps unbelieving, as Bodie pushed him onto the settee. He was even more startled when Bodie straddled him, hands on Doyle’s shoulders, one knee on the settee, the

other between Doyle’s legs, pressing firmly into his balls.

Not wanting a scene, not wanting to provoke Bodie further, he fought to remain calm, to not react to Bodie’s aggression. He sat open-mouthed, awed by Bodie’s anger and the sexual urgency suddenly rippling through him as the pressure on his genitals continued. But as hard as he tried, the instinct to resist, to fight back, swept through him and he attempted to throw Bodie off with a swift upsurge of strength. Bodie had him too well pinioned and the almost agonizing pressure of the knee in his balls stilled him momentarily.

“Come on, Ray, fight me,” Bodie taunted, shifting to put more weight on his upstart captive. Doyle tensed, trying to break the firm hold on his shoulders. “That’s it, sunshine,” he rasped, heartbeat surging, “struggle.” Bodie’s cock began to fill with the urgent coursing of blood as Doyle angrily twisted under him. “Ohh yeahh, show me how big and tough you are.” He smiled a thin, humorless smile.

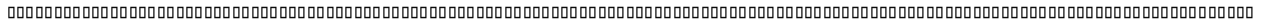
Suddenly, Doyle slumped back into the cushions, all physical resistance gone. “No, Bodie,” he glared furiously. “Say what you fucking well have to say and then get the *fuck* out of here.” He kept his voice dangerously even, deceptively calm.

Bodie eyed him for a moment. He realized angrily and grudgingly that having Doyle had become akin to breathing. Bodie needed him now to keep on living in the most fundamental way. And he was not going to let Ray go.

“You can’t do this, Ray. You can’t do this to us.” Anguish and threat mixed in his tone.

Doyle narrowed his eyes. “It’ll work out,” he said purposefully misunderstanding. “When we get this thing with her father cleared up, I’ll talk to the Cow about the suspension. We’ll be back on the streets in no time, mate.” And he shook his head, as if *that* would clear up their situation, as if that could negate his body’s betrayal.

“Do you honestly think she’s going to let you keep on at CI5?” Bodie asked acidly, running his thumb along Doyle’s jawline.. “Come on, Ray, she hates what we do. You said yourself she doesn’t like *our kind*.” He glared at the man under him, daring him to contradict. “She thinks we run around all day shooting at villains,” he continued, one hand absently stroking the curve of Doyle’s neck. “And the hours. You think she’s goin’ to adjust to you always being on duty? To being on



Bodie had made his point, had said too much, perhaps. It was time to escape before he exposed any more to this man. He slipped off of Doyle, headed for the door and stopped. Hoping to salvage something from the unprecedented show of emotion he had just given Ray, crying to himself to not give in, to not let Ray see the need that was burning at his inner core and cascading through his body, he slowly turned and calmly said, "A kiss is just a kiss, sunshine," and then he was gone. Doyle sat slumped on the divan, exhausted, confused, and still aroused. He looked like the aftermath of a storm: flushed, tousled, disarrayed, mind and body reeling. Bodie had looked as tidy as when he had walked in.

Bodie and Cowley stood in the small office discussing the possibilities of Holly's drug drop by air. They had spent considerable time tracing leads together; time Bodie seemed to have a lot of since Ray's involvement with Ann and his subsequent suspension.

Cowley was getting frustrated, knowing that finding this drug shipment was too close to the

proverbial needle in the haystack, and the air authorities were none too pleased, either, with the delays and long searches it was engendering. But this idea of Bodie's, two small planes flying in tandem, one dipping below radar and dropping off the shipment, there might be something in this.

"We'll stake it out. Move in a task force and get over there ourselves, eh." Cowley picked up the phone to start making arrangements.

Entering without knocking, a serious Ray Doyle broke in. "I'm coming with you." Bodie's eyes locked on him. "Holly knew Conroy. I've just seen a photograph of 'em. They were in the RAF together."

"RAF," Bodie's brows lifted as he watched Doyle. *His Doyle*. Back in the fold.

The next day, entering stealthily only to find her father being interrogated by CI5's best, Ann listened and her trust in Ray Doyle crumbled. Wailing like a banshee through the building, she stormed out of their lives, leaving Doyle to bitterly watch her drive away.

Bodie was there waiting.

oo

RAPERERE

(THE SEIZING)

oo

For serious Avon/Blake fans, “Rapere” consists of three companion pieces each beginning with an identical premise and opening line: “We require,” the Ultra said, “for our library purposes, the Human Bonding Ceremony.” And with those words, Sebastian and M. Fae have cut straight to the heart of the themes they wish to develop: the relationship between Blake and Avon as viewed through sex. All three stories are psychosexual explorations in which the sex not only advances the plot, but *is* the plot. Rapere is Latin for seize or snatch. From it derive rapture (a synonym for ecstasy, Sebastian’s original choice of title), raptus (a state of intense or overwhelming excitement; ecstasy), and raptor (one who seizes by force; robber). One final note for purists: the timeline of the original *Blake’s 7* series has been adjusted. For our purposes, the *Liberator* encountered the Ultras while Blake was still on board.

"I'd *rather* die—" Blake began hotly, and then he stopped, glancing at Avon, clearly wondering just how far Avon's instinct for survival would take him.

"Would you, Blake?" Avon said to him harshly; "Would you really?" and Blake was silent, shook his head, for once in his life utterly at a loss. It was a neat dilemma. Even if he felt strongly enough to expire rather than comply, should he force the consequences of that choice on Avon, who might not?

The alien switched on a viewscreen. "The woman too will die."

And of course, that decided Blake as he gazed up at the wall, at golden Jenna, all unaware. Standing staunchly in her cell, looking doggedly for an escape, not knowing that it was in their hands all along.

They were left alone in a different room, a purpose-built specimen cell by the look of it. It contained a medicine shelf, a sink, and a bed.

As the door shut behind them, Blake glanced at Avon and turned away, his voice low. "I'm sorry, Avon."

"Don't be," Avon snapped, unaccountably irritated by Blake's assumption of responsibility; he watched the broad shoulders hunch defensively. With the deliberate intent to shock he said: "Shall we get on with it?" And turning one palm to the ceiling he flicked open the fastener of his suit, began to strip.

Blake turned, and looked and leapt, to stop him. "Wait a minute. *Avon*."

"What's the point of putting it off?" Avon rasped, an unpleasant smile shaping; he shook Blake's hand off.

"A moment, Avon," Blake said, one degree more forceful; the voice of his leader. Avon sighed and desisted.

"Don't tell me: you wanted to wait till you were married?"

Sarcasm was his way of coping: Blake's was somewhat different. Brushing off Avon's hostility as he so often did, he sat down on the bed, elbows on his knees, and looked up. "I'm not sure I can do it at all." His tone was open, confiding, as if he spoke to a friend: someone he liked, someone he trusted. Avon knew it was an act; Blake neither liked nor trusted him, or if he did he was a fool.

"What's this?" he sneered. "A mountain you

are *not* prepared to scale? I'm sorry the view is not more to your taste." He stared at Blake with as much insolence as he could muster; he himself had strange, fleeting sexual whims and hatred would help him. Already, viewing Blake's panic, he felt a dizzying rush, adrenalin surging to his nerve-ends.

"I'm sorry, Avon," Blake said, calmly enough. He examined his palms, dried them on the soft cord of his trouser-legs. "I don't—" He veered off the subject abruptly. "What the hell do they want from us?"

Avon regarded him through hooded eyes. "You heard him. They've read the books." He smiled nastily. "Now they want to see the pictures."

Blake was still looking at him, hiding nothing, even, perhaps, Avon fancied, appealing to him to take the lead. "It's all very well letting you in for this—*myself* in for—" He stopped, then resumed—"without any real idea of whether we can—"

Avon did not help him out. Blake looked up at him again, his rugged Robin Hood face mild and curious. "How do you really feel about this, Avon?" was all he said, in the end.

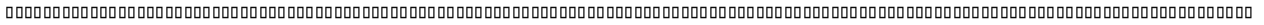
Avon said, "What do you expect me to say, Blake, *I've been waiting for the chance all along?*" Making his point, his eyes flicked over Blake's dishevelled form with clear disinterest. "What I feel, precisely, is that this is something we have to do to get out of here alive. Nothing more, nothing less."

Blake was off in a world of his own. "I wouldn't do it—wouldn't make you do it—if it wasn't for Jenna."

"Oh really," Avon said tightly.

"She doesn't deserve—"

Bitter, Avon put himself nearer Blake and glared down. "Understand this, Blake. You're not making me do this. I'm not doing it for Jenna. I'm doing it for *me*. Because *I* want to get out of this place." Perversely, the dark eyes widened, a ripple of black humour softening the Stygian effect as an amusing thought occurred: "What a pity their file on human sexual reproduction is closed. Myself locked up in solitude. You and Jenna—forcing yourselves into a coupling distasteful to both of you—for *my* sake." His gaze, malicious, teased Blake: Avon had seen too many looks from one to the other, seen Blake too often visibly strain for the decision that it wouldn't work, that he and Jenna must deny themselves for the good of them all.



back.

“Not just like that, Blake...”

After a moment Blake turned his head, one large brown eye appearing through the frame of his arm. “You too?” There was a definite softening; as if to discover that Avon shared his doubts was in some way a help to him.

“Just give me—” Avon managed, and then— “time.” With one hand on Blake’s shoulder he nudged him, gently enough, to lie on his back. Blake rolled willingly enough and lay propped with one hand behind his head, watching Avon’s face.

Conscious of time running out, all in a blur and a hurry Avon touched Blake; the satin softness of his skin, the ridged delicacy of bone beneath. His palm brushed over Blake’s breast, rubbing nipples; stroked down to his stomach. His eyes drifted from there to Blake’s cock lying there, as large as he might have imagined but drooping; his throat moved rapidly as he swallowed over sudden dryness.

“Avon,” Blake said softly, “you don’t have to— we’ll think of something else.”

“Like what,” Avon said, suddenly vicious. “Like what, Blake? What else have you to offer them?”

“We’ll wait. Stall for time. Maybe Vila—”

“—Vila won’t be back for 72 hours at the earliest.” Avon’s most disagreeable smile put in a fleeting appearance. “That’s a lot of foreplay, even for amateurs.”

“What’s the matter with you, Avon!” Blake said, angered as always by defeatism. “Anyone would think—” But he stopped himself.

Avon had caught it. “Well, they’d be wrong,” he said, low and dark and quiet. “You can hardly believe this is something I would choose.”

Oddly enough the statement calmed Blake; he nodded. “I think what we must do—is explain to them that it isn’t going to work. That humans of a certain sexual orientation are necessary. That it can’t be—”

“And what will the reward for that be, Blake?”

Avon cut in, snapping. The answer to that was obvious. Blake said nothing. Avon continued, softly, with an odd little smile: “So if I were you, I think you should begin to consider—my finer points.”

“It’s not that I—”

Avon pushed Blake, with a trembling hand. “Lie down, Blake.” And, helpless, Blake did what

Avon said, watching him through wide brown eyes, shutting them as Avon began to caress him, stroking his cheek, his chest, his thighs. *Maybe*, Blake thought, *maybe it will be all right...*

But the truth was, he had only ever felt a mild revulsion at the thought of another man’s touch: he fought an inner battle to subdue it which he seemed to be winning. Until he felt the brush of Avon’s mouth on his belly.

His mind flying, his eyes opened wide: he stilled the instinctive motion of his hand and brought it, instead, to rest, gently on the dark head hovering at his groin. “Avon—no.”

He could barely meet Avon’s eyes. “I couldn’t bear it,” he said simply. “I’m sorry.”

Avon’s eyes hardened and he lifted his head, sitting up, away from Blake. He looked—stiffened with dislike, with pride. Blake noticed the difficulty he was having to keep his breathing even, the stain of colour on his pale skin.

“This isn’t going to work for me,” he said, as gently as he could. “Nothing to do with you. I just can’t. But if you can—” he hesitated— “you go ahead.”

Such a delicate issue: but Avon merely stared at him, eyes filmed with thought.

Struggling in Avon’s silence, “Do you think you can?” Blake asked, but Avon didn’t reply. He got up, left the bed and went to the wall where he pressed a sensor to open the cupboard there. Looking into it he retrieved something and threw it towards the bed. Blake stared at it: it was a tube of some emollient cream. A cold sensation drenched the inner walls of his stomach, but he forced himself to be sensible. It really was the only way, and he should be grateful, relieved that Avon was taking things in hand: yet the flash of resentment took him by surprise, and took more quelling than it should.

Avon sorted quickly through the contents of the unit: medical supplies, obviously, for the use of the various specimens who had been coerced into performing for library purposes. Lubricants such as he had tossed to Blake, some drug-strips he guessed were contraceptive in purpose (one problem they wouldn’t have), a few packages he didn’t recognise; and one he thought he did. Because he was looking for it, or something like it.

He took it out and opened the little vial, sniffing it. He inserted a little finger and tentatively touched the point of his tongue to the white powder ad-

terrible wonder of it all; images danced before his eyes and Blake’s moans came to his ears like music...

With a stifled sound he reached around Blake’s body, his hand ranging restlessly over Blake’s nipples, his belly, then down to his poor sad cock, curled up afraid; thrusting into him from behind even as he worked on it swiftly, sweetly, handling Blake now with a rough, sure arrogance. And Blake responded to that, was beginning to thrust back against him in a rhythm all their own, the sweetest of harmonies, so that Avon felt himself fall into a black vortex at the very heart of Blake’s body: touching now all the secret places of Blake he had yearned without knowing to touch.

Love and terror and delight overwhelmed him: he heard the song again in his head and the rhythm went on and on. He kissed the sweetness of Blake’s skin and rode, exulting, on the wings of a terrible, terrifying desire: to hurt, to have, to own.

Inside his fingers Blake’s cock stiffened, and kissed his palm with something warm and wet, two, three...little pulses, dying away. It was the ultimate thing... Moved beyond thought Avon clapsed Blake to him hard and thrust once more, breaking through some depth undreamed of, pouring all of himself out and into Blake in a rush of the purest and sweetest ecstasy he had known.

He was awakened from deep sleep by Blake’s voice—

“Excuse me.”

Avon opened his eyes, half awake, and looked into Blake’s face, very near to his own. “Sorry,” Blake said, with crisp apology, “Had to move—getting cramp in my arm.”

Instant remembrance now: he remembered that they were on a different planet, another world entirely, and he tracked Blake with his eyes before closing them.

The mortal wound he had suffered moved again inside him. He understood something now about himself.

About himself, and about Blake.

Blake was rolling away from him, beginning to sit up. “Blake,” Avon said, and laid a hand on Blake’s arm, traced the line of dark hair there. He wanted Blake to touch him as he had touched Blake, pay some service to this tremendous thing which had sprung into life: it would be difficult, of course, more difficult even than—Anna, but Blake

was worth it just as she had been. Blake was as brave as he, and as strong: somehow, they would manage...brought together across the universe by impossible odds. He opened his eyes, and the world was in them.

Needing to wash, but hesitating to be so discourteous, Blake looked down into Avon’s eyes, and was dazzled by what he saw there, the deep darkness of them. He smiled to himself; Avon’s dose of the drug must have been larger than his own, cobwebs still lingering in his system, making his eyes shine that way, his mouth a tender curve. Blake himself felt alert and clear, his mind sharp and the grip of Rapture completely gone. His body felt a little sore, but that was all. Not marked for life in any way. Funny, that he had thought in the depths of it he might be.

He shook his head. That had really been quite something!

“Certainly did the trick, eh Avon?” He patted Avon on the shoulder and got up.

Behind him Avon said slowly, “What?”

“That Rapture stuff. Certainly sent me to the sky and back.” He laughed, and shook his head. Water ran into the sink. Blake buried his face in his wet hands and rinsed the sweat and salt away, but he was not insensitive, was suddenly uneasily conscious of the stillness of the man who lay on the bed. And, Blake decided, looking back on the sensual depths they had sunk to, no wonder. Avon was a civilised man: naturally he would be embarrassed. Best go easy on him for the next few days, give him a chance to forget, make it clear that he, Blake, was never going to remind him of this, the worst of times.

He swung around from the sink and began to put on his clothes. Try as he might he could think of nothing to say. The silence began to feel strained. What comfort had he to offer? Avon must be going through hell.

“You couldn’t help it, Avon. It was the drug...we both got carried away.”

For a moment he thought that Avon would not reply. He busied himself with dressing and did not look Avon’s way.

Then Avon said, “Of course.” It was Avon’s voice, and yet not Avon’s voice: an odd note rang in it. Desperately anxious to reassure him, Blake added: “I swear to you, Avon, it won’t make any difference. I do swear that.”

RAPERE II:

RAPTUS

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"We require," the Ultra said, "for our library purposes, the Human Bonding Ceremony."

With varying degrees of unease, all three men in the small grey cell stared at the communications screen in the corner.

"Then I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed," Avon said urbanely, draping himself casually across the plump divan.

"Specify," the Ultra said in the same monotone it used for everything from statements of fact to emergency warning announcements.

"The human bonding ceremony," Avon intoned, a lecturer in a hall of half-wits, "requires one female and one male. As you can see," his gesture encompassed himself and his two unmistakably male companions, "you have what could be called an embarrassment of riches." A small, very sophisticated smile, a deprecation of the two men with him. "If one were accustomed to abject poverty, that is."

"This is false," the Ultra replied without looking up from the console in front of it. "We require the Human Bonding Ceremony. You will now proceed."

"Don't be stupid! You heard him, he says you need a woman and a man and for once in his life, Avon's actually telling the truth!" Vila, from the corner where he was close-pressed to the wall, arms crossed protectively, right hand drifting down to cover his groin.

"This is false," repeated, without inflection, without any interest in the beings it was addressing. "A male and female are required only for the

Terran and/or Federation marriage ceremony and/or the reproduction of the species. We do not require this ceremony nor breeding at this time. We require only the Human Bonding Ceremony. You will now proceed."

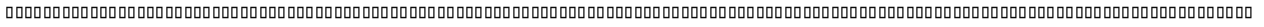
Fleeting baring of teeth, and then Avon was back to his usual controlled self, an expression of patient charm covering the truth of his emotions. He speared Blake with a glance, then went back to rationalising with an alien that was as literal and implacable as a machine. "This... Human Bonding Ceremony you seem in such dire need of. What is it... exactly?"

The alien attended to a light flashing on its console before it answered the subjects in Holding Cell 392. "It is the mating of humans."

A half laugh, Avon not looking at either man in the room with him. "I rather thought you might say that. This mating you require—whom do you require to perform it?"

The question was unexpected; the alien withdrew, consulted, returned, all without the slightest flicker of expression.

Blake shuddered, felt the sweat prickle down his spine, memories crowding his mind. So much had been forgotten—why the hell couldn't he forget what they had done to him when they were making him forget all the goodness in his life? None of his happinesses survived, but he could remember being surrounded by machines, and bland faces, bland voices, people as uncaring as this Ultra as they drove him mad with pain. Technicians discussing the small details of their



you can do what our great leader couldn't quite manage. It's your chance," and he looked, menacingly handsome, over his shoulder at a man he would never now choose to follow. "It's your chance, Vila," he said, but it was Blake he was talking to, Blake he was still looking at, "to prove that you have more..." and the vulgarism dripped from him like poison, burning Blake, "balls than he."

"But in public, Avon?" Vila, whining, never a wise thing to do around Kerr Avon, and most especially not when his eyes were glittering with a complexity of emotion that was razor sharp and could be turned inward or outward with equal lethality.

Perhaps it was that he had been looking at Blake: today, Avon turned none of his anger on himself, immolating his companions instead. He snapped around, pinning Vila with his stare. "Surely you're not going to pretend to be shy?" Now he was sneering, expression as nasty as his words, and the contained tempest of his emotions dominated the room. "I would have thought that you, Delta that you are, would be more than used to performing sex in public." He ignored Vila's flinch, stalked over to the divan, and began peeling off shirt and trousers, blackness folding away to unveil soft, white skin.

"Avon—" Blake's voice cracked across the room, a protest, a rejection, a plea.

"Don't say a word!" Avon whispered, his quietness more dangerous than any other man's shout. "You've made your..." a pause to display that he was sophisticated and confident enough that Blake's rejection was nothing more than mere gauche inadequacy, "shall we say, position clear. You got us into this fiasco in the first place, and as usual, I shall be the one to get us out of here in one piece." As coolly as if this were an everyday occurrence—and suddenly, absurdly, Blake found himself wondering if it were, if there were some secret between these two—Avon bent the full force of his leashed anger on Vila. "Haven't you managed to master undressing yourself, or should I ask the Ultras to come in and help you?"

"Don't remind me, Avon, I'd just started forgetting about them." But he was pulling his shoes off, then his socks. Unlike Avon, there was nothing graceful about this, simply Vila standing, wobbling, in the middle of the room as he lifted first one foot and then the other. "Hate having to do this," he

was muttering to himself. "Not that it makes any difference round here, though, does it? Doesn't matter how I feel about this or what it does to me. Oh, no, got to take care of poor old Blake, with all his delicate Alpha sensibilities, haven't we? Never mind poor old Vila, well, not that I'm that old, any way." He stopped, having run out of both words and clothing. Naked, swallowing hard, he walked over to Avon, appallingly aware of how limp his sex was, and how small in the cool air, and how absurd and unattractive he must look to Avon. Ah, Avon, now there was a sight for sore eyes! At the edge of the divan, Vila dithered, not quite sure what he should be doing next, and not sure if Avon wasn't going to rip his head from his shoulders if Vila spent too much time staring at him.

"Well?" Avon said.

Not wanting to be accused of either staring or gazing raptly, Vila looked away from Avon, then wished he hadn't: he had enough to think about without worrying about that tangled expression on Blake's face. He shrugged, trying to be casual about all of this. "So how do you want me?" he asked.

"Precipitous and co-operative," Avon answered drily. "Although you're hardly likely to be either if you stay there. Absence," he slanted a look at Blake, "may make the heart grow fonder, but it plays havoc with copulation."

"Oh, right," and Vila clambered onto the divan, cursing himself for his unusual clumsiness and all too frequent inanity. He should be saying witty, entertaining things, making this just another transaction. He'd had sex to keep him safe before, hadn't he? So what was he making all this fuss about this time? He knelt beside Avon, leant down to take Avon into his mouth, and hesitated, an inch away. This is bloody stupid, he told himself. It's not like it's something you've never done before, and it's not like it's someone you don't fancy—in fact, he'd had a thing about Avon from the second he laid eyes on him. So what was so different from any other time?

A shiver along his spine reminded him: there hadn't been another time like this one. Before, it had always been for pleasure or gain, pure and simple, with none of this laden atmosphere pressing down on him, with Blake looking as if someone had finally told him Santa Claus isn't real and Avon looking as if he'd bitten an apple and found half a worm. And this was the first time he

had felt like he was going to be fucked to rub salt in someone else’s wounds. Which didn’t make sense, he thought, not really. Wasn’t as if Avon and Blake had had a thing going, was it? Or was it? Maybe they’d been building up to something, and maybe they just hadn’t got round to realising that yet, and then here they were—

Avon’s impatience interrupted his prevaricating thoughts.

“Either do it or don’t, but don’t just sit there gaping. I want to get this over and done with, so either fellate me or let me get myself ready, just make up your mind.”

Vila lowered his head and opened his mouth, and filled himself with Avon. He sucked hard, feeling the immediate response, Avon growing quickly larger, his penis thickening against Vila’s tongue. He thought, for a second, of the Ultra watching and recording and analysing, but pushed them from his mind: he had been handed Avon on a silver platter and he was going to make the most of it. He cradled Avon’s balls, separating them with his thumb, fingers daring to caress the cleft of Avon’s arse. And retribution did not fall from the sky. In fact, Avon was pulling him in closer, fingers tangling in his hair, pressing him down, then lifting him again until only the very tip of Avon’s prick was in his mouth.

So that was something Avon liked, then, he thought hazily, flickering his tongue around the head, pressing his tongue-tip against the slit. Pressure on the back of his head, and he swallowed Avon inside, tongue rubbing the heavy vein that snaked along the underside. He could hear Avon, could hear the excitedness of his breathing, and the faint shush of skin moving on the divan coverlet.

“That’s enough,” Avon said, catching his breath, lifting Vila away from his cock. “It’s eminently satisfying for me, but I think our hosts want a little bit more than that.”

Vila grinned at him. “Yeh, but if we got it wrong, we could always do it again, couldn’t we?”

“No, watching this once is once too many.” Blake, hoarse, as if a noose were tightening around his neck, the unexpected harshness of his voice dousing the rosy glow of sex.

“What?” Avon, of course, sharp and brittle and altogether too amused to be believed. “So not only are you incapable of forcing yourself to actually save my life because it would mean the horror of

actually touching me, but now you can’t even bear to watch? Well then,” and he was whispering, seductive, skin flushed with temper and rising arousal, his hands lingering caressingly on Vila, “why don’t you turn your face to the wall for the dunce you undoubtedly are. Now, Vila,” and the charm was on full force, the smile bent on Vila intended as a slap to Blake, “where were we?”

Not nice, Vila thought, not nice at all. But he didn’t argue, didn’t complain: he was getting what he wanted, albeit under unpleasant circumstances. That was all right: he’d had sex in worse places than this, and enjoyed many an encounter less. “I think you were about to get me on my knees so you can fuck me,” he said clearly, catching sight of Blake out of the corner of his eye. He moved, so that he could no longer see Blake, and most importantly of all, could no longer see that haunted, tortured expression.

“Lubricant?” Avon asked.

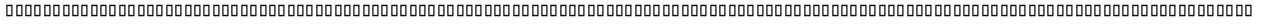
“Yes, please,” Vila answered, smiling, moving Avon so that Avon had his back to the screen and was sideways to Blake. Making it just him and Avon, making the best of this, whatever it took to see it through. “Got anything on you? Apart from the obvious,” he tapped Avon’s erection with his finger, “the very obvious.”

Avon knelt over him, staring at him, for just a second, and then: “Why don’t you make yourself useful, Blake, and find the lubricant like a good little boy.”

“Enough! Damn you, Avon, stop pushing me.” Chest heaving, cheeks a hectic red, angry and dangerous enough to give even Avon pause. “Just do what you have to do—”

“And leave you out of it?” He ran his thumb down Vila’s spine, lower and lower until it disappeared into the shadow of Vila’s rump. “But isn’t that precisely what I’m doing?” For a long moment, Avon and Blake stared at each other, neither speaking, neither one backing down, and the tension grew, coiling between them, lethal promise overwhelming the fading spice of sex.

“Ehm, I’ll just get the lube then, shall I?” Vila, absurdly polite, his nervousness deflating his erection, fear making him quick and deft, as if this silent challenge between the two Alphas were just another complicated lock he had to decipher before he could get to safety. “Here it is,” he announced, scrabbling in a small chest lying beside the divan. “And a lot more besides! I don’t think



so desperate on his reddened cock, squeezing and rubbing it, tugging at his balls to tighten the skin to add even more sensation.

And then Avon yielded to the pressure of Vila’s arms hugging him in close, and subsided, until he was flat on top of Vila, Vila’s arms and legs tight around him, Vila’s cock caught tightly between their bellies, his own cock held even more tightly by Vila’s arse. There was nothing for Blake to see now, only the movements of Avon’s hips, the swell of his buttocks, the shadow that protected an arse Blake was never going to have. Avon looked up, and saw: Blake watching him, Blake caught painfully on the precipice of orgasm, so close that Avon would have long since come.

“Look at me,” he said, and Blake did, his eyes dark with lust and pain and barely hidden fear. Then, carefully, Avon leaned down and kissed Vila, decisively shutting Blake out, telling Blake that he wasn’t wanted, he wasn’t needed: he didn’t even exist.

But then Vila’s tongue was in his mouth, and that cock was rubbing against him beautifully, and that arse was clutching him perfectly...

And Vila was ecstatic. He had Avon, in him and over him and all around him, and Avon was kissing him, not even looking at Blake any more, not even thinking about Blake, and this was the most exciting thing Vila had ever known. He was whimpering in his throat, and his heart was ready to burst. Then Avon was fucking him deep, straining to get in even deeper, his body shuddering and tensing, then abruptly, relaxing, collapsing, and Vila swore he could feel Avon’s cum wet and hot inside him. He could hardly move, but he didn’t need to, Avon’s hand snaking between their bellies to grab his cock, doing wonderful things to it, and Avon was kissing him again, and it was enough.

A moment, and then Avon was moving again, the thrill of the chase leaving him nothing more than rather cold and very sticky. He didn’t look at Vila, simply rolled off him and began, immediately, to wipe himself off with one of the pre-moistened towels so thoughtfully provided. Like so much else, he thought bitterly, still not looking at Blake. In the end, he considered, he had lost far more than he had gained: after all, Blake had remained untouched at the end, out of reach, affected by nothing more than physical gratification. His conscience nagged at him, and he proffered Vila another cloth

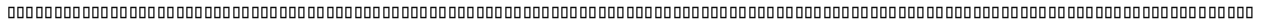
to mop up the visible aftermaths, to erase those aspects that could be erased and not merely put behind locked doors to fester and peek out as barbed weapons on the flight deck.

Somewhere during the whole sordid display, his clothes had fallen from the end of the divan where he’d left them, and he gathered them, began dressing. And glanced, quietly, at Blake.

Blake stared and stared, unable to look away, almost weeping with frustration and fury and resentment that could too easily turn to hate. He stuffed himself back inside his trousers, trying to ignore the too familiar painful ache of his heart. He wanted, quite passionately, to kill Avon. He had been so close! Only seconds away, he knew that, was sure of it, so close to coming and only seconds away from being able to function like a man again! But Avon had ruined that. He had taken Blake’s moment of triumph—a man again, for the first time since the Federation treatments—and ruined it, turning the triumph to ashes in his mouth. Avon had kissed Vila and it was in a misery of being excluded that Blake had come. To feel like a man again, and still be made to feel useless, unnecessary, unwanted. To see Avon kissing Vila with such intensity, such pleasure, such...

And that was something Blake didn’t want to explore. He had no feelings for Avon, he reminded himself, watching the play of muscle as Avon stood to fasten his trousers. Nothing more complicated than fellow-feeling and that continuous hum of admiring irritation that Avon inspired wherever he went. Nothing more than that. There had been no jealousy in him when Avon had kissed Vila like that, and done it because Vila had asked him to. After all, it wasn’t as if Blake particularly wanted that sort of attention from Avon, was it? Of course not. Nothing more than the warmth that one feels for a fellow colleague, someone with whom danger has been shared and enemies defeated. It was Avon who had obviously harboured secret emotions, secret possibilities, things that would have to be handled with delicacy and tact, a gentleness so as not to cause Avon any more pain, he told himself, pushing uncomfortable emotions back into nice tidy boxes where they could be made comfortable by completely ignoring them. Yes, he thought, concentrating on Avon and how this would affect the Cause, he would have to handle this very carefully indeed...

“This completes the Human Bonding Cer-



emony,” Avon was saying very sarcastically.

Blake and Vila both started, all alertness to the discreet grey screen in the corner of the bland grey room long since subsumed in the heat of the moment.

“It’s time for me to leave now.”

“What about me?” Vila, of course. “I did my bit, didn’t I? Don’t I get to come with you?”

And Avon turned, very slowly, and looked at Vila, then, just as slowly, just as deliberately, looked at Blake. “Yes,” he said, “you do ‘get’ to come with me.”

Blake had the first stiletto touch of the implication: Avon had made that sound far more important than merely returning to the ship with him as at the end of any routine—or otherwise—planetfall. “And what the hell was that supposed to mean?” Blake asked, not being

gentle, not handling this situation very carefully indeed.

“Obviously,” Avon said with such a spurious smile, “your brain is as useless as your body. It’s quite simple, really. So simple, in fact, that even someone as severely impaired as you obviously are should be able to comprehend.” The door hissed open, the Ultras apparently satisfied with their information gathering and ready to let the lab rats out of their maze. Avon stepped aside, pushing Vila through the door ahead of him. “Vila is coming with me. Back to the ship to which I have at least as much claim as you do. And,” the civilised veneer was peeled back, revealing just how truly unwise it was to reject and humiliate Kerr Avon, “if you’re a very, very, good boy, I shall even permit you to come with me also—oh Great and Fearless Leader.”

RAPERE III:

RAPTOR

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“We require,” the Ultra said, “for our library purposes, the Human Bonding Ceremony.”

Blake slowly lowered his hands and looked up, not at Avon. “Why?” he asked, completely levelly.

“To continue with our research into the Human Condition. You will begin the Ceremony now.”

Blake smiled, an odd little smile, with more of pain in it than amusement. “That might prove difficult. You see,” he spread his hands in the age-old lie of ‘see? I do not intend to fight you’, “there are no females of our species here.”

“The presence of females is not required in this instance. We require an example of what your Histories name ‘Male Bonding’.”

“Ah,” said Avon, “that is something else entirely.” An entirely sour look at Blake, and then he went on: “And you certainly have the wrong males if you want to see *that*.”

Calmly, no anger showing, Blake stared at Avon for a moment, an imp of perversity dancing on his shoulder. “Really, Avon?” he asked, quite sharply, instantly seeing Avon’s comment as challenge as well as insult. “Then the failure is entirely on your side, isn’t it?”

“I would hardly call not bonding with you a failure, Blake. In fact,” and he smiled his best sneer, “I’d call it sheer genius.”

“Not surprising, for a man who spends his entire adult life wrecking a simple embezzlement and then looking for somewhere to run away to.”

“It was an extremely complicated plan—”

“So you don’t deny you are running away?”

It wasn’t often Blake managed to outmanoeuvre

him so thoroughly, and Avon’s hands clenched in simple fury. “You were, as always, too hasty, jumping in—”

“Where angels fear to tread? I would have to, if I wanted to call you ‘friend’.” Blake turned back to the screen and shrugged. “As you can see, Avon can’t participate in any sort of bonding ceremony, so I suggest you let us go back to our ship—”

“Then we shall eliminate this male and provide you with the other male from your pack.”

The completely dispassionate voice was unnerving in its disinterest, chilling in its callousness.

“Eliminate? From this study or...something rather more radical?” Avon, sounding not at all scared, for all that Blake could see the unease in his eyes.

“A non-functional unit serves no purpose and will be eliminated.”

“I rather thought that’s what you had in mind,” Avon said drily. “Well now, Blake, this puts a new complexion on the entire absurd situation, doesn’t it?”

“Is there no other data we could provide for your records in return for our freedom?” Blake asked, ignoring Avon for the moment.

“We require the Human Bonding Ceremony in all possible variations.”

“And if they get their hands on Vila, that could take them quite a while,” Avon muttered.

“So we have no options?” Blake was standing now, in the middle of the room, arms akimbo, the wonderfully appropriate pirates’ sleeves billowing in the faint zephyr from the air vents.

figure, his weight trapping Avon on the bed. “They’ll know we’re not finished. But I have a better reason than the Ultras.”

“Well now, this is hardly the time to play coy with me, is it?” Avon’s voice gave him away, a tremor there, a shiver to match the taut erection caught between his belly and Blake’s. “Tell me, Blake. Now.”

And Blake knew, with all the unsolved puzzle pieces clicking tidily into place, exactly what Avon wanted him to say. “We’re doing it because we want to. Because *you* want to.”

“Because you,” Avon’s arms and legs were suddenly around Blake, enveloping him in strength, Avon possessing him even in apparent surrender, “*need* to fuck me. You need me, Blake. You need me more than you need to breathe.”

And Blake, helpless, laughed. “Need you? *Need* you?” He shoved his hips forward, cock scraping against Avon’s, Avon’s gasp of arousal music to Blake’s ears. “I need you about as much as I need a knife in the back. And as this is you,” he fumbled for and found the pristine tube, a clenching of his hand and the valve was open, the lotion spilling out over his fingers. He kept his fingers stiff, stabbing them into Avon’s arse, all consideration for possible inexperience in this one thing completely subsumed by the rush to possess, to dominate—to make Avon submit to him and finally belong. “As it’s you, I’m as likely to get a knife between my ribs as I am to get my prick up your arse, right, Kerr?”

“Shut up!” A controlled shout, huge violence poured out into a smallness of sound, and Avon was spitting himself upon Blake’s fingers, twisting his hips this way and that, fucking himself on Blake’s hand. He was a maelstrom of conflicting emotions and desires, and he hated himself for yielding to Blake as much as he...hated...Blake for doing this to him. But then he closed his eyes, shutting Blake out, so that all Blake was to him, once more, were hard fingers to be used, a hard cock to be consumed for Avon’s own pleasure. “If you think I’m going to stab you in the back, then perhaps you should have me up against the wall. Then,” and he lost his breath for a moment as Blake’s fingers found and seared his prostate, “our little aliens could add,” teeth gritted against the insidious pleasure, words forced out to make Blake distant from him, a dildo that required no batteries, only battery, “rape to their list of studies.”

“Rape, Avon?” Blake asked, dangerously softly, his fingers pulled viciously from Avon’s body, the liquid sound too loud for the room. “How can it be rape when this is what you’ve been after from the very beginning. Flirting with me,” he snarled, wrapping both hands round Avon’s cock, squeezing him so hard the flesh purpled and viscid pearls dropleted from the slit. “Flashing your eyes and your arse at me.” He released the abused flesh, Avon’s continued erection inflaming him even more—how dare Avon not be deflated by Blake’s anger, by Blake’s strength?—and now his hands went to Avon’s nipples, pulling hard enough that the paps distended and Avon’s back arched in an agony of ecstasy. “And so wild, my Avon, I can see it in your eyes when I put you in your place, when I shout ‘enough!’ and force you to obey me. That’s what you like, isn’t it?”

Blake released Avon then, knelt back away from him, left Avon bitterly separate in his own skin. Blake waited, stroking his own erection, the burning arousal alive on every nerve, and himself, exhilarated beyond anything he remembered. Avon, he admitted, was not the only one who fed on their battles, and this, the most private of all, was exciting to the point of self-destruction. His own eyes more than a little wild, Blake stared as Avon lay spread wide on the bed, chest heaving, Blake’s fingerprints red round his nipples. Suddenly, aching, Blake wanted to mark that body, to make it belong to him, to force the allegiance Avon so stubbornly refused him. He raised his hand, and struck, the slap drowned out by Avon’s gasp and groan of pleasure, Avon’s beautiful face bearing now the sign of Blake’s dominion over him. “Is this what you’ve been trying to get me to do all this time? Is this,” sharp bite to Avon’s left nipple, beadlet of blood lingering behind, “what all those petty arguments have been about?” Hand now on Avon’s balls, spreading them until the skin was shiny and taut, until Blake’s hand was flat against the underlying hardness of body. “You should have said, Avon, because the Federation trained me well.”

Avon was whimpering now, pain become the most exquisite of pleasures, and Blake knew how fulfilling the fantasy of castration could be to a man so self-repressed as Avon. But that wasn’t enough for Blake. He wanted Avon to be truly afraid, so terrified that he would break under Blake as Blake had been broken. Kneeling between

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Avon's open legs, he brought his other hand up and gathered Avon's cock and balls between the palms of his hands. Awash in pleasure, locking Blake out, Avon writhed in pleasure, and then Blake twisted, corkscrewing Avon's genitals until the balls were pressing into the softness of his belly and his cock was trapped between his legs, Blake's big hands forcing it there. Now Avon's breath was hissing from him, teeth clenched, sweat erupting on his forehead, across his cheek, drops of light to highlight the marks Blake had left on him.

"Like this?" Blake demanded, twisting a little more until Avon actually cried out, the sound a fanfare of victory to Blake. "I could rip them off you, right now, and with no effort at all," Blake whispered, leaning down low so that his breath was a caress on Avon's skin, so soft a contrast to the vice clamping Avon's cock and balls. "I could," Blake tasted Avon's throat, bit it hard, as if he could consume Avon's lifeblood and make Avon his liegeman, "make you a pathetic eunuch, give you an excuse for following me like a lost sheep. Shall I do that, Avon? Give you an excuse?" He was half an inch from Avon's mouth, and Avon convulsed away from him, a strangled scream coming from him as the movement made Blake's grip on him a real Inquisition and not the sweetness of sexual torture. "Oh? Don't want me to kiss you? Fucking's all right, but not kissing?" He licked the corner of Avon's mouth, was rewarded by another convulsion of escape, which made Blake smile: he knew now how to break Avon. First the abuse that Avon craved, and then the tenderness to chain him to Blake. Just as... Blake didn't know the man's name from the Treatment Centre, knew only that He had come in the dark and the night, clad in black, invisible until Blake knew he was going insane and cried and wept and wanted to die...

He shook the memory off, focussing everything on Avon, his own lifeline, of a very twisted sort. He would use softness now, reward after punishment, perfect for an old hand at all this, as Avon obviously was. Blake released Avon's cock and balls, and watched as that relief etched agony on Avon's face. He waited then, until Avon was free of the pain of release, and then, with extreme tenderness and a vicious smile, he cradled Avon's face between his hands, thumbs rubbing so gently across the arching cheekbones. "Look at me," he murmured, the merest breath of sound, the very quietness

making it compulsive.

Avon's eyes opened, and Avon wanted nothing more than to be able to run away and hide, find a bolthole, even if it were a grave. He made his eyes blank, hiding his secrets inside, where he and Blake would never be able to find them. "Are you going to fuck me or not?" he asked laconically, pretending that his nipples weren't hard peaks and that his cock wasn't pulsing desperately against the pressing softness of Blake's belly.

"All in good time, Kerr," and now the smile was tender as it ought to be, but Blake's eyes were as unyielding as Avon's, filled with banked resentment. "But first," he nudged Avon's legs a little higher, and Avon lifted them, wrapping them around Blake's waist so that Blake's cock was slick against his arse. "Oh, no, boyo," Blake laughed, shifting Avon to his pleasure so that Avon's rump was on his lap, and Blake was once more in complete control of the situation, "not before I decide to. But before we were so rudely interrupted," breathless, voice catching on the excitement constricting his throat, "I was about to do something that I don't think you're going to like at all, Avon." He reached out, arching over Avon's prone body, once more cradling Avon's face in his hands. "I'm going to kiss you," he whispered.

"Try it, and I'll bite your tongue out." Snarled, an animal at bay, and fear writhed in Avon's eyes.

"Oh, I doubt that, Avon. You see, if you were stupid enough to do that, then I would be vengeful enough to rip your balls off and feed them to you."

Avon managed a laugh, undermined by the fine tremble in his hands. "Quite a threat."

"I'd have thought it was quite a promise. For you." He saw the fight in Avon's eyes before Avon could move, and simply moved so that he was lying completely on top of Avon, his weight holding the other man down. "But I thought you liked it kinky?" Which was why, amongst other reasons, Blake had the perverse desire to give Avon no more of that, simply because the games of power and pain were what Avon desired. "But this is about what I want, what I need. You, my dear Avon, don't enter into it at all."

He pressed downwards then, his nipples brushing the taut peaks on Avon's chest, and gently, oh, so cruelly gently, pressed his mouth to Avon's and traced, lightly, his tongue around the bow of Avon's lips, Avon opening to him, absorbing his tongue inside, and the kiss was deeper

G A E L X . I L E

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AFTER

MARCINI'S

FROM THE PRIVATE
JOURNALS OF

JOHN H. WATSON, M.D.

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We had, indeed, stopped at Marcini's for a little dinner on our way to the theatre that night. If the truth is to be told, and I have sworn by all I hold dear to record nothing but the absolute truth upon these pages, Holmes and I lingered so long over dinner that my friend offered the driver of our hansom half a guinea if he were to gain the theatre before the curtain was raised. It was certainly a night to remember, for my companion is not a man given to displaying passions, but on that remarkable night, he was overflowing with emotion, a display the likes of which I had not seen from him since the very earliest days of our acquaintanceship and long before Holmes and I had truly become friends.

Sherlock Holmes can be a man of the utmost charm when he chooses to exert himself in such a frivolous direction, although he would insist, were he to read this dangerous account, that I impart that he was never frivolous in his charm, rather employing charm in those circumstances in which it would be of the greatest good. He was, however, utterly charming to me that evening, beginning with the game soup and abating not one jot until we had finished the tiny cups of richly aromatic coffee for which Marcini's is justifiably renowned amongst those residents of our great capital who value epicurean delights. All the while we were eating, and most particularly in the intervals between courses, when our plates had been cleared away and the waiter had not yet returned with the next laden platters of delicious food, Holmes regaled me with entertaining tales of past exploits.

On occasion, he would decipher every secret of our fellow diners, in such a manner that I was near reduced to tears more than once by his rather unkind but exceedingly amusing detections. His grey eyes danced with humour and fondness, his pallid cheeks were yet bronzed by his exposure to wind and elements upon the moor during the dreadful events surrounding Sir Henry Baskerville, an account of which I have already put forth for the public to enjoy. It is a great pleasure to me to write my accounts of Holmes' exploits for general publication but this, my battered old journal with its ink jots and coffee stains, is a great solace to me. Here is one place wherein I can safely unburden my soul and speak of those things best left unspoken in the society of our day.

To return to that night in the latter half of October, Holmes was more vibrant than I could recall seeing him before, so much so that, I confess with a guilty heart, I suspected him of having fouled his system with another dose of seven per cent solution. I need not have feared such a thing, for I had scarcely had time to conceive such a disloyal thought before Holmes had leaned over the table with scant regard for good manners and said to me, his voice very low and pitched so that none but myself could hear: "Unless you have renounced all your loyalties and are no longer a subject of Her Majesty and no longer count yourself an Englishman, then it is nothing foreign to me that has brought about this..." He hesitated then, seemingly at a loss for words, which could mean nothing but that the subject concerned not the dry

facts of science, but rather, one of those matters in which Mr. Sherlock Holmes is so woefully ill-prepared to communicate.

Knowing him as I had come to over the years of our association, I believed myself to understand the meaning he was attempting to convey as I gazed at him more than a trifle bemused by such an extravagant display of amity. "I believe the word you are seeking is 'giddy'," I said, fully as quietly as he had spoken.

"Is that the word, my dear Watson?" He was smiling at me and his eyes were still as bright as they had been since first he had suggested this evening on the Town. "Am I so similar then to a young debutante at her first ball?"

I could not help but laugh at such a preposterous image. Firstly, it was absurd to imagine Sherlock Holmes as a giggling young girl barely stepped across the threshold into womanhood, and secondly, it was utterly impossible to contemplate Holmes as young at all. Consumed though I had been by curiosity about my friend's past history, I had more than half-convinced myself that he had sprung, fully formed, from the forehead of an esoteric professor of philosophy among the dreaming spires.

"It is not nearly often enough that I hear you laugh," Holmes said to me and I swear his eyes softened the way a man's customarily do when he faces someone in whom he had more than a passing interest. It occurred to me, at that moment, that if I were a girl and Holmes himself, then my Mama would be whispering to my Papa, who would then be asking Holmes precisely what his intentions were. Quickly, I shook this foolish and libellous thought from my mind, bitterly ashamed that I could suspect such a thing of my only true friend. Would that I could have apologised to him, but an apology would require me to admit the sin for which I owed such reparations. Better, then, to stifle such thoughts at birth, and to then concentrate on the wholly innocent overtures of friendship Holmes was making towards me. I should not have been surprised at the tone of his speech towards me, nor by the extra-ordinary intimacy of his gaze upon me. My dear friend had had no friends in all his lonely life, and were it not for me, he would still be friendless. I resolved to curb my worldliness and to remember always that Holmes had little skill in the realm of friendship and would be prone to gaffes and gaucheries when he mis-

measured the degree of affection required to show a friend that he is valued. I reminded myself, quite sternly, that this was the pureness of gratitude for my aid and assistance in the matter of the Baskerville Curse that had brought this frothy mood upon my friend. I cast all unworthy thoughts from my mind, and thought instead, of him comparing himself to a giggling, foolish girl.

Still laughing a little over the mental portraits I had painted of Holmes as a blushing debutante, I was very proud of my legerdemain in putting the great Sherlock Holmes off the scent once more. I was secure and certain in the knowledge that if he had not yet discovered my secret, then I would assuredly have the ability to hide it from him forever.

Even here, in my most private journal, I hesitate to record and give name to my secret. A cold fear breaks out all over my body and a faintness creeps upon me as I contemplate what would befall myself and by extension, Holmes, were these pages to fall into the hands of one of the legions of blackmailers and extortionists who inhabit the streets of London like rats. Yet I must give my shame its name, for if I fail to do so, then I shall be lying, by omission undoubtedly, but a truth untold can be a worse sin than a deliberate lie. I love Sherlock Holmes. I love him as one would a cherished brother or a dear friend, but I also harbour a love for him that is cut of the same cloth as the love a man feels for his wife. There, I have said it, and how strange the words appear upon the white page! It is daunting and frightening to think of how much damage these few black scribbles on the pages of my journal could do to both myself and the man I love, were any of this to fall into the hands of one of the evil band.

I wander far from the execution of my tale, but there are none to castigate me in this, for this is but my journal. I'm afraid I am all of a muddle, my head spinning and my heart racing as if I were in the grip of some tropical fever. Perhaps it is a fever that has taken me over, a fever of the heart and soul and mind. I would do anything for Holmes, and this is a fact which he never fails to utilise to the fullest degree. It is also, as I so recently realised, a fact which Holmes has fully understood since before I knew that I would find myself in such a state.

The fog that had so irritated all of London for the past several days, had finally lifted. We were,

by now, replete after an excellent dinner and fine wine, in our hansom on the way to the theatre. The city was bedecked in her finery and fulfilled her reputation as the greatest jewel of the Empire. The lamps were lit, and their bright glow cast colour and shadows upon passers-by and cabs alike. Beside me, so closely that the night chill was kept off as much by his warmth as by the heavy rug across our knees, Holmes was silent now, merely pointing at this or that to draw my attention. In my public recordings of his deeds, I have given naught but the scantiest descriptions of him and in such a way that one could be forgiven if one were to think him less than truly handsome. He was, however, a singularly attractive man, whether pale and melancholy in one of his morose moods or as he was tonight, dark from the weather and vibrant. It took all my strength to refrain from gazing at him to the exclusion of the world around me and it was with the greatest relief that we attained the theatre. For, although it embarrasses me still to think of it, the close press of his person was wringing unwelcome responses from my own more intimate parts.

The theatre stairs were thronged with people, ladies in their gowns and plumes, the gentlemen sober in their dark clothes and top hats. I felt a thrill of pride as we alighted from our hansom, for not only was my companion recognised by several people, but he was indubitably the most handsome man there. He is so much taller than most, and thus carries his clothes well. It is one of his few vanities, that his suits are always of the finest cloth and the most superb cut. Beside him, I felt very much the dowdy city starling in the shadow of a falcon. I would not dwell on such an ignoble thought, and hastened instead to engage my companion in conversation, to entertain him as he had me, and thereby return the great compliment of good companionship. It was a sweet reward indeed, when one of my little jokes brought a smile to his lips and he tucked his arm in mine and led me into the theatre.

The theatre is the world of make-believe, of pretence and artifice, and I indulged myself as we walked up the wide sweep of staircase and entered the perfumed warmth of the building itself. I pretended that Holmes was more than my friend, that he was my escort, my brother-in-arms, in the tradition of civilisations which our society so reveres, save the never-discussed detail of man-to-

man friendships and affections that were indistinguishable from marriage.

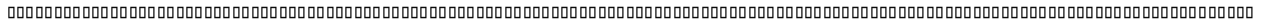
The play was stimulating and illuminating. The costumes were stunning and the acting subtle and convincing. I could see Holmes only by the light reflected from the stage, for he had taken a private box and our lamps were not lit.

As the curtain rose, Holmes moved his chair nearer to mine, until we were once more as close as we had been in the hansom and my heart was once more pounding as if I had run miles.

"As you can see, my dear fellow," he said to me, "the stage is so much more effective if one is distracted neither by the rustlings and fidgetings of fellow play-goers nor by the glow from lamps that have merely been trimmed."

"Yes, yes," I said, although perhaps I should admit that I was stammering, for it was most distracting to have Holmes leaning in so close to me. His mouth was at my ear as he whispered, his breath caressing my skin and making me shiver with reactions best left unmentioned. Still, for all that this attention had knocked me for six, I almost reached out to stay him when he at last moved back to sit upright in his own chair. I stifled my emotions and did everything I could to regain mastery of my own body, a task made all the more difficult by Holmes' restlessness. This fidgeting, for which he was wont to castigate everyone else in the theatre, resulted in frequent small touches of his leg against mine. This, in its turn, caused physiological responses in me that I despaired of either controlling or disguising.

I was in a horrible dilemma. If I were to excuse myself and thence make my way to the gentlemen's facilities, Holmes would surely analyse such an action, for I had no cause to return to such a place, having used the situation in Marcini's not a three-quarter hour before. However, if I were to remain seated beside him, with nothing to protect me from his comprehension than the distraction of the play, then I would surely betray myself to him. My choice, then, was all too obvious. No matter which course I chose, he would certainly deduce the nature of my problem. If I kept my seat, then my breathing and my trembling would confess my dreadful secret to him. Yet were I to stand and leave, the most unobservant of creatures could not help but remark on the condition of my anatomy. Holmes, as the entire world must know by this time, is an extra-ordinarily observant man, able to



piece together a man's entire history by nothing more personal than examining the man's walking stick. What, then, would be revealed to him if he were to see the effects his presence was having upon me?

Holmes knows I am not a passionate man, needful of the satiation of the flesh simply for the sake of carnal gratification. I am a man of honour and moderation, and have always prided myself somewhat on my ability to control those base needs to which all men are prone. I was proudest of my dealings with other men of my own sort. It was only upon the rarest of occasions that I availed myself of the companionship and release afforded one such as I by another of the third sex. Sitting beside Holmes, in the dark, the brilliant play unfolding in front of me, I was nearly overcome by a wave of misery. Surely, I thought, I have not much longer before he notices my condition. Another thought brought even more melancholy with it. I wondered if Holmes had, in his usual sharp-eyed fashion, seen my problem and was now trying to find a way of separating himself from me.

His attention was fully engaged by the movements upon the stage, and his restlessness had settled down to a steady pressure of his body against mine. Innocent in this as in so many other things (I know not of a single occasion upon which Holmes has had carnal knowledge of a woman, although I am aware of several invitations from women both high- and low-born), he was supremely unaware of my fouling his friendly gesture into something of which he would be bitterly ashamed.

"Look, Watson," he whispered to me again, and I was hard pressed not to gather him close to my chest and hold him. It was only the contemplation of his response that saved us both from my sinful desire. "If you watch carefully here," he was yet speaking, oblivious to the turmoil in my body and mind, "then you will see the moment when smoke is puffed onto the stage by one of the hands and the trapdoor is released. Do you see the way the boards do not quite match, there, in the centre?"

"Yes," I responded, as much as I was capable of at that moment. He had twisted almost full around in his chair and his right hand had come to rest upon my right knee, whilst his left arm was draped affectionately around my shoulders. I wanted, with a fever of passion, to kiss him, but I controlled

myself fiercely and he returned to his normal pose, unaware of how dreadfully close he had come to being molested. Tears thickened my throat, and this, in a man who could not remember crying in his lifetime. Not even when I was sent off to school at the age of seven did I shed a tear, nor when I was four and I wrenched my ankle falling down stairs. Now, a grown man who had seen war and death, and had shot his revolver in anger, a man who had leaned on no-one since leaving the nursery, I was on the verge of weeping. My shame, then, was to know no bounds. Desiring Holmes, polluting the naïve beauty of his friendship and now, weeping like a woman. I could not move, dared not draw attention to myself and truthfully, I feared that my legs would not hold me if I were to stand.

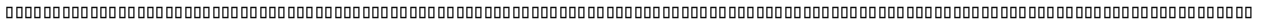
"Ah-ha!" Holmes exclaimed. "There, in the wings, you can..."

His words trailed off and I wished only that I could die. I was undone, for he had turned and seen my shame, for I am sure that little light though there was in our box, there was sufficient to mark the passage of my tears.

"My dearest fellow," Holmes said, and I was ashamed that I had harboured such thoughts and feelings about a man whose only concern was that I was pained. "Oh, my dearest chap, whatever is the matter?"

The very gentleness of his tone made my misery all the worse. To have a taste of the tenderness and then only to lose it when he uncovered the cause of my unhappiness—oh, life is a bitter chore at times. I struggled with my weakness and controlled myself. A handkerchief with initials not my own was thrust into my hand, and I did what was necessary to regain my composure. His fingertips then came and wiped from my lashes a few traces of moisture I had missed. I noticed that his hands were only slightly steadier than mine and I wondered at the cause, until my shame spoke and asked me what else could I expect from a man like Holmes when his companion wept like a woman and responded to him as Ganymede to Zeus.

"There is no need for this," he said to me, and my cheeks flamed when I discerned pity in his voice. "No need at all and I am entirely to blame." He gave one his bursts of laughter then, and took my hand in his, where the lip of the box would hide us from those few people who could see in at all. "I thought I was being...well," he shrugged,



and stroked his thumb along my palm. My heart was pounding again and I was absolutely confounded by his behaviour. It was so unexpected, so unlike the Holmes I had thought to know. Greatly daring and in dire need of something that would assist me in understanding what was occurring between us, I looked up at Holmes. His expression was an odd mixture of diffidence, apology and tenderness. It was, in fact, an expression I had seen not a week since, when I had emerged from the hiding-place on the moor and discovered Holmes. Although I could scarce believe my eyes and ears, he was, indeed, still my friend, and I gazed at him as he continued speaking. "I was trying to be romantic, to wine and dine you. Then an excellent play, and perhaps, if neither of us was too exhausted, then I was going to take you on to a rather unusual club of which I am a member."

Abruptly, his movements as quick and spare as was his habit, he abandoned me, but for mere moments only. He had loosened one of the box curtains, as if to shield us from a draught.

"There," Holmes said, "that is a distinct improvement. Now, our box is visible only to the stage and to our sister box directly opposite. As that box is empty and the actors somewhat pre-occupied, I think I can safely say that we are in private here." He was beside me again, and took my hand in his.

"I don't know what to say," I told him, rather less than steadily, although at least my unmanly fit of weeping had not thickened my voice.

Holmes smiled at me in a singularly sweet manner. It seemed to me that I had perhaps had more smiles from him this evening than in all the months of our friendship. "You could, perhaps, say that you forgive me?"

"But why ever should I forgive you? You have done nothing! I am the one with the stain against my name, not you."

He canted his head as he looked at me. "Ah, but my dear Watson, your actions were innocent and restrained by your honour and basic decency. I, on the other hand..."

"What could you possibly have done to compare to my behaviours? Would you force me to admit to you, actually to state to you here and now, the terrible things I have thought and imagined? Would you have me confess my feelings, emotions that no gentleman should ever

have for another gentleman?"

He was smiling at me again, but there was less sweetness there and more than a hint of spice. "I would be very much interested in hearing such a confession from you, my dearest friend. You see, I do believe that your confession of such matters would prove a perfect match for mine."

This was more than I could comprehend in an instant. Words failed me, and I'm afraid I gaped like a stranded fish after Holmes' pronouncement. "You?"

"Yes," he answered softly, "me."

"You," I began, only to falter. How could I possibly put such a thing into words? I could not be sure that I was not being led astray by the wine I had consumed with dinner, nor could I be certain that I was not deluding myself with something I so fervently wished to be true. "Are you saying..." It was hopeless. Nothing in my life had prepared me for such a moment, and I was floundering.

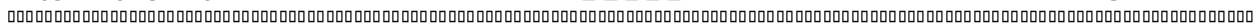
Then, as he had done as many times for me as I had for him, Holmes came to my rescue. On this occasion, he saved me with words. "Yes, John, I do. I find myself caring about you far more than is either sensible or practical. I had intended to do nothing about it at all, simply ignore it until it went away. But I'm afraid you are too strong an influence upon me for that fate to befall us."

I understood his speech precisely, but I wanted to hear more. I needed time to come to terms with this singular change in my fortunes, and I also craved the reassurance Holmes' words were to me. There was a happiness beginning in me, and a hope for something I had long since given up as lost. "So you are saying that you feel for me as I do for you? Is this—" I broke off, not quite satisfied over which word to choose.

Holmes appeared to have no such doubts. "I desire you," he said.

Flustered, I hushed him and looked all around us for fear that someone had heard him. This was a foolishness on my part, for Holmes had chosen our box well. We were quite safe, fully as safe as in our own rooms, where Mrs. Hudson was never more than a few rooms distant.

"It's perfectly all right," Holmes soothed me. "I have taken every precaution, for I had intended to make love to you in this box as I had in the restaurant earlier this evening. I had planned this, dear chap, that I might whisper to you, touch you thus," he placed, once more, his hand upon my



knee and his arms around my shoulders, “and perhaps, if you were bold enough and willing, I thought I might even dare a kiss.”

So saying, he closed the last small distance between us, and for the first time outside of my fevered dreams, I felt Holmes kiss me. His lips were soft, supple and yielding, and I could not have enough of him. I opened my mouth to his, welcoming his presence within me and then coming to know his mouth. My hands firm upon his nape, I held him to me and kissed him with all the desperation born of the lonely nights I had endured in my single bed with only a door or two between us as he slept or worked. Innumerable heartbeats later, we parted, both of us breathing heavily. My collar was too tight around my neck, and my member was engorged with my passion, so full and hard that my underdrawers were strained by its pressure. I was so overflowing with emotion, I could hardly think. There was one thing I had to say, however foolish considering the magnitude of the events transpiring between us, and it burst from me. “You called me John.” In all our time together, he had never done such a thing before and it betokened so clearly the changes I hoped were to come.

“Would you prefer I did not employ your Christian name?” Holmes asked me and I swear his eyes were twinkling. “You would rather, perhaps, that I refer to you always as Doctor Watson? Or perhaps John H. Watson M.D. suits your fancy better?”

“John is quite perfect, thank you.” I wanted to ask the same of him, that I might use his Christian name, but I was yet diffident with him. I do not believe that I had fully assimilated the implications of our situation. It was all too much, and all too quick. I had entered this theatre convinced that Holmes was trying on the unfamiliar mantle of affectionate friendship, and not an hour later, I was confronted with the notion that Holmes was far from innocent, and knew precisely the Wildean depths that yawed open before us.

“Have you nothing else to say?” he whispered to me and I found the touch of his breath upon my skin to be most distracting, so much so that I must admit that cogency was not fully in my grasp.

“What would you have me say?”

“I would have you return me the intimacy of using my forename. I would have you,” and he paused wickedly, the inference Biblical and

thrilling to the depths of my soul, “permit me the intimacy of your person, with nothing forbidden me.”

I am quite sure that I must have taken on the appearance of a rabbit with a stoat, my eyes wide and staring, my breath gasping and my heart hammering in my throat.

“Forbid me nothing, my dearest John,” Holmes said to me, “as I forbid you nothing and give you dominion over me.”

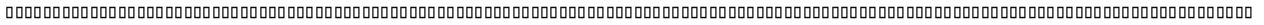
It was more than I had ever dared to dream. Men of my nature did not have happiness handed to them in this manner. We did not find love, not unless that love and happiness were hard-chased by misery and misfortune. Naught but ill ever came of such liaisons, all society knew this. And yet, and yet, this was the great Sherlock Holmes daring to speak of love. This was the most brilliant mind in London speaking words which implied even men of such perverse and unnatural desires as I had the right to declare love and devotion.

I did not know what to think. I wanted Holmes, yearned for him as I had ached for nothing and none in my lifetime, but yet, what he was proposing was the most unnatural of vices, one that could have us both in Reading gaol and hounded from the doors of decent society. Overwhelming even that was the dizzying knowledge that it was Holmes saying all this to me. Holmes, whom I had more than half-convinced myself knew nothing of love and was, indeed, as incapable of love as he had always claimed.

“All you need do,” Holmes said to me whilst the actress upon the stage wept and wailed, “is ask me. Whatever is disturbing and confounding you so, ask me, and I shall make it clear to you.” He smiled at me then, a singular smile I remembered from late nights in our rooms in Baker Street when I would wake from an exhausted doze only to find Holmes staring at me. He would bless me with that same smile, and it never failed to cause a stirring and a confusion in me. With so much new data placed before me, comprehension was slowly forming. “Treat it as one of my cases, if that will render the mystery easier for you.”

“But I thought you did not love?”

“Always so willing to believe me. It is one of your many charms. As for love...” He sat back a little, leaving me cold and lonely for all that he was so nearby. “I believed in love, I simply saw neither the use nor the desirability for it. But then you



intruded yourself upon my life..."

I spluttered then, too outraged to remind him of who had requested me to accompany whom on so many occasions. I subsided when he smiled at me once again and took my hand in his.

"I did not think to arm myself against you, and by the time I saw the danger you posed me, it was far too late to save myself. All that remained was to attempt to minimise the damage. Then, as time passed, and I observed how you comported yourself—for I had perceived your emotional attachment to me, I believe long before you yourself had recognised your affliction."

"Now, really, Holmes," I began, outraged.

It was not often that Holmes displayed such rank surprise, but I saw that I had shocked him. "You would deny having such feelings for me?" he asked me.

"No," I blustered. "I deny anyone but myself the right to call my feelings for you 'an affliction.'"

"Ah," he answered, smiling gently at me, and his hand upon mine was of an equal gentleness. "I should know better than to usurp a doctor's right of diagnosing."

I was no longer listening to what he was saying, my mind having finally caught up with what he had said before. "You are telling me," I asked, and my voice was as tremulous as a girl's, "that you know of my affections for you and also of my...carnal interest in you."

He answered me in the tone usually reserved for those occasions upon which it was necessary for him to elucidate a point that was, to him, all too patently clear. "Yes, that is precisely what I am telling you."

"And you are also informing me," I took a deep breath in the forlorn hope that it would steady my nerves somewhat, "that you share these carnal interests of mine?"

His eyes darkened, as men's do in the heat of passion. It was an unexpected sight, upon his face, looking at me, and a sight I had never taunted myself with hopes of. "Do not, I pray you, forget the companion of our carnal interests, that other aspect which you and I both share in what I hope will be equal measure."

This was surely too much. I stared at him, aghast. "You have affections for me?"

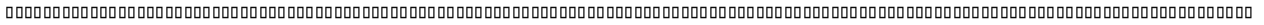
He threw his head back and gave a shout of laughter, and at a most inappropriate moment of the play. There were a few hissed calls for quiet,

but it was most reassuring to note that none of the audience had but the vaguest idea from whence that shout of laughter had come. "Affections?" Holmes was saying, completely undisturbed by any consideration of what the masses, no matter their class or breeding, would think of him. "Affections? Oh, my dear fellow, surely affections is too banal a word. Affections are what one harbours for a pet or a house or even a favoured strumpet. Between you and me, surely, surely, there are better words?"

There was one word far better than affection, yet I was not certain he would willingly entertain its speaking. I was only too aware of the term appropriate to describe my emotions for my truest friend, but this was hardly a word Holmes had ever welcomed in the past.

"Have I swayed you so, that you will not even speak the word?" He was whispering once more, leaning in very closely towards me, his hands both strong and tender upon me. "Have I so convinced you that the emotion is valueless that you will not confess to it?" He kissed me then, a butterfly-wing against the corner of my mouth. The caress was utterly chaste in execution, but libidinous in effect. I trembled, and I believe he misunderstood the reasons for that physical response. "No, you would confess it, but never to me. You fear me too much. My damnable temper and my callous inconsideration. None of that will change, my dearest chap, but I promise you that you will no longer bear the brunt of my self-loathing for having failed to keep you at a suitable distance." He repeated the kiss, and as he did so, his hand slipped under my jacket and began unbuttoning my waistcoat. "Instead, I promise that you will know that my tempers are purely the result of some case, or of boredom. You will know," he had finished now with the buttons of my best white waistcoat and had started to undo the waistband of my trousers, "that my affections for you are of the deepest measure."

I gasped, not only from the impact of his words, but also because he was now spreading my flies open and his hand was searching out the opening to my drawers. His long fingers found the gap, and I felt, for the first time, his hand upon my private parts. I am afraid I made a sound then, but could spare only the smallest amount of concern over public reaction. I knew this to be insanity, but not even the prospect of the prisoner's dock, the



functioning once more, of the most vital importance to me that he should perform this act for me and that he should take my seed inside of himself. Of course, this was purely my need for him to prove his word to me, to give me evidence that my eyes and ears had not deceived me and that Holmes did indeed return my affections full fold.

He was stroking my testes, and I could feel them jump with his every caress. He knew, then, that I was close to *le petit mort*, but he did not hesitate. His mouth closed more firmly around me, his tongue pressed more firmly against me, and he made a sound in his throat, the vibration delightful against my glans. In that moment, I spent myself, and he swallowed me, taking everything I had to offer and not ceasing his ministrations until I was both drained dry and flaccid in his mouth. Then, and only then, when my pleasure was utterly complete, did he relinquish his physical hold on me, his emotional hold all the more firmly enshrined. I was sprawled inelegantly upon my chair, incapable of either movement or speech. He raised himself with a final, and very moving, kiss to my spent manhood. Then my clothing was rearranged, every button buttoned and every fold smoothed out.

"There," he said, "nothing at all to betray us." The he looked at my face, and my expression must have said more than any mere words ever could. "Well, nothing, if you keep your hat low and your face averted. No-one could look upon that countenance and not see you for a man in love."

I found my voice, and my boldness. "And a man who has recently been well loved. I wish to thank you..."

"For beginning reparation on a terrible debt? I think not."

"I wish to thank you in kind," I replied. Infected with his daring and made brave by the heedlessness of the rest of the audience, I reached for his trousers. Once again, he brushed my hands aside, but not before I had ascertained that he was in a state of some arousal.

"Allow me to do penance in my own way," he said, retreating back to his seat. "I feel myself to be dishonoured for having treated you so shabbily, and these few hours are all I can bear to redress the balance."

I heard my own words once again, as I had stood upon the moor and met him. "Then you use me, and yet you do not trust me!" I had cried with

some bitterness. 'I think that I have deserved better at your hands'. Holmes, it would seem, was in agreement with me. "It does not matter," I replied tenderly, my hand seeking his in the darkness. I found it, and clasped him tightly. He returned the gesture, and also smiled, a little shyly, a little ashamedly. "Yes, I confess that I have felt myself treated harshly in your hands, but what you have just done—" I lost the words, for the softness in his grey eyes brought a lump to my throat and I must needs swallow before I could hope to speak another word. "What you have confessed to me—"

His eyes were twinkling now, and upon his lips hovered that small, quirked smile of which I have always been so enamoured. "In fact, you did not know that I had it in me."

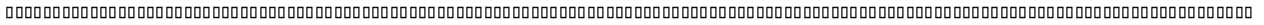
"There is more that you shall have in you shortly," I replied in haste, and then my cheeks flamed with heat as I realised the dreadful crudeness of my speech. Holmes, however, did not seem to find such roughness offensive. Rather, he took my hand that was yet clasped in his and pressed our entwined fingers against the burgeoning strength of his groin.

"I could not agree with you more," he said, and I was astonished to note that his voice was all aquiver. "However, as I have said, I must repay you for the dismay and anguish I have caused, to prove that I am sincere."

I began to protest, unwilling to either wait to know his body or to make him suffer one whit of what I had endured in my lonely aching for him.

"No, no," he said, "this is something I must do. There are no marriage certificates for our sort, nor is there a clergyman in the land who would bless our union. We must make our own bonds, John, and we must make our own covenants. This," and again he pressed our joined hands to the heated hardness of his manhood, "is my proof to you that I am sincere in my vows and honest in my devotion to you."

I did not know what to say to such a blatant display of love from a man I had once believed had no human weaknesses at all. "This is not necessary," I told him. "And worse, it leaves me in a deuced awkward position." He was withdrawing from me, untangling our hands and his eyes were shuttered and opaque. That hurt me more than I believed possible. "Don't," I murmured, "please, I beg you, do not shut me out. I love you, as you



country residence than a home in Town, but that was the only odd thing about the place. Holmes raised his stick and pounded in what was obviously a code. After a few moments, a small cache port opened and a shadowed face growled— “Yes? What d’you want and who are you?”

“We wish admittance and we are friends of Sir David and his cousin, Sir Jonathan.”

The door immediately opened to us, and we entered. The shadowy face belonged to a handsome, rough sort of man, of perhaps thirty summers. “Thought it were you, guv’nor,” he said, “but I ’ave ter be sure. Yer’ve picked a good night to come.”

“I’m delighted to hear that. For future reference, Jimmy, this is my very special friend, Dr. Watson, and you may admit him without fear.”

“Right yer are,” Jimmy replied, taking a good look at my face. I knew this man would recognise me again, even were I not to return for ten years.

“This way, John,” Holmes said, pointing along a white path that was bordered by weeping willows and a brooklet on one side and large rhododendron bushes on the other. I thought I could hear sounds coming from behind the vegetation, and my suspicion must have been obvious. “This is an extraordinarily special house,” Holmes whispered. “One can do anything one chooses here. Complete freedom, John, without having to once look over one’s shoulder. We are safe, within these walls, where none but our own kind ever enter.”

“I would still rather be home in Baker Street,” I replied somewhat churlishly. I had heard of houses of this sort, and I had no desire to share Holmes with any debauchery, nor did I wish to indulge in anything of that nature with anyone but the man at my side. I was in love, and newly told that my love was returned, and had no wish to dally in pleasures of the flesh that might be welcome once the first blush of love has worn into the comfort and ease of long-term companionship. I wanted Holmes, and I wanted him all to myself.

“Come, come,” he whispered to me, almost pushing me, reluctant, up the sweeping stairs to the front door. “Trust me in this, as you have trusted me so well in all other things.”

Had it not been for his open affection for me and how important it was to him that I trust him still, I should have left that house without setting foot over its threshold. Instead, still dizzy from

what Holmes had said and done to me this night, I followed him. A manservant took our coats and hats with a discreet murmur of welcome. Holmes asked him something, low-voiced, and I heard the servant reply, “In the main ballroom as always, sir.”

Someone else who knew Holmes well. I began to feel a fool for having thought him innocent and unaware of the demands of the male body. It would appear that Holmes had far more experience to call upon than my few paltry engagements with members of my own sex. Doubt began to settle upon me, as I contemplated how often Holmes must have frequented this house and how many men he must have known in a purely Biblical sense. Darkness weighed upon me, and I wondered if all his protestations were nothing more than a means to an end. Perhaps he was merely curious, or seeking the convenience of a partner he already shared rooms with. I did not truly believe any of that, but I was not certain that all my doubts were born of insecurity. I truly feared that he was doing this out of pity for me. My own words, my own voice came back to me as I had spoken to him on the moor. I had sounded pathetic to my own ears, ill-done by and melancholy. I knew that Holmes had intended to cheer me by dinner and an evening at the theatre, and despite his apparent sincerity, I could not relinquish the insidious fear that all this was done out of his sense of guilt at having used me so poorly.

A liveried servant opened another door to us and we stepped into a magnificent ballroom. The first impression one had was of immense size, and a huge crowd, and then one saw that it was an illusion created by mirrored walls and large chandeliers. There were sofas and chairs encircling the room, and a table laden with a cold supper. It took but a moment for the most uncommon aspect of the room to become clear. There was not a woman present. All the revellers were men, dressed primarily in black, as was proper, but some were dressed in gaudy clothes of a most improper sort. One man, I noted with some astonishment, was bedecked in a formally cut suit of the most livid green satin. Another was in peacock blue, yet another in brightest red. For the most part, the rest were dressed in the usual somber colour of Englishman at play. There were couples—two men, together!—dancing closely, and elsewhere men were discoursing with men. There was nothing

WISH I WASN'T HERE

oo

Silent and grey, water and sky surrounded him. Even the pier was grey in this light, the cloudy skies leaching the colour from painted wood, the shuttered cafés and amusement arcades staring blindly out at the deserted seashore, summer’s colourful profusion of sun-burned holiday-makers nowhere to be seen. Bodie stuck his hands more deeply in his pockets and wandered a little farther out, to where a grizzled old man was sitting, solitary, fishing. They exchanged the brief nod that passed for greeting, then Bodie was walking on, looking for something to do, or see, or best of all, someone to talk to.

Christ, but he missed Doyle. The tea shop, used year round by locals, was still open, so he went in there, but only old Mrs. Henderson was there, dozing behind the till. Familiar now, Bodie helped himself to tar-like tea from the urn, and a cake from the old-fashioned cake stand that Teresa simply couldn’t persuade her gran to get rid of. Quiet enough to not wake Mrs. Henderson up, he slipped a pound note under the tip saucer; he’d get his change later, if Mrs. H. woke up before he left, or tomorrow when he came in as usual.

Depressing thought, that. Sunk into a routine that would bore an octogenarian, and it was still a bit much for him sometimes. Not surprising, really. The injury was well healed now, but he was still a bit weak from the infection. Mind you, he was willing to admit, if he were alone with no-one within five miles of him and had a written guarantee that Cowley would never hear of it, that the tiredness was caused more by depression than

any lingering after-effects of the stabbing.

Christ, but he missed Doyle! And how many times had he thought that today? Steadfastly, he refused to think about Doyle any more. Well, he wouldn’t think about Doyle for an hour. Wouldn’t think about the job, or his mates, or going out to a decent pub, or a film that was less than three years old, or a good Indian restaurant or any of the other million things he missed. Such as Doyle. But he wasn’t supposed to be thinking about Doyle, was he? Not for another fifty nine minutes anyroad. He picked up the paper, supped his tea, took a bite of his cake, engrossed himself in the fervid discussion on whether the Council should erect a new wind shelter on the Promenade, or use the money for extra bins round the shopping precinct. By the second paragraph, he had reneged on his promise to himself and was missing Doyle all the more. If Ray were here, he’d be able to toss sarky comments across the table, and have Doyle answer him right back. But all he had was the grey sky, the grey sea, and Mrs. H. snoring at the till.

Small wonder he was depressed.

Go to the seaside, Cowley had said, recover your strength, get your edge back. He closed his eyes for a minute, indulging himself in one of the few amusements available him. Reliving the past. Correction: reliving the bits of his past that were about Ray but safe, oh, yes, only think safe thoughts about Ray...

The sun had been streaming in Cowley’s window when the old man had ushered them both in, Doyle looking at Bodie, Bodie looking at Doyle,

hope.

"If I don't know?" A longish pause, more than a mouthful of good Laphroaig disappearing. "If I have cause to suspect—cause that can be put down in black and white and used against me, ye understand—" a sharp glower at them both, a warning and an anger, "then I'd have no choice but to order a full security check run on the pair of you."

And that slight emphasis on 'full' was the most chilling threat Bodie for one had ever had levelled at him.

"So basically what you're saying is that if we'd done anything—and we haven't, so you're in the clear—" Bodie said, unable to look away from Ray, watching the disillusion grow, "but if we had, then we'd be out, and if we hadn't—which we haven't—" and he wondered why Doyle was looking at him like that, as if he were some sort of slimy creature crawled out from under a rock—"but then decided that we were going to—which we're not, wouldn't ever even consider such a thing," and now he wasn't looking at Doyle, didn't dare face his partner, "but if we did, then you'd run a check and we'd be asked to resign?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, have you turned into a parrot as well as a fucking eunuch?"

"If I was a eunuch, I wouldn't do much—"

"That's quite enough of that language, you two."

"Yes, sir." Bodie, looking downwards, closing in on himself.

"Oh, that's great, that's really great! I've got you threatening us with the chop and I've got him dancing like a puppet on a fucking string!"

"What d'you expect, Ray?" Shouting, jumping to his feet, not even noticing the way Cowley was watching him. "Me down on one knee with the diamond ring in its little box?" Subsiding then, folding in on himself, unnaturally small in his chair, all the power and bravado gone out of him. "We could never have anything like that. Why d'you think we've been going round and round in circles the way we have? If anything was going to happen..."

"That's enough," Cowley again, but not his usual bark. This was very gentle, and the bite it carried was all the more painful for it. "You two know better than to have this conversation in front of me."

Two voices, in tattered unison. "Yes, sir."

"Just see you remember to watch your language in front of me—and everyone else on the squad."

"Is that it?" Doyle asked, but looking at Bodie, asking a question that Bodie didn't know how to answer.

"Aye, laddie, it is." Cowley, saying it for them both. "If you either one of you intend to stay in security—and you've both got fine careers ahead of you, so don't go doing anything any stupider than you already have."

"So that's it then. Over and done with." Still looking at Bodie, but not asking any more, not really.

Bodie didn't quite shrug, a gesture Doyle had always found attractive. "Suppose so."

Doyle looked away, out the window, watching the light glint off a window opposite. "Best be off then, I suppose." Something too close to a sigh for comfort, then a watery smile, one that had no heart to it. "Need a lift, mate?"

As Doyle had driven them both here, and as Bodie was in no fit state to drive, the comment was nothing more than a signal that everything was back to being just friends, all other possibilities dead and decomposing before their eyes.

"Before you leave, Doyle, take this with you."

"What is it?" As cool as if this were a routine day, he picked the typed page up from Cowley's desk.

"A special course in weaponry at Sandhurst. I've made arrangements for you to spend this weekend and the next fortnight there."

Doyle just looked at him. "Is that a hint or an order? Sir?"

"The latter, if you're too stupid to take the former."

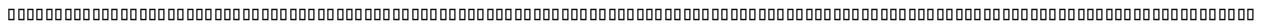
"It's all right, I've got the message. No need to send me off to the boondocks."

Cowley ignored him, turning his attention now to Bodie. "And you're looking too peaky for anyone's good. A weesojourn at the seaside should see you straight."

And no-one was going to actually comment on that, although Doyle opened his mouth, only to close it again when he looked at Bodie's unrevealing face.

"The seaside at this time of year? Guaranteed pneumonia—"

"Not at this time of year, Bodie, not if you wrap up well." Implacable, making his point, giving them both the opportunity that they were still to be



breath caught in his throat as he watched his finger disappear inside his partner, and again, as two fingers went inside, flesh stretching around him, widening to welcome him, Ray twisting round on his fingers. Then Bodie felt it, the nub of gland, and he scissored his fingers round it, Doyle's cock pulsing with every touch of his fingers deep inside him.

Bodie pulled back, letting Doyle calm down a little, then he put three fingers into him, stabbing him, fucking him like that, until the hole was loose and ready, sucking at him, Doyle clutching at him as he pulled free.

"Ready?" he asked, Doyle's legs over his shoulders, his own cock poised at Ray's arsehole, the slickness irresistible.

Doyle pushed up, and the first inch of Bodie's cock went into him, then all of him, as Bodie thrust hard, going straight in, hands braced on either side of Doyle's head, Bodie's belly hard against Doyle's cock and balls, Bodie's cock hard inside Doyle's body. Bodie pounded into him, Doyle meeting every thrust, the two of them finding the right rhythm, pleasure spiralling. Doyle's hands were urging Bodie down, his cock finding a deeper angle as Doyle's open mouth met his, as Doyle's tongue claimed his mouth, and they kissed for the first time, their chest and bellies pressed together, Doyle's hot seed splashing, making them slick, Bodie's cock sliding in and out of his arse with ferocious passion, until his whole body stiffened, and he spilled

himself inside Doyle.

Then there was silence, only the sounds of their breathing, and flesh slipping from flesh, and two people becoming separate once more.

Bodie lay beside Ray on the bed, as he had done when Ray had come home from hospital, as he had done when he himself had come home from his sojourn with the bedpans. They weren't touching now, as they hadn't touched then, and the doubts began, chilling him. Maybe the gun didn't mean anything. Perhaps Ray had simply left it behind because he was off duty for the day. Perhaps he was going to put it back on the minute he got back to London and the old life, and this was going to be a one-off, a temporary giving-way to temptation.

Or maybe it was pity. That fucking postcard! Christ, what if Ray were here out of pity? He wouldn't put up with that, would sooner watch him walk away than have it be that.

"Ray?" he asked, softly, almost fearful of bringing speech in to disturb this fragile silence between them.

But Doyle said nothing, and Bodie lay beside him alone, waiting for the moment when he would hear Ray get up and dress and leave.

The bed dipped, and he thought to himself, this is it. He's getting up, he's leaving.

Then he felt Ray close beside him, sensed Doyle leaning over him. Felt the kiss pressed to his mouth.

And knew that this was never going to end.

DIY:

A S L O W

S W E D I S H

S C R E W

He had just settled himself down to watch the racing, and thereby find out if he were going to end the weekend richer or poorer, when the phone rang. Before the first trill had faded, he was on his feet and half way across the room, one hand automatically smoothing his hair, the other popping the first of a big bag of Revels into his mouth.

Pausing, to allow the phone to ring an ego-protecting number of times—for it would never do to let Claire think he’d been sitting round on the off-chance that she might forgive him after all—he finally picked the phone up. “Hello?” he said in his suavest voice.

“What took you so long, Bodie?” Doyle demanded in his most peeved voice. “The old arthritis slowing you down, is it?”

Oh, Doyle. Not Claire and the possibilities of a lovely afternoon of sex at all. Just his tormenting bugger of a partner who sounded in a really charming mood today, even by Doyle standards. “What d’you want, Doyle?” he asked, refusing to let himself be conned into jollying Doyle out of his fit of the moodies the way he usually did. He’d given that up for Lent, he’d decided, before he ended up being Doyle’s permanent doormat.

“Remember that stacked Swedish blondethingy I was telling you about?”

Actually, no he didn’t, but stacked, Swedish and blonde—even with the typically Doyle-ian unflattering ‘thingy’ added on—sounded a lot more appealing than Lester Piggot on a three-year-old Arabian grey did. “Swedish? Planning on *entering* the Common Market, are we, my

old son?”

“What are you going on about now, Bodie? Never mind, I probably don’t want to know. Listen, I’m having a hell of a time screwing—”

“Never! Not the Long-Haired Lover from—”

“Shut up, Bodie! If you’re going to be a prat about this, I’ll ring Murphy and get *him* to come and help me put it in.”

For once in his life, Bodie was left absolutely speechless. “Come again? I mean, did you say what I think you just said?”

There was an extremely expressive sigh from the other end of the phone, one that warned Bodie had been given enough rope and was just about to hang himself. “Look, Bodie, I need help with the screwing—”

This was too good to be true! “What, you want me to draw you a diagram?”

“No, I’ve already got one of those, fat lot of help it’s been. I want you to come over here—”

Bodie’s voice had risen at least half an octave, and his pertinent little parts were rapidly following suit. “You want me to *come* over there and help you screw?”

“No, I’m fed up trying to get this stupid fucking thing up and properly screwed. I want *you* to fucking well do it for me!”

Bodie wanted to make sure that there was no room for error in this, and that he wasn’t going to wind up *in flagrante delicto* with Doyle’s gun doing the shooting. “You want me to do your screwing for you?”

“Christ, the penny finally drops! Any slower,

Doyle was worth being thrown out on his ear. Doyle, he realised, was still sitting gazing at him with his eyes all wide and his lips parted and, oh, god, the rotten sod was wetting his lips with his tongue! Bodie turned back to the hi-fi unit before his cock revealed not only itself, but Bodie as well. "Yeh, but there are some that are designed to go into the female—," he had to swallow then, hands fumbling as he attached wires to plug, "that's the one with a hole in it—" Christ, trust Doyle to wind him up like this! It had to be deliberate: no-one was that innocent, not in this day and age, and Doyle was good with his hands—which thought made him almost drop everything, including his inhibitions and trousers, "so it's got a long piece that sticks into the hole..."

Into the unsurprisingly tense pause, Doyle said, still playing the innocent, "Oh, you mean like a prick?"

Bodie turned round for a second, just long enough to look disbelievngly at his partner, then turned away again, obviously still not convinced by the patent expression of innocence he found on Doyle's face. Silently, he attached the wiring to the light, started working on the incidental details now that he had the main frame put together. "What're you up to, mate?" he asked, shoulder muscles flexing as he adjusted the hinges on the door that would hide the stacking components of Doyle's new and hideously expensive hi-fi system, with it's fancy tape deck and separate turntable and a few other bits Bodie was too embarrassed to admit he didn't know the proper name for. "Come on, out with it."

Doyle very nearly obliged, until he conceded that his cock wasn't what Bodie was referring to.

"Tell me what you're up to," Bodie pushed.

"Up to? Me?" Doyle almost added, 'anything you fancy, Bodie, anything at all', but cowardice reared almost as high as his cock, and so he wormed his way out of it, postponing the moment of revelation until he had found out if some of his suspicions about Bodie were, happily, true. "The only thing I'm interested in getting up is this bloody shelving unit."

He got another curious look for that—which made Doyle wonder if he'd, shall we say, blown it—but Bodie let it slide, going back to the job at hand, even as the rippling of his muscles forced Doyle's hand to readjust himself within the far too confining closeness of his jeans.

A fair amount of time passed, with Bodie fiddling with hinges, checking the hang of the door, whilst both partners contemplated how hung the other man was. Bodie took a good, long look at Doyle, then turned back to the unit. He wondered, sometimes he really wondered... There was an interesting edge to Bodie's voice when he finally spoke. "Screw dowel."

For one moment of bliss, Doyle thought Bodie had said, 'Screw, Doyle?'. But then reality set in, and it was a truly peeved, not to mention terminally frustrated, Doyle who muttered under his breath: "Right now, I'd fucking screw anything!"

Bodie, suspicions confirmed entirely to his soon-to-be satisfaction, murmured an indulgent and fond: "Yeh, you would, wouldn't you?"

Doyle jumped, eyes startled: he'd thought he'd been quieter than that.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," Bodie was going on, preening a little now, making sure Doyle was getting a good view of his arse, not to mention a lovely view of his balls from the rear. In fact, now that he'd added all the pertinent information and prurient deductions together, Bodie was positively smug. It was a great feeling, knowing that Doyle was not only on the simmer, which was a fairly common occurrence, but that Doyle was on the simmer for *him*, Bodie, and available. Oh, that was the best part: from what he'd finally put together and from the way Doyle was looking at him like a cat with a canary—now there was a thought: Doyle, eating him. Delicious!—and the things Doyle had been saying, well, Doyle was not only available, he was looking a bit on the desperate side. Smiling to himself, he started setting the dividers in place, checking to make sure the records would be held absolutely upright and not end up warped. Timing it to the last second before Ray jumped in with both feet, Bodie turned round to face Doyle, smiling, rather pointedly at a certain rather pointed part of his partner. Then, with Doyle almost squirming in front of him, he went on: "Randy old toad like you, stands to reason you'd fuck anything that stood still long enough."

Doyle, unsmiling, stared right back, giving nothing away: leastways, not until he'd added two and two and come up with a four he wanted. If Bodie was setting him up...

"Well," Bodie said, quite casually to cover his nascent trepidation that maybe, just maybe, he was wrong and his partner wasn't as bent as a

to get me on the Isle of Man! Christ, but that feels wonderful. C'mon, Bodie, chuck that in and come into the bedroom with me."

So much for Doyle having the upper hand. Bodie was barely aware of what his hands were doing—after all, it didn't actually matter, since he was only doing it to drive Doyle to complete distraction and stretch the seduction out to unbearable lengths (rather like Doyle's arousal, now we stop to think about it.). All he cared about was Doyle, desperate for him, so wild with lust they wouldn't be afraid of sex that was a handspan away from love.

Doyle had always said that his partner was sex mad, but as Bodie was struggling to actually continue building the stupid shelves, Doyle decided that it was more that Bodie went mad when sex was around. "Here, are you sure that's supposed to go in there?" This, as Bodie manhandled—Doyle should be so lucky!—a slender partition into what seemed an awfully small space. Doyle's voice was almost as strangled as his poor demented cock. But if Bodie could control himself, then Doyle wasn't about to give himself a showing up by popping his cork prematurely. "Is that the right bit for in there? D'you even know what that is?"

"Course it is and 'course I do," Bodie replied cheerfully, which was hardly surprising, considering where his foot had been and that Doyle's left hand was now returning the favour in kind—or in lust, depending on how you wanted to look at it. With too much fabric covering too much skin, Doyle would have been happy to look at it any way at all, but Bodie was showing no signs of showing his bum off.

"You what?" Doyle asked, realising that he had been too busy contemplating Bodie's hidden charms to pay attention to a single word his co-worker had said.

"I said, of course this is supposed to go here." He looked over his shoulder at the strained expression on Doyle's face and the strained condition, and then Bodie grinned. "And of course I know what it is. This here's what you call a Top Upright. And you know what they say, don't you?"

"Oh, go on," Doyle answered, playing straight man, so to speak and in a very limited meaning, his hands furthering their explorations, not to mention their excitations. "Tell me, what do they say?"

Bodie glanced significantly at the front of his own track suit trousers, where his top bit was

exceedingly upright. "Takes one to know one," he said proudly.

"So you're just another lump of wood, eh?" Doyle said, deflatingly.

"Well, it's big enough," Bodie came right back, completely undeflated and not averse to making a show of it, "so I can see why a titch like you might get confused, Robin."

"An' if you're a bat man," Doyle grabbed Bodie between the legs, getting a very satisfying moan for his trouble, "then we'll need more than a bit of elbow grease to fit it in any of the holes I know about."

"Course," Bodie muttered vaguely, more than a little distracted by big things happening lower down, "we could always work something out..."

"Thought the whole idea was to work something *in*," Doyle said, and then, because he was a cruel, callous, cold-hearted bastard, he removed his hand. No, not from his arm, from Bodie's cock, of course.

Bodie was no longer—as the Yanks would say—a happy camper. In fact, he was very displeased that Doyle was no longer playing tent-poles with him. "You're a cruel, cold-hearted bastard, Doyle!"

"Yeh, I am, aren't I?" Doyle answered, pleased. "And I'm going to stay that way till you finish screwing this thing together."

Bodie wiggled his bum at him. "Bit difficult to screw it together," he said. "Nobody's that flexible."

"Nobody?"

Something in the way Doyle said that pricked—so to speak—Bodie's attention. "You can't!" He turned round in time to see Doyle lick his lips. "No, you can't."

Doyle winked.

"You can?"

Doyle tapped the side of his nose knowingly.

"You can't!"

Then Doyle laughed.

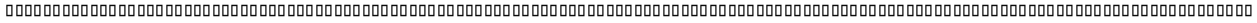
"No, you can't, can you, you rotten sod."

"Really had you going there, didn't I?"

"You've had me going since the first day you walked into the training centre and waved your arse in my face."

Doyle preened, and patted Bodie on the bum. "Nice of you to finally get round to returning the compliment."

"Yeh, well," Bodie did a creditable impersonation of the naïf innocent he might possibly have



been in one of his former lives, but certainly couldn't claim to be this time round, "told you, I'm not forward."

"You're kidding!" Doyle exclaimed dramatically, hands examining Bodie's rump in minute detail, then slipping round to make an even more detailed exam of a less than minute part of Bodie. "Doesn't feel like it's on backwards," he announced.

Not that Bodie was paying much attention. In fact, Bodie's mind wasn't on what Doyle was saying at all, being far more interested in what Doyle was doing. What was that they said about actions speaking louder than words? At that precise instant, Bodie felt as if his body should be shouting.

Doyle, busy playing their game of one-upmanship (the non-consummated version), was still nattering on. "In fact, it feels as if it's on just right to me."

Bodie decided that this was getting out of hand—precisely because of what was *in* Doyle's hand at that moment. He cleared his throat and started to get a bit of his own back, mainly by removing Doyle's hand—again, not from his arm, but from Bodie's cock. "You can pack that in right now—"

"I thought you'd never ask," Doyle said seductively. "Here or in the bedroom?"

Mrs. Whitehouse would have been proud of Bodie's truly prissy tone of voice, although she would have been appalled by Bodie's real reaction. "Really, Doyle, I swear you keep your brains between your legs sometimes."

"Only sometimes?" He grabbed himself a healthy handful of Bodie's impressive arousal. "Unlike you, eh?"

Bodie squirmed, and from more than just Doyle's handling of the situation. "Leave off, Ray. Have to get this finished before we go back on call tomorrow or it'll never get done."

"Funny," Doyle murmured, breath whispering against Bodie's back, "that's exactly what I was thinking."

Bodie thought that letting Doyle win this particular chest-beating competition might well be worth it: if it wasn't a chest Doyle beat. In fact, judging by what Doyle was doing to him right now, Ray had picked on just the right anatomy to beat. Oh, yes, Bodie thought, letting his eyes close as Doyle made him feel ten feet (Bodie always did

have delusions of grandeur) tall, letting Doyle win this once might not be such a bad idea after all.

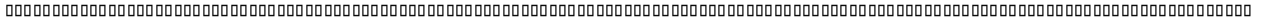
Pity Doyle had a tendency to crow over victories... "Knew you'd fall at my feet if I so much as whistled," his voice drowning out the sound of his zip being undone. "Definitely got you standing still for whatever I fancy, haven't I?"

Bodie, for some reason that to Doyle was inexplicable, decided that after that comment, Doyle could take a flying fuck off the Mersey Ferry before Bodie would let the big-headed bastard win. "Gerroff!" he shouted, pulling away amidst the loud protests of his cock. "Fallen at your feet, have I? Coming to heel like a fucking poodle? You want your head examined, Doyle."

This, Doyle decided, was what Cowley would call a slight tactical error (or a complete balls-up if he couldn't mend it). Not quite the purpose he had had in mind for their balls, which meant he had to do some fancy footwork if he was going to get Bodie back where he wanted him: under his thumb, always presupposing the part of Bodie under his thumb was a bit that needed stretching and lubricant and all sorts of wonderful things done to it. "Don't be a wally," he said to Bodie's diligently bent (sounds like a description of Doyle, doesn't it?) back. "I was only having you on." Chance'd be a fine thing, he thought, staring at Bodie, willing the other man to turn round and look at him. No such luck. Until Doyle replayed what he'd said to Bodie, and how he'd feel if Bodie'd said that to *him*... If Bodie'd said that, then Bodie would currently be nursing his own balls, and not in pleasure, and quite possibly no longer attached to his body. "Oh, fuck it!" he said.

"You should be so lucky," Bodie muttered, supposedly hammering a nail in, even though no nail was supposed to go there and Bodie kept on missing the damned thing anyway. He was getting up and leaving, he promised himself, just as soon as his body stopped being such a bloody big show of how turned on it was by Doyle. And just as soon as he could drag himself away from the sweet pleasure of Doyle's body so close behind him, and the alluring promise of what they might have—if Doyle wasn't such a fucking prat, he reminded himself, hitting the nail so hard Doyle was always going to have a dent in his shelves to remember this oh-so romantic encounter by.

"Okay, so I'm sorry, all right? I shouldn't've said what I said the way I said it." Such explosively



shouted comment got no reaction at all. Doyle tried again, curbing his temper and frustration in enough to be coherent. "I just meant that I had you," which was easy enough to say. It was the next bit that was almost as hard as he hoped Bodie's cock was. "And that you, well, you know what I mean."

Now this was interesting enough to stop pretending to hammer poor defensive nails. "Might do, if you actually explained yourself."

Doyle ran a trembling hand through his hair, then down his chest, to finger his deflating erection. "I just meant..." Funny, he thought, how all this started with a misunderstanding, and if he wasn't careful, it was going to end for the same thing. "That you, well, you..." He stopped for a second, took a deep breath, and asked himself if scoring one over Bodie was really worth not scoring at all—and worth killing something he thought just might be the best thing ever to happen in his life. There was, really, no doubt, only the old, familiar insecurities and fears that all of us carry with us. Then, before he lost his bottle, he spoke, all the words tumbling over themselves in his hurry to say them before he gave in to the yellow streak blossoming where his spine should be. "If I've got you, then you've got me."

And Bodie, the object of all Doyle's tangled emotions and passions? Bodie gave nothing away. Not a thing, just kneeling there, half in the hi-fi unit, half out, bum up in the air, and not an utter being muttered, his quietness unnerving to say the least.

"So," Doyle ventured, sexual tension vanquished by an emotional tension he hadn't exactly been prepared for, although he cursed himself for a moron because he hadn't seen what must've been right under his nose for weeks, "d'you want to give this a go or not?"

There. He'd said it, laid all his cards on the table—even if it meant he didn't get to lay Bodie anywhere—and now it was Bodie's turn.

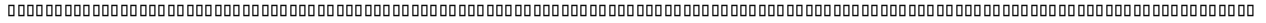
As we said before: and Bodie? That worthy stayed where he was, grinning to himself, pride more than ameliorated by Doyle's somewhat hesitant confession. Blood from a stone, Bodie thought affectionately, more than a little pleased by the path this unexpected afternoon was taking. There were a lot of things he could say, but too many emotions were clamoring to be heard, to be sorted out, too many implications to be faced and

discussed and dealt with. Too much talking by far: not something he wanted to start on right now, not when his balls were heavy from arousal that had flared so brightly and then subsided so unwillingly. So. Talk later—fuck now, he decided. He'd already reminded Ray that this was going to be an equal partnership off the job as well as on it, so he could, he decided (absolutely and utterly uninfluenced, of course, by the fact that he loved being fucked and hadn't had that particular pleasure in what was, in his far from humble opinion, far too long a bout of anal celibacy), afford to be generous, and let Ray do all the work this time. Which meant that all he had to do now was find a way of stopping Ray from anguishing over this for hours until everything was neatly pigeonholed and Bodie's prick had forgotten that sex could be more than a definition of gender. So Bodie did as Doyle was wont to do: after all, didn't they say that lovers did what they wanted done to themselves? Something that put an entirely new twist on the old 'do unto others', and one that Bodie found far easier to live by.

Doyle was swithering between standing on his dignity and leaving dramatically with a suitable display of camouflaging temper—a plan which was severely flawed due to this being his flat—or pummelling Bodie to a bloody pulp, which was severely flawed due to a) Cowley killing him for hurting his blue-eyed boy, and b) the fact that Doyle didn't really want to hurt Bodie. At least, not irrevocably. But if the bastard didn't give him an answer soon—

Bodie gave him an answer: non-verbal, but an answer nonetheless. Bodie wiggled his bum, an invitation if ever Doyle saw one. And Doyle could be quite quick on the uptake, as his cock was merrily proving, leaping back to its previous state of affairs, even as its owner leaped headfirst into a previously unexpected affair. "I take it that means yes," he whispered, pushing Bodie's tracksuit top up and out of the way, his hands and eyes and mouth feasting on the exposed white skin and smooth muscles.

"By George, I think he's got it!" But the joke was delivered in a voice that caught on a sudden intake of breath as Doyle's fingers fastened on his nipples, flickering on him the way he had once—God, had Doyle fancied him since then?—mentioned he liked some lover or other doing. The thought flooded him with a warmth that melted into pas-



examined a file—anything, in fact, to give him a second to pour cold water on airy-fairy notions he had long thought safely interred under years and years of work. Tension erupted as anger: “Your head’s full of clouds if you think you should keep your secrets to yourself.”

“But they’re not my secrets, are they, Mr. Cowley?” Doyle asked, uncrossing his legs so that the light cast intriguing shadows on the cusp of his moleskin trousers. “And since they’re not my secrets, maybe you should ask one of your *spies* to weasel the truth out of the man the secrets belong to.”

Cowley knew he should look up then, stare the arrogant git down, but his mind was overflowing with the beauty of the tightly-clad thighs, fabric clinging so snugly, and the sweet swelling of groin... *Get yer mind out of the gutter and back on the job!* he shouted at himself. *You can go to the Club later if you need to, but you’ve got a job of work to do, and start thinking what this yin’s so desperate to hide that he’s flirting with you.*

And then he remembered the man’s profession, and amended that to: *that he’s trying to seduce you with the merchandise.* The mental cold shower was useless, for having thought of ‘the merchandise’, he couldn’t help but wonder how much the man charged, and for what. And whether or not the checks would turn Doyle up to be a security risk or the soul of discretion. Disaster, or everything Cowley had hoped for, until age and common sense had cured him of dalliances with men as luscious and alluring as this one.

“Thought you were supposed to be questioning me?” Doyle, casual, completely confident, his sexual attraction both weapon and shield. “If all you’re going to do is sit there staring at a closed folder, then I’m off home.” He rose to his feet, that simple motion turned into a work of erotic art, thigh muscles flexing, one hand coming to rub absently at his chest, the other resting, open, on his hip, the fingers pointing inwards and down...

...down, Cowley noted, swallowing quickly, to where the man’s prick was clearly delineated, a thick curve, a sheen on the fabric to show that he habitually dressed left. And habitually walked through life partially aroused, as in love with his body as everyone else was. Mouth suddenly dry, Cowley needed a drink, the crack in his tough image be damned. This Ray Doyle character didn’t seem to be at all impressed with his image anyway,

if that knowing little smile was anything to go by.

“Get back in your seat,” Cowley snapped, getting to his own feet as Doyle sat down, the two of them moving as if choreographed. Then Cowley was crossing the room to where he kept his drink, two glasses clinking as he brought everything back to his desk—and to his silent humiliation. He had, he admitted, appalled, tried to hide his limp, tried to walk straight and tall and proud, as he had when he’d been young and his hair had still been red and not faded out to this middle-aged sandiness. He took a good swig of whisky that was better savoured sipped slowly, but it was the kick he was after, not the taste. He almost choked on it as well, as Doyle took his first mouthful of malt, and managed to make it all look like a hedonist’s delight. The worst part of it was, Cowley would have bet good money that it wasn’t even for display, the tangible pleasure nothing more than Doyle’s natural sensuality.

He knew he should be asking questions, browbeating the younger man, harassing him into confession, but he didn’t dare speak quite yet, for fear that his voice would betray him. Pathetic, he chivvied himself, truly pathetic, to have his head turned by a pretty face and a beautiful body. Ah, but, that rebellious voice in his mind answered, it’s not a pretty face, is it? Cowley glanced up, now that he had the excuse of trying to categorise the face. No, not pretty, he thought as he made a note in a margin that needed no annotation. Interesting, intriguing, with those green eyes—put him in mind of a boy he’d known at school, a teuchter brought down to Glasgow by his father’s need for work. Aye, and that hair, all rich chestnut and curls, thick enough to lose his fingers in. Even the broken cheekbone attracted him, with its tacit statement that here was a man tough enough and hard enough to fight for something.

Probably his payment, Cowley’s sensible cynicism reminded him. With a sigh, he took a proper sip of his whisky, and forced himself back to his job. *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour*, he paraphrased in his mind. “Flaherty,” he said, ready to begin again.

Doyle shook his head, and even the light was conspiring against Cowley, the late afternoon sun dancing through the curls like kisses. “Nothing to say about Flaherty. He was a friend of a friend that I helped out once or twice, and that’s it.”

“A friend of a friend? You mean, he was in-

