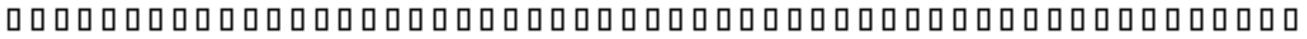


MULTUM IN PARVO



PÆAN  
TO PRIAPUS



V



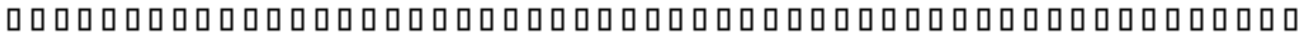
AN ANTHOLOGY OF MULTI-MEDIA FICTION  
VOLUME FIVE



MULTUM IN PARVO



PÆAN  
TO PRIAPUS



V

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



AN ANTHOLOGY OF MULTI-MEDIA FICTION  
VOLUME FIVE



PÆAN TO PRIAPUS V is available from [www.oblique-publications.net](http://www.oblique-publications.net)  
or in printed form from the publisher.

Send an email to

[oblique@oblique-publications.net](mailto:oblique@oblique-publications.net)

or send SASE to the address below for further information.

**AGE STATEMENT REQUIRED WITH ORDER**

OBLIQUE PUBLICATIONS P.O. BOX 43784 TUCSON, AZ USA 85733-3784
--

**Also available from Oblique Publications**

(Note: All publications are slash and require an age statement with order.)

the OBLAQUE series (*Blake's 7* slash)

*Oblaque*

*Oblaquar*

*Oblaquest*

*Oblaque IV: to be taken intravenously*

*Oblaque V: in venery veritas*

*Oblaque Sextus*

the BENT COPPERS series (*The Professionals* slash)

*...As a £3 Note*

*...As Two £3 Notes*

*...As Three £3 Notes*

the PÆAN TO PRIAPUS series (multi-media and literary slash)

*Pæan to Priapus, volumes I, II, III, IV*

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

*A Dickensian Christmas*

by M. FAE GLASGOW.

The fiction word count for PÆAN TO PRIAPUS V is 68,101
--

PÆAN TO PRIAPUS V is an amateur publication, copyright © Sept., 1993 by Oblique Publications. All rights reserved. This copyright is not intended to infringe upon or conflict with other holders of copyrights. No reprints of any type are permitted without express written permission of the publisher and individual contributors involved.

# TO THE READER

---

*Multum in Parvo*—much in little. *Pæan to Priapus V* is a bit shorter than our normal zine, so we thought we'd subtitle it just to let you know that good things do come in small packages. Or rather, it's not the size that counts. (Hmm, a very appropriate sentiment for a slash zine.)

The stories this issue fall into four different universes. There are three *Professionals* tales, two *Blake's 7*, and two *Sherlock Holmes*. The eighth is from *The Crying Game*. There is also a general theme of music appearing in many of the stories. Without a word about it to me, M. Fae decided to use Beatles' songs as inspiration. She is quite familiar with my opinion that, other than the Beatles, popular music is not worth listening to. In fact, whenever I come to visit, she very kindly turns off the loud noise emanating from her CD player. A true friend indeed. Anyway, M. Fae figured I would know the lyrics to the songs she chose. She's right, I do. So readers, if you don't, then I suggest you get hold of the songs and check them out before you read the stories. In fact, you might even play them in the background as you read. Wonderful inspiration. Say M. Fae, I have an idea for another Beatles' tune. How does *Come Together* sound to you...?

The usual suspects are to be thanked: Kota, M. Fae, and LDM—the last two in particular for hosting a party for tons of people while I packed up the computer and sneaked off to work elsewhere.

—Caroline K. Carbis, editor

## CONTENTS

---

### THE PROFESSIONALS

And All the Secrets 5

*Tallis*

The Earth That They Inherit 19

*Shoshanna*

If I Fell 27

*Edi N. Burgh*

### SHERLOCK HOLMES

A Thrice-Daily Injection 47

*Jane Mailander*

If I Needed Someone 52

*Emma Scot*

### THE CRYING GAME

Lavender Blue 66

*Gael X. Ile*

### BLAKE'S 7

Revolution 74

*Cally Donia*

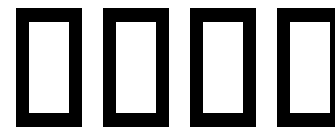
Head in Hands 83

*M. Fae Glasgow*

□□□□

TALLIS

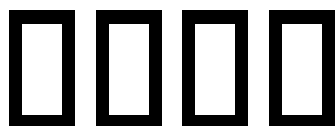
# AND ALL THE SECRETS



---

*This is the first of the Professionals pieces. Tallis says it was inspired by constant daily listening to U2's song Love is Blindness. After a year or so of subjecting herself to the song, And All the Secrets just erupted from her brain. And so somewhat like Bodie in the story, Tallis didn't have a choice. She had to write!*

---



RAY DOYLE AWOKE to the sound of rain pattering unrelentingly on the window pane

and the smell of bacon frying. One slender hand snaked its way out of the untidy mass of covers piled on the bed to scratch drowsily at his nose. He opened his eyes just long enough to read the time on the watch on his wrist. Three hours he'd been asleep. Shouldn't've slept so long, ought to get up. He yawned and scrunched back under the warmth of blankets, ready to drift back for a few more minutes of uninterrupted half-sleep. His head sinking contentedly into the pillow, he was peripherally aware of the thud of footsteps clumping up the stairs, the creak of the door swinging open and the rattle of china and silverware. The smell of bacon grew stronger, insinuating itself into the cozy warmth surrounding him. A muffled grunt accompanied by a dangerous swaying of the bed almost rolled him onto his side and announced the arrival of his very awake and very bulky partner.

"Oi, Doyle." Bodie chirruped brightly. "Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

"Go 'way" Doyle grumbled, trying to fumble the blankets over his head. But his big lump of a partner was sitting on a corner of them and they were going nowhere, pinned by the sheer mass of Bodie.

"Now is that any way to treat room service, mate?" Bodie asked amid the rattle of crockery. "Brought you brekkers in bed." And he plopped a laden tray of eggs, bacon, and toast

unceremoniously on Doyle's supine form.

Doyle stared at him with narrowed eyes.

"This is your wake up call, petal. Half five, as requested." Bodie plucked a slice of toast from the tray and managed to stuff most of it in his mouth. "Time to rise and shine and greet the new day. To say nothing of Cowley who'll be here in twenty minutes." He grinned as Doyle struggled to sit up without upending the tray all over himself.

"Shit." Doyle scrambled to untangle himself from the huge pile of bedclothes, fettered by the tray and Bodie. "Get off the covers, you lug, and lemme out of here."

"What's your rush?" Bodie asked, poking a large strip of bacon into his mouth as Doyle, still clad in yesterday's rumpled jeans and T-shirt, finally extricated himself from the bed and stood on firm, if naked, footing in the chill of early dawn.

"Oh, yeah," he said dropping to his knees and reaching under the bed. "We're supposed to be minding this Cheltenham bloke—" his muffled voice drifted up from underneath the coverlet.

"—sleeping like a babe—" Bodie pointed out.

Doyle pulled a sock and two trainers from under the bed. "—from all and sundry villains and nasties—"

Bodie eyed another strip of bacon. "—if babes snore and wheeze in their sleep—"

"—and the Cow'll walk in," Doyle popped out from under the covers, second sock in hand, "and find us having a nice little lie in instead of keeping watch on his prize witness." Sitting on the cold floor he jammed a foot into the balled up sock.

“Don’t know about you mate, but I want to live long enough to leave this fucking safehouse and—”

“Oh, is that what this is?” Bodie sighed as he lifted the last broken bit of bacon to his mouth. “I’d been wondering what we were doing here, up all night with guns and all.”

“Bloody hell, Bodie,” Doyle said angrily as he viciously yanked tight the laces of his trainer. “Why didn’t you get me up sooner?” He glared up at Bodie who sat on the bed, wide-eyed, licking thumb and forefinger in turn.

“What? And have you lose a single, precious moment of your beauty sleep? Tut, tut, Raymondo...” There was a sudden squeal of tires outside and the sound of a revving engine. Before thought had time to register, the two men were racing out onto the landing and down the stairs, guns drawn and faces intent. The roar of gunfire tore into the quiet morning as the front door splintered and a booted foot kicked it in. Bodie quickly edged his way down the hallway while Doyle circled through the small kitchen, both of them ready to enter, weapons blazing. Amid the noise and chaos, a disheveled, pajama clad figure with greying hair and a look of panic came out from the room off the side and stood, dazed, too scared to move.

“Get back!” Bodie shouted hoarsely from the door. “Get back, you fucking moron!” But the man was immobilized, terrified perhaps by the knowledge that death had tracked him here, to this supposed safehouse where that bastard Cowley had sent him to wait out the endless days before the trial. The intruder had already let loose a barrage of bullets as Bodie watched Chelten slam back against the door jamb, a look of surprise in his eyes, and crumple to the floor, trails of blood streaking the painted woodwork behind him. Bodie easily shot the gunman, bullets tearing into flesh, momentum spinning the body around. Doyle had burst from the kitchen, adding his own impetus to the flailing dance in the center of the room.

The silence was thunderous.

Holstering their guns they stood staring at each other. “Fuck.” Doyle said succinctly.

“Yeah,” replied Bodie, pulling out his RT. “Alpha One. Three-seven...”

By the time he arrived, Cowley had calmed to a dull roar, scowling his way into the crowded house, flipping the sheet unemotionally back to view the dead Chelten, and finally turning his sour

gaze toward his sullen agents idling in the small kitchen.

“How did he find you?” Cowley asked Doyle, who only shrugged and grimaced, hands stuffed into jacket pockets.

“Dunno, sir,” Bodie answered for his partner. “No one knew where he was and we kept our heads down getting here. By the book, sir.”

Cowley grunted. Chelten was the key witness in a case they had all put interminable hours into and his death was going to cripple it. Wasted effort, Cowley thought angrily. But what gnawed at him was how the gunman had known where they were keeping him. As Bodie had said, *by the book*, and he knew the two of them would have been scrupulously careful. He didn’t like loose ends like this. He walked over to the mute gunman, wishing the man could speak. All he said was, “Did you have to kill him quite so dead?”

“DAMN!” Doyle spat as he thumped his glass down on the table. They’d returned to Bodie’s flat after exhausting hours tracking down a dozen dead ends. Nothing. No ID on the gunman and not a murmur on the street about who had commissioned the hit, or how. Bodie just sighed. “How the fuck did they know where to find us? We were as careful as—”

“You’ve said all this before, Doyle,” Bodie said impatiently, twisting his glass in his hand. “Quit worrying it.”

“But it just doesn’t make any sense,” Doyle replied, rising once again to pace the room, Bodie’s dark eyes following his taut form as he bounced from chair to table to window and back to chair again.

Leaning forward in the stuffed chair Bodie grated, “Sit down, for christ’s sake. ‘M getting tired watching you.” He took a slow swallow of beer. “You’ll wear out my carpet.” Doyle looked down at the ugly, speckled brown carpet and raised an eyebrow at Bodie.

Bodie was as tense as Doyle and just as curious as to how anyone could have traced them to the safehouse with Chelten when they had covered their tracks so thoroughly. But it wasn’t in Bodie’s nature to rehash the day, cooped up in his sitting room. He wanted action, movement, a physical release. What he needed was a good hard fuck to make him forget. He ringed the narrow, tapered glass with two fingers, slowly sliding them up and

down the hard, smooth surface. He closed his eyes briefly, imagining the feel of flesh pounding into flesh, the smell of sweat and cum to dispel the lingering memory of blood. He felt a tingle of arousal sweep through him, his cock twitching slightly at the idea. He sank back in the chair, eyes narrowing as he viewed the slender figure of his partner prowl the room.

They'd talked about it once, briefly and cautiously, on a long stake-out when they'd sat up all night over a strip club, the thrumming bass of the band filtering up through the floorboards. Through the muted vibrations and after much cajoling from a bemused Bodie, Doyle had warily admitted that he liked to fuck men, not exclusively, but enough. Bodie had held the confession close, rolling it around in his brain alone at night, a sweet, secret pleasure.

"Jesus, Bodie," Doyle turned on him. "We let the poor fucker get killed. It shouldn't've happened." He moved back to the window, running a hand along the edge of the curtain, peering out into the gloomy dusk, streetlight sheening off the wet streets.

"But it did. So leave it." Bodie shifted in his chair. His skin felt hot and a prickle of sweat slithered down his nape.

"S not that easy for me, y'know," and Doyle came to stand in front of Bodie, one arm wrapped across his chest, hand gripping his other arm. His narrow hips tilted provocatively, his crotch inches away from Bodie's face.

A spark ignited.

His brain screaming and his cock throbbing, Bodie forced himself to move, dragging his gaze up the sinuous body. Their eyes locked and held for long moments, a vicious half-smile on Doyle's lips.

Then Doyle started to spin away in retreat but Bodie grabbed his wrist, holding him locked in an iron grip. Doyle stared down at him, anger filling his features. The touch burned; Doyle's heat branding his skin. "It wasn't our fault, Doyle," Bodie said furiously, his anger hotter than that heat, hot enough to damp it down.

Doyle glowered and pulled away. "It was our fault. We should've seen it coming, been more careful. Then old Chelton would still be living the sweet life and we wouldn't have Cowley breathing fire down our necks."

Infinitely tired of arguing with Doyle, Bodie stood. He wanted to shut Doyle's mouth. The best

way would be to stuff it with something. A thought whispered through his body: his cock, ram it down Doyle's throat. The heat was back. "Dammit, Doyle!" he grated out. "I said let the bloody thing alone. You'd think we'd put the gun to his head ourselves!"

Mid-stride, an angry Doyle spun, fists balled. "We might just as well have done for all the good we did," he half-shouted, pent up fury rolling off him like waves of desert heat.

Needing to move, to put some distance between himself and Doyle, Bodie stepped over to stand near the door. The room was close and hot. The sounds of wet traffic slooshing by outside filtered into the tense silence.

"You fucking don't care do you?" Doyle glared at him. Still pacing, he added, "He's just another meaningless statistic to you, isn't he?"

"Don't be bloody stupid." Bodie ran a hand tiredly back through his hair. "Of course I care. Makes us look like rank amateurs when someone gets snuffed right under our noses." He stared at Doyle, back militarily rigid, hands dangling at his sides.

Anger flaring through him, Doyle crossed the small room in several quick strides and grabbed Bodie by the fabric of his shirt, pushing him forcefully against the wall. The hollow thump of Bodie's body slamming the wall echoed in an eerie, momentary stillness of twilight. "That's it, isn't it? You're only concerned because his death makes *you* look bad."

Faces inches apart, Bodie's nostrils caught the slightly acrid smell of Doyle's uneven breath. "Shut up, Doyle." Bodie snapped, hands lifting to unsuccessfully push his partner away. As Doyle took a small sideways step, his hip and groin pressed into Bodie's thigh and with a shock of recognition, Bodie realized Doyle was erect and hard. The feel of Doyle's hardness against him, the heat of his hands pressing against Bodie's chest, brought a surge of arousal to Bodie. His hands tightly gripping Doyle's upper arms, he stared into Doyle's eyes, watching the flush rise on the uneven features. Slowly, deliberately, arms straining with the effort, Bodie pushed a resisting Doyle down until he was on his knees, eyes level with Bodie's bulging crotch. Risking a countermove from his partner, Bodie released one hand to unfasten his belt and zip. He pulled free his hard, dark cock. Doyle's breathing had quickened but he was staring at the



wall off to the side. “Look at me,” Bodie demanded, oddly enraged and excited by this challenge. “Time to pay up now, sunshine.” One hand clenched tightly in Doyle’s curls, the other lightly caressing his hardness, he forced Doyle’s defiant head towards his arching cock, the glistening tip nudging dumbly at unrelenting lips. Twisting his hand in Doyle’s hair he hissed, “Suck me.”

Doyle dropped his gaze to the prodding flesh and slowly opened his mouth, his tongue sliding out to lick the head of the throbbing cock. A guttural moan escaped from between Bodie’s clenched teeth and a small smile crossed Doyle’s face. Then, Doyle took the cock into his mouth, wrapping his lips and tongue around the shaft, suckling it, worshipping it, seeming to drown in the dark scent of Bodie’s arousal. Tugging, he dragged the obstructing clothes halfway down Bodie’s muscular thighs. One hand slipped up to graze Bodie’s hip and then purposefully slid round to stroke his taut arse, a finger running slowly up and down the crack, tickling, teasing at the sensitive hole, making Bodie quiver and twitch.

Both of his hands entwined in Doyle’s hair, Bodie pulled the mouth close and away, forcing Doyle to engulf his needy cock, and then pulling him back to let the cool air tingle over his nerves. He watched transfixed as Doyle’s cheeks filled and hollowed as they sucked Bodie in. The sounds of sucking and gurgling, of wet balls slapping Doyle’s chin intertwined with the soft moans and sharp rasps of Bodie’s pleasure. Grunting, shoulders pushed up against the wall, his hips jutted forward to allow the probing finger access to the tight channel of his arse. Doyle had two fingers inside him, rotating and scissoring them, his tongue and lips laving the trembling cock, immersing Bodie in an unending cocoon of pleasure. Looking down at Doyle in supplication, he thrust his hips fractionally to force his cock further into the dark warmth of Doyle’s gulping throat.

With the hard wall against his shoulders, the light switch digging into his shoulderblade was a necessary counterpoint to the sweet friction of tongue and teeth on his cock. An unquenchable pleasure began uncoiling through his muscles, his bones quivering, his skin electric with sensation. Suddenly stiffening, his fingers grasping Doyle’s scalp painfully, his arsehole shuddering tightly on the invading fingers, Bodie came, his seed spilling

out in pulsating bursts into the eager mouth. Tension gone from his body, Bodie finally released his hold on Doyle. His limp cock fell from Doyle’s mouth, a sticky string of semen and saliva connecting the tip of it to Doyle’s mouth. Calmly, Doyle wiped the back of his hand across his lips, cleaning away the dribbles of drying cum.

Apart from Bodie’s harsh breathing, the room was silent. Bodie half opened his eyes to see Doyle staring up at him, eyes dark and wild, one hand rubbing at the fabric over his hard cock. Doyle reached up and, with a determined tug, jerked Bodie’s trousers and pants the rest of the way down. His hands pulled at Bodie’s hips until Bodie slid down the wall to his knees. Without comment, Doyle maneuvered him until he was positioned on all fours, legs slightly apart, his pale buttocks upthrust in the lamplight. Fumbling with his own trousers, Doyle managed to get the belt undone and the zip down, his own cock straining and glistening. Spitting loudly into his palm, he rubbed his heated flesh and then centered the thick head, foreskin peeled back to reveal the rosy tip, on the pucker of tight muscle, slowly easing in.

Bodie bit the side of his mouth, focusing on the sharpness of pain and tang of blood.

Doyle sheathed himself halfway and paused, gasping for breath. Whispering “I’m goin’ to fuck you into the floor, cunt,” into Bodie’s ear, he gripped him tightly by the hips and leaned forward, pushing his cock all the way in, no longer able to stay still. He plunged in and out, the hot channel gripping his cock, his balls slapping into Bodie’s arse.

Bodie was on his knees and elbows, his arse high in the air as Doyle thrust over and over again into his flesh. Taunting, he gasped, “C’mon Doyle. Fuck me. Fuck me harder.” He felt a sharp sting on his asscheeks from the flat of Doyle’s hand. Teeth gritted, muscles trembling, he urged Doyle on. “Harder, Doyle. Harder.” The rough edges of Doyle’s zipper cut into the tender flesh of his arse leaving bright marks.

Pounding viciously into the reddening flesh, back arched and mouth open and panting, Doyle fucked Bodie with an impassioned fervor. His hold on restraint almost gone, he reamed into the pliant arse and came with a rumbling wail.

Drained and panting, Doyle’s cock slipped from the warm envelope of Bodie’s arse and he fell back against the wall, eyes closed, damp hair

plastered across his cheeks.

The air in the room felt cool on Bodie's face. He rustled as he shifted position, then, with a tentative touch, he gently rubbed a finger up Doyle's cheek, his thumb lightly caressing the corner of Doyle's mouth. Doyle opened his eyes. Bodie hunkered in front of him, staring intensely. A small smile swept over the pale features and just as quickly disappeared behind a wall of neutrality. They stayed like that, a still tableau in the silent room.

MID-AFTERNOON, the rain had finally relented for a brief time. Walking the few streets back to HQ after a quick, late lunch, Bodie felt a little light-headed, as if the illicit pleasure of walking alongside Doyle in the crisp, winter air might dissipate as rapidly as the pale, grey sun.

"So the guy's a small-time hitman for Leaman's mob and Leaman was worried about what Cheltenham knew about his business dealings," Doyle continued the lunchtime discussion. "But why a suicide run? 'S not very good for business."

A series of busses rumbled past, spewing diesel and passengers. An icy breeze sent a waft of after-shave mixed with fumes past Bodie. "Doesn't build a lot of confidence in your clientele," Bodie smiled. "But it really doesn't matter who he was, Doyle." They walked side by side, almost touching, occasionally separating to weave through the throngs of people rushing to get somewhere before the rains began to fall again.

"Or why he'd be stupid enough to do it."

"Yeh. He should just be glad he died before Cowley got to 'im." Bodie felt an electricity between them as their shoulders brushed. His mind slipped into its favorite pastime of the last week, images of sex with Doyle, hot, slippery memories, a tingle of arousal spiralling through his veins. The image of Doyle, on the precipice of orgasm, head thrown back, body impaled on Bodie's burning cock, sweat sliding down Doyle's chest and hips to pool in the writhing hollows of Bodie's belly.

"Yeh. Guess the question still is how the hell they found us." Doyle skirted a small puddle on the pavement.

"Bastards could've gotten incredibly lucky and chanced on it or..."

"Or they had to have inside information."

Veering closer to Doyle to avoid a large man weighted down with carrier bags, Bodie imagined

he could feel the heat of Doyle beside him. "Yeh, but it was a new safehouse, wasn't it? The cover couldn't've been blown yet." Doyle's hand brushed against his, knuckles lightly grazing the back of it. Bodie's heart thumped a little faster at the touch. He allowed a wave of anticipation to sweep through him at the thought of the sweaty nights to come. He turned to look at Doyle, to share the secret knowledge but Doyle seemed unaware of the contact, head turned to gaze into the shop windows they passed. Bodie gave a small frown, a frisson of uncertainty running up his spine.

"Eh, fancy a drink tonight, Bodie?" Doyle asked. "After this meeting with Cowley?" He seemed so unaffected by their change in status, so casual about what to Bodie was the culmination of the sweetest passion he had ever known. What if Doyle decided he wasn't good enough after all? What if he thought Bodie wasn't worth sticking around for? He cast another quick glance at his partner, the dark curls framing his face bouncing with the rhythm of his walk, mouth set in a half-smile as they dodged round a short, pudgy woman pushing a pram.

Leaning into his partner, Bodie remarked, "Mmm. Fancy more'n a drink," his eyebrow rising in his best come hither look. Doyle graced him with a jab in the ribs and a scowl.

Arriving early for the briefing with Cowley and several other senior agents over preliminaries for a special security op, they sat in silence at the large, pocked table. There was a chill in the gloomy, high ceilinged room.

Cowley, dressed in his black velvet-collared overcoat, began the meeting precisely on time. Bodie shifted in his seat, the aged wood creaking with his weight. Doyle was seated next to him at the table, loose limbs in a sprawl. How could he sprawl in these straight backed chairs, Bodie wondered, catching a glimpse of the long line of legs and torso. While Cowley's voice droned on about checks and perimeters and manpower, Bodie's mind drifted back to what was so ill-concealed by those tight jeans. Doyle's voice broke into his reverie.

"Has anyone taken into account the buildings to the southwest...?"

Bodie's mind sidled back to musing about the long, strong fingers tapping on the tabletop. Fingers that were so adept at wringing pleasure from him. Fingers that had teased his nipples and

ringed his cock.

Abruptly, he felt a sharp, swift pain in his right shin and jolted back to the present and the circle of faces staring expectantly at him. Doyle, quick-witted and surefooted, had kicked him in desperation. His eyes focused on the pursed mouth and piercing eyes of his boss.

“That was a direct question, Bodie, but as you’ve apparently been struck dumb, perhaps your partner is capable of answering it. Well, Doyle?”

And again there was a bruising swift kick, of punishment this time, as Doyle glibly set out more ideas on the op.

Chagrined, Bodie tried to concentrate on the discussion.

Finally exiting the building, feeling like a kid let off for half-term, Bodie rushed his partner into the cold evening, one hand draped over Doyle’s shoulders, the other stuffed in his coat pocket, nervously fingering the car keys. They walked the short distance to the nearest pub as the evening traffic swirled around them.

“Brilliant move in there, mate,” Doyle muttered to him as they crossed the road, dodging taxis and honking cars. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“Ah, c’mon, Ray,” Bodie said, unwilling to divulge what he’d really been thinking about. “It was just the same old lecture. ‘S nothing complicated about this op.”

“How would you know?” Doyle countered. “You didn’t hear half of it, squirming about in your seat like a kid. You’re acting like we could handle this with our hands tied behind our backs.”

“Oh. Fancy a bit of bondage, petal?” Bodie smiled his most smugly gleeful smile. “Ouch!” he yelped as Doyle elbowed him in the side.

“Idiot!” Doyle grinned and pushed the heavy door of the pub open for Bodie.

Scanning the room quickly, Bodie was secretly pleased to find that the only single females in the pub were a pair of overdressed, middle-aged women drinking vodka and limes.

Heading towards the bar, Doyle looked around hopefully then let out a disgusted snort. “Not a single decent bird in here.” He shook his head and frowned. “Two half-pints, please,” he said to the barman.

Bodie leaned in, resting one hand on Doyle’s shoulder, and said into his ear, “Thought you weren’t looking for decent—more like indecent.”

Doyle let out a filthy little chuckle, picked up the

two glasses and headed for an empty table.

They sat in the corner of the bar, Bodie telling fabulous lies and crude jokes, jealously trying to entertain Doyle. Every time the door opened Doyle would look up to see if anyone interesting had entered. He seemed fidgety, thumping his fingers against the edge of the table, playing with the cardboard coaster. His knee brushed against Bodie’s thigh, sending a shiver straight to Bodie’s groin. Bodie knew Doyle wanted a good fuck tonight. So why were they sitting here, not really drinking, when they could be back at Bodie’s flat, ensnared in the heat of each other.

“How ‘bout the other half, mate?” Doyle asked with a nod toward his empty glass.

Bodie wasn’t really in the mood for getting drunk but wasn’t about to go home without the prize of Doyle. He stood and headed for the bar anyway.

Settling back in, he noticed Doyle’s eyes follow an elegantly dressed woman as she crossed the room. Approaching a man she obviously knew, she settled a hand on his shoulder and let out a little laugh, her dark hair falling in front of her face. Sighing, Doyle leaned back in his chair.

Tired and a little worried that Doyle might actually find someone and slip off without him, Bodie leaned across the small table and in a low voice began a long, involved and very erotic tale, a true Bodie confection.

“All lies...” Doyle laughed.

“No, I swear it’s all true, Ray,” he concluded to Doyle’s interjections. He smiled smugly, pleased to have diverted Doyle away from his surroundings. “She could go at it for hours. Something to do with yoga—”

“Stop, stop, Bodie,” a grinning Doyle interrupted. “You’ve got me going something awful. ‘M goin’ to embarrass myself right here and now if you don’t stop,” he added, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

“C’mon, Ray,” Bodie said wickedly. “I know how to fix this,” and he rubbed his hands together gleefully.

“What, you’ve got an easy solution to a hard problem?” Doyle snorted and stood, joining him in the shallows of inebriation.

“Things might be hard just at the moment...” Bodie continued, and, with a hand in the small of Doyle’s back, propelled him into the night.

Lying in the semi-dark watching the faint rise

and fall of Doyle's chest and the dark shadow of curls splayed across the pillow, Bodie shifted to his side. A small pleasure crept through him. Doyle was coming around. This time he hadn't risen after the brief, exhausted sleep after sex and dressed to return to his own flat. Yeh. This time was different. Bodie felt it.

The clouds in the night sky reflected back the light of the city, bathing the room in a faint glow. The sex was intense and as good as he'd ever had. Lyrical. If he were of a poetic turn, that's how he'd describe it. He slowly ran his hand over Doyle's chest, not quite touching, hovering just above the slow-beating heart. It felt as though they had achieved some primal connection, reaching beyond words and thought to create a carnal language.

Rolling onto his back, he stretched and pulled the blankets back up. Smiling, he waited for dawn.

THE RESTROOM at CI5 headquarters was unusually quiet. A small group sat at a table speaking in low voices about the latest in guns, women and football. The dampness of the grey drizzle outside permeated the room, the plop plop of drops on the windowsill adding a counterpoint to the muffled conversations. Murphy was propped in a faded, overstuffed chair, head tilted at a neck-breaking angle, mouth partially open, occasionally punctuating his snoring with a snuffle. Jax arrived in a bluster, moaning out loud about his exile in records, the result of too close a call with Cowley. Murphy awoke with a snort, stretched his long frame and rose. He was pouring a cup of what passed for coffee when a puffing, red-faced agent came charging in.

"Eh, Jonesie," Murphy called. "Cow after you or something?"

"No. Listen," the young agent urged in a serious tone, eyes darting around the room. "I've just come from the computer ops room. Word's just out." His urgent tone cut through the chatter in the room and the attention of the agents shifted.

"What's up, mate?" asked Jax, wandering over and settling on the arm of the sofa. Jonesie nervously looked over his audience. "Well, you know how they've been running a security sweep through most of the agencies?" It was a standard thing, just another run of positive vetting and keeping an eye out for any possible misconduct. Nothing out of the ordinary. They'd all been through these a dozen times before. Not much

ever came of them. "This time they *found* something."

"What?" asked Murphy. "Lucas been caught snapping dirty pictures again?" A few snickers erupted.

"No. This is real," insisted Jonesie. "They've found a leak. In CI5..."

The door opened and Bodie waltzed in followed by a chuckling Doyle. "Hey lads, did you hear about Fiona down in—"

"Shut up, Bodie," Jax barked. "Jonesie here's got some news."

"Well, if it's about Fiona and the Norwegian bloke I heard it first," Bodie said heading for the coffee pot. Doyle grinned, joining the crowd and swinging a muscular leg over to straddle a chair. Bodie scowled at the coffee but poured a cup anyway.

"Go on, Jonesie," urged Jax.

"It's about Humphries," he continued. "In Ops. Seems he'd been havin' it off with a bloke he met in some pub. Turns out he was being blackmailed and was giving them operations info to keep 'em quiet."

There was a general clamor in the room as the agents let loose their surprise and disbelief. "Fucking queer," someone muttered. Doyle went white, all color draining from his face. He gripped the back of the chair with a strength that would have shattered anything else. Bodie, standing with a cup of coffee in his hand was rigid, his face pale and taut. He silently placed the cup on the table beside him. His heart was pounding furiously but his face was expressionless, unreadable. What the fuck had they gotten themselves into, he thought. If a low-level sweep pulled up something of this magnitude then Cowley would probably authorize a full blown one. *Always make sure your own house is in order.* He looked over at where Doyle was sitting. There was an unmistakable rigidity in his partner's back and shoulders. He needed desperately to talk to Doyle, to reassure him.

"Hey, Doyle," Murphy mumbled. "Must be how they found Chelten." Doyle turned his wide gaze toward Murphy, never uttering a word.

"Yeh," Jonesie added. "He had access to information on just about every operation. Poor sod must've been scared to death he'd be found out. Told 'em everything they wanted to know."

Yeh, thought Bodie. Of course he would. The little bugger. What if...? Could've been me, just as

easily. Could've been *us*. And a shiver ran up his spine, knowing that was exactly what Doyle would be thinking.

"Shit, bet the Cow's screaming bloody murder over this," Jax said.

Murphy nodded assent. "Yeh, he'll get rid of 'im faster than a fart."

"Jeez. A fuckin' queer! How'd he ever get into CI5 in the first place?" someone asked. Doyle turned to look at the speaker and Bodie's blood froze at the look of absolute impenetrableness on his partner's face.

"Well, he's done for, anyway," Murphy said. "There's nowhere else for him to go. Who's goin' to hire you after this mob?" It was true. To get into CI5 you had to be close enough to the edge to see the drop. It was a collection of misfits and outcasts. Getting kicked out of CI5 was akin to being black-listed. If you couldn't cut it with Cowley's brigade, then you must be a right nutter, not fit for anything else.

He risked another glance at Doyle and saw the tendons in his hands standing out in stark relief. Those hands... He swallowed hard, felt panic rising inside him. Doyle would not look at him, would not acknowledge his presence in the same room except by his exclusion of him. Just like Da, he thought, a faded memory of his father turning away from him, back as stiff and unbending as Doyle's, surfacing.

A voice broke into his thoughts. "I thought there was something not quite right with him."

Murphy retorted, "Oh, yeah. You can spot a poofter 20 meters away!"

"Naw. But you just *know*."

Do they know? Bodie felt a tremor of paranoia sweep over him. Could they tell?

Rising from the sofa, Jax commented, "So he liked a bit of the other. It's legal, y'know."

"Not in Cowley's brigade, it's not," chortled Murphy.

"Oh, c'mon. The security services are full of 'em," Jax said, pouring a cup of coffee. "Why, I knew a bloke once..."

"Yeh, Bodie," someone called out. "You were a merc. What did you do out in the bush with no women?" Bodie just stared stonefaced, his guts churning and his pulse racing.

"Now, now, lads," Murphy interjected, "we all know Bodie's reputation as a ladies man."

"Hey, Murphy," another agent shouted, laugh-

ing, "what about those long stakeouts—you ever get so randy you thought you'd burst if you didn't get some relief?"

"You mean," grinned Murphy, "a quick wank with the other guy's right hand?"

"You public school lads are all the same," Jax said in mock disgust.

"Bugger off!" Murphy laughed and slapped him on the back.

"Poor choice of words, mate!"

The chatter continued, voices rising and swelling as Bodie stood there, silent and unmoving, watching Doyle's still profile. Suddenly, Doyle rose and left the room without a word or a look to Bodie. Jumping up, Bodie quickly went after him, the sound of Doyle's retreating boots echoing in the empty hallway.

He knew if he didn't get to Doyle right away, talk to him and calm him, then everything would fall apart. He knew his Ray, knew how he hid behind a cloak of righteousness and morality.

"Doyle!" he yelled as he spun around a corner. A door at the end of the corridor swung open.

"Bodie. Doyle," Cowley barked. "My office. Now." And Bodie watched helplessly as he lost all chance to quell the rising waves of fear as they were sent off on separate chores.

BEGGING OFF from the game of darts and the final round of drinks, Doyle slipped out of the noisy pub and into the blustery cold to have an early night and catch up on lost sleep. He hadn't seen Bodie since Cowley had sent them off on different errands earlier that day.

Huddled down in the warmth of bed, he was brought roughly awake by the chirruping of the telephone. Hand fumbling for the phone, the clock fell with a *thunk* to the floor. He rolled, cursing, to his side and managed to pick up the receiver. "This better be fuckin' good," he swore into the mouthpiece, instantly praying that the caller wasn't George Cowley himself. Silence and the faint hum of the wires met his ear. "Doyle here," he said, absently rubbing his nose. There was no response. Struggling to sit up in bed he added, "Hello? Who's there?" and stretched to switch on the lamp. A faint *click* and then the buzz of a disconnected line. Puzzled and angry at his broken sleep, he slammed down the receiver and began the search for the fallen clock.

Sitting in his darkened lounge, Bodie cradled

the telephone in his lap.

DOYLE SAT at the window, looking out at the rain-grey street as a few brave, damp souls skittered toward destinations unknown, bodies and umbrellas bent into the streaming wet. His mood was as grey as the street.

A familiar car pulled to the curb across the street and a familiar figure dislodged itself and plunged into the rain and traffic. A disgruntled horn honked as the figure dodged a path across the road and up the steps to the small shelter of the portico.

The bell rang and Doyle buzzed him in. A minute or two later, a somewhat damp looking Bodie meandered in looking smugly like the cat who had eaten the bird. “Lo, mate,” he grinned, reaching a hand out to stroke a shoulder that, like a cat, suddenly wasn’t there.

“Ere, watch you don’t drip all over the carpet,” Doyle said sullenly, sidestepping Bodie and quickly ushering him on through to the kitchen. “Drip on the lino. At least I can mop up in here.”

Raising a cynical brow, Bodie said sarcastically, “How domestic of you,” then to lessen the harshness, smiled sweetly and wrapped two soggy arms around Doyle, pulling him into a hard embrace.

“Oi! You’re getting me all wet.” Doyle twisted violently. “Leave off,” he complained, finally pulling away. Bodie eyed him uneasily as Doyle maneuvered his way around to the opposite end of the table, quite out of Bodie’s reach.

“S’up, Doyle?” he asked, an edge creeping into his voice.

“What do you mean, what’s up?” Doyle almost shouted. “You bloody well know what’s going on.”

“The sweep,” Bodie muttered, eyes narrowing. He felt his guts begin to tighten, his jaw clenching as he stared unblinking at Doyle.

“Yeh, the fucking sweep.”

“What’s your point, Ray?” He leaned back against the countertop and folded his arms across his chest, knowing the worst was coming yet unable to stop it in its full-tilt rush towards them.

“*My point*, you fucking moron,” Doyle enunciated clearly, “is that *nothing ever happened*. We never did anything.”

“*What?*” Bodie rumbled as Doyle flinched. “It didn’t seem like *nothing* when you were bent over and begging for more!” He leaned angrily over the small table, hands balled into tight fists, and glared at Doyle. “It didn’t seem like *nothing* when you

were stickin’ yer prick up me arse!” he roiled, slamming a fist down on the hard wood of the table, rattling cups and spoons.

“Dammit, Bodie! We could lose our fucking jobs! We could get blacklisted. And over what? A quick fuck or two?”

Silence filled the space between them. A quick fuck or two? A prickly chill ran through Bodie. “C’mon, Doyle. No one’s goin’ to find us out,” Bodie said in a quiet voice.

“Jesus, Bodie.” Doyle was aghast. “It only took a low-level sweep to find out Humphries! Cowley’ll authorize a full blown sweep now. They’ll be looking for *anything*.”

“And they won’t find anything. It’s between us.”

“You’re stupider than you look. They’ll find it if they look hard enough. We’re prime blackmail material and what could be better than a couple of agents in your pocket?” He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand.

“But nobody but us will know.” Bodie felt a wave of nausea rise and grow inside him.

“Why are you being so bloody-minded about this, Bodie?” Doyle asked. “It’s not like it meant anything.”

All air whooshed out of Bodie’s lungs as if he’d been hit. Didn’t *mean* anything?

He felt dizzy, thought he might topple right there. He gripped the back of the chair. In a crippling flash, Bodie saw his life illuminated, all the disappointments, all the betrayals, all the leavings. Doyle was just one more in a long succession of people walking away from him. All the years and what did he have?

He thought of all the books on his shelves he’d never had time to read. Gathering dust. And all the places in the world he’d never been to see. Maps in his head. And all the things he’d never had the guts to say to Doyle. Stuck in his throat. The paths not taken, all because of the fear of disappointment. And here he was faced with Doyle’s indifference instead.

Uneasy in Bodie’s silence, Doyle went on. “Cowley doesn’t like to get caught with his knickers down, especially when it’s his agents’ knickers.” He paused. “It’s not like it meant anything.”

“No.” Bodie felt hollow inside. He desperately wanted a cigarette. He hadn’t smoked since joining CI5 but he needed one now. He needed to feel the burning as he pulled the fetid smoke down into his lungs, the sickening rush of the

nicotine as it hit his bloodstream.

"It was just sex, Bodie." Doyle cocked his head and gave Bodie a funny look. He made a nervous little laugh. The expression on Bodie's face remained unwavering. "It wasn't any more than sex, was it?"

"What if I said it was?" Bodie asked. "Would it make a difference?"

Doyle stared at him a moment. "No." He leaned back against the cooker, hands thrust in his jeans pockets. "It wouldn't." The refrigerator motor cycled on, a low droning filling the small kitchen. "Nothing ever happened, Bodie," he said staring into Bodie's eyes. "Nothing." Then he walked out of the room.

Bodie watched Doyle's retreating back, the finality setting in.

Images raced and flickered through his mind. His da, face drawn and grey, shouting at him, telling him he was stupid and inept, diminishing the small child until he found solace in the hard facade of indifference. The nights, staring into the dark as he listened to his mum weep and his da rage about how stupid they were, how she and the boy were a drain and a waste. He would curl into a ball and rock back and forth, eyes squeezed shut, when his da would come home late and drunk and smack his mum about. The sound of glass tinkling as she fell back against the little table in the corner where she kept her tiny collection of souvenirs from their family trips to New Brighton and Blackpool, little treasures of colored glass and ceramic. The back of his father as he slammed out of the rundown flat into the chill afternoon, leaving the young Bodie standing alone and shivering on the step, fists jammed deep into his pockets.

Not good enough. He and Mum hadn't been good enough for his da. And now Doyle was coldly saying he wasn't good enough for him, too.

He shut his eyes, trying to black out the memories, then, gathering himself together, let himself out of the silent flat.

BODIE PUT the car in gear, released the brake and pulled away from the curb before his partner had time to settle himself in and slam shut the door. "Hey, what's your problem?" he grouched at Bodie who just stared unhappily at the road. Doyle sighed and propped a foot on the dash.

Doyle would leave him. He'd told him so.

They were headed for a street in east London.

Cowley had sent them to pick up Rawlin, a small-time drug dealer with possible information in a corruption case. His last known address was a crumbling walk-up in an area set to be razed to put up more ugly council flats.

Leave him alone and bereft and aching. Bodie wasn't sure he could survive.

He drove automatically, mind slipping and colliding like bumper cars with thoughts of Doyle: Doyle underneath him in bed, heaving and thrashing as Bodie brought him closer and closer to the edge; the image of him in the restroom, back rigid when news of the security sweep had uncovered Humphries' treachery; the look of casual indifference on his face when he'd told Bodie they'd be safer not sleeping together.

They pulled up just down the street from a dilapidated row of buildings. Getting out of the car, Doyle looked up at the overcast sky, muttered, "Bloody weather," and slammed the car door.

Bodie covered the front, strolling up to press the buzzer while Doyle sidled round the back. There was a burp of static from the speaker as Bodie leaned in to speak. "Yes, hullo there," he drawled. "I'm from the council. Is a Mr. Rawlin there?" A curtain twitched inside and a door banged.

He heard Doyle's muffled yell and the thud of footsteps running. Tracking the sound, he took off in their direction, ending up at a deserted building site, rubbish and pieces of pipe scattered among piles of bricks and lumber. He weaved his way through scaffolding, finally spotting Doyle off to his left.

A shot sounded, ricocheting off some metal sheeting. It was hard to tell where it came from. Sounds mixed with traffic and bounced off machinery, masonry and half-built walls.

Gun in hand, he edged his way towards Doyle. Hunkered down behind a clutter of buckets and boards, Doyle silently signalled Rawlin's location. Another shot fired and Bodie quickly joined Doyle in his temporary shelter.

"The little fucker's got us located," Doyle whispered. Cautiously, he peered around the rubble only to pull back instantly as more shots echoed through the site. "C'mon, Rawlin!" Doyle yelled out. "We just came to talk. Put the gun away now."

He was answered by a quick volley of gunfire. Sighing, Doyle looked at Bodie who raised an eyebrow in response. Instinctively reading each

other, Doyle balanced on the balls of his feet then took off running while Bodie let loose a hail of bullets. Bodie watched as Doyle zigzagged a path off to the side. Stupid bugger, he thought to himself. He's not staying down. Rawlin'll spot him in an instant. Get himself killed, he will.

The idea erupted into his brain, as swiftly and dangerously as a bullet. Fear gripped him. And a certainty. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, trying to ignore it, to focus wholly on his surroundings. He moved quickly, diving for a cover that was closer to where Rawlin was. But he couldn't let it go. Like a siren's song luring him ever closer to treacherous waters, the idea beckoned him, her deadly rocks hidden beneath the crashing waves, ready to drown him with her sensuous promises of fidelity and eternity.

Another shot echoed. The bloody bastard's moved, Bodie realized, mentally tracking where the shot had come from. He caught a whisper of movement and knew it to be Doyle circling around.

It was so simple. That was all he had to do. Just drop his vigilance slightly, be just a split second too slow in covering Ray's back, be just that tiny bit derelict and Ray would buy it. He would die here in Bodie's arms and no one would be the wiser. The thought tripped through his mind. *A little death without mourning. No call and no warning. No recriminations, no board of inquiry, no questions. After all, who was to say he wasn't doing his duty? No witnesses, no one to tell. A dangerous idea that almost makes sense.*

And Ray would die. The pain of the thought cut through him like a knife. But Ray would die and Bodie would have him forever. No one would know. *All the secrets and no one to tell.* Ray would be locked forever inside him, his to keep, to cherish, to hold onto until he himself died. The pain of that was nothing compared to the pain of watching Ray walk away, of telling Bodie he wasn't good enough.

Not good enough. Wasn't good enough for Da either. And Da had walked away from him, too, just like Doyle was. He leaned against an unfinished wall, panting. The roughness of the brick cut through his jacket into his back.

He could even do it himself, he thought numbly. No one would know, he kept repeating, no one would know. *Cold steel, fingers too numb to feel. A shot gone awry. Squeeze the handle, blow out the candle.* He could do it and keep the secret buried deep inside him, along with all the treacherous and

hidden demons perched like vultures around his soul, waiting patiently to devour him some dark and unforgiving night.

He caught sight of Doyle again. He crouched down suddenly and Bodie could see that he was listening intently, divining Rawlin's whereabouts before he took another step. Sixth sense he has, Bodie thought. Always knows when there's someone about.

And Ray would never know of his betrayal, would die believing in Bodie, innocent in his faith that his partner would be guarding his back, protecting him with his life. Only Bodie would know and he would never share that betrayal. He would hold it close inside his heart, knowing he would always have Doyle and could rewrite those last few days, mentally erase the argument and the parting and the pain. He could hold Doyle close forever.

Doyle was moving again. Bodie could see him carefully picking his way. The ground was slippery with puddles and mud. A slight movement of color close by caught his eye and he then knew where Rawlin was. And if Bodie could see Doyle then so could... Rawlin rose from behind a nearby piece of machinery, gun aimed unerringly on an unknowing Doyle.

He imagined he could actually see the bullet spinning toward Doyle in slow motion, hear the muted "rrrrr" as it sliced the air in its unwavering path towards Doyle's heart. He saw Doyle turn and catch sight of him staring, frozen. He looked puzzled.

Images filled his brain: Doyle lying bleeding, face white and drawn: Doyle, still as death, tubes stuffed down his nose, body grey and cold as granite: doctors hovering like white wraiths, trying to repair the gaping holes in Doyle's body. His heart thudded in his chest, he could barely breathe, his throat was dry. *NO!* he screamed silently.

Bodie yelled, "DOYLE!" and his partner spun, moving off to the side slightly, grunting as he fell against the bricks. The bullet burned a narrow path across his arm.

"Shit." Bodie hissed. "Doyle!" he yelled, dodging his way through crates and debris, finally bending down next to Doyle. "You all right?" he panted, all the time thinking oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.

The pain must have been excruciating; Doyle's eyes teared behind their closed lids, tiny droplets of



liquid squeezing out and trickling down the sides of his cheeks, leaving bright smears in the dust and grime covering him. He moaned and grasped his arm, and through gritted teeth let slip a “Yeh.” Lifting his hand from the wound he stared at the blood, adding, “Just a crease.” Bodie flinched. “Hurts like all fuck, though.” Doyle’s breathing was heavy. “Be okay in a minute.” He pushed his hair off his face with the back of the bloodied hand.

Bodie took it all in with a tremendous sense of relief, of disappointment, of fear and of guilt. A shot pinged off the pile of bricks they hunkered behind and he leaned around it, getting off several rounds. Sweating, he popped the empty clip from his gun and jammed in a fresh one. Still shooting, he could only look at Doyle in quick glimpses, not daring to let the rest of his attention wander, lest the nightmare begin again. With the will of survival Doyle scrambled for his dropped gun. But it was too late. In a burst of confused retribution, trying to redeem his guilty self from damnation, Bodie went dashing out into the open, drawing Rawlin’s fire. As the gunman moved to shoot, Bodie’s trained soldier’s instincts found his target and drove home the final, killing shot. Rawlin cried out in surprise and then fell. He lay sprawled in the mud and a seeping pool of blood.

Trembling, his whole body gave in to the shock and the adrenalin, breaths coming in short, rapid bursts. He felt like exploding. Damn. Doyle would know. He would take one look at Bodie and read the betrayal in his eyes. He tried to keep his hands steady as he reholstered his gun. He turned his back on Doyle, trying to hide his shame behind a blank facade, trying to return his breathing to normal.

Doyle toed Rawlin’s body with his grimy trainers, scowling. Bodie closed his eyes and tried desperately to regain control of himself. After all, he sighed, he hadn’t done it, he hadn’t let his vigilance slip, hadn’t let his darker side take control and kill his partner. God. His breathing began to slow. He had come so close. He ran a hand back through his already ruffled hair. But he hadn’t done it. He hadn’t let Ray die. He mentally chanted, like a mantra, over and over, penance for his guilt, as he stood back and watched Doyle calling in on his RT. I didn’t do it. Doyle’s not dead.

Pocketing the RT, Doyle turned his angry glare at Bodie. “What the hell happened back there?” Doyle stormed at him, cradling his bleeding arm

with the other. “What the fuck were you doing? I could’ve been *killed!*”

Bodie looked at him, swallowing the dirty truth, burying it deep amid the useless refuse of his soul. About to open his mouth with nothing to say, Doyle’s unflinching gaze penetrated and caught a quick flash of the drowning honesty and knew. Knew without doubt down to his toes. Doyle’s eyes opened wide in astonishment, and horror mingled with dawning understanding. He took a step back and in the action Bodie knew that he was lost, knew that Doyle knew.

As truth bubbled around them, blackness and misery filled Bodie, suffusing through his pores, murdering all hope of redemption. He went deaf, dumb and blind. All he comprehended was the certainty of Doyle standing in mute understanding, sharing the awful knowledge. The ruins of his life loomed ahead like a deep, black canyon waiting to swallow him into the abyss. Everything he had worked for, everything he had ever wanted was slipping quietly away. Everything...was lost.

And then Doyle looked away, his face settling into a blank, and with utter amazement Bodie watched as all the anger and sense of betrayal percolated into the ground. With a flash of horror he suddenly understood.

Doyle knew and would use it against Bodie. He would hold the knowledge above Bodie, flaunt it, use it, weave it into a dark threat. *Thread is ripping, the knot is slipping.* He knew what Bodie was and that comprehension gave him power, infinite and baroque. It was the vilest of secrets and the most viselike of holds. Doyle would flog him with it, drub him into endless submission, bind him with fealty. Oh, Doyle was a fine piece of work and now, the devil incarnate, he owned Bodie. *All the secrets and no one to tell.*

Worlds passed between them. Contracts were signed, souls were bound and Bodie was cast upon a sea of misery. They stood like that, feet rooted in the concrete, staring, not moving as the whine of sirens and screeching tires came tumbling upon them.

RETURNING FROM Casualty with a somber and bandaged Doyle, Bodie pulled up outside Doyle’s flat, letting the motor idle. Silence was like a blanket between them. Doyle reached for the door handle. “See you in the morning, then?” Bodie asked, voice thick with uncertainty.

Doyle turned to look at him, expression giving

nothing away. Bodie stared straight out the windshield, hand tightly gripping the wheel. "Yeah, tomorrow," Doyle replied and he opened the door and slid out.

He watched as Doyle walked away, the world and all its terrible sadness settling heavily on him. From the car he sat staring at the retreating figure in the twilight, envisioning all he had lost, all the wonders and joys and irritations of Ray Doyle that would never be his. Wiping one hand wearily across his eyes, he gunned the engine and pulled into traffic with a small screech of tires.

He knew where to go and it wasn't Soho, with all its glittering decadence. Soho was for teenagers and tourists. Bodie was neither and when his desire arose, when the need was urgent and unforgiving, he knew where to head to slake this need: the dark streets full of hard men and promise, where the night was a cloak of anonymity, and pleasure was like ripe tomatoes ready to be plucked.

Pounding into pliant flesh, one hand gripped bruisingly on a narrow hip, the other fisted on pulsing cock, Bodie let himself drown in the blackness of sex. He'd found a willing body to fuck, one that would ask no questions and carry no guilt. The man had silently hustled Bodie into a dank and smelly alleyway, dropping quickly to his knees to undo the zip on Bodie's trousers and engulf his already hardening cock in the dark warmth of mouth. Bodie had moaned his pleasure, hands entwined in the man's hair, and then, when it seemed he could take no more, he dragged the man to unsteady feet and pushed him up against a rough wall. Not waiting to be asked, the man undid his trousers and half bent, legs spread, palms pressed to the wall, offering himself up to the dangerous, smouldering man. Bodie carefully pressed his saliva-slick cock into the tight ring of muscle, easily pushing through into the tight channel. He grunted. Rocking back and forth, Bodie willingly let himself surrender to the sensations, forcing coherent thought into the cold night. His breath escaped in wispy puffs of white. The wet slap of his balls against the man's bare arse was muffled by the sounds of traffic just a few meters away. He came with a muffled whimper and when the man had finally pulled his trousers back up and left the alley, Bodie leaned blindly against the wall, alone and once again filled with overwhelming misery.

THEY SPENT most of Monday morning work-

ing up reports and filling in forms, drowning in the morass of paperwork that followed the end of any op, especially ones with casualties. Stuck in a small office together, what little conversation they shared was strained and brief, the close quarters feeling hot and claustrophobic. The quiet scratching of pen, the rustle of papers turning and the muted sounds of conversations in the corridor were giving Bodie a headache, the back of his skull pounding at him like the rhythm of the heart still beating in Doyle's chest. Bodie was consumed, his mind replaying every minute of yesterday, watching over and over those horrible moments of dawning horror as Doyle had realized what Bodie had almost done. He could see Doyle's face, eyes wide in anger and disbelief, see the smudged grime on his face, the light filtering through the dark curls, backlighting him with a halo of luminance as sweat beaded with blood on his creased brow.

The chair screeched against the floor as Doyle pushed it back and rose, interrupting Bodie's nightmare. He turned and left the crowded office without a word. Bodie sat staring at the empty chair.

By late afternoon the rain had finally cleared; a wan sun hovered low in the sky but cast no shadows. Bodie watched as Doyle walked out to the car park with Murphy, occasional chuckles punctuating the heavy sounds of traffic. Parting at Murphy's motor, Doyle ambled on towards his own, jangling his keys in rhythm to his steps. Sixth sense prickling, he turned to see Bodie a few meters behind and stopped, patient as a cat in wait. Bodie did not want to talk to Doyle, had been carefully avoiding him all afternoon, his conscience not quite smoothed over enough to face the situation, his own self-created hell. But Doyle was not to be avoided.

"Bodie!" Doyle called, legs apart, uninjured hand on hip, all casual grace and indifference. The cant of his hips was a lure, drawing Bodie, beckoning him. Bodie closed his eyes briefly, the pain of knowledge arrowing through him to rest achingly in his chest. "Listen, mate," Doyle continued, eyes gleaming. "I've been thinking." He gave the keys a little toss, catching them in his palm. "You were right. Nobody needs to know. It can be just between us."

Bodie's breath hissed out; he was rooted to the spot. Doyle's hair ruffled gently in the breeze and he caught a whiff of stale sweat. Then Doyle gave

him a look that pierced him to his core. A look that knew the unspeakable. He shuddered and cursed. Cursed Chelten for getting killed, cursed Humphries for getting caught, cursed Rawlin for not killing Doyle. But mostly he cursed himself for allowing Doyle to own him.

Doyle stepped over to Bodie, grabbed the collar of his jacket and pulled him close. "You want it don't you, Bodie?" he whispered. "You want to get down on your knees and suck me off, don't you."

Bodie looked at him, pleading in his eyes. He licked his dry lips. A nasty little smile crossed Doyle's features. "I know what you are," Doyle breathed, almost inaudibly. It was unbearable. "Get in the car," he ordered, letting go of Bodie and unlocking the door, slipping in behind the wheel.

And Bodie went like a lamb to the slaughter, despite the risk of being seen, of getting caught at what had bitterly driven them apart, for he was bound irrevocably to Doyle and his whims. His pulse raced as he walked to the other side of the car and opened the door. Sliding in next to Doyle, he entered a private world. With the doors closed to the cold and noise, and darkness settling rapidly around them, they were wrapped in a close, timeless world.

Long moments passed. Then, shifting back so that his hips and groin were upthrust, Doyle tersely ordered, "Undo the zip." Bodie obeyed, unbuttoning the jeans and slowly drawing down the zip. "Now, pull it out."

Again, Bodie did as he was told, pushing aside Doyle's shirt and gently slipping the half-hard cock from the confines of soft cotton, fondling it, pulling it, drawing it out to its full, shuddering length. "Ray..." he began.

"Don't say anything!" Doyle snapped. "Just do what I tell you." Bodie met his eyes and saw the determination there. "Now suck me," he hissed.

Bodie bent over in the seat until his face was inches from the dark patch of Doyle's groin. Carefully, he took the hard cock in his mouth, savoured the sour flavor and smooth texture, felt the pulse of blood in the long vein. He lavished the cock with his tongue, tormented it with his teeth and nurtured it with his lips. His left hand reached

down to cosset Doyle's balls, rolling them between thumb and fingers, saliva from his sucking dripping down to soothe the friction.

"That's it, Bodie," Doyle whispered into the darkness. "Yeh, let me fuck your mouth," and his hips thrust upwards, forcing his cock deeper into the suckling mouth. His breath grew harsh and from his lips rolled a litany of curses, of harsh encouragements, of obscenities. With one hand gripping the door armrest, the other clenched at his side, Doyle never touched Bodie.

Bodie's back ached. He was arched over sideways in the small car, one leg pulled up halfway under him on the seat. His own cock was hard, his balls tied in knots as his mouth worked and his mind raced. He was terrified. He knew that this was just the beginning, that this was only a taste of what was to come from Doyle. Doyle owned him, totally and without parole.

Doyle's hips were rocking, plunging his cock in and out of Bodie's mouth. The hardness of the shaft, the unrelenting pounding of it against his throat, began to overwhelm Bodie. He thought he might suffocate, as much from the unyielding drive of Doyle's sybaritism as from the unexpected treasure of tasting and holding Doyle again.

After what seemed an endless succession of sucking and licking, of supplication and atonement, Doyle came with a shudder and a muffled moan, one hand fisted against his lips. Bodie stayed bowed, his cheek resting on Doyle's damp belly, the pungent scent of cum filling the confined space. Gradually, their breathing slowed, came to normal. Doyle's cock rested limply in a shadow of pubic hair.

Urged by Doyle's stirring, Bodie lifted his head and straightened, wiping dried semen from his lips with the back of his hand. They sat in the dark, staring out the windscreen. Bodie could hear the rustle of fabric and the scrape of the zip. *In a parked car in a crowded street, you see your love made complete.*

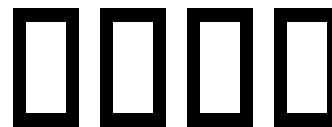
"Don't say anything," Doyle grated. "Just get out."

The car door slammed shut, echoing in the car park. The engine roared and Doyle pulled away, leaving Bodie standing in a cloud of exhaust.

□□□□□

## SHOSHANNA

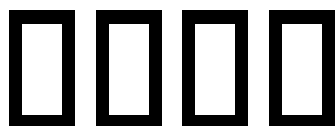
# THE EARTH THAT THEY INHERIT



---

*Two years ago M. Fae Glasgow did a Professionals trilogy of stories entitled Grievous Bodily Harm. It was a bit kinky, delving into S/M. This piece is Shoshanna's extension into that universe. I hope you will find it intriguing and unsettling. And if you are familiar with the famous story, The Lady or the Tiger, then after you finish reading, ask yourself a similar question.*

---



BODIE NO LONGER knew how long he had been blindfolded. He had been standing

when Doyle bound the thick pads over his eyes, and secured the cloth's edges with surgical tape so that he was lost in darkness. He had managed to stand until Doyle had begun turning him about, and he had reeled, and Doyle had sent him to his knees a moment before he would have fallen. Now he knelt, naked and unseeing, listening to the rumble of the music and the silence that was Doyle's presence in the room.

Doyle was there, somewhere; at least, he thought so. He could never hear his footsteps, but sometimes through the darkness and the music's mutter he thought he could hear the door open or close. Doyle had blinded him, and brought the box for him to kiss, and bound him, and turned him, and made him kneel. He was there somewhere, although Bodie couldn't see him, although Bodie felt utterly alone at this moment, knowing that Doyle watched him. Knowing that although he was blind there was light in the room, light that Doyle saw him by. It was as if they were in separate rooms: Doyle in the light with his lover, and Bodie alone with the stripping dark. And Doyle.

His cock throbbed heavily, and he waited. Hands bound behind his back, he couldn't touch himself, couldn't do anything but wait, and know that Doyle watched him waiting. It made him tremble, with anticipation and a little fear. The leather straps were tight around his wrists. He had

never seen them, never seen any of the things Doyle brought out of the box. Had never even seen the box itself; Doyle blindfolded him first, always. But he would bring it to Bodie, make him kiss the cold metal of the lock, before he opened it and took from it something to use. On Bodie. And again, at the end of it all, there would be the sound of the key turning, tumblers clicking into place, locking it all away, and the metal against his lips for a moment. The blindfold itself was all Bodie had ever seen.

A touch, sudden, against his thigh. Bodie jumped, and an open palm struck him across the face in rebuke. Doyle was there, then, near him. He turned his face up, skin stinging across his cheek, searching.

"You want my cock?" Doyle's voice was hoarse, harsh.

"Yes, sir."

Another slap, harder. "You want to suck my cock?"

Bodie strained to smell the damp heat of Doyle's groin. His mouth was watering, craving the hard thrust of cock inside it. "Yes, sir, please..."

"Beg for it."

But Doyle was gone; the heat of his nearness was gone from Bodie's skin. The low beat of the music muffled everything; Bodie was alone again, in the empty black. He flailed his head from side to side, not in refusal but in a desperate attempt to find something, to find himself. "Sir, please..." He hardly felt real, he was real only where Doyle touched him. Nothing touched him. He wanted to

be hit again, to feel Doyle's hand crack across his face, his stomach, the soles of his feet; he wanted Doyle's cock to make space for itself deep inside him, make him as it thrust home. "Please," he said again, and hearing the quaver in his own voice he flinched, humiliated; but even humiliation was better than nothing. And he was alone; there was no one to see. Except Doyle, watching.

His voice was shaking. "Please, sir, let me suck your cock. I can do it good. Better than anyone. Please let me suck you..." He was begging, hot with shame, on his knees and blind and begging the darkness to provide. He craned forward, hoping, rising up a little and opening his mouth, craving to be filled. The emptiness might have gone on forever, the lightless desolation he was lost in; and at the same time he knew that Doyle was watching him. Doyle saw the red wetness of his tongue and the sweat on his face, although he himself could scarcely remember his own body. He was alone, and Doyle watched him, and Doyle could withhold his touch. "Please, sir. Oh, God, please..."

Then he was gripped, hard, at the nape of his neck. His heart leaped, but he was well-trained; obediently he froze, barely breathing, while fingers dug into the tendons of his neck and the point of a knife slid down from his shoulder and along his arm, sharp and cold. Was it cutting him? He couldn't tell; it might have been parting the flesh so cleanly that it drew no pain behind it, left no blood upwelling in so shallow a slice through skin. He was that swath of flesh now, that sweep drawn from neck to arm to wrist, marked out by the pinching pain at the base of his skull and the knifepoint sharp against his pulse. A moment it held there; and then it turned and sliced upward, cutting through his bonds, jerking him backward and off-balance for a moment until the leather snapped.

Shoulders aching, he brought his hands around and clasped them in front of his groin, not touching himself; that lesson had been well-taught. Not to touch himself without permission, not to come, not to cry out in pain unless he was told to; he was bodiless and silently, obediently desperate to be flesh at Doyle's command. He was afraid, not that he would be hit again, but that he wouldn't. Once, angry, Doyle had threatened to stop the scene and walk away, leaving him unbound and lost; he had nearly done it, and

Bodie shuddered with terror at the memory.

Something prodded at his fingers, and he opened them to take it in. Long, cool, slender and slightly curved: a dildo, plastic falsity, ending obscenely in midair without balls or body or soul. Bodie mourned the mocking gift, and waited to be told what to do.

"You want me." Doyle's voice was cool, level, and with a tinge of mockery of its own. "You want me to put my cock in your mouth. Don't you?"

"Yes, sir," Bodie responded obediently, miserably. "Please, sir..."

"Why should I?"

There was no answer Bodie could give. Why should he, indeed? He knelt, silent, and was jolted by a lash that struck white sparks from his back, and the crack of Doyle's voice, angry. "Answer me, boy. Why should I? Are you any good?"

Pain burned a pungent line across Bodie's shoulders, but the thin whippy thing wasn't what he wanted; he wanted Doyle's hand against his skin. And more. He licked his lips and let his need force the words past humiliation and fear, knowing that Doyle saw his shame and his desperation.

"Yes, sir, I'm good. I can—I can suck you so well, you'll love it. Best you've ever had. Just let me—" His voice shook. "Just put it in me, please, sir..."

"I can fuck anyone I want," Doyle said scornfully, and Bodie knew it was true. "Show me why I should bother with you."

Confused, uncertain, Bodie lifted his head. "Sir?"

"Show me. On the dildo. Show me what a good cocksucker you are."

No. Oh, no. Cold hands lifted the plastic thing to his lips, fumbling to find, good Christ, the right end; Doyle couldn't mean to make him do this. Suck the lifeless plastic, like a performing dog, playing his tricks to be watched, stared at...the dry end touched his lip and he choked, helplessly.

"You've got ten seconds," Doyle said, and his voice was far from where Bodie knelt. "Or I'll go and find someone else."

Black expanse all around him, Doyle perhaps already half out the door; he would do anything to stop Doyle leaving. Anything. He opened his mouth and put the thing inside.

"Not good enough," came Doyle's voice, and it was closer now; Doyle had come closer to him. "I like to fuck your throat, you know that. Show me

you can take me deep and hard, the way I like it. Shove it down your throat, boy.”

Bodie clutched the thing’s end in both hands, convulsively. If it brought Doyle closer to him, if it was what Doyle wanted to see him do, if it would bring Doyle’s cock in his mouth and let him stop this horrible performance... He dug his nails into the hard plastic, into the backs of his hands, and forced the thing farther into his mouth, choking, so that tears wet the pads over his eyes, but taking the whole length of it into his throat and holding it there for a moment, as long as he could, before pulling it out again with desperately-feigned reluctance.

“Oh, that’s good,” he heard Doyle say, and with a jolt in his chest he heard the deeper note in Doyle’s voice, heard how close he sounded, though when he was silent Bodie might have been alone in the universe. “That’s good, boy. Suck it.” Encouraged, hoping, Bodie put the thing into his mouth; and when a hand covered his on the blunt end and shoved it deep, gagging him again, he scarcely noticed the pain for the blessed heat of Doyle’s hand on his, forcing his fingers tight around the plastic, refusing any negotiation. “Suck it deep.” He obeyed, knowing that Doyle wanted to see him do it, able to do it with Doyle forcing him; he took it so deeply that his fist, around the dildo’s base, was against his mouth, and exulted when an alien finger traced his lips where they stretched wide before letting him go.

A little bolder now, a little daring, he didn’t pull the thing completely out. He was a good cocksucker, he’d said, and Doyle wanted to see proof; so he kept it partway in his mouth, slipping it fractionally in and out, as if it could respond to teasing. Working by touch, alone in the dark—for Doyle had left him again, and he hoped to get him back—he even put his tongue out, running it along the plastic tip, feeling the seam where the mold had joined. He knew that Doyle was watching him, watching the picture he made, and he held the dildo before his face, licking it, embarrassed but trying to prove his skill. *I’m a good cocksucker, sir, please...* Worse than the embarrassment was the fear, so he performed. “Very nice,” said Doyle, distantly approving.

The music stopped, with the rattle of the tape player halting, and he heard the sounds of Doyle slotting in another cassette. He’d never even seen the tapes that Doyle played during these scenes,

had no idea what the music was called, if it had a name at all. None of it had any words, and scarcely any melody: low, rhythmic, atonal, the instruments electronic or unidentifiable. The new tape was darker, faster than the last, not energetic or aggressive but more intimate. Ominous.

“Yes, very nice,” Doyle continued, as if there had been no interruption. “I like watching you suck that thing.” Bodie felt himself flush; he tightened his grip on the dildo in his hands, half in the shame of exposure and half in mute hope. Would Doyle touch him now, let him stop and touch him?

“But you want more than that.” Doyle said, and he sounded angry again. “You’re greedy, boy. You think you deserve more than to suck my cock. But you don’t even deserve that, do you? Do you?”

“No, sir,” Bodie muttered, miserable and afraid. Would Doyle leave him now?

“Damn right you don’t. But you think you do. You don’t just want me to put it in your mouth, you want me to fuck you. You want me to fuck your arse, boy. Admit it.”

Bodie’s gut convulsed. Was it possible that he—? Doyle rarely would, at least in a scene. And outside of one, Bodie almost never asked. Stammering, terrified of saying the wrong thing, he managed, “Yes—yes, sir. I want you to—”

“To what?” The accusing voice was suddenly behind him, and when Bodie involuntarily half-turned, startled, the lash caught him across the tops of his thighs, a burning reminder that he hadn’t been given permission to move. In front, behind; Doyle must be circling him, then, watching him from all sides.

Bodie bowed his head, stilling himself, wondering if Doyle could see the welt he felt rising on his legs. He still held the dildo, his fingers clammy with spit. “I want you to fuck me, sir.” His own voice sounded hoarse and alien. Was it really him, begging for such a thing?

“You do, do you?”

“Yes, sir.” The silence seemed expectant; he tried again. “I want you to fuck—fuck my arse, sir.” He did; at least, he thought so. He knew that Doyle wanted him to say it, and he did want to. But saying it aloud... If Doyle would only come to him now, it would be all right.

“Show me.”

Bodie went cold with shock. Doyle couldn’t mean— He nearly dropped the dildo, clutching it when it slipped, afraid of what Doyle would do to

him if he actually dropped it. But to do that, for Doyle to watch...

Doyle would watch him. He was alone with Doyle. It would be all right, and if he did it well enough, Doyle would come to him. He clung to that thought, dizzy again without sight or touch. Slowly, so slowly, he began to kneel up. His cock, hard and softer by turns since the darkness had begun, was limp and sagging, as with one hand he held the dildo upright between his feet, and set himself, with a twist of almost-nausea, to lower his arse down on it.

It was actually touching him, prodding at the dry flesh, when Doyle stopped him. "Not like that," he said, and Bodie's burst of hope for reprieve turned to bile as he heard the lilt of amusement in Doyle's voice. "Not like that, boy," Doyle repeated, sounding as if he were smiling. "I can't see you well enough like that. I can't see you fuck yourself with that thing if you're sitting on it, can I?" And the lash just touched him, lightly, with Doyle's last words, so that Bodie knew what was required, and managed to answer, obediently, "No, sir," while he hovered over the plastic point that wanted to spear him, his legs quivering as the new welt burnt over the old.

"I can't see you shove that thing up your arse like that," Doyle went on, ignoring Bodie's words. "And you'd better let me see it. If you know what's good for you."

Then he was gone. Alone, without direction, Bodie strained to hear, to smell, even to feel the faintest breeze that might be Doyle's passing; but no sound rose over the bass mutter of the tape, his nostrils were empty, and nothing touched his skin. For all that his half-real body could tell him, Doyle might have left the flat altogether. But he wouldn't have. He wouldn't have, because Doyle wanted to see him fuck himself on the dildo, and if he did it—if he could do it, Doyle wouldn't leave. If he performed, displayed himself well enough, maybe Doyle would—he was afraid to think that Doyle would fuck him, but maybe Doyle would touch him. Would come back to him, hit him or put his cock in him, save him from being alone in the dark. For that, he would do anything, would even bear the awful blind mortification of the display Doyle wanted to see him make. For Doyle. Because Doyle wanted to see it.

Hesitantly, he brought the dildo out from underneath himself. He had to move, he supposed;

speaking without permission was worse than moving without it, so he didn't ask, but only lay down on his back, feet apart, his knees high. Was Doyle watching him, looking up between his legs?

"Wider," said Doyle, and, "Get it wet."

He couldn't tell where the voice had come from, couldn't even tell if Doyle had perhaps moved again as he spoke. Was Doyle watching his face, his cock, the crack of his arse? Bodie mouthed the dildo again, hating the flat artificial taste, but still grateful for the instruction; the thing's press against him, before, had told him how much it would have hurt otherwise. He would have welcomed the pain, begged for it, if it had been Doyle bringing it to him.

"Wider, I said!" The lash struck his left calf, and he reached up and pulled the leg up and back with a hand behind his knee, thigh burning with the strain, left foot waving in air. Doyle wanted to see him, so he had to. Trembling, he tried to relax his arse for Doyle's gaze, though at the same time he cringed from the thought of what he must look like, what Doyle must be seeing.

"Go on, then," said Doyle. "I want to see you get fucked."

Bodie clung to the memory of Doyle's voice. Spine curved taut and aching, he took the dildo from his mouth, spit dripping from it onto his hand, and reached over his leg and crotch to push its tip against his arse. His balls were flaccid against his wrist, and he could hardly breathe; his hand was shaking. "Sir...please..."

"Do it," said Doyle, and suddenly he was very close, his voice next to Bodie's ear. But even before Bodie could stifle an abortive turn of the head, the low, rough words were coming from somewhere below his feet. "Show me what a good fuckhole you are. Show me how much you want it, and maybe—maybe you'll get it."

Bodie gasped and desperately, before he could lose his nerve, pushed. The dildo went in an inch or so, the molded plastic cockhead cold and hard inside him, and he winced in pain, trying not to make a sound.

"Now push it in, slowly," Doyle said. Bodie cringed from the intensity of his voice, the fierce attention it implied; he couldn't bear the thought of being seen like this, ugly and degraded, a plastic cock stuck halfway up his arse. But to be alone would be worse, he reminded himself almost despairingly; Doyle wanted to see him, so it would

be all right. The force of Doyle's scrutiny was a lifeline of wire that cut into his flesh when he clutched at it.

He'd been given an order, and he couldn't imagine anything worse, at this moment, than Doyle becoming angry enough to leave him like this. He breathed out, trying to hollow himself, and pushed the dildo deeper, feeling it prod inside him, nestling obscenely in his gut. He grunted with the shock, and under the music he thought he heard Doyle's breath catch as well; the faint sound struck into him and, emboldened, he shifted his grip, pulled it out a little and pushed it back in. If Doyle liked what he saw...

"That's good," said Doyle, hoarsely, and Bodie rode a dizzy wave of hope. "I like that." It was all right; Doyle watched him and it was all right. He was doing what Doyle wanted him to, and he could bear it, in the dark. For Doyle.

"Twist it," Doyle ordered. He obeyed, and the hard tip rubbed his prostate, making his cock jump unexpectedly. "You like it, don't you?" Doyle accused. "Keep going." Bodie had frozen momentarily; but obediently he began again, pushing and pulling the alien thing in his arse, twisting it a little. Did Doyle want him to like it? Want to see him—getting off on it? The thought of Doyle wanting that, and the rubbing on his prostate, was sending a slow pulse to his groin; the motion of his wrist brushed his cock and it rolled, stiffening slightly.

Doyle was silent for a long time as Bodie worked the dildo inside himself, long enough for Bodie to begin to be afraid. Hoping to please, he gritted his teeth and shoved the thing in again, and pushed his buttocks up to meet it in a horrible parody of desire. "I like that," Doyle said then, from somewhere beside him, and Bodie almost sobbed with relief. He wasn't alone. He could bear Doyle's eyes on him, even now, as long as Doyle didn't leave him alone and blind and lost.

"You look a proper slag," Doyle told him. "Knees up, arse packed full. Proper little whore. Go on, show us how much you like it." Bodie, panting, obeyed, pushing the thing awkwardly in and out, trembling with humiliation made even worse by the knowledge that his cock was swelling, that Doyle could see him getting hard for this piece of plastic. There was scorn in Doyle's voice, and Bodie cringed, all the while longing for Doyle's voice if he could have no more of him. He whimpered, and then flinched at his own forbidden sound, half

fearing, half hoping for the blow; but Doyle only laughed.

"Yeh, you love it. Crying for it, you are. Ought to make you take that thing back out of your arse and suck it, dirty like it is. You'd do it, wouldn't you?"

The thought nauseated Bodie; bile surged in his throat, and he knew that if Doyle told him to, he would. Would suffer any degradation for Doyle to watch, if Doyle wanted to see it. Alone in the dark, with Doyle. But, mercifully, the command did not come; instead, he thought he heard Doyle moving toward him, felt a tingle in his legs that might have meant Doyle stood nearly between them, and he longed to bring his legs together, to feel Doyle's solidity against his shins.

"Go on, boy," Doyle told him. "Make it good enough, and maybe you'll get something better than that toy. Maybe I'll let you have mine, in a while. If you fuck yourself well enough. Get it up, boy. Give us a look at that cock of yours. I want to see how much you want it." And Bodie worked to obey, screwing the cold plastic into himself, trying to find his prostate again, trying to will himself hard for Doyle to see. Surreptitiously he rubbed his wrist against his balls; not having been given permission he couldn't pull his cock. But the burning knowledge of Doyle's eyes on him helped, even as he shrank from it; Doyle wanted him hard. Doyle wanted to see him hot for it. The thought of what Doyle might give him if he pleased him made him shudder. He wanted Doyle to touch him, to hit him, wanted suddenly to be hit on the cock, to have his balls pulled and twisted until he screamed, just so they would be *there*, would be real under Doyle's touch. Gasping, he shoved his hips up to meet the dildo's thrust, twisting them so that his cock rolled against his arm, hot and aching.

"That's good," said Doyle, intently.

Bodie's cock burned. He needed to touch it, knew that he couldn't get as hard as Doyle wanted him to be if he didn't. But he couldn't. Unless—"Sir?"

"What, boy?"

"Permission to—to touch myself, sir?"

"You want to play with yourself, do you?" Bodie couldn't answer; but, thankfully, he didn't have to. "Go ahead," Doyle told him.

Letting go of his leg, Bodie took his cock in his left hand, hips juddering upward at the touch. "Hungry, aren't you?" he heard Doyle say. Blood



was rushing in his head, swelling in his groin; he was hard now for Doyle to see, still shoving the dildo in and out, squeezing his balls and pumping himself. “Yeh, you love it. What a sight you are, boy. Turning on to a plastic prick. Quite a sight, isn’t he?”

“Oh, absolutely,” said another voice.

Bodie screamed. Clawing at the floor, trying to get up in a convulsive movement that toppled him sideways as the floor crazytilted under him, the dildo wet and repulsive sliding down his leg; pain yellow hotwired through his hip as he fell and scrabbled, heaving, screaming again— “Ray? Ray, is there someone here, God, Christ, Ray—” gagging, bleeding, naked and alone and someone there *seeing* him flailing, desperate—

—and Doyle was there, pulling him backward, yanking him back against the hard reality of his own chest, fingernails in his arms, legs pinning his struggles to the mat, one hand clamping his skull and Doyle’s mouth close by his ear. “Shh, Bodie. Be quiet. I’m here.” A wrenching twist away was forcibly subdued, a leg thrown over his, until it was as if Bodie were strapped into a chair that was Doyle, with the straps Doyle’s own fingers, on the mat with Doyle’s body smothering, from behind, Bodie’s retching shudders.

“Is there someone here?” Tears were soaking the pads over his eyes, he could feel them, and although Doyle clamped him so tightly he could scarcely move he was shaking, trembling, terrified; he dug his fingers into Doyle’s arms. “Ray?”

“Sh. I’m here.”

With Doyle behind him, the whole looming emptiness before him pressed on his skin with the weight of unseen eyes; Bodie shook his head violently, wanting to run the length and breadth of the room, wanting to huddle in Doyle’s grip as if the narrow muscular arms could hide him. “Sh, Bodie,” Doyle said, and Bodie tried to obey, tried to stop shaking and choke off the screaming breath in his lungs.

Doyle’s arms didn’t loosen, even when the ratcheting heaves eased a little; Bodie’s wrists were gripped and his arms doubled and pinned against his own chest, body pinned against Doyle’s. The music had stopped; Bodie could hear only his own rasps for breath, and the heartbeat hammering at his ribs. The pads over his eyes were soaked, the tears still leaking from beneath them, and he felt Doyle’s body grappling his, his shudders vibrating

through them both until they shook together with his fear, barely calmed.

Doyle shifted a little behind him, and Bodie felt the press of his erection against his back. For a moment it meant nothing to him, until Doyle said, quietly, “Spread your legs.”

Bodie convulsed, fighting with absolute, frantic denial, alien eyes like needles piercing his naked skin; and Doyle held him down easily, rode the struggles that left him gasping. “Spread your legs,” he said again, and his voice was even, almost gentle. “Boy.”

Exhausted, almost sobbing, Bodie obeyed helplessly. Doyle’s legs opened to let him move, and when one hand let go of him and Doyle leant away, the cold air against his skin where Doyle had been was worse than any blow. He could feel the motion of Doyle handling something, the muscles shifting in his shoulders; and then Doyle’s hand was back, fingers uncurling Bodie’s clenched fist, and the dildo was put into his hand.

No. Please, God, no... “No,” he whispered, and the grip on his left wrist tightened warningly. “No, I—sir, please... Ray, please, is there someone here?”

Doyle’s fingers touched his neck and pressed, not lightly, at a spot where more pressure would leave him choking for breath. “Do it, boy.” The gentleness was gone; his voice now was as hard as the threat at Bodie’s airway. “Do it because I want to see it.”

The other voice hadn’t been familiar. At least, Bodie thought not. He shied away from the memory even as he tried to recall it; it had been a man, and he had said something about him, about how he looked. Was it someone he knew? Someone from the squad? Or had Doyle brought a stranger, or some friend of his own, into the flat after Bodie had been blindfolded? The more he tried to recall its sound, the more the alien voice slipped away from his mind’s ear; now he wasn’t even certain that it had been a man at all. A deep-voiced woman, somewhere in the room, eyeing him as he wallowed on the floor in unwitting exposure?

“You’ve got ten seconds,” said Doyle. Again. And Bodie, sobbing with fear and desperation and self-disgust, reached down, leaning forward in Doyle’s grasp, and pressed the dildo’s tip against his arse. It slid in before he expected it, greased to his surprise with something wet and slimy; he gasped and gagged at the sensation,

spasming in the cage of Doyle's arms.

"That's good, boy," said Doyle, by his ear. "Spread your legs. I want to see you take it." And Bodie obeyed, working the thing in through flesh that crawled with revulsion, terrified at every moment that the strange voice would speak again, or that Doyle would leave him alone with the unknown other, watching.

Doyle shifted behind him, digging his erection into Bodie's skin. The firm press of his body against Bodie's was a comfort; Bodie pressed back against him as if he could find refuge there from the threat before him. His back, his arms were solid against Doyle's flesh; the welt across his shoulders was a welcome pain, flaring reassuringly when Bodie twisted to push himself against Doyle. The dildo in his arse gave a sucking sound as he pulled it out, and he cringed.

"Go on," said Doyle, and strong legs levered his own further apart. "Show us how much you like it." Bodie flinched violently at the plural, afraid even to wonder if Doyle meant it literally. He was still shaking. Like it? He had no hope of getting an erection, shrank from the thought.

"Go on, boy," said Doyle again, and Bodie, through his own misery, could hear his voice deepen. "I want to see you take that thing. Want to watch you get fucked. Get it up, boy; I want to see that cock of yours." His arms tightened around Bodie, and Bodie felt a desperate resolve take hold of him. Gritting his teeth, he shoved the thing into himself and deliberately twisted it, until it struck his prostate almost painfully and he felt his cock jump in unfeeling reflex. He couldn't, not even for Doyle. But if he tried hard enough, if he shut his mind to the unknown horror of the unknown watcher and struggled with all his desperate strength to do what Doyle wanted him to, perhaps it would be all right. Perhaps Doyle would forgive him, would relent and let him stop; and anchored in Doyle's arms, fixed and solid in the hold of his body, so that he couldn't fall away and be lost, and with his shivering muffled in Doyle's unyielding grip, it was possible.

He worked the dildo doggedly, in and out of his arse. Another scrape across his prostate made his cock jerk again, pulsing, and the momentary hope was drowned in helpless humiliation, as he remembered the other, watching him. But Doyle muttered, "That's good. Do that again," and obediently he did, internal pressure and the rough sound of

praise sending another throb through him. "Good boy," said Doyle.

Painfully, fractionally, Bodie's shuddering rigidity slackened. Doyle was holding him, gripping him inflexibly, and every time Bodie's cock throbbed, whenever he felt it swell, Doyle's voice encouraged him. Bodie forced his mind away from everything that wasn't his own flesh and Doyle's, squeezed his eyes shut behind the blindfold until his solitary darkness was lit with orange flashes, and barred all knowledge of anything beyond his body and Doyle's, until Doyle's solidity was his only anchor. The dildo moved more easily within him now, and he was half hard already when Doyle's hand left his throat and reached down to enfold his shaft.

Bodie cried out, hips jerking upward involuntarily; Doyle was touching him. Was pulling his balls, hard, away from his body and then rolling them against the base of his shaft; his own wrist brushed Doyle's as he froze, the dildo half in, half out. He whimpered, trembling between the hard plastic up his arse and the fingers testing his scrotum, drawing light nail-scratch lines along his length to flick at his foreskin. "Sir," he said, helplessly, filled with a desperate, soaring hope. "Sir, please..."

"Fuck yourself, boy," was all Doyle said, but the fingers moved again, tightening on him as he hurriedly obeyed, shoving the dildo in, gasping as the surge caught him from inside and out. "Good boy," said Doyle. "You know what I want."

And he did; Doyle wanted to see him come. Wanted to see him come for the plastic thing up his arse. Wanted to watch him come—Bodie shied away from the thought that Doyle wanted him to come for someone else's eyes to watch, and focussed desperately on Doyle's voice, the only sound beyond his own sobbing breath, deep and insistent as the absent music. "Go on, boy. Fuck yourself on that thing. Such a slut, you are—I love to watch you. You love having that thing up your arse; all hard and hot for it, you are. You know you love it. Admit it—" and finger and thumb suddenly snapped tight around his scrotum, yanking until Bodie almost screamed, babbling "I love it, sir—I love it—" and he didn't know whose hand shoved the dildo deep inside him, whose hand stripped his cock, and Doyle whispered harsh in his ear, "Shoot for me, go on," and Bodie screamed again in pain and fear and sobbing release, coming with little

pleasure but with desperate, all-encompassing relief; he'd done it, he'd done what Doyle wanted, was there someone there even now seeing him coming in Doyle's hand—

—and even before he had caught his breath, before the last racking pulses had spilled from him, Doyle rolled him onto his side, pulled the dildo from his aching arse, and forced his cock inside. It hurt, Doyle thicker than the dead thing in Bodie's still-convulsing gut, and Bodie welcomed the pain, pushed back against Doyle's thrusts, clutching behind himself at Doyle's jolting hip. "That's good," Doyle was muttering, "that's so good, oh god, yeh, I love you," and in one bursting moment Bodie wanted him to say it again, wanted the stranger in the room to hear what Doyle had said, filled with pride and relief and exultant joy as Doyle stiffened and clawed at Bodie's chest as he came.

For a while he lay gasping, locked in Doyle's arms, Doyle shaking now, too, against him. Exhausted, he didn't move when Doyle's cock, limp, slipped from his arse, and Doyle's arms tightened once before opening, as Doyle pulled away, leaving him lying on the mat, streaked with sweat and his own semen. At the rattle of the tape being removed from the player, however, he heaved himself carefully up, settling as ever on his

knees. He knew he was to clasp his hands together, but before he did so he felt the whip-weals on his thighs, curiously; slightly raised, they burned when he touched them. Minor enough. His arse was sore, and his head rang with fatigue and aftershock, but the darkness no longer made him dizzy, and if he concentrated he could follow Doyle's barefoot steps. He couldn't hear any others, but that didn't mean anything; he preferred not to wonder.

Doyle came back to stand before him. Bodie waited, surprised when Doyle only stood there for a moment, silent. He heard him take a shuddering breath, but when he spoke his voice was steady.

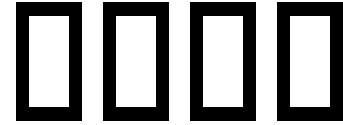
"Will you kiss the box, Bodie?"

Doyle had never asked before. Bodie nodded, understanding the question. "Yes." He didn't want to know any more than he did. Never wanted to know if there had been someone there, watching him writhe in mortifying display, and hearing Doyle say—what he had never yet said.

The cold metal was against his mouth, and Bodie pressed his lips to it, so that they clung slightly when Doyle took it away. He knelt, listening to Doyle leaving to secure the box wherever it was kept between these times, and waited for him to come back. To take the blindfold off, and bring him home.

□□□□□

IF I FELL



*This is the final Professionals piece and the title, of course, is from the Beatles' song. As is to be expected in a story set immediately after the Ann Holly incident, the wee Scot must deal with Doyle's reaction to Bodie's bugging of his flat. You might think there would be fireworks and there are—but of a different nature entirely...*



*Author's note: this is set immediately after the events in Involvement.*

COULD BE ANY NUMBER of things brewing under that storm cloud, Bodie told himself, acutely aware of the sharp unease of Doyle sitting next to him. And finding out what wrath was nursing itself into that gathering storm wouldn't be pretty, and it'd be a far sight from pleasant. Nodding politely at the couple edging past their small table, Bodie managed to catch a glimpse of his friend's face, that instant long enough to confirm that the green eyes were still focussed on some inner distance, that the mouth was pursed as if after lemons. Oh, yes, there was something brewing in there, and if past experience was anything to go by, it was going to be either a brood to put an entire hen-house to shame, a flood of misery no Ark could ride out, or a binge well out of even Cowley's range. A tiny movement, stifled almost immediately, but Bodie was minutely attuned to all of Doyle's constrained tightness, and he saw the clenching of the fist before it was deliberately relaxed, the hand opened and brought up to fiddle, apparently casually, with the soggy beer-mat in its miniature ocean of spilled booze.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bodie observed his partner, nothing more, simply sat there beside Doyle quietly and watched and waited, as if Doyle were some mad bomber that had to be handled with care or else the entire city would end up blown to smithereens. An exaggeration, but not by

much, Doyle's rages infamous even in so seriously misfit a group as CI5.

"Ready for another?" Bodie asked, rising smoothly to his feet to push his way to the bar, not waiting for Doyle's answer: it would only be stropky, or nasty, or maudlin, a time-waster until Bodie would go and get what they both needed. With the press of people and the ineptness of a new barman, it took several minutes, time enough for Bodie to be eyeing their corner with concern, Doyle not safe to be let out on his own tonight, and this delay long enough to give the dozy bastard enough rope to hang himself and anyone else unlucky enough to get in the way of his mood.

Another few moments ferrying the drinks through the crowd, and Bodie could see him, Doyle sitting there like his very own tempest just waiting to happen. "Get your laughing gear around this," Bodie said with a fine dusting of irony, his own attention ostensibly on the flow of people around them.

At Doyle's side again, feeling like the proverbial sitting duck waiting to be hit. Five more minutes, Bodie promised himself, hackles rising in the reflected heat of Doyle's temper, five more minutes. And then if Ray didn't say something, then he would. Doyle could keep this simmering silence up for hours, and it always drove Bodie right round the twist, even though he usually wasn't stupid enough to let Doyle know that. Get on with it, he found himself thinking, stoking his own anger in sheer self-preservation, the only deflection that stood a chance against Ray Doyle's scything

tongue. Say it. Get it over and done with. It'd be ugly, but at least then it would be sorted. And all Bodie wanted was to get this sorted out, and get back to normal, put this last nasty episode behind them, dump it with all the rest of the crap they had to put up with.

Of course, sorting it out and putting it behind them was always supposing Doyle would see reason, and Bodie knew he himself wouldn't be feeling too reasonable if he'd been the one on the receiving end of CI5's institutionalised distrust. Wasn't a nice thing, bugging your best mate's bedroom. Spying on his fiancée wasn't exactly the done thing either—unless George Cowley had you at his less than tender mercies. Bodie took another good draught from his beer, savouring the taste, the drinking of his pint just something to do before Doyle started in on him. But Doyle, contrary to the end, was doing none of the usual things that led up to the recriminations and the eventual absolutions: instead of flicking, acid glances, and small, pointed comments, there was nothing but silence, distant, lowering silence, grating on Bodie's nerves like a tap dripping in the night.

It went on like that, Bodie waiting in silence, Doyle silently sitting, went on like that while groups of people came and went, sea on the shore, and Bodie and Doyle sitting there like pensioners watching the world go by. The jukebox worked its way through its entire repertoire, and the pub owner rolled his eyes and then rolled up his sleeves, wading in to save his once-promising barman. A young man objected to another young man stealing his bird, the argument escalating in a way Bodie would actually welcome, until the two young men threatened to come to blows, the young woman clobbering them both and stalking off in disgust. Too close to home, that, Bodie decided, friend enough to be grateful that Doyle had been too introspective to see that by-play.

More drinks, Bodie down to half-pints, Doyle up to double G&Ts, not that he seemed to notice, consuming them slowly, with the same abstract attention that he scrooged on the pub meal Bodie plonked down in front of him.

Food taken care of, Doyle yet to be. Still that silence, still that endless contemplation. With good reason, Bodie hated it when Doyle started thinking, the results always unsettling, always something that put Bodie on edge. He had long since given up sneaking measuring glances at his partner, Doyle

so lost in thought that Bodie could catalogue every pore uninterrupted. Bodie was staring now, at the set of Doyle's mouth, at the hooded eyes, at the tangle distance between himself and his partner. Between himself and the partner who just might be brooding himself up into a right tizz, perhaps enough righteous and self-righteous indignation to make Doyle march into Cowley's office and demand a partner who didn't crawl around under his bed spying on him.

Nothing given away by that thoughtful face, nothing to work with, only the silence that had become ominous in Bodie's ignorance.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, why don't you just say it?" Bodie demanded, his patience in tatters, barely keeping his voice within the limits of pub etiquette, depending on the presence of others to limit the damage Doyle would do to him, and still wishing the words unsaid the minute they left his mouth. He was more than half furious with himself for bringing it up here instead of getting Doyle back to the privacy of his flat, but once started, the flow of words was in full spate, pouring over Doyle's silence. "Go on, get it over with, 'stead of sitting there like the fucking Sphinx, go on, call me everything under the sun—"

Doyle blinked, turned, looked at Bodie. "What for?" he asked in a quite devastatingly reasonable tone of voice.

Incredulous, Bodie gaped at him, having been expecting a blast of typically Doylean temper, and getting, instead, this wary, guarded look, coolly impersonal.

"Oh, so it's going to be like that, then, is it?" Bodie said disgustedly, settling back against the leather-covered banquette because if he didn't, he was going to get up and walk out—and then who would fancy the chances of the partnership ever getting back on the old even keel? "The cold shoulder, accompanied by sudden showers of sleet, and patches of black ice to trip the unwary?"

Doyle glanced away, fiddled with his beer mat again, looked back at Bodie, his expression odd. "Nothing you did that I wouldn't've done, mate."

Not by a flicker did Bodie betray how uneasy all this controlled calm made him. Unhealthy, too, for Doyle to bottle it all up: made the explosion bigger and nastier when it finally came, always better to give Doyle an outlet, get him to rant and rave for a bit, and taking it out on Bodie was the best safety valve available. Standard behaviour, for them, a

familiar, reassuring pattern, but this quiet, this complete absence of outrage—what the hell was going on? “Are you trying to tell me you’re letting me away with bugging your bedroom? Wasn’t that long ago you were ready to hang, draw and bloody quarter me for that—”

A glimmer of what Bodie would have claimed was embarrassment on anyone but Raymond Doyle. “Yeh, well, I was fucking furious with you then.”

“And now you’re not?” Bodie sneered, far too well acquainted with Doyle’s temperament to believe this amenable reasonableness. Where the fuck was the explosion that would clear the air—this was like talking to a stranger, and that strangeness was threatening to pull the floor right out from under Bodie’s feet. “What is this, eh, Ray? Since when’ve you smiled sweetly and not bothered when someone’s spied on you and your bird?”

“Told you, it wasn’t anything I wouldn’t’ve done,” Doyle said, and where temper should have honed his voice to cutting sharpness, there was only a dullness that worried the hell out of Bodie.

“So I’ve got that to look forward to, have I? You crawling around on my bedroom floor, planting bugs, listening to every moan and groan, counting how many times the springs squeak?”

Doyle gave him a sidelong look, measuring, still laden with that unnatural calm. A shift in his expression, some emotion there, and Bodie wished this was some cheap novel so that he could read Doyle’s eyes. “Come on, mate,” he said, trying another tack, thumping Doyle affectionately on the arm. “What is it?”

Another one of those unnerving stares, another contemplative silence that left Bodie feeling horribly exposed.

“You like me, don’t you?” Doyle asked him, the question almost drowned out by the rugby louts singing along to the jukebox.

“Oh, petal, I simply *adore* you,” Bodie lisped, limper than Liberace, the humour not sounding anywhere near as forced as it felt.

“Stop prating about,” Doyle snapped, some habitual temper surfacing. “I’m serious and I mean it. You like me, don’t you?”

Bodie went cross-eyed, put on his thickest moron’s voice. “Uh, yeh, I fink so. A golly’s much better than any old teddy bear, innit?”

“Cept it’s all Paddingtons and Wombles nowadays, isn’t it?” Doyle said, handing the gift of

Bodie’s attempted humour back unopened. “Half the things you and me grew up with—out-of-date, that’s what they are.” Doyle stopped, hesitating, fingers skimming round the rim of his glass, the sound too faint to be heard amidst the raucous happiness of the pub. “Out-of-date. Like you and me.”

Christ, Bodie thought, heart sinking, *it is going to be one of those after all*. He could always turn that last comment into a joke, but it would be a waste of time, or worse, it could be incendiary, and a morose Doyle was still better than a bellicose one and far better than that calm stranger. “Here, have another drink—”

Doyle actually smiled at that, lifting his almost full glass in mocking salute. “You poor old bastard. Haven’t got the faintest what do with me, have you?”

Bodie, if he were feeling reckless and suicidal, just might dispute that.

“Get me drunk, take me home, pour me into bed and leave me to sleep it off. Is that it, Bodie? That your grand plan for the night?”

Uncomfortable, Bodie shifted in his seat, taking great pains to observe the crowd so he wouldn’t have to look at this smiling man he suddenly feared he didn’t understand at all. “Yeh, well, it’s always worked before so unless you’ve a better idea...”

“Yeh,” Doyle got to his feet, the G&T disappearing down his throat in one long swallow, Adam’s apple bobbing, Bodie needing to avert his eyes again, the lean lines of Doyle’s body lingering in his mind. “‘Course I ’ave a better idea. Skip the getting plastered, get me home, tuck me into bed, and at least that way I won’t have a hangover in the fucking morning, will I?”

That was more like it, Bodie hanging onto the sour snap of that voice, on familiar Doyle-ground now, this basic misanthropy easy, if unpleasant, to deal with.

“I’ll drive,” he said, filching the keys from Doyle’s hands, Doyle’s driving not fit for man nor beast when he was in this mood. “You can watch out for traffic wardens—”

Doyle gave him an unexpectedly affectionate smile, unnerving Bodie even more thoroughly than before. “—to make sure none of them get away,” Ray finished resignedly, falling into their old, old joke. “Come on, Batman, the Batcave awaits.”

In the car, Bodie’s hands light on the steering wheel, Doyle slouched beside him in a pose that

was usually artless, but tonight, it was measuredly artful, a careful display, like a museum exhibit of the way they used to be together, everything Doyle said sounding once removed, filtered and dusty like something put on for public remembrance. By the time they made it to Doyle's flat, Bodie's palms were sweating, and all his guilt and good intentions were long since flown. A world-weary Doyle he'd deal with, a furious Doyle he'd protect innocent bystanders from, but this precision-crafted calm was something that made all his instincts scream *run*. "See you on Wednesday then," he said, with Doyle's contrived casualness. "Pick you up as usual?"

"No." Doyle was unsmiling, reaching across Bodie to shove Bodie's door open, his after-shave and soap losing the battle with the stale beer and cigarette smoke from the pub.

"Oi, shut the door, Ray, it's fucking freezing—and now you've gone and got me drenched—"

"All the more reason for you to come up then, isn't it? We wouldn't want you to catch your death, would we?" It should have been light and friendly, if Doyle really did see the spying as being something Bodie had no choice over, or it should have been dark and portentous, heavy hints of what Doyle was going to do to him as soon as they were in the privacy of Doyle's flat and away from either witness or aid. It should not have been devoid of anything but what sounded like genuine concern.

Bodie took another look at Doyle's face, and conceded that if he didn't know what Doyle was going to do next, then his partner could well be a liability, and not only would he sound like a right fool explaining that his partner had scared the shit out of him by being nice, Cowley would also have his guts for garters if he left and then Doyle did something stupid. Such as going out as soon as Bodie had driven off, and getting himself into a public brawl somewhere. Shivering, the cold a perfect excuse to cover the unease crawling along his spine, Bodie got out of the car, following Doyle, watching his back, a horrible thought taking root. All this not-shouting—what if that was because Doyle had just had enough this time and was beyond mere fury? If that was it, if this whole being spied on like a criminal had been one callous manipulation too many, the one thing that Doyle couldn't forgive CI5 for... Doyle could resign, or just disappear. Or just as bad, Bodie thought, coming to a halt while Doyle unlocked the flat, all

this calm could be a front for Doyle having run out of resources, his innate bleakness too much for him, depression—Christ, Bodie thought, half ashamed that he'd forgotten, Ann just dumped him! First and only time Doyle had ever even hinted at marriage—

"Oi, Dozy! You coming in or are you going to stay there and drown?"

"Sorry," Bodie said, coming in, rain still dripping off his nose and down the back of his neck. "Was thinking..."

"And we shouldn't expect you to think and walk at the same time. Here," this as a towel came flying towards Bodie, "and take those mucky shoes off before you walk on my good carpet."

Muttering under his breath about Mrs. Mops masquerading as CI5 agents, Bodie did as he was told, really put out when he saw just how soaking wet he was.

And then Doyle was back in front of him, that strange expression back in his eyes. It made Bodie's flesh crawl: Doyle was looking at him assessingly, and for the first time, Bodie suspected he wasn't going to measure up. "Did you manage to miss *any* of the puddles?" was all Doyle said, despite the seriousness of his expression. "Go on, there's an extra dressing gown in the wardrobe."

Practical. Sensible, even. But going up those stairs, Bodie still couldn't shake the feeling that practicality and common sense had nothing to do with Doyle's suggestion. By the time he had stripped off and hurried himself into Doyle's big blue dressing gown, he could smell coffee and toast coming up from downstairs, a veritable symphony to a stomach that hadn't been fed anything but half-cold pub grub. By the time Bodie got down the stairs, Doyle was in the kitchen taking the last slices of toast out from under the grill, and Bodie grabbed the first slice from the mounding plate.

Doyle didn't even bother to pretend annoyance, just shoved the last of the newly buttered toast onto the plate. "This'll do the pair of us more good than the cat's piss and greasy pies in that pub."

Bodie would have agreed, but he had half a slice of bread in his mouth, butter melting, dripping out the corner of his mouth.

"Typical," Doyle said, rolling his eyes heavenward, "can't take you bloody anywhere, can I?"

Trying to grin round the toast, Bodie went to wipe his mouth. And froze.

That strange expression was back on Doyle's

face, and his fingers were there on Bodie's mouth, smoothing away the butter, taking longer over it than he should have. No, Bodie thought, unwilling and unable to go beyond that simple denial. No.

Doyle, moving away now, going through to the living room, Bodie following all unwilling, a fish already hooked. Doyle, speaking over his shoulder, so sure that Bodie would be right behind him, reeling Bodie in on a tacit promise that might yet prove a threat. "What I said in the pub..."

Not a topic Bodie wanted to get started on, not with the way Doyle was looking at him, nor the hints Doyle was dropping, nor with the unwelcome heat gathering in Bodie's groin. "Going to bug my bedroom," Bodie said cheerfully as if this were all a good laugh, "and sell them as how-to tapes to the filthy buggers at work—"

"No," Doyle said, staring at Bodie with more honesty than was comfortable, Bodie glancing away, glancing back, Doyle saying nothing more until Bodie was sitting down, looking right at him. "I meant, when I said that you liked me."

Bodie suddenly knew what quicksand felt like. He knew he was sinking, on ground that had looked familiar and normal and mundane, but was something entirely different. "Have to, don't I?" he blustered, trying to find some solid ground. "Don't have any choice, sheer self-preservation, what with the way we have to work together—"

"We're not talking about work, Bodie."

Bodie hadn't thought they were either, but it had seemed as good an escape route as any.

Doyle, obviously, wasn't going to let Bodie get away. "We're talking about *off* the job." A momentary pause, just long enough for Bodie to swallow hard, for Doyle to not blink, his eyes quite horrifyingly honest. "You like me, don't you?"

Bodie couldn't look away, mind skirting around Doyle's words by being acutely aware of just how green Ray's eyes were, and how they slanted, just a little, the right eye more than the left—from the time he'd had his cheekbone broken, maybe? And how unwavering that stare was. Choice time. Either answer, or get out now. Ray wanted—something—and the only way not to give it him was to leave. And Ray never forgave anyone who did that to him. "All right, all right, so I like you!" Bodie admitted with ill grace, confessing to that in the hope that it would satisfy Doyle. "Since when has bad taste been a crime?"

Doyle could be incredibly soft-spoken when he

chose to be, but it did nothing to disguise his implacability. "But it's more than that, isn't it, Bodie?"

Bodie swallowed, finding it suddenly difficult to breathe, to think, to do anything but feel like a donation to science, spread out, cut open, completely exposed.

"You love me, don't you?"

Eviscerated. The heart cut out from him and presented on a bloody silver platter. Bodie couldn't look at Ray—couldn't not look, knew he'd given himself away by the extremes of his reaction.

More intent than ever, Doyle leaned forward, elbows on the coffee table, stare fixed on Bodie. "You love me. And not just all-mates-together either, is it, Bodie?"

Bodie looked then, transfixed, body caught in fight-or-flight. Wanting to kill Doyle for saying it, because if no-one ever said it, then it might not be true. If no-one ever said it, then it could be ignored, called something else, lied about. He could strangle Doyle for speaking the unspeakable, or he could simply run away and never stop running. Fight, or flight. Neither, in the end. Settling, painfully, for surrender, and knowing it for the bravest thing he'd ever done. "And so what if I do?" he demanded, pride all the protection he had left. "It's a free country, at least that's what Cowley pays us to keep it, isn't it?" He shrugged, feigning what should have been nonchalance but showed itself for misery. "Anyroad, it's not as if it's ever got in the way, is it?"

Doyle was still staring at him, giving nothing, demanding everything. "Are you in love with me?"

"Christ, Shylock and his pound of fucking flesh!" On his feet now, pacing, to the window, the bookshelves, the coffee table and sofa between him and Ray.

"That's what this," he tugged on the lapel of the dressing gown, "is all in aid of. Get us both stripped down, so you can bugger good old Bodie—stupid old Bodie more like. Ann dumps you, and I get to play stand-in so's you can prove to yourself that you can't be as crap as she says you were—"

"Shut up, Bodie!" An explosion, the very thing Bodie had been waiting for all evening. "It's not fucking like that, and don't you go putting words in my mouth, right, mate?"

"Then if it's not that, then what the fuck is it? Suddenly decided you're bent, Ann prove that to



you, did she? Well, listen, mate, if you couldn't get it up for her then it was because she was a frigid—"

Doyle was over the sofa and at Bodie's throat before another word could be hurled. Hands clawed tight around Bodie's throat, Doyle was all but snarling. "You watch your mouth, mate. It wasn't like that, and Christ, but you get ugly when you're jealous, don't you?"

"Jealous?" Supposed to be incredulous, but hoarse, as much from emotion as Doyle's hand warningly round his neck. "What the fuck would I be jealous of her for? What did she get from you, eh? Roses? Nice and easy to give, because you didn't give her any of yourself, did you?"

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Bet you even fucked her with your little finger stuck out like a vicar's tea party. Send her a posh, polite thank-you card every time you got in her, did you? Or were you pretending to be such an upper-crust twit that you just held her hand and recited fucking poetry to her?"

"You don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about, you stupid crud—"

"Oh, no? I know she was a stuck-up bitch who didn't give a fuck about you. She was only interested in what she thought she could turn you into—"

It was the second time Doyle had punched Bodie over Ann.

"Feel better now, mate?" Bodie asked, much as he had the first time, slipping them back into the tried-and-true mannerisms of their old routine, the quicksand no longer sucking him under. He knew this Doyle, understood him, could handle him. Could put away the words they had both said, lock them up as if they'd never been spoken. It wouldn't be the first time they'd done that—slithering memories of weaknesses admitted in the dark, fears spilled out, failures confessed, sins laid bare—and they'd survive intact again.

But then Doyle was giving him that look again, and the quicksand was back, and Bodie was sinking in up to his neck.

"Christ, how did that happen?" Doyle ran his fingers through his hair, shrugged. "Sorry. Honest, I am." A sort of laugh, a wry smile. "Wasn't meant to go like this, you do realise that, don't you?"

"Then how was it supposed to go?" Edging away now, perching himself on the sofa, eyeing Doyle warily as his partner came round to sit beside him. Close. Too close. Bare knee through the

heavy dressing gown, lean muscular thigh, hair growing thicker as it disappeared into the shadow cast by the fabric.

"You know, you're half right about Ann—and about me an' all. Both of us looking for the same thing, thinking we could get it from each other. Stupid, really."

"I thought you'd hate her for what she did."

"No point, is there?"

"Yeh, well, no point in hating yourself for it, doesn't make any sense either, but that's not going to stop you, is it?"

Another one of those deprecating laughs, no hint of the filthy chuckle that could make Bodie's pulse race. "Not this time, mate. This time round, I'm too tired to hate anyone."

"Not even me?" Hearing the way he asked that, Bodie winced, and hurried on with: "Don't answer that."

"Since when've I ever listened to you anyway?" There was no sting to the words, Doyle maintaining this façade so well that it might yet prove to be the truth. He was slumped down, head tipped back against the back of the sofa. "Yeh, okay, so I'm really pissed off about it—but if it'd been you doing what I was doing, with a bird whose old man was under suspicion... Yeh, I'd've done what Cowley told me." He smiled then at Bodie, an undercurrent of warmth drawing Bodie in. "And I'd probably enjoy it more than you did."

There it was again, that undertow that in anyone else Bodie would assume was sexual, an invitation, but in Doyle—oh, no, he wasn't going to set himself up like that. Bad enough that he'd admitted what he had. Sheer insanity to offer visible proof as sacrifice to Doyle's uncertain mercies.

"Always been one of my kinks," Doyle was going on, as idly as if they were discussing their favourite beer. "Voyeurism," he added, by way of elucidation, as if Bodie's agile imagination needed any help, Doyle's eyes quick to note the slight movement under the blueness of borrowed dressing gown, and where Bodie would have expected—had always expected, those rare drunken nights when he'd dared think about it—contempt, there was more of that uncommon gentleness, more of what could only be described as affection.

"What are you after?" Bodie asked, shifting uneasily, fighting the urge to cross his legs, trying to be blasé about sitting here next-to-naked with his partner, a nascent erection troubling him with its

needs. “Come on, Ray, you’ve done the Spanish Inquisition bit, so why don’t we get down to brass tacks. You’re after something—”

“What makes you think that?”

“I know you, mate, that’s what makes me think that,” Bodie said with great confidence, thinking and feeling no such thing, an affectionate and willing Doyle not something that happened every day. “You’re setting me up—” and painfully, he could believe it, Doyle driven by the pain of losing Ann, needing proof, any proof, that he was still desirable, still every inch the man, and pathetic old Bodie was always hanging around. The image of himself as pining wallflower was both absurd and too close to raw nerves, either or both enough to inflame Bodie’s restless anger. “You’re sitting there chatting me up like one of your fucking Friday night scrubbers. Going to tell the lads how I was between the sheets? Give the lot of them your usual detailed report?”

“Bodie—” hurled out, more anger in that one word than Doyle had shown all evening, echoes of that dangerous time when his vitriolic resignation had looked like charity to an old man he could break between his hands. “Look,” Doyle said, holding on to his temper with visible difficulty, the lines of strain around mouth and eyes reminding Bodie that Doyle had had a hell of a day, a hell of a week, “all right, so I’m not doing much by way of coming up with the right words—and if I listened to a replay of all this, I’d even admit I’m probably fucking this up royally. But come on, Bodie, what’d you expect, eh?”

Bodie held his peace, looking away so that the bitterness of his expectations wouldn’t show, but when had Doyle needed to see the nakedness of his eyes to know him? He hunched into himself, ostentatiously shutting Doyle out, uncaring of how this minor self-preservation would look to his ever hyper-prickly partner.

Perhaps it was because Bodie had every reason to protect himself from Doyle that his voice was harsh with honesty sieved through tension. “You want me to trot out the usual patter I use on the birds? You want the dinner and the flowers—yeh, I’ll give you fucking roses, you don’t even need to bother asking—and I’ll whisper whatever sweet nothings you want to hear,” Doyle was going on, the words coming more easily now that he’d actually started saying them, and now that Bodie wasn’t looking at him like a man betrayed. “Only

thing is,” and he didn’t bother smiling at the back of Bodie’s head, but tried, unsuccessfully, to sound no more than amused, “I don’t know what I’m supposed to whisper to a bloke, do I?”

That was greeted by silence, and then Bodie slowly turning round to face Doyle once more. “Are you honestly trying to tell me,” Bodie finally asked, his disbelief getting the better of him, all this a far cry from the quick machismo of a ‘me-Tarzan’ fuck he’d been expecting from Doyle, “that you want to...go out with me?”

Doyle, to his credit, met the sneer with equanimity. “Yeh. D’you have a problem with that?”

Of course he had a problem with that. He’d barely even begun admitting to himself that his attraction for Doyle went above the belt-buckle, and here was Doyle threatening to carve his heart up like a Sunday roast, all in the name of getting over Ann fucking Holly. “Do I have a problem—Christ’s sake, Doyle! My best mate, my fucking *partner* is sitting there coming the Don Juan with me, and you have the cheek to ask me if I have a problem with that? Of course I have a fucking problem with—”

Doyle ignored the blusterings, putting them down for a last ditch effort designed to put him off the scent. “Bit over the top there, don’t you think?” He paused, eyes wide and bright, waiting until Bodie was staring at him, waiting until Bodie was unblinking, the hook embedded ever more deeply in Bodie’s flesh: “Considering what you’ve already admitted, anyway.”

A sudden rain of cold sweat clamoured on Bodie’s brow, and he swallowed the fear that rose in his throat. “Oh, you know me,” he tossed off with apparent flippancy, “say anything to get you going—” He trailed off then, Doyle’s steady glower refusing to yield, denying them both the comfort of lies. Bodie got to his feet, to go nowhere, simply to put a little distance between himself and Doyle, give himself the balm of not having to face Doyle right now, not over this. “Ray,” and his voice was gentle with the remembered surrender, that backhanded admission he’d made twisting his spine like rope, “I’ve always been the first to admit I’m a twisted bastard, so it stands to reason that I’d be a bit fond of you, doesn’t it?” A brief temptation to glance at Doyle assailed him, but this was hard enough without actually seeing it all register on Ray’s face. “And all right, so I’ve been round the roundabout more times than Zebedee, and I

probably wouldn't say no to fucking a bloke again, but..." A breath of laughter, cynical amusement that Ray Doyle could expect even this just handed to him, and that Bodie was co-operating with all the common sense of a lemming. "But all this whispering sweet nothings and bunches of roses—bit romantic, isn't it? Bit too romantic, as if it was love and all that crap."

"Thought we'd already established it was love"

Oh, they had, Bodie thought, beginning another surrender, sitting back down beside Doyle, yielding another skirmish to his partner. They'd established Bodie's weakness and Doyle's strength. Had come right out with the one thing Bodie had never asked for, never wanted. "Life's a funny thing, isn't it?" he said absently, propping his feet carelessly on the coffee table, dressing gown falling open half way up his thighs, all hints of sexual arousal fled in the face of all this emotion. "Just when you think you've finally sussed the whole thing out, all the plans laid, everything worked out—and then it hits you, right between the eyes." He leaned back, closing his eyes, closing his emotions down, closing off this frightening willingness to surrender to a man he had to admit he loved. "Love," he said disgustedly, as if the word itself were a foul taste in his mouth, "love. Worse than a fucking dum-dum."

Not, perhaps, the nicest thing to say, given the circumstances, given the man at his side.

"Oh, that's rich, that's really fucking perfect!"

Doyle snapped, and if Bodie had been looking at him, perhaps the expression on his face would have been shocking. "I'm sitting here, offering you—"

"Offering me *what?*" Bodie demanded nastily, eyes open now, glowering at Doyle. "I get to lay my heart at your feet like a fucking virgin sacrifice and what do you get? You get to fuck me, until you get over dear, precious Ann—"

"Shut up, Bodie, you sound like—"

"Like what? A pathetic fairy? A fucking queer? Well, guess what, if you want to fuck me all of a sudden and if you want me dripping hearts and flowers all over you, then that makes you just as big a pansy, doesn't it?"

Doyle opened his mouth, beautifully vicious retort honed and ready. Then he closed his mouth, forcing himself to reign in, to stop this before it degenerated into a fight they'd never recover from. "We neither one of us is a fairy—"

But Bodie still wasn't ready to let him finish a single sentence. "Speak for yourself, mate. But if we

go round fucking each other and having me gush all over you like a fucking lothario, then people, petal, are going to talk."

"So let them—"

"Let them? And does that include the Old Man? We'll let him talk, shall we? Gossip about us over tea and bickies with Betty? Be nice that, won't it?"

"What the fuck's got into you—"

"Not you, that's for sure."

"Oh, yeh, now I get it," Doyle said in the knowing way that was infuriating mainly because it meant he was right, "this is all about pride, isn't it? It's all about you being shit-scared because you've fallen for me, and you think you're going to just roll over and play doormat?"

Bodie knew he should come up with some witty response that would bring Doyle down a peg or two, but his brain was going ga-ga, too many secrets that he'd kept hidden from himself just hung out in front of him like so much washing.

"Don't be such a prat, Bodie! You'd never do anything like that—"

"It's the only way I'd do anything as stupid as get involved with you, isn't it? You get to fuck me, I get to gaze longingly into your eyes, and then you're off the rebound, and off and running with the first decent cunt you see."

The second time Bodie had said words to that effect, and this time, Doyle actually heard what Bodie was really saying. "That's not what's on offer here, mate," Doyle told him, inching that fraction nearer, his dressing gown pulling open, the skin of his genitals pale in the framing fabric. "I'm talking about more than fucking, not just sex."

"Oh, yeh? We've had the seduction," Bodie said coldly, pulling Doyle's dressing gown shut, proud of himself for resisting the temptation to touch, if only a little, if only an inch of that lush flesh. He cleared his throat, shoved his hands into the pockets of his borrowed dressing gown. "So as I said, we've had what passes as a seduction round here, so do I get the sweet nothings now? Going to tell me how much you're in love with me?"

Doyle couldn't miss the sarcasm of that, but he also heard the pain that was looming right behind. "Not yet. Because I don't."

"Oh, ta ever so," Bodie exploded, jumping to his feet, the truth being spoken hurting more than he'd feared. "Nice to know, you don't love me—"

"Yet, I said, Bodie. *Yet.*"

"Planning on it, are you? When? June's a nice

month, you pick then. Or save it, wait until Christmas, stick it in my stocking for me..."

"I'll ram it down your throat—"

"Not a fucking chance, *mate*," Bodie said dangerously, eyes glittering with the violent pain roiling inside. Doyle had followed him, was within easy reach, and Bodie could have killed him for being loved enough that he could say even things like that without fear of being hurt. "You won't be shoving anything down my throat."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, I didn't mean that and you know it! I've told you, I'm not talking about sex—"

"No?" Asked coolly enough to freeze even this heated exchange.

"All right, so I'm not talking *exclusively* about sex. And I've told you, I'm not in love with you—"

"Yet, yeh, I heard you. Just waiting to see when you're planning the big event for."

"You're a difficult bastard," Doyle said, calling the kettle black. "Why can't you shut up for once and listen to me?" Because, the flicker of expression on Bodie's face reminded him, Bodie was shit-scared, and Doyle couldn't blame him. "Ann..." he began, couldn't think of a way to say it, tried again. "When I said earlier, about me and Ann both looking for the same thing but from the wrong people—it's true. It's what I was thinking about in the pub, how we're always so busy looking for things we don't see them when they're right in front of our faces."

"So you're looking for love then, are you?" Bodie said with a reasonableness that unnerved Doyle in a way Bodie would recognise from recent personal experience. "And seeing as how you didn't find it with Ann..."

A longish pause, and then Doyle finally continued. "If I fell for you..."

"If? Thought you were just deciding on the date a minute ago."

"You're not making this easy are you? Yeh, I know, I know," he added immediately, "I'm not helping either. C'mon, sit down, might as well be comfortable if we're going to be spilling our guts."

"Ooh, Ray, you're such a romantic." No humour in that, only warning, of what not even Bodie was entirely sure, his emotions churning around in his belly, refusing to be properly ignored as they ought.

"If I fell for you... I'd have to be sure—from the very start—that you'd love me more than her."

The sheer gall of that took Bodie's breath away,

and perversely, warmed him, the whole attitude so precisely Doyle.

"Because I couldn't stand it—the pain, you know, really loving someone and then them not loving me back." He didn't quite smile, but his mouth quirked in recognition of his own whistling in the dark. "I'd be fucking miserable if I went through all this with you, all the adjustments we'd need to make, loving you—and it coming to nothing."

Quite terrifyingly, hope began to mingle cheerfully with the emotions souring Bodie's stomach. "So what you're saying is that you *want* to be in love with me—"

Doyle smiled then, leaning forward.

And the rest of Bodie's thought completed itself, and if Doyle had known it, then his own hope would have faded as quickly as Bodie's. Oh, yes, Bodie could see that Doyle would want to love him, because in Doyle's eyes—in Bodie's too, honesty a hard taskmaster—Bodie was a safe bet, someone tried and true, as reliable as only a partner on the job could be. A safe bet, a safe haven, somewhere for Doyle to lick the wounds this whole *débâcle* with Ann had left him with. Somewhere for Doyle to recover his confidence and when he did that, then where would Bodie be?

In the same shoes Doyle was wearing today. Except... Doyle hadn't loved Ann the way Bodie had a horrible suspicion he loved Doyle. It would be more than lost hope and a few shattered dreams for him, once Doyle left.

"Bodie?"

Brought back to the subject of his thoughts, not really wanting to hear any more of this, tired of the talking and the thinking, and the prescient fears and pain all those ponderings brought with them, Bodie could see the whole thing far enough, could quite happily walk out then and there. If he could only forget what he'd admitted to himself and Ray. If he could only drag his own eyes away from the possibilities brimming in Ray's. If he could only quell his own hopes, his own desires, the aching need inside him that he was afraid Ray would satisfy.

"I mean," Doyle was saying, "I already trust you everywhere else, so if I were to trust you in our private lives—" a tightening of his mouth, the losing Ann too recent to so blithely dismiss. "Would you promise?" he asked suddenly, a question that should have been insult, but was

turned into compliment by Doyle's uncomfortable need for reassurance, his leaning on Bodie a rare privilege.

"Promise what?" But looking at Doyle, realising that all that potential for love and belonging might be his for the asking, Bodie knew he'd promise the moon, the stars and Cowley's first born if he had to marry the old bastard himself to do it.

"Promise not to walk out on me. Promise not to muck me about. Christ, Bodie, look at what just happened with Ann—and she's not the first, not by a long chalk. But you and me... I could trust you, and I can understand you. And you won't run and hide, will you? It's just..."

"Just what?"

"This love lark. I always thought I had it down pat, you know, flowers, candlelight—but it's more than holding hands, innit?"

That assessing gaze was back, and perhaps, Bodie thought, just perhaps, he'd measure up after all. "It's a lot more."

"Learned that in Africa, did you? From the girl you loved, the one Krivas..."

"Yeh, the one Krivas..." Bodie trailed off with Doyle's own attempt at tact, an edge of mockery in his voice. "It was a long time ago, Ray, and—"

"Not that long ago you wanted to kill Krivas with your bare hands for what he did to her."

"Not that long ago you wanted to do the same thing to me for what I did to Ann."

"Yeh, but that's different. You had Cowley on your back—"

"I still wish I hadn't done it."

"And been fired? Then where would that have got us? Bad enough you doing it, but it'd've been a hell of a lot worse if McCabe or Stuart had done it." The gesture unpremeditated, the effect unplanned, Doyle rubbed the back of his hand affectionately across Bodie's cheek. "Did a lot of thinking in that pub tonight, and as far as I'm concerned, all that's closed, so shut up about it, Bodie."

"Fair enough," Bodie said relatively steadily, although his heart was pounding, his cock was stirring, and he wanted to die from embarrassment at being so moved by so minor a caress. But it was the fact that it was Doyle, and that Ray was being sincere, not some calculated movement guaranteed to have the desired effect. Proof, then, that Ray at least liked him in the right way, that Ray might mean all this guff about falling in love with someone he could trust, someone who would under-

stand... "Were you serious about never doing anything with a bloke?"

"When did I say that?"

"When you said you didn't know what to say to a bloke—"

"Didn't know what to say, didn't mention anything about keeping to the straight and narrow."

"You never? When?"

"Thought we were having a serious discussion here?"

"Oh, we are, we are—I take discussing sex very seriously. Go on, when have you done it with men?"

Doyle shrugged, more uncomfortable than he would have thought. "Just the usual, you know, a bit of diddling about when I was a teenager, bit of experimenting with some of the people I met doing art. Nothing once I'd decided to go into the police, so..." And then, before Bodie could side-track them: "And what about your misspent youth then?"

"Misspent? Never missed in my life, I'll have you know." Took note of the way Doyle was looking at him, shook his head in amusement. "You actually want an answer, don't you? You been reading Shakespeare again, Shylock? Well, next time, try one of the comedies, will you?"

"Thought you'd prefer the sonnets."

"Don't," Bodie said very clearly, very calmly and with the weight of serious threat behind it, "make fun of me. Not about this. Not ever."

"Wasn't trying to."

Not yet, Bodie thought to himself, pessimistic reality muscling its way in to spite it all. "Good," he said lamely, for once believing Doyle, wary of this new version of a Doyle who wouldn't press home the slightest advantage. But then, and pessimism began a slow retreat, Ray'd hardly been like that with his precious Ann, had he? Been all over her, coming across like a knight in shining armour from one of those women's books, clutching Ann protectively to his manly bosom...

Would be nice, sometimes, to have someone to lean on. Someone like Ray, someone he already trusted, knew he could rely on. Perhaps even when it came to love... After all the tension, he felt as if his face would crack when he smiled, albeit so small a smile. "So here you are, on the rebound, never shown the slightest bit of interest in any fellas before, let alone me. You don't love me, but

you fully intend to. That about it, Ray?"

"Yeh, well, technically speaking, you could put it like that. But—" he broke off, broke the parity of their gaze, fiddled with the tie belt of his dressing gown, finally faced Bodie again, his own eyes narrowed, weighing up everything he knew about this man, from how loyal a friend to how deep still waters could run. "Suppose I should tell you—think I'm already half-way to being in love with you as it is. If you were a bird, Christ, I'd've married you ages ago."

"And if you had, what about when you met Ann? If I'd been a bird and you'd married me—dump me just as quick, would you?"

"Wouldn't've needed her, would I? Told you, the two of us were looking for something and we thought the other one could give it us."

"And now you think you were looking in the wrong place, and you've decided to give me whirl, eh?"

"Stop trying to twist it, Bodie. You can kill something before it even starts with an attitude like that."

"Loose lips sink ships?"

"Something like that."

Another longish pause, neither one of them really looking at the other, each one of them doing some thinking of his own. Again, it was Bodie who broke the silence. "If I do all this, you know, promising you can trust me, seeing you through all this—what's in it for me?"

"You what? Christ, mate, you're the one in love with me, I should've thought it was obvious!"

"Oh, I get to worship you with my body?"

"Told you, it's more than sex, Bodie. If I can trust you, if I can depend on you enough to give you love—then you have me. The two of us, together."

"For how long?"

Doyle shrugged, unwilling to go that much out on a limb. "For as long as we both want it."

"For as long as we both shall live?" Delivered with a veneer of cynicism so thin, even Bodie could hear the hope and the love in his voice.

"For as long as we survive the job."

"So not for long, then."

"Forever, Bodie," Doyle said fiercely, convincingly. "I don't fuck about with a bit of time here and a couple of months there."

"Forever. Supposed to be a long time, forever. But it might only be a couple of months for us."

"Then we'll have to make it count, then, won't we?"

"I don't know, Ray," Bodie said tiredly, body resonating with Doyle's closeness, mind reeling from the volte-face his life and his partner had taken today. "I just don't know."

"You love me, don't you?"

There wasn't even any point in denying it any more. "Yeh."

"And I'm looking for that, from someone I can trust, someone I can depend on."

Bodie, eyes closed, didn't see it coming, was unprepared for the touch of Doyle's breath against his cheek.

"And you'll promise?"

Each word brought Doyle's lips delicately against Bodie's, and right then, he would have promised his soul to the devil. Promising to love Ray was simplicity in itself. "I promise," he said, and opened his mouth, feeling for the first time, the caress of Ray's tongue against his own, Ray inside him, touching him, making promises of his own. Oh, yes, this was the sort of promise Bodie could live with. He brought his arms up, wrapping them around Ray, shifting them until Ray was kneeling astride him, heavier than he looked, pressing himself into Bodie. Bodie was losing himself in the luxury of Doyle's mouth, wet slickness caressing the inside of his mouth, another promise, of other things to come, other parts of Doyle that Bodie would welcome into his mouth.

He couldn't stand all this cloth between them, and fumbled with it, the coherent part of his mind grateful to Doyle's blatant planning as simply tied dressing gowns slid open, and then he could feel it: the heat of Ray Doyle's skin against his own, chest hair against the almost total smoothness of his own chest, the hair rubbing against his nipples, bringing them to sensitive erection. And then, Doyle moved again, and the last of the fabric was shoved aside, and Bodie felt Doyle's cock against him, semi-erect and rubbing restlessly along Bodie's own hard length.

"Like that?" Doyle asked, canting his hips and pressing harder against Bodie, grinning when Bodie groaned wordlessly but with a wealth of expression. The grin faded, replaced by a look of intense concentration as Bodie's hands slid down between their bellies, and took Doyle in his hands, thumb teasing foreskin back and forth. "Ohh, yeh," he said, instinct taking him into Bodie's rhythm,

fucking his cock in the tight tunnel of Bodie's fist. "That's it, Bodie, you keep on doing that..."

Not a chance, as far as Bodie was concerned. Submerged beneath Doyle's lean strength and lithe body, Bodie wasn't going to settle for a mutual wank—not that it was mutual. He opened his eyes then, needing to see Ray, and took his friend's hand, wrapping it around his own cock, almost dissolving from the sheer joy of having Ray touch him like this, of having Ray so obviously enjoying this, from Ray milking his cock, and leaning closer and kissing him again.

"Let me suck you," he said into Ray's mouth, and smiled, allowing this newly confessed love to show when Ray's breath caught on a pulse of excitement. "Up you come," he whispered, urging Ray with his hands, stopping him briefly to feed on brown nipples that peaked from a perfect pattern of body hair. Felt the nudge of cock against his own chest, the urgency of desire seeping damply against him. Couldn't hold Ray back, heard the near-sob of need, and then the snub head of Ray's cock was pushing between his lips, catching briefly on his teeth, and then was in him, thrusting too quickly, making him gag, Ray immediately pulling back, his hands a caressing apology on Bodie's throat. Slowly, now, Ray's cock entered him, hesitating, stomach muscles trembling, until Bodie reached up and finally got his hands on that luscious backside, fingers splayed, fingertips instinctively seeking Doyle's centre, rubbing there as Ray's cock rubbed against his tongue, the tight muscle of Ray's arsehole gradually responding.

Deeper now, fingers and cock, Bodie opening his throat up with well-remembered expertise, one finger carefully penetrating Ray's body with all the awe of a new experience, reaching inside a man Bodie had considered untouchable, inviolate, and who was now opening up to him, every tiny movement of Bodie's finger eliciting a gasp from Doyle. Farther inside now, Doyle's fucking Bodie's mouth a steady, heart-stopping rhythm, Bodie's finger fucking Doyle in perfect harmony.

"M gonna come," Doyle muttered, fingers scrabbling to tangle themselves in Bodie's too-short hair.

Bodie sucked him harder, fingerfucked him harder, driving Doyle on, devouring him until he felt Ray explode inside him, cum filling his throat, swallowing it down, sucking Ray dry until the cock in his mouth began to diminish. It was taken from

him then, and Ray was kissing him again, tasting himself in Bodie's mouth, his hand tight and demanding round Bodie's cock, milking him while his tongue fucked Bodie's mouth and his other hand twisted Bodie's nipple, inciting him, hurrying him on towards orgasm, staring intently as Bodie succumbed to the pleasure, cradling him until the last pulses faded, only then letting go.

Doyle opened his mouth to say something, was silenced by Bodie kissing him again, with a fiercely sweet intensity that held all the promise in the world. "Bed," he said when Bodie freed his mouth long enough for him to catch his breath and find his voice again. "Come on, you, I'm too old to fuck on the sofa."

Bodie held him for a moment, looking into his eyes, kissed him gently once more as if reluctant to yield him for even so short a journey as going up the stairs. "Bed," he murmured eventually, indulging himself in another caress along the length of Ray's supple back, his hands already learning to map every vertebra. "And then you can fuck me through the mattress."

The thrill of that shuddered through Doyle, bringing the first pulse of new arousal to his cock. "Or you can fuck me," Doyle said, being fair.

"Nah," Bodie said easily, content because he wanted Doyle inside him, "it's been too long since you last had someone up the bum."

"And it hasn't been for you?"

Bodie's smile was slow, and wicked, and knowing, making Doyle laugh, his chuckle filthier than ever, his cock responding with the same enthusiasm. "Going to tell me all about it?"

"Want me to?"

"I want every gory detail," Doyle said, one hand straying between Bodie's legs to tease at his arsehole. "But first of all," and he swooped down, taking Bodie briefly, stunningly, in his mouth, releasing him too quickly for both of them, "we're going upstairs, where I'm going to fuck you legless."

"Then lay on, MacDuff."

"I'd rather lay you, Bodie, so shift your arse, and get up those stairs."

"After you."

Doyle stopped then, smiling at the hunger in Bodie's eyes. "Dying to finally get an eyeful of my arse without my jeans getting in the way?"

"What d'you think?"

"I think," and he was already turning, hurrying

over to the stairs, "I'd better get us into the bedroom before I end up fucking you on the coffee table."

In the end, they almost didn't make it to the bedroom, the sight of Doyle's naked arse twitching upstairs in front of him more than Bodie could stand. He reached out as he had so many times before, but now it was bare skin that met his hand, and a grin tossed over Doyle's shoulder gave him tacit permission. He slipped his hand between Doyle's buttocks, fingers cradling the tender swell of Ray's testicles, Doyle almost losing his balance, giving Bodie what little excuse he needed to gather Ray close, kissing him again, hands roving over every delectable inch.

"Bed, Bodie," Doyle said, firmly putting an end to both the escalation of amities and any possibility of a stairway encounter. "And if you don't get a move on," Doyle said, deliberately provocative, "I shall start without you."

Bodie moved, pushing past Ray, the two of them scuffling and giggling down the hall, until by the time they had reached the bedside, they were kissing again, and Bodie couldn't get his fill of Ray's skin, couldn't stop lingering over the play of muscle over bone, all that strength, almost enough to match his own, and an inner strength that might well prove more than his equal. The idea excited him as another man's superiority over him so rarely did, there being no threat in Ray's power, only an equality that would translate to parity in bed, him yielding to Ray this time, another time, Ray would be his, those muscular flanks parting to allow penetration, Bodie's cock sliding home as lushly as Ray would fill him.

On the bed now, Ray on top of him again, covering him, Ray's legs between Bodie's, Ray's fingers between his cheeks, Ray's finger inside him, his own body so eager it needed no encouragement to open for Ray, his arsehole widening hungrily, his body a tumult of need and lust, no room for thought, only for Ray, and the touch of flesh on flesh, and the wordless intensity of their passion. The rustle of sheets was subsumed by the fainter sound of skin sliding on skin, and of Ray wetting his cock with saliva, the hard flesh glistening in the overhead light.

Bodie looked down then, his own cock taut against his belly, getting in the way of what he wanted to see. He leaned up on his elbows, and Ray noticed, smiled in understanding. Kneeling

between Bodie's legs, Doyle reached up with his free hand and caught Bodie by the nape, the press of his hand hot and damp. "Can you see me now?" Doyle asked, voice harshened by lust. "Can you see my cock? I'm going to put that in you," he murmured, snatching a deep kiss from Bodie. "I'm going to put that so fucking deep inside you, you'll never forget what it felt like. You'll be mine, Bodie," he said. Together, they watched Doyle guide his cock to the opening of Bodie's body, stopping as the moist head pressed snugly against Bodie's arsehole. "See me, Bodie? This is you promising me, Bodie," he whispered, and now Doyle was watching Bodie watch as Doyle's own body claimed Bodie for his own. Flesh slowly sank deeper into flesh, until Doyle had disappeared, his cock buried in Bodie, his pubic hair damp and curling against Bodie's balls, the pulse of Bodie's body all around his cock like a heart.

"Oh, god," Bodie groaned, falling back on the bed, lifting his hips, Doyle moving inside him now, too slowly, too carefully, not enough for this knot of passion and need that suffused him. "Harder, Ray, fuck me harder, come on, come on—ohh..."

Thrusting into him, driving harder now, sweat slicking skin, dripping from one to the other, Bodie's cock seeping passion, Doyle's hips moving with a rippling of muscle, his hand moving even faster, blurring hard and fast on Bodie's cock, passion peaking more slowly this time, giving them longer to savour the touch of the other's body, longer to rejoice in this sweetly building pleasure.

Orgasm then, Bodie spilling his seed, whiteness glistening on the black of his pubic hair, in the dark brown of Ray's body hair, on the pale flesh of Doyle's hand. Bodie growing still for a moment, and then Doyle's cock was thrumming deep inside him, his body turning inside out with echoing pleasure, Ray's experience his own, the hard thrusting inside him catapulting Ray to orgasm, the wet heat inside him shuddering through Bodie in exquisite awareness.

Collapse, then, too much too soon after the last time, which had been their first time. Ray recumbent across Bodie, Bodie limp under Doyle, the two of them curling together naturally, fitting together comfortably, a minor scuffle with the bedclothes until they were both warm, each of them then sinking rapidly towards sleep. Vaguely wishing that whoever had remembered to put the light on hadn't, Bodie stirred slightly when he heard Ray



laugh, Doyle held closely enough in his arms that his own body trembled with Ray's good humour.

"What?" he mumbled, more than half asleep, and awash in a great sea of contentment.

"Just thinking," Doyle said, kissing Bodie's nearest nipple, licking the flesh, giving Bodie a very different tongue-lashing from the one he'd been expecting what could be a lifetime ago.

"What about?" Bodie said round a yawn, wishing he didn't feel like a wrung-out dishcloth, because Doyle's tongue was doing some wonderful things to him.

"'Bout Ann."

Sleep receded slightly, not that Doyle noticed, snuggling in closer, wrapping himself all the tighter round Bodie, giving an enormous yawn, eyes drifting shut.

"What about Ann?"

"If she knew about this," a lazy hand snaked down to where Bodie's cock was still slightly damp from cum, "about me fucking you an' everything," too sleepy now to laugh, a low-wattage chuckle instead, "she'd cry. Prob'ly burst into tears when she hears we're a pair."

"Yeh," Bodie said faintly, not wanting to believe what he'd just heard, desperate to reject all the implications inherent in what Doyle'd just said. "Yeh, yeh, she'd cry, all right. Quite a blow to a woman, eh? Bad enough to drive her fella right into the nearest bloke's bed..."

But Doyle said nothing, had drifted off before Bodie had finished, hadn't heard what Bodie had said. Couldn't deny the inference.

Couldn't admit to it either, Bodie told himself, post-coital sleepiness kicked out the bed by the cold adrenalin of fear.

It made sense, a nasty little voice told him, even as Doyle made himself more comfortable, sliding off Bodie to curl in behind him, Doyle's front plastered down Bodie's back, Bodie turning on his side, feeling Doyle cuddle in closer.

It did, actually, make sense, doubt seconding fear. After all, Bodie knew Doyle was so much on the rebound, the poor bastard was still bouncing. A quick look at the alarm clock, and Bodie realised it had been scarcely fourteen hours since Ann had dumped Ray. Not even a day, and look at where Ray was now: in a someone else's bed, someone as opposite to Ann as it was possible to be and still stick to his own species. Couldn't possibly have picked anyone more different, unless he'd gone for

someone coloured, and Jax was in Bristol, safely out of reach.

What was that he'd been thinking earlier on, about good old Bodie who'd always be there? Bodie, who was a complete mug, everyone knew he let Doyle away with murder.

Yeh, but was Bodie willing to let Doyle away with this?

Making it sound as if rubbing Ann's nose in it was the real reason for Ray being in bed with him. But then again, Ray could be a vindictive little bastard, and it'd be typical of him to see his own happiness as a weapon to get back at someone who'd hurt him. Could be something as simple as that, now that Bodie stopped to think about it.

All that talk about not being in love with him yet—half-way there, optimism piped up, fuelled by the echoing sensation of Doyle deep inside Bodie's body, by the warmth of the other man so close against Bodie's back.

True, Bodie conceded, and after today, he couldn't pretend that he didn't love Ray Doyle enough to at least try to work something out with him. So what, he thought bracingly, if Ray wasn't completely in love with him? And so what if Ray was on the rebound? Good relationships had been built on less, and at least they liked each other—fond of each other, even, as well as Bodie being in love with Ray. And they understood each other, understood the job and the insanity that became normality for them, for the inversions of their world compared to the cosy safety of lace curtains and chintz cushions. And the sex, god, the sex, he thought, his heart beating that little bit faster, his cock giving as much enthusiasm as it could manage. The sex had been superb, the best since Janine in Africa.

Funny what love could do for animal rutting, wasn't it? Bodie smiled to himself, doubts temporarily assuaged, easy enough done with Ray wrapped round him like a limpet, one hairy arm slinging itself round Bodie, Doyle mumbling affectionately in his sleep.

Must be having sweet dreams, Bodie thought happily, settling himself down for sleep, wriggling around a bit to pull the covers up over them again, thinking that Ray's propensity for next-to-no bedclothes was going to have to be one of their priorities to sort out. The other things, too, such as Ray falling in love with him. Toe-rag probably already had, years ago, just had never conceded it

to himself. Just like Bodie himself, Bodie thought comfortably, slipping off towards sleep. A right pair, that's us.

Behind him, he could still hear Ray mumbling away to himself, and smiled. Until he heard one word, one distinctive word.

Ann.

And it was accompanied by Doyle cooing in closer, holding Bodie all the more tightly, hips pressing into Bodie's in a way that couldn't be mistaken. No arousal, oh, no, too soon for that. But it was obvious what Doyle was dreaming about. Painfully obvious.

Under the glare of the unforgiving light, Bodie lay awake, and thought.

NEXT MORNING, sitting on the corner of the bed, watching Doyle surface slowly from sleep. Watching sleepy eyes being rubbed away, watching wake-up yawns, watching as Doyle scratched an itch on his bum.

I won't have that arse, Bodie thought dispassionately, shutting himself off, closing down the emotions, distancing himself from Ray Doyle.

"Morning, sunshine," Doyle smiled, stretching luxuriously, making a display of himself for Bodie's benefit.

Little slut, Bodie thought. Bet he'd do that for Cowley if he thought it would get his expense chit signed. Or if he thought it would make dear little Ann cry.

"You're up bright an' early," Doyle was saying, still sleep-ruffled and not quite with it yet. "An' I'll be up myself in a minute too," he went on, voice sultry, eyes heavy with the beginnings of desire, shifting to wry amusement as Nature demanded her due, "as soon as I've been to the loo."

"Coffee's made," was all Bodie said, moving aside to let Doyle get out of bed, bending down to pick up Doyle's black watch a good enough excuse to get him out of Doyle trying to kiss him.

Presented with Bodie's well-fucked arse contained in the rare sight of tight denim, Doyle couldn't resist the temptation of palming one firm buttock on his way past. Unseen, Bodie clenched his fist to stop himself from ramming the randy toad's tonsils out his backside. Treating him like one of Doyle's endless stream of meaningless birds, just another cunt to be fucked and abandoned. Slapping Doyle's watch down on the pile of clothes which he had folded with military precision while

Doyle was still dead to the world, Bodie told himself fiercely that he wasn't going to be another notch on Raymond Doyle's fucking belt, oh, no, not he. In fact, he'd show Doyle a thing or two.

Had, a small voice reminded him. Showed him more than a thing or two last night.

The thought was stamped out ruthlessly, Bodie's face impassive, as blandly determined as only a soldier can be.

I am not upset, he reminded himself. I do not give a flying fuck about Ray Doyle, he told himself, going downstairs, methodically chewing his way through a breakfast that was barely warm from being forgotten. But he was not upset, and he was not hurt. Or so he told himself anyway.

"That looks good," Doyle said, coming into the kitchen, breezily naked and sure of his welcome. He leaned down, putting Bodie's averted face down to embarrassment. Kissed him on the cheek, and was nearly bowled over when Bodie erupted from his chair, going over to the sink with all the grim determination of an executioner with a deadline. "And good morning to you too, mate," Doyle said under his breath, a bit worried now, although he had expected there to be problems, Bodie being Bodie. This didn't exactly look like typical morning-after awkwardness, either. Still, he wasn't going to jump to conclusions—had almost bugged everything up doing that yesterday. Something else he'd bugged yesterday: small wonder Bodie was a bit off this morning. Could unnerve a bloke, letting another man fuck him like that. And Bodie had sucked his cock too, a memory that made Doyle warm all over and brought the first flush of blood to his cock. Back to bed, that's what they both needed, Doyle decided, thinking about Bodie admitting that he was in love with Doyle, thinking about Bodie a mindless, boneless wreck under him, fucked into next week, so absolutely vulnerable. Definitely need to get him back upstairs, let Bodie take the lead, re-establish the evenness of the partnership.

"Bodie," he whispered, going right up behind his partner, not at all liking the way Bodie's back tensed visibly at his nearness, "why don't you leave the domesticity, and come back to bed with me? Hmm?"

Doyle was going to kiss him, Bodie just knew it. Could feel him coming closer, could feel Doyle staring at him, Christ, could just about feel the heat from his nakedness.

He was not, he reminded himself, interested in playing catcher for Doyle on the rebound. Did not choose to be Doyle's stopgap and scapegoat until Ann forgave him and came back to him in another flood of tears. When she finds out, Doyle had said last night. Not 'if'. Bastard had probably already planned a way of making sure she found out. Probably came up with the idea when he was sitting in that pub brooding himself up into this fine frenzy of substitute fucking.

Well, no more. Behind him, Doyle was murmuring, and Bodie could feel Doyle's breath on his nape, could feel the other man's heat all down his back. "You don't mind if I borrow your bike, do you? Only, my car's still at HQ," he hurried on, wiping his hands on the dish-towel, sliding neatly out from Doyle's sphere of influence without actually being touched. "Anyway, I've a day's leave, so I thought I'd look up an old mate of mine."

"An old mate?" Doyle asked him, holding on to his temper, thrown by this iciness that was both far more and far less than he'd expected the morning after they'd made love for the first time. "From the Army?"

Bodie turned on Doyle with a sneer he hadn't used since their earliest teaming. "SAS, copper."

That did it. "So it's going to be like that, is it, big man? Doing your Action Man on me—"

"Thanks for the loan of your bike," Bodie said coldly, cutting off even the faintest hint of discussion about what they'd done last night, and tacit denial of anything Bodie might have said yesterday. "Saves me having to go home and pick my own bike up, and I'm anxious to see my old mates. You know how it is," he went on, carefully hammering in every nail until the last night was firmly in its coffin, "combat situations—man forms real friendships with the blokes he serves with. See you in the office tomorrow, then, shall I?"

And not waiting for an answer, but leaving, quickly, grabbing the bike keys from the kitchen drawer, looking back to make sure that Doyle had got the message loud and clear, almost faltering when he saw the confusion of anger and hurt written all over Doyle's expressive face.

But I don't care, he told himself, climbing astride Doyle's bike. Last night was a fluke, one of those stupid mistakes a man's entitled to make. Anyway, he'll survive—can always phone Ann if he's that bothered. Or do what he always

does, ring up one of his other bints.

But not *me*, he thought, revving the bike ruthlessly, spoiling many an early morning dream.

A flicker of movement, and the bike died, Doyle palming the small brightness of the key. "Inside," Doyle said harshly, glaring right into Bodie's face. "I want you inside this fucking minute."

"Give me the key, Doyle."

"Not a chance, big man. If you think I'm going to let you go tearing out of here like a bat out of hell, then you're off your head. Come on, back inside before P.C. Plod nicks me for lewd behaviour."

That was when it dawned on Bodie that Doyle had come after him so quickly, the idiot was still naked. Served the bastard right.

"Fuck off, Doyle," he said nastily. "Before you give the worms a superiority complex."

"I'm staying right here till you come back inside with me. And you'll be cracking jokes out the other side of your mouth if Cowley has to bail me out because my partner wasn't looking after me."

"So you need a nursemaid now, do you?"

"I think you need a fucking minder. Now get off the bike and get inside."

"Give me one good reason why I should."

"I'll give you three. One: you've obviously got a bee in your bonnet about something and we need to sort it out if we're going to make this work. Two: Cowley. And number three, the best reason of all: me. You won't like what I'll do to you if you walk out on me, mate."

"Sort it out?" Bodie sneered, getting off the bike and strolling back into Doyle's flat. "Walk on water as well, do you?"

"I'll walk on you if you don't watch it," Doyle nearly shouted, locking the door behind the two of them. Turning, he faced Bodie, sharp eyes noticing that Bodie was doing a strict 'eyes front and centre' routine. "What the fuck is the matter with you?"

Silence, mutinous and mulish, a brick wall not even commanding officers had been able to dent.

"Come on, Bodie. After last night—Christ, last night was incredible, but now this morning, you won't even look at me."

Bodie did exactly what Doyle was complaining about.

"Look at me, Bodie."

Nothing.

"I said, look at me." Doyle grabbed him by the jaw, twisting Bodie's face round until the blue eyes

finally looked at him. “That’s more like it. Now you can talk to me. Go on, Bodie, tell me what’s got you running out of here doing your Marlon Brando.”

“You should know.”

“Oh yeh? And if I did, would I be asking you? So even though you think I *should* know, how about filling *me* in on all the important details.”

The sarcastic edge made Bodie want to hit him. “Ann,” he snarled, shoving Doyle aside, storming into the living room, caged there by the softness of modern urbanity. “Ann fucking Holly.”

“Now you’ve lost me. What’s Ann done between last night and this morning? The phone didn’t ring, and—”

“The phone didn’t ring,” Bodie mocked nastily. “No, it didn’t have to. Ann didn’t do anything, *mate*. You just opened your big fucking mouth.”

“So now it’s all my fault, is it? Right. Fine. Fair enough. I’m the baddie. Right. So what is it I said? Eh? Was it when I said I was already half-way in love with you? Or was it when I told you how fucking wonderful you were?”

Those were two of the many things Bodie didn’t want to think about right now, not when he was trying to get out while he still could. “It was when you snuggled up against my bum and called me Ann.”

Doyle looked pole-axed. “Christ, mate,” he said, and even Bodie couldn’t argue with the man’s sincerity, “I’m sorry. That must’ve been a pleasant surprise.” Doyle wiped his hand through his hair, sighed heavily. “I don’t even remember what I was dreaming about.”

Bodie wasn’t about to be sweet-talked, not that easily. Not at all, he told himself, clinging on to the memory of what Doyle had said last night, and how it had felt to know he, Bodie, was nothing but the rebound and the revenge. “Last thing you said before that was how much Ann would cry *when* she found out you’d gone off with a fella.”

“Yeh, I remember saying that. Well, it’d serve her right. She was one of that sort, you know, ‘Ooh, some of my best friends are *queers*’, and she deserves it just for that.”

Drily, almost without visible or audible emotion. “Thanks a lot.”

“Come on, I didn’t mean it like that. All right, all right, I did. But come on, you know I’m a malicious bastard when I get started.” A slanted look at Bodie then, judging, guessing what was going on behind Bodie’s stoicism. “One of the things about you that

made me think it could work with you.”

“What, you being a malicious bastard? Think I’m a masochist then, do you?”

“I meant that you already know the worst about me, and you love me anyway.”

“Do I?”

“Oh, yeh, Bodie, you still do. The way you know me—it’d take more than me whispering her name in the night to make you go off me.”

“Well you did more than whisper her name—”

“So I gloated a bit because she’d still be a mess because she didn’t have me, and I’d stopped kidding myself.”

Quiet, devastating calm, the absence of overt anger more worrisome than anything else. It was when Bodie went quiet the real trouble began.

“You rubbed against me, and you called me Ann.”

“And you expected me to drop women, just like that?”

“I expected you to fucking drop Ann, just like that. Just the way she dropped you.”

“Oh, Christ, we’re in trouble already.”

“Quick, aren’t you?”

“Will you pack it in? How the fuck are we supposed to stand a chance if all you’re going to do is stand there on your fucking hobby horse throwing stones?”

“Yeh, well, us innocent ones are supposed to throw stones, aren’t we?”

“Innocent?” Doyle came right up to Bodie, a surge of adrenaline rushing through him at the banked anger he saw in Bodie’s eyes, “And who was it, mate, who made being in love with me sound like a fate worse than death?”

“At least death’s over quick and once you’re dead, that’s it.”

Deep breath drawn the better to deliver his invective, Doyle hauled his temper back under rein, forced himself to calm down, to back off, give them both breathing space. Forced himself to think, Bodie the bull in the china shop, not him. Right. Stop. Think. Put yourself in Bodie’s shoes.

“Would it help,” he said carefully, “if I told you I love you?”

“Only if it were true, and as it’s not, no, I really don’t think any more lies would help at all. Thanks all the same.”

“But it is true.”

“Just not yet,” Bodie drawled, sounding bored, a sure tip-off to his inner turmoil. “Or just not all the way.”

“And how am I ever going to do that if you don’t give me a chance?”

“Oh, yeh, good old doormat Bodie. He’ll let you walk all over him and just lie there while you kick him.”

“All I’m talking about, is trying to explain that—”

“Yesterday your pride had taken a knock, and I was a convenient hole to fill until you felt better.”

“And I’ll just bet that’s half of all this, isn’t it? Yeh, Ann’s got something to do with it all right, but when you calm down, you’d see I wasn’t using you any more than you were using me.”

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t come the outraged innocent with me, Bodie. Don’t forget, you know me, but I know you just as fucking well. You used me, yesterday, because Ann had hurt me, and you thought I was on the rebound, so might as well fuck me while the going was good.”

Very much standing on his dignity, such truth having no place beside the genuine love he felt for Doyle. Didn’t feel for Doyle, he reminded himself belatedly. Did not feel love for Doyle. And if he repeated it often enough, he might even get to believe it. “Good enough theory, but shot down by one major detail. I didn’t fuck you, did I?”

“Would you feel better if you had?”

“Don’t be so fucking stupid.”

“Oh, it’s not stupid. It’s not easy to tell someone what you told me yesterday. And then you sucked my dick for me, and then you let me fuck you. Bet that bothers you today.” The uneasy flicker of expression gave Bodie away. “So go on, tell me. Would you feel better if you fucked me?”

“Is that an offer?”

Smiling, cocking his hip, genitals thrusting forwards. An offer, on his own terms, him very much in control. “Yeh, it is.”

“The way I feel, Doyle,” Bodie whispered with blatant self-control, “I wouldn’t fuck you, I’d rape you.”

“Couldn’t be rape, because I’m willing.”

“Yeh, but I’m not, and in my mind, it wouldn’t matter if you got down on your knees and begged me, I’d still be fucking raping you.”

“Would it help, Bodie?” Standing his ground, eyes wide and honest and very, very green.

“Would it help?”

“What if it would?”

“Then do it.”

“Into pain, are you?”

“Sometimes.”

“Well, this would be more than a bit of pain. This would be me ripping you apart.” A sneering chuckle, a dismissive glare. “And try explaining that one to Cowley.”

“Easy enough done.” Doyle shrugged, leaned against the wall. “Coming home late from a pub, taking a short cut down an alley, some skin’eads mistake me for a queer because of my hair or my bracelet, the way I walk, something. They jump me, I fight them off, but one of them gets me from behind, and then it’s all over. Too many of them for me to get clear, too dark to see anything. Case closed.”

“But we’d know.”

“Cowley would an’ all, but there’s nothing he could do if I don’t tell him.”

“Should’ve known, shouldn’t I?” Bodie smiled, a parody of his usual affectionate grin for his friend. “Make me an offer I can’t refuse and then blackmail the balls off me.”

“Oh, fucking hell!” One deadly hand thudding into the wall, coiled temper exploding. “That’s not what I meant either! Will you fucking *listen* to me?”

“Why don’t you listen to yourself and hear what you’re offering me. Emotional blackmail. I’ll love you one day, Bodie, honest!’ Or job blackmail. ‘Oh, rape me, rape me,’ and then you’ve got me by the short and curlies forever. Never mind asking what’s the matter with me, we should be asking what the fuck’s wrong with you.”

“I’m scared, all right?” Doyle yelled, the truth coming out before he had a chance to stop it. Then, quieter. “I’m so shit fucking scared, I don’t know what do.”

“Scared? You? What do *you* have to be scared about? Go on, pull the other one.”

“I’ve never been in love before, Bodie. Never trusted anyone that much, not once. Never been willing to take the chance to give someone that much power over me.”

“Never?” Bodie demanded, insidious hope creeping past all his self-defences. “Not Ann, not Esther—”

“Esther?”

“Oh, how soon they forget. Remember Esther? The policewoman from Hong Kong.”

“Yeh, yeh, just wasn’t thinking about her right this minute, funnily enough.”

“Yes, you must remember Esther. Lived with her as man and wife, didn’t you? Played houses. So

don't try to tell me—"

"But I never said I was in love with her, did I?"

That brought Bodie up short: Doyle had never said he was in love with any of them, not even Ann.

But Doyle had said he was half-way in love with Bodie. And he'd said he was scared.

"But what about last night and you snuggling up to me and calling me Ann? What about that?"

"I don't fucking know—for Christ's sake, Bodie, I was asleep at the time. How the hell do I know what was going through my mind? Could've been anything—"

"Could've been you wishing you were with her."

"Yeh, could've been. But I tell you, mate, if I was still wanting to be with her, after what it was like with you, then I'll be in seeing our Doctor Ross so fast her head won't stop spinning for a week."

Bodie didn't comment, just looked at Doyle for a second, then walked over to the window, looking outside at the small garden and thinking. Thinking about Doyle, a man who killed for a living, but move him into a flat like this, and the first thing he did was plant a herb garden and stick a few plants in. Well-cared for too, that small garden. Took time to nurture things, did Doyle.

'Cept this thing with Ann. That hit with all the slowness of a tornado, and Doyle hadn't done a thing to save it.

"Bodie..."

"What?"

"We never said this was going to be easy, did we?"

"And never a truer word was said."

"So we get to choose here and now. Sort things out, or split up every time we have an argument."

"'Nother flaw in there. If we split up after an argument, there won't be an 'every time' to argue."

"After what we've done, and after what we've said—what we've *both* said—d'you think we'll ever be able to stay apart?"

"No problem."

"You look me in the eye when you say that, and I just might believe you."

Resolutely, Bodie stared out the window.

"Didn't think so."

Outside, some birds were vying for the seeds in the bird feeder, squealing and squawking, climbing all over each other to get to the abundant food.

Inside, Doyle was moving around in the kitchen,

less what was called a comfort eater, more a comfort cook, recipe books his first refuge.

Slowly, reluctantly, his mouth set in an uncompromisingly straight line, Bodie went into the kitchen. "Ray."

Saucepan put carefully into the sink, Doyle turned to face Bodie, nothing in his attitude showing that he was even aware that he was still totally, beautifully naked. "Yeh?"

"Do you love Ann?"

"No. I wanted to, but it's not the same."

"You say you want to love me—what if you can't, the same way you say you couldn't with Ann?"

"Yeh, but I've got a head start with you, haven't I?"

"Have you?"

"What's it going to take to prove any of this to you? Come on, Bodie, tell me what you need, and if I can, I'll give it you."

"I need to be sure."

"Oh, god," Doyle groaned, shaking his head, turning back to the sink and clattering the pot around viciously. "You had to go and ask for about the only thing I can't give you."

"Why not?"

"Because who can prove anything to anyone? If we could prove that all this would work, d'you think I'd be this fucking scared?"

"Last night," said doggedly, stubborn refusal to let Doyle talk rings around him and to stop himself from giving in to the hope that would not go away, "I proved it to you."

"Only because I already believed it. That's the difference. I know I can trust you, and I know you can love someone right. But you and me—we don't know that about me, do we?"

"No."

Such a bleak word, to hang there with such finality.

"You sound..." Doyle began, stopped what his hands were busying themselves with, was finally self-conscious enough to sort-of casually drape a dishtowel in front of himself. "That sounded as if you're not willing to give this a chance."

"And if I'm not?"

"I don't know, Bodie," said with incredible weariness and the dawning of misery in his eyes, green shading dully to grey. "I just don't know."

"Would you go back to Ann?"

"Christ, Bodie, what do you think?"

"I don't think you would."

Doyle looked at him in surprise, which was pretty much the way Bodie was feeling himself.

"Even if this is only you on the rebound—"

"After the years we've been together? After the length of time I've had to think about trying this with you? Fat fucking chance."

"The length of time? Since yesterday?"

"Yeh, well, it was my bright idea to try and sort things out, actually tell the truth and all that, wasn't it?"

"Yeh, Ray, it fucking was. What are you getting at?"

A shrug that did nothing to convey innocence. "We'd hardly been partners half an hour before I thought you'd fallen for me. So I wondered what it would be like—the sex bit, first, of course. Then wondered what it would be like to settle down with you."

"All this time, and you've been wondering? Oh, thanks, mate, thanks a lot. And if Ann hadn't dumped you, would you ever've got round to telling me?"

"Dunno. No, don't look at me like that, I'm telling you the truth, even though it'd probably be safer to lie to you. But that's the truth, the god's honest truth."

"Christ, Ray, I don't know what to do with you!"

"Give it another go?" Doyle asked, coming closer to Bodie, their unerring instincts together guiding him. Bodie backed off a step, but Doyle had already seen the expression in his eyes, knew that this round, for the time being at any rate, was his. "Course," he went on, rubbing the side of his nose, "you could always fuck me."

Bodie glowered at him.

"Then again," Doyle shrugged, "you can still rape me if that's what you fancy."

"You're serious," Bodie finally said, incredulity dripping from him as his own insecurities faded enough for common sense to weasel its way in.

"You're actually serious, you mad fucking bastard."

"That's me!" making it light, essaying a smile that actually managed to wangle a glint of humour from Bodie. "And yeh, for the record, I am fucking serious."

"You know where that leaves us, don't you?"

"Shit scared and quaking?"

"Apart from that."

"Where?"

"Back where we started."

"No—" said quickly, Doyle poking Bodie in the chest for emphasis. "Not back at the beginning. We just proved—*both of us*, Bodie—that we can't just walk away from this. And that we're willing to try. We're nowhere near the beginning any more, Bodie."

"But still no guarantees."

"No. Not for either one of us."

"So it's just the two of us."

"That's right."

"This is all there is, for us, isn't it?"

Doyle didn't need to answer that, saw the knowledge in Bodie's eyes. Who else could there ever be for the two of them?

They ran out of things to say then, and stood staring at each other for a time.

"Now what?" Bodie finally asked.

"Well, I don't know about you," Doyle whispered confidingly, and Bodie was kind enough not to comment on the real fear still lurking behind the *bonhomie*, "but I'm freezing my balls off standing here. So why don't we go back upstairs..."

"And go to bed."

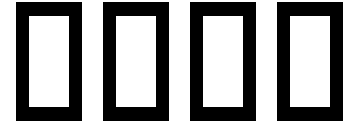
"Come on, Bodie," Doyle said, grabbing Bodie by the hand, yielding gracefully when Bodie turned the move on him so that Bodie had his arm round Doyle's shoulder and was hurrying him towards the stairs, "let's get you up the stairs so you can fuck me into next week."

It wasn't everything, but at least it was a beginning.

□□□□□

JANE MAILANDER

# A THRICE-DAILY INJECTION



---

*Here is the first of our two Holmes/Watson stories. Completely coincidentally, both focus on the same pivotal point in the original Conan Doyle stories. Let me stress that neither Jane Mailander nor Emma Scot saw each other's work; they simply saw the potential for an interesting story and ran with it. We readers are the lucky recipients.*

---



*'The division seems rather unfair,' I remarked. 'You have done all the work in this*

*business. I get a wife out of it, Jones gets the credit, pray what remains for you?'*

*'For me,' said Sherlock Holmes, 'there still remains the cocaine-bottle.' And he stretched his long, white hand up for it.*

WATSON PRINTED "END" in large letters at the bottom of the page and set the last sheet in its place in the bundle of pages. A bit of brown paper and string, a bell rung, a door opened and closed, and Mrs Hudson was on her way to post the parcel to the editor of *The Strand*. The clock was just chiming three on a dreary afternoon.

The final installment of "The Sign of the Four" was done. A full two days before deadline!

Dr John Watson leaned back at his desk with a sigh of supreme satisfaction, flexing his right hand to remove the last vestiges of cramp before retiring to his chair before the fire for a well-deserved brandy and a cigar. The proceeds from this latest embellishment of one of his friend's cases should eke out his wound pension very nicely for at least a month. This latest effort was his favourite to date—but then, his favourite story was always the one he'd just finished.

It was almost too easy, the way things had finally worked out between himself and his singular roommate. Sherlock Holmes' eccentric hobby—who else in all the world could boast the occupa-

tion of private consulting detective?—provided grist for the mill of John Watson's own, more conventional hobby. As luck would have it, mysteries and detective fiction were all the rage these days, and *The Strand* editor had been pleased with his first few chapters of "A Study in Scarlet". When his small government stipend or Holmes' detective work did not quite meet the bills—Holmes working purely for the love of exercising his unique deductive powers, accepting whatever payment his clients could muster—his writing neatly finished off the corners.

In turn, his little fictionalized accounts of his friend's abilities had spread the name of Sherlock Holmes across the country. Watson took a personal pride in observing the increase in the number of people who sought the aid of the brilliant man, people who had learned of him solely from *The Strand* stories. Sneer though he would at the romantic form of narrative Watson preferred, Sherlock Holmes would not have a fifth of his clientele—certainly not such a variegated one—and not a hundredth of his fame, had his exploits been set forth in the series of lectures he himself had envisioned as a vehicle for the exposition of his talents. Some of his most difficult cases had been brought to his attention by people who would not be allowed into the hallowed halls of learning solely on the basis of their sex, caste, accent or appearance—people who were not barred from the romantic flights of narrative produced by the popular fiction magazines and the yellow-backed novels.



For all his keen insight, Holmes was amazingly blind on the subject. Watson's low taste in writing styles was a constant litany of his—and yet he himself often castigated the official police for their lack of imagination, the spark of his own which often produced the correct answer to a convoluted problem when plain cold logic was insufficient, and which quality seemed to be abhorrent to the scholars' domain.

The theft of the Agra Treasure involving the murder of Major Morstan had been an intriguing puzzle from start to finish, and full of more details than even the most romantic fiction writer could have imagined: fabulous treasure, a secret band, convicts, pygmies...

Complete with a lovely prize for the narrator, Watson thought, smiling beatifically and taking a contemplative sip of his brandy. Romance, true love, and marriage. It had worked out beautifully, giving the murder mystery the added spice of a love story.

And every part of his description of the Major's daughter who sought to ascertain her father's fate was true as he had written it. Mary Morstan had been a beguiling creature, warm and gentle and generous. Had matters been just a little different between them, and had they not each had different plans, Watson had no doubt that he would have proposed to her. But he had certainly enlivened his account of the case by turning their friendly association into a full-blown romantic involvement. Careful always to blend fact and fiction very carefully—each nicely enhancing and embellishing the other—he had poured out his heart's music into those pages dealing with his fictional counterpart's wooing of Mary Morstan.

And music it was. He shook his head at his own inventiveness, the lightly-treated yet profoundly felt declarations of love within the story. For all that he could turn out such blood-curdling pot-boilers, John Watson was quite capable of startling even himself with his profound romantic turn.

With such thoughts the physician and author sank into a pleasant reverie. Perhaps an hour passed; perhaps two.

As he finished the snifter's dregs, he heard the stirring and groaning from the other room. Watson sighed, returning the snifter to the board. He knew what that sound meant.

Sherlock Holmes was rising out of his latest torpor. It had now been a fortnight since the

termination of the Morstan case, and Holmes' usual pattern of behaviour after such a case was showing true to form.

Sherlock Holmes' manic activity during a case was no Watson-embellished fiction. Nor were the bouts of profound lethargy and melancholia afterwards. Indeed, until another unusual case caught and held the interest of Sherlock Holmes, the detective had only one recourse during these droughts...

John Watson gave another sigh, and a shake of the head—this time directed at himself. The small matter of Sherlock Holmes' addiction often produced that effect in the doctor.

It was a despicable and loathsome habit, all modern medical research agreed, and one which led unfailingly to destruction of the mental faculties, and to an unwholesome and unpleasant death. As a medical man, Watson should surely know better than silently to allow his friend to indulge in such a dangerous and damaging practice.

At his lowest moments, when Sherlock Holmes was at his most cold and distancing, Dr Watson even pondered the unworthy thought that the only reason the man tolerated his companionship at all was for his ability to supply Holmes with the wherewithal of his addiction. Unworthy thought indeed; he chastised himself for even entertaining such a thought every time Holmes let drop a remark or directed a gaze that let Watson see how truly valuable he was to Holmes as colleague and friend. In the very bottom of his heart, Watson knew that it was no addiction he supplied to the singular and solitary man, but steadfast companionship.

Now he listened to the little sounds that friend made as he rose, performed perfunctory ablutions, and made his way into the sitting room. Watson's chair was so situated that its back was presented to the entrance to Holmes' sleep chamber. Watson remained where he was, savouring his cigar, listening to Holmes' approach.

His proximity to such a brilliant master of deductive reasoning had not been without effect on Watson. His own ability to draw clues from his environment had been sharpened considerably, and the ability had the extremely beneficial side effect of making his observations as a physician keener, quicker, and less likely to be swayed by a patient trying to hide something. It had also succeeded in making his fiction more of a facsimile

of life and less the rantings of a pulp artist. He did like to exercise his own small deductive powers whenever he was provided opportunity, such as the one now.

From his seat, Watson was ascertaining his friend's state as he came into the room. Sherlock Holmes was barefoot; he was wearing his old dressing-gown—there was the small sloughing sound of the torn hem dragging on the floor. His hair was unkempt—Watson had not heard the comb in use—and the long forelock would be falling into his eyes.

And his eyes, oh, his eyes...

Watson put down his cigar, nodding slowly to himself. He knew what the man's eyes would look like right now.

For his craving was upon Sherlock Holmes, and the light of anticipation would be gleaming in his eyes as he headed toward his succor—

And then the wiry arms surrounded Watson from behind. A lean cheek pressed fiercely against his own, the thick shock of black hair flopping over to touch his own forehead.

Watson's own hand rose to curve around the sharp outline of the man's jaw, stroking lightly but surely with just the fingertips.

"John," the man whispered, his voice hoarse with the need within him, and he tightened his grip around Watson's neck. "John."

Dr John Watson rose from his chair, leaving the remains of his cigar to moulder unmourned, and took his friend's hands in both of his own. Holmes was indeed wearing the old dressing-gown and was unshod. There, indeed, was the wild light in those eyes, normally such a sober grey or keen with the challenge of the chase, but now seeing only the appeasement of need.

Without a word Watson closed the distance between the two of them, and covered Holmes' mouth with his own, comforting and inviting at one and the same time as the other's mouth clung to his fiercely, hungrily seeking solace.

He felt frantic need hold itself back in Holmes; it was being fed by the kiss that promised fire, and fire becoming light, reassurance, tenderness and control. Not quenched, not even dampened—but contained, that need. The fierce fire was now held firm in a strong brazier. Strong enough for both of them. Strong enough to give what was needed, and strong enough to take what was so needfully given.

The kiss John gave was thorough, strong and

unhurried, a man's strength meeting a man's strength, punctuated by the scratch of unshaven upper lip. Watson could only speculate on how the bristle of his own moustache felt to his companion...

John pulled away first, slowly, his tongue slipping free with a reassuring lick to the lower lip. Still in silence, holding both long white hands in his own graceful and steady surgeon's hands, Watson led the way back to Holmes' bed-chamber and thence to the bed itself, whose rumpled state gave evidence of the man's uneasy drowse. As the man began fiercely to pluck at his waistcoat and shirt, Watson took hold of the frantic hands with his own, stilled them, and brought both to his mouth in a kiss; but it was the kind, sure look in his own eyes, the steady look of love, that calmed Holmes more than the physical gesture did.

Holmes lost no time in ridding himself of his dressing gown. He wore nothing beneath it. His whole body was lean and wiry—all, save for the thick heaviness of his penis raised high in erect state and oddly incongruous with the whippet-like leanness of the rest of him.

Watson finished his own stripping, quelling the automatic urge to don a night-shirt. His own body was stockier, more solidly built than was Holmes'; his was the weightier strength of the wolf, not the whippet. And the beginning of desire, the slow sweet surge of pleasure and passion, was filling and lifting his own cock into position. The taller, leaner Holmes and he were at least of a size here, in this respect.

Sherlock Holmes was already in bed again, covers lifted for Watson to join him. When he did so, he was caught up in a fierce embrace; arms, legs, the entire lean body encompassed him like a limpet clinging to a rock. Every muscle in the sinewy form seemed to be vibrating with tension, as if Sherlock Holmes were made of nothing but plucked harp strings. Soft whimpering cries rose from the man, deep in the throes of his addiction.

"Hush," John murmured, again silencing the frantic man with his mouth, his own hands laying hold of the lean flesh beneath them and stroking more to soothe than to arouse. "Shh. It's all right. It's all right, old fellow. It will be seen to."

"John, I, I need—"

Watson silenced the frantic man again, his hands never ceasing their explorations of now-familiar territory. "I know," he said fiercely against Holmes'

mouth before covering it again. "I know what you need, Sherlock. Only I know what you need. I have it. I will give it to you."

The combination of the soothing words and the steady, tender ministrations to the flesh began to work their magic. Holmes relaxed, tightened his arms in an encompassing gesture—an invitation rather than a clinging. He gave a great sigh of pleasure and relaxed, loosening his hold.

John bowed his head to succor his friend with his mouth, understanding to the marrow of his bones every sharp gesture, every cry made. Experience he'd had, a knowledge of women that spanned three continents. But there were some things only another man could give a man, only another man would know; things for which no respectable woman could be honourably asked.

When he raised his head, John knew that the time had come—the light in the frantic eyes would not be denied any longer. He nodded.

And without another word Sherlock Holmes turned 'round in the bed and settled into position, the lean buttocks presented for Watson's perusal.

Perusal, and...

Watson had been preparing himself from a jar of vaseline on the tabletop nearby. Now he knelt between parted lean thighs.

Only another man, a man could do this, would understand the glory of subjugation, the power of the reversal, the need for fulfillment.

Slowly, so carefully, strongly, John covered Sherlock, held him firm, safe under his aegis. His wet penis divided the lean rump, penetrated; filled the man gasping in delight beneath him.

"John, John—"

"Here, Sherlock. I'm here. I'm with you," John groaned, pushing. "I'm inside you, old man, I have you. You're mine, your arse is mine," he hissed, feeling the power of the ownership strengthen him, stiffen him, enlarge his masculinity. But not conquering, not cowing the man under him—making him one with him, being man enough for both of them, becoming twice the man he was. Not stealing his friend's manhood, but holding it safe inside him, as that lean arse held his cock safe inside it.

Strength, pride, overwhelming tenderness for his man, his Sherlock, gave power to John's thrusts, gave voice to Sherlock's cries. It built, rose to inevitable height, reaching the crest—

He bowed his back, opened his mouth, but no sound emerged as climax exploded in him like

fireworks. He was vaguely aware of the sharp distressed whimpers and sudden frozen motion as Sherlock gave himself up to the power holding both men in the palm of His hand.

And after death, as it always did, came sleep.

WATSON AWOKE first, as he always did; Sherlock Holmes slept the sleep of the dead when his daemons had been appeased, and would not awaken for another hour at least.

The doctor lay quietly beside his friend and watched him in repose, one hand carefully lifting the heavy hair away from his closed eyes, pulling the coverlet higher around the bare shoulders. The strong profile was turned into the pillow, the keen grey eyes were now closed, and the thin lips held a faint curve that would vanish with wakefulness as a lap disappears when a person stands up. Hawk-nosed, high-cheekboned, with a shock of black hair almost too thick for the pallid gauntness of his face—his dear friend was no beauty, for all his striking features. Watson smiled tenderly, remembering the first time Holmes had icily commented about the Strand illustrator making him too handsome by half, and attributing Paget's own artistic license for the inordinate number of young ladies who came seeking his help.

His own body, securely backed and stayed by the warm heavy bedclothes, echoed and re-echoed its satiation, even as his heart swelled with the love he felt for this wild, lonely man.

A love neither of them could ever proudly declare to the world with ring and rite, under the blessing of God and the law. A love Watson dared not express at all—save disguised in the safe fiction of his counterpart's declarations for the fictional Mary Morstan. No wonder his hidden romanticism had tumbled over onto the pages of his latest work.

And Sherlock was so needful...

That need had been the undoing of both of them. How could Watson resist the signs of vulnerability in the man of prodigiously cold calculation and iron will? Here, in this place, at this time, the clear, bright eyes were dimmed by emotion; the firm lips were parted and inviting. And the cold, precise rationalizations of the great brain gave way before the desperate, hidden song of the great heart.

Holmes needed what Watson gave him during his times of lethargy as much as he needed the electric excitement and mental stimulation of a difficult case during his times of energy.

A filthy addiction, all the best modern medical minds warned. A beastly and abominable craving unworthy of the human race.

And John Watson would most assuredly share that very repugnance with his medical colleagues, did he not already share that very addiction with Sherlock Holmes. An addiction each was able to sate in the other, to their mutual benefit. It had only made them fonder of each other, and better and stronger friends than Watson had ever been with any of his old school chums or his army compatriots. What a subtle and profoundly tender thing this friendship was between them, a trust and a knowledge of each other that Watson had never known could occur between two men. It was astonishing, and humbling at the same time.

A weakness the fictional Sherlock Holmes must have, to endear himself all the more to his public and add that ungovernable spark of humanity to the precise thinker. But it must be a safe weakness, an acceptable weakness; a weakness that could be boldly stated in print in a

respectable periodical like *The Strand*.

So. Let his dear, benighted readers believe it was cocaine in which Sherlock Holmes indulged his senses via a thrice-daily injection, an addiction that his friend Dr Watson wholeheartedly despised. It was certainly not the first time Watson had disguised facts to make a pretty fiction, one that would not distress complacent and genteel society.

And as he left his friend's bed to make his ablutions and ready himself for supper, the corner of Watson's moustache quirked upward in a sly smile.

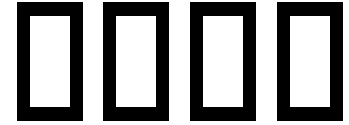
What would be the reaction of his faithful readers, if they knew the real cause of the two men seeking lodgings together in the first place; how would they react, to know of the faithful Mrs Hudson's complicity in the charade?

And indeed, would not all London howl outrage if it only knew the true occurrence at their first meeting—the one which had caused Sherlock Holmes to comment to John Watson, “You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive...”

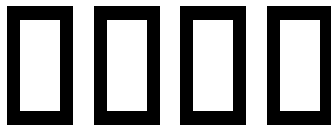
□□□□□

EMMA SCOT

# IF I NEEDED SOMEONE



*And now to take two on Holmes/Watson. Where Jane Mailander's A Thrice-Daily Injection follows the optimistic high road, Emma Scot, as is her nature, has chosen to slide along the pessimistic low one. We faithful readers are not surprised. The title, of course, is taken from the Beatles' song.*



THE ROOM'S SOLE occupant was crumpled untidily into his chair, an opened

book balanced precariously upon his knees, his head nodding as he dozed. A hansom treacled past outside, each clip-clop of horse's hoof loud in the stillness of the small hours of the night. The man did not stir, until the clock on the mantel struck three, the last striking of the bell rousing him from uncomfortable slumber. Rubbing at his eyes, he then examined his pocket-watch as if he could not trust the time kept by the mantel clock.

It was obvious that Dr. John Watson was keeping vigil, sitting up waiting, as had become his habit of late. In the early months when first he had shared these apartments with Mr. Sherlock Holmes, the two men had had little contact with each other, each being of differing habits and tastes. However, as Dr. Watson's health had slowly recovered from the Jaizal bullet and the enteric fever he had suffered whilst an Army doctor in the second Afghan war, his bored and restless mind had turned more and more to the oddities and eccentricities of the man with whom he shared lodgings. With the passing of time, this had grown from mere curiosity to be satisfied, to active participation in the mysteries at which Holmes was so gifted in solving. This fortnight past, Watson's current involvement had dwindled as the case neared fruition and Holmes insisted that only he, and he himself, could safely bring the matter to a satisfactory close. Tonight, if Holmes' deductions were

correct, and Dr. Watson had come to doubt that his friend could ever err in matters of logic and investigation, then Holmes would bring to justice a particularly loathsome creature who had been preying upon widows and spinsters, ruining both their good names and their fortunes.

Stretching mightily, as a man must after so many hours in a chair designed for sitting and not for sleeping, Watson roused himself enough to stand by the window, staying there for many minutes until the sight of driving rain and his chilled distance from the hearth ushered him to resume his impatient waiting in the relative comfort and cosiness of his chair. It was nigh on four o'clock when finally he heard the muted click of the outer door, and the weary tromp of Holmes' feet on the stair treads.

"Good God, man," Dr. Watson exclaimed from his warm place in front of the fire, his friend coming damp and morose through the door, "you must be absolutely chilled to the bone. Here," he continued, rising rapidly to his feet, hurriedly taking the shawl from the back of the sofa and wrapping it around the wet and bedraggled figure now shivering and dripping on the oriental rug, "wrap this around you, and let us get you immediately into a hot bath, else I fear for your lungs in such inclement weather. Especially," he added with that stern tone he had taken to of late in addressing Holmes, "after you have been taking such ill-care of yourself these last several days."

"Oh, don't fuss so," Holmes told him, with such an irritable snap in his voice that one would expect

Watson to look at him sharply, but the other man had quickly reconciled himself to his companion's irascible nature and sharp tongue and thus paid little heed to Holmes' protests, which it must be admitted, were nothing more than tokens of pride, as proved by his speedy acquiescence to Watson's ministrations.

"I hardly call preventing pneumonia to be fussing, Holmes. If it troubles you, then remind yourself that I have taken the Hippocratic oath and may not deny succour to a man in need." So saying, he hustled Holmes into the bathroom, where he had earlier had the foresight to lay hot water bottles in the folds of the Turkish towels. It was the work of moments to have steaming water pouring into the bathtub, and to it, Watson added several handfuls of mineral salts, mindful as he was of the aches and pains that were the usual result of being out in such weather.

Turning from preparing the bath, Watson was confronted with the sight of Holmes not yet fully disrobed. "Come, come, Holmes," he tut-tutted, irritated at Holmes' behaviour over such a trifle, and surprised at such prudery from a mind that was usually so logical and cold, "surely you cannot feel constrained to modesty in front of me? For Heaven's sake, I'm a doctor, and I have seen many more men in their natural state than you could even begin to count. Hurry up, there's a good fellow, and into the bath with you."

It was with an odd cast to his countenance that Holmes did as he was bid, contriving a degree of modesty even then, turning, as he did, so that his back was almost all that was presented to his colleague. Silently, he began bathing, and it was not lost upon Dr. Watson that a flannel was dropped, and discarded, to conceal that most private of parts.

As he had become adept at doing, Watson refrained from comment, assuming that this was yet another in a long list of Holmes' peculiarities, and not wishing to seem himself to harbour any untoward interests in his friend's anatomy. "You haven't said a word since your return. Am I to assume the evening a success?"

Leaning back until he was all but hidden by the cabinet of the bath, Holmes closed his eyes in utter weariness, but his mouth hardened. "It was an unqualified success."

"Then this rake has been stopped."

"The rake, as you so colourfully call him, has not only been stopped, but sent to his Judgement."

"Holmes! Surely you cannot possibly mean—"

"No, no, do not distress yourself. I did not kill him. But I did see him stumble and fall over the edge of the canal. And I confess, Doctor," he went on, with a slight emphasis on Watson's humane vocation, marking it in contrast to his own actions, "that I did nothing to assist him regain the bank."

For several moments, neither man spoke, and then Watson, with gaze softened to compassion, said: "It is in God's Hands now, Holmes, and I dare say, by not risking your own life to save his, you have saved several decent women from public humiliation in the witness stand. And we cannot calculate how many more women you have saved from abasement and ruin at that swine's hands."

"That was surely a part of my decision. But I must also confess to a degree of revenge."

"And for that, I cannot condemn you for what I feel myself." With that, Watson took up the sea-sponge from the bath rack, and began washing Holmes' back. "We had best be thorough," he said, rubbing more soap into pale skin, "for I dread to think what creatures were living in those clothes you wore tonight."

"Whatever they were, I vouch they were carnivorous."

"In that case, we must resort to the carbolic." With the quick movement that had only recently returned, Watson gathered the unpleasant soap from the wash-stand, and immediately began lathering Holmes' back, acutely aware of the other man's tension and the near flinches that every sweep of his hands garnered. "Shh," he murmured, thinking of the men he had seen dying, not because he had chosen not to help, but because he himself had been helpless. "It does you no good and much harm to knot your muscles so. Allow them to relax, so that the blood can flow unimpeded. Yes, that's better..." With even, smooth and calming strokes, he worked the soap into Holmes' skin, rinsing it carefully with the sponge. As he worked, he could not help but notice the flawlessness of Holmes' complexion, skin as clear and unblemished as if he had never lived anywhere but in the deepest countryside. The muscles, too, while lean and evocative of the whipcord strength and stamina that was such a characteristic of the other man, were of great interest to the physician, but not as a result of his profession.

"This mark," he said, gently swabbing round the darkening of a bruise, "how did you come by it?"

“A cudgel which I failed to dodge. It is of no importance, Watson.”

“It’s not a serious wound, I’ll grant you, for while there is some swelling, the skin is not broken, but any hurt to you is important,” Watson replied. “I shall apply liniment to it when you are bathed.”

“Do not trouble yourself.”

“Nonsense,” Watson replied heartily, entirely failing to hear the tone of warning in his friend’s voice, “it is no trouble whatsoever.”

“I fear it will be more trouble than our friendship can bear.”

“What in Heaven makes you say such a thing?” Watson demanded, carefully rinsing the area around the bruising. “The world has come to a sorry pass if the need of a common courtesy from a friend is deemed a demand greater than friendship can bear.”

To this, Holmes did not reply, hunching forward instead, away from the touch of Watson’s hands.

It seemed to Watson, spurred no doubt by the guiltiest of consciences, that Holmes’ withdrawal was an answer to Watson’s thoughts rather than his words. “Holmes,” he said, pained, grasping his friend by the shoulder, the damp softness of skin a temptation upon which he did not act, “please do not do this. You must surely know that I would never step beyond what is proper.”

“My dear fellow,” Holmes murmured, his own hand rising to grasp Watson’s, “don’t.”

“I was doing nothing, absolutely nothing one man might do in perfect innocence to comfort a friend, Holmes,” Watson snapped, snatching his hand away from any contact, fired by Holmes’ cruel misjudgement of him. “You have no need to fear any action from me—”

“And indeed, I do not,” Holmes replied quietly.

The statement gave Watson pause, the implications of it slow to make themselves conceivable.

“Does this mean...? Do you imply that...?”

“Apply my own methods, but only if you must,” Holmes said harshly, erupting from the bathtub like Poseidon, water spilling and splashing everywhere. Almost before Watson had time to realise that his friend was making an escape, Holmes had enveloped himself in a voluminous bath-towel and was hurrying from the bathroom itself.

His first impulse was to follow at all speed, but common sense asserted itself, and Watson remained where he was, lost in thought. It could not be denied: Holmes’ words implied that it was his

own reaction, his own weakness that he feared, which could only mean that Holmes suffered from the same unnatural desires which so beset Watson. Applying, as Holmes must surely have known he must, Holmes’ own deductive reasonings to the problem, Watson re-examined his friend’s behaviour, looking at Holmes’ amity in a new light. There was no-one else in Holmes’ life who was accorded the companionship, friendship and intimacy that Watson received. There was none other referred to as a dear friend, or introduced as an intimate associate, nor yet anyone else with whom Holmes spent his time, unless that person were germane to some investigation or study.

Who else, Watson wondered for the first time, had Holmes ever attended a concert with? For whom had Holmes ever played his violin—and for whom had he composed those haunting harmonies that spoke directly to the heart and were such contrast to the man’s cold and calculating intellect? In truth, who else had ever been permitted to see the heart at the core of the great mind?

His own person was the only answer that such questions supplied. Holmes, Watson decided, most definitely had the right of it when he said that Watson saw but failed to observe. It seemed that he had failed to observe far more important matters than how many stairs led up to their sitting-room. Now, Watson mused, he had to decide what to do now that he had finally observed, now that he had enough information to eliminate all other possibilities and arrive at the correct conclusion, no matter how absurd it might seem. After all, who ever would have thought that Sherlock Holmes would harbour affections for another person, in light of that gentleman’s oft-repeated insistence that emotions served no purpose but to cloud the intellect and distract the mind? Perhaps, anyone who had troubled to observe him, anyone who had noted the way Holmes was slowly coming out from behind the protection of his sere armour.

Watson returned to the sitting-room, pouring himself a stiff measure of malt whisky, and reseated himself in the chair which he had already occupied for so protracted a period this night. He could hear, only faintly, and then not at all, the small sounds of a man readying himself for bed, and as the noises stopped completely, he could safely assume that Holmes was finally abed. Thereby truly solitary, Watson nursed both his glass of spirits and his thoughts. Even if Holmes’

intentions were reciprocal to his own, this did not give him true cause to go to his friend and engage in that which others might call sins of the flesh and which God called an abomination.

Yet, the appetite was an imperative, and it seemed to him, in those moments when the hunger was upon him, that this taste for men was no less natural than any other hunger. Indeed, when it seemed that the need would consume his very soul, Watson could no more conceive of starving that hunger than he could of starving his body of food, so basic a need was it to him. That is, when the hunger was upon him. Rationality never failed to re-establish itself once the demands of the body had been sated, and in the aftermath, the waste of his seed in such rites of infertility and the guilt of his sin would weigh upon him, and it was that which he did not know if he could visit upon Holmes.

For all the man's incredible knowledge, there was yet a terrible vulnerability to him, an innocence of ignorance, and what would the result be if Watson were to awaken the beast of carnality in Holmes? What price pure intellect then?

Light was seeping through the windows, where Watson had left the curtains undrawn that he might see Holmes the moment of his return. The fire had fallen to smouldering ashes, and the odour from Holmes' disreputable disguise had disappeared. Downstairs, the scullery maid could be heard drawing water, and the tweeny was clattering around with the coal scuttle: it would not be long, with such carelessness and such noise, that the girl would be replaced, Mrs. Hudson proud of the way in which she ran her house.

If the silence from his room were any guide, then Holmes would be asleep, or lying there still, awake, and worrying over Watson's reaction to his earlier statement. It was not time, though, for Watson to take his decision, not when the end results would have such import. Rather than face his friend over the breakfast table, Watson took up his hat and his cane and withdrew to the outside world, where he could think in peace.

IT WAS many hours, and many more miles, later, when Watson returned to his lodgings at 221b Baker Street.

"Oh, good afternoon to you, Dr. Watson," Mrs. Hudson said as he came in, damp from the heavy fog that had fallen and precipitated his return. "Mr.

Holmes has just gone out. He said you weren't to wait dinner for him, so I shall bring you up a nice piece of fowl at the usual time, shall I?"

"Yes, yes, that will be perfectly all right," Watson replied with an air of distraction Mrs. Hudson more usually associated with Mr. Holmes.

It was the second night in a row that Watson had kept vigil for his friend, but on this occasion, the clock had not yet struck eleven when the weariness of his sleepless night took its toll and sent him nodding. When midnight chimed, he roused himself, checked Holmes' room, and finding it empty, retired himself. Dreams troubled him, and his sleep was exceedingly restless, his nightshirt a tangle around his legs and the bedclothes a tumbled heap on the floor when he awoke with a start. He could not tell what had awakened him, but it seemed to his sleep-befuddled mind that he had heard the door to his own bedroom closing, and that could mean only that Holmes had opened it to look in upon his sleeping friend, and had intended to slip away quite unnoticed.

With more silence and skill than Holmes was yet willing to credit him, Watson donned his dressing gown and tiptoed down the stairs, carefully avoiding stepping on the two treads that creaked so abominably. Thus was he able to come upon his friend all unawares, and saw as Holmes stood melancholy in front of the fire. He watched, driven by both curiosity and an unvoiced need for reassurance, as Holmes first touched his fiddle as if contemplating playing the instrument, to turn from that to an instrument of a different sort, the syringe and glass jar that sat on the mantelpiece like a malevolent god of old.

"No!" Watson exclaimed at the very moment Holmes' fingers touched the gleaming glass. "Do not, I pray, inject yourself with that evil potion."

"I will inject myself with whatsoever I choose," Holmes said coldly, his voice and his demeanour unfriendly.

"But you know what that solution will do to your mind—"

"I know what the medical profession claims it will do to me. Better yet do I know what the lack of this 'evil potion' will do to my brain."

"Ennu is no excuse to abuse your body and risk your mind."

Holmes smiled condescendingly, and the disappearance of affection from his gaze wounded Watson to the quick. "Thus speaks the man who is



easily and readily amused, who can occupy his mind with trivialities and inane scribblings.”

“Thus speaks the man who cannot face himself and must hide behind the false excitement of a drug.”

“How can you know it is false? Is something less true for coming from an unexpected source?”

“That is not what I mean, Holmes, and well you know that.”

“I know nothing of such things,” Holmes replied, turning back towards the fireplace, his hand resting beside, but no longer touching, the syringe. “I can tell you the maker of the cigar that left behind ash at the site of a murder, I can deduce the height and weight of a man from the impression left by his shoe. But of these things, the meanings behind a man’s words when he speaks of anything other than crime or a mystery—of these things, I am profoundly ignorant.”

“I am not,” Watson said, stepping more fully into the room, approaching his friend until they were a scant measure apart. He could scarcely imagine what it had cost so proud a man to make such an admittance to him, and could only hope to equal such bravery. “In these things, I am something of an expert, albeit an unwilling expert. I have tried,” he went on, as Holmes stilled, listening to him, “to gain no further knowledge in this field, but no matter how I struggle with the demon of my nature, I am compelled to accede to the part of me that controls the direction of my heart.”

“And where do your affections lead you now?” Holmes asked very quietly.

“My affections lead me to you. Where else could they possibly take me?”

“To a woman, marriage, home, a family—”

“I have all but given up hope of such things. I feel great affection for the fairer sex, and there have been no small number of whom I have had knowledge, but I have long since feared that the darker side of my nature will forever deny me the joys of a home and a family of my own. Perhaps, together, you and I could...” Even in an atmosphere of honesty, Watson could not actually bring himself to put such a matter into words. At a loss of what to say, he looked to Holmes, and found no easy pathway there, Holmes at a greater loss than Watson himself was. If words would not suffice, or could not be spoken, then action must needs speak for him. Reticently, Watson took Holmes by the hand, and led him towards Holmes’ bedroom, for

that room was the farthest from any other habited bedroom in the house. There was hesitancy, but no degree of reluctance in his companion, Holmes content to be led in this. Together, they entered the bedroom, gaslight burning low, and while Holmes disrobed, Watson lit the candle and closed the door, shutting the world and its disapproval outside.

Careful of his companion’s lack of experience, and wary of giving Holmes any cause for concern, Watson disrobed with his back to Holmes, contriving to be half-way under the covers before he took his drawers off. Naked, he lay down beside Holmes, the two of them made to lie close together due to the smallness of the bed. The feather pillow was soft under Watson’s cheek, and carried a faint hint of Holmes’ hairdressing, and the feather bed cradled him in softness and the heat reflected by Holmes’ lean body. “All I ask,” he murmured quietly, stroking his hand across Holmes’ dark hair, “is that you relax and permit me to do this for you. You need do nothing, nothing at all, for I know how to pleasure a man, and I will teach you, in good time. This night is for you, and what you need—”

Watson’s words stopped there, halted by the frantic pressure of Holmes’ lips upon his, and the grinding need of Holmes’ body pressing the two of them so tightly together. Watson opened his mouth, and he did not know if it were experience or instinct that drove Holmes’ tongue inside it, the limber muscle caressing him, tracing across the smoothness of his teeth, exploring every minute detail of him. Watson surrendered to the sensation, luxuriating in the absolute hedonism of being here, naked and aroused, with his dearest friend, that most special of friends that all men of his nature sought, even while they dreaded the final loss of redemption. With Holmes enveloping him in affection and nurturing him with the most tender of passions, Watson could not hold on to any thought save those which centred on what Holmes was doing to him, on the exquisite sensations those fine hands were bringing him. His manhood was taken firmly in hand, every caress perfect, every move an expression of utter delight.

“You are not the innocent I thought you to be,” Watson whispered into Holmes’ ear, before his tongue traced the delicate aural outline.

“I am innocent only in affairs of the heart,” Holmes replied, and he was gratifyingly breathless,

his eyes intent. "In matters carnal, I have had experience but, my dearest friend," he leaned down and kissed Watson once more, with such passion and affection Watson was moved close to tears, "nothing has prepared me for the joy of knowing you."

It was not a protestation Watson had ever expected to hear from Holmes' lips, and it did his heart good to hear not only the words, but the sincerity in that hoarsened voice. He would warrant that no-one else had ever been loved by Holmes, and that no-one had ever been given the opportunity to return the love of this solitary man. Once more, words failed him, and he allowed his body to express his affections, his hands touching Holmes everywhere, and with passion, and affection, and adoration. Soon, he filled his palm with the heat and heaviness of Holmes' arousal, and his mouth watered with the desire to taste this man's flesh. With some difficulty, Holmes reluctant to yield an inch of him, Watson lowered himself down the bed, stopping and rolling Holmes on to his back, so that his manhood stood straight and proud, an invitation to a feast. First, Watson gently rubbed his face with his friend's manhood, his moustache tantalising on the rigid flesh. With a groan of pleasure, Watson sank his mouth down upon Holmes, taking him within, filling his empty maw with another man, with this most cherished of men. Under his jaw, he could feel the press of Holmes' testicles, the thin skin and firm ovals touching him as he swallowed his friend down as deeply as he could manage. Holmes' hands were in his hair, stroking endlessly through the brown locks, his fingers straying round to touch the bob of Adam's apple as Watson swallowed, and swallowed again, the sensation singing through both of them. The moment approached, and Holmes, with the utmost reluctance, withdrew himself from Watson's mouth.

"I would not limit us to that," he whispered, kissing the mouth that had taken him inside. "If we are to do this," and they both knew that Holmes was referring to that most difficult of things, his own emotions that were more than mere lust, "then I would have us consummate our *affaire de cœur* fully. Come within me, my dearest John, join us, flesh to my flesh..."

Watson's heart was suffused with love, and his body surged with such passion as only those words could inspire. "Gladly," he replied, already reach-

ing down to explore between Holmes' legs, caressing his testes and then going farther, until his fingers found the tight pucker that led to the dark depths of Holmes' body. "Are you certain you want this?" he was compelled to ask, even as his fingertip sank into satin heat.

"I'm sure I want this," Holmes said, lifting his hips so that Watson's finger sank a little more deeply into him. "It is the other aspects of all this that give me pause. But do not, I beg you, waste time talking. I can feel you within me, and my body craves more. I need to feel all of you within me, completely inside of me."

"And you shall," Watson whispered, his mouth round one erected nipple, his finger thrusting inwards and outwards of Holmes' body. Such openness of the flesh augured well, but Watson was doctor enough to be reluctant to rely on the body's natural resources which, in their haste, might not prove sufficient. Fumbling, he snuffed out the candle, and gripped it, the hot wax burning tantalisingly against his palm. Pulling it free from its holder, his thumb ran along the candle, making sure that there were no hot drips to burn Holmes internally. Satisfied of that even as his body ached with its own need to be satisfied, and with Holmes assisting by lifting his legs up so that his calf muscles rested on Watson's shoulders, Watson slowly pressed the tallow candle against the entrance to Holmes' body, his own body shivering with pleasure as he saw the whiteness disappear into the darkness, a faint sheen appearing where traces of tallow were melted by the heat of Holmes' anus. Holmes' rectum was opening and closing around the invading candle, and allowing his legs to fall, splayed wide, on the bed, Holmes leaned up on his elbows so that he could, with Watson, watch the false phallus penetrate him.

"Enough!" he gasped suddenly, one trembling hand alighting on top of Watson's, stilling the motion of the candle. "I want you. Now. Do not torment me any longer, John. Join with me..."

Carelessly, Watson tossed the candle aside, unknowing of where it landed, interesting in nothing but Holmes spread open and submissive in front of him. He had never expected his friend to be his catamite, but even with Holmes lying there, naked, in such wanton display, Watson could not find an ounce of disrespect within him for his friend. Indeed, all he saw, when he looked at Holmes lying there shamelessly, was a man who

loved him, a man in love for the first time, and all that love and passion was for him. Struggling for some control, he took his penis in his hand, and pressed it home against the opening of Holmes' body. The breath hissed from him, his sighs matching those of Holmes as their bodies became no longer islands, but were joined, ever more deeply, until Watson was belly to belly with Holmes, his manhood completely within the satin heat of his friend's body, Holmes' legs wrapped round Watson's waist. In this manner, they moved together in the ancient rhythm, every movement a joy and a pleasure, Holmes shifting until Watson was penetrating him in such a manner that the secret spot that is within all men was stimulated by the thrust and slide of Watson's manhood. In the quiet of the bedroom, the sound of their lovemaking was loud, and this casting aside of daily circumspection excited them even more.

The pleasure between them fed upon itself, a banquet of sensation. Passion built itself up into a crescendo, until Watson helplessly spilled his seed deep inside his friend's body, Holmes holding him tightly, cradling Watson to his bosom until the paroxysms of the flesh had ceased. As coherent thought replaced the mindless needs of the body, Watson was acutely aware of the rigidness pressed into his belly even while his own limpness slipped free from inner darkness. "Let me do this for you now, my dearest friend," he murmured, such an act the least he could do to declare a passion and a devotion that matched Holmes'. Once again, he lowered himself down Holmes' body, and with Holmes' passion-filled cries lapping his ears, Watson felt the tide of fluid that heralded Holmes' release. He did not immediately yield his possession of his friend's body, suckling like a babe at breast until Holmes was helpless and limp, inarticulate with satiation.

Only then did Holmes withdraw from Watson's mouth, shaking hands urging Watson to rise up so that Holmes could encircle Watson with his arms, enveloping him with more affection than either man had thought him capable. "This is more—far more than I had anticipated."

"Better, then, than your previous experiences?" Watson enquired, equally curious about both Holmes' past and his own prowess.

"Tawdry fumbblings in the dark or the paid caresses of the Cleveland Street boys cannot compare."

"I shall take that as a compliment, paltry though it surely is," Watson replied to that, in the manner of one man feeling secure enough to tease another.

"If you expect more..." Holmes broke off abruptly, sitting up even more rapidly, all but throwing both Watson and the bedclothes to the floor. "If you expect the language of lovers, poetry and love tokens, then it would be best were you to leave now. Such protestations are not in my nature—"

"And rank stupidity is not in mine. I confess to seeing yet not observing, as you have so often criticised me. But I do not see any purpose in expecting a leopard to change its spots simply because its situation has changed."

"That is as well, my dearest fellow. For I will not become a simpering beau throwing myself at your feet." He ceased speaking, but only for a moment. "Not, that is to say, now that I have thrown myself upon your mercy."

"And I upon yours. We neither one of us could expose the other without also exposing ourselves. We have entered into a partnership this night, Sherlock, one that is of mutual benefit and mutual protection. You need have no fear of me in this, or in any other matter."

"Need I not? To confess such weakness before another—it is a terrible thing, John."

Watson was coming to realise that the only way to defeat Holmes' cold and callous intellect was to suborn it with feeling, and so he knelt behind his friend, and put his arms around him, and kissed him, lovingly, on the nape of his neck. "Only if such a weakness is not shared. And you and I share this in equal measure. Now," he continued, his hands roving freely over Holmes' chest, taking the greatest of delights in pert and reactive nipples, "come back to bed with me."

"As a physician," good humour laced the melodious voice, and that engendered more hope in Watson than almost anything else had, "you should be most acutely aware of the limitations of the male of the species in matters procreational."

"And as an intelligent man, you should be aware that when two men share the joys of the flesh, procreation is the farthest thing from their minds. No, I wish only to hold you, and kiss you, and say all the foolish things that you would never say."

Holmes permitted himself to be manoeuvred down onto the bed, lying still and gazing at his

friend as Watson covered them both with sheet and blankets. "What if I were to declare that I had no desire to hear such nonsense?"

"Why then," Watson murmured, dropping brief, loving kisses on a visage that softened only for him, "I should stop saying them of course. But I would not cease to think them."

IT WAS the slovenly tweeny with the coal scuttle that gave them warning enough that they were able to arise and hurry themselves to the sitting room, where they carried on with every evidence of proper deportment. The tweeny curtsied as she came in, the heavy scuttle banging against the door.

"Ever so sorry, sirs," she said quite shyly, eyes darting from one dressing-gowned gentleman to the other, the colour rising in her cheeks. "I'll come back later," she mumbled, coal abandoned by the fire as she scurried from the room.

"A problem we should have considered," Holmes said from where he stood by the fireplace.

"If I remember correctly," Watson replied rather drily, not at all amused by Holmes' distant and supercilious manner, "we were both somewhat distracted yesternight. Such practicalities were, I think, of no great importance to either one of us in the face of such...passionate discourse."

"Quite," was the full extent of Holmes' reply. Turning his back to Watson, he began tamping tobacco into his favourite pipe, using a spill to light it, a cloud of smoke wreathing his head and hiding his eyes before he once more turned in the direction of his friend. "However, we shall not have the excuse of ignorance a second time."

"What do you suggest?"

"There are a few possibilities, primarily that we find lodgings in a house run to less stellar sensibilities, or that we take Mrs. Hudson into our confidence and pray that she will not be horrified, or that we are simply careful in future to always return each one to his own bed."

"Thank God! For a moment there, Holmes, I feared you were about to suggest that we desist from such expressions as those we employed last night."

"I am not prone to effusiveness of words or empty gesture, Watson, my dear chap, but I am a man of exceeding loyalty and honesty."

Watson positively beamed at such a declaration. "And to think that yesterday, I had no hope of any such reciprocation at all! The world is a wonderful

and marvellous place, Holmes."

"And here comes one of them at this very moment," Holmes replied, his tone that of a stern warning, "in the form of one of Mrs. Hudson's excellent breakfasts."

"I could hardly believe it when Mavis said that both of my gentlemen were already up and about." She put a heavy tray upon the table, her deft hands setting plates, food and accoutrements in place. "Although I must remind you both, while I am a widow and used to the ways of men, we have mere girls in the house, and if you are going to rise so early, I'll thank you to keep the doors to all your rooms locked until you are presentable."

"Oh, we shall," Holmes said, bending his not inconsiderable charm upon his landlady. "In fact, we shall make a point of keeping our doors locked from this very moment onwards." With a gracious, if ineluctable gesture, he hastened her through the door, turning the lock and brandishing the key with a flourish.

Watson could scarce control his laughter. "And that, unless I'm very much mistaken," he said, attacking his breakfast with all the enthusiasm of a man who has exercised thoroughly, "is the final solution to our little problem of discretion."

"Yes, I believe it is," Holmes said more slowly, toying with the buttered kipper on his plate, his attention more fully upon his table companion.

"Yet I see that you are still troubled."

"Are you not troubled also?"

"Well, of course I am. But I am only lately returned from India, and equally, I am of limited means, and you are an eccentric. No-one would suspect anything of a criminal nature from either of us."

"All of that is true enough, but you neglect the fact that you are a physician, more than capable of earning an excellent income, and I am a 'confirmed bachelor', a statement that arouses suspicion in petty minds."

"Easily taken care of. You shall give me details of your cases, I shall print them, and carefully include references to romances—"

"I will not be turned into some Lothario, Watson."

"An engagement, then, tragically ended—"  
Holmes' expression was lyrical.

"No? Then a wife died painfully young, in childbirth, that would be best—"

"All of which would be difficult, if not impos-

sible, to explain to my brother.”

“Then I, who have no family, will write a wife for myself—”

“And no doubt kill her in a suitably melodramatic illness which left you determined to become a doctor.”

“Ah-ha! I’ll make a novelist of you yet, Holmes!”

The glare that greeted that was inimical, and Watson subsided into a more decorous demeanour. “Very well, I shall show some restraint. However, I am perfectly able to create some ruse that will protect us from suspicion.”

“Do you think,” Holmes said wearily, “that Mrs. Hudson does not read your accounts?”

“Then what do you suggest we do?”

“I suggest,” Holmes said quietly, and then greatly surprised Watson by reaching out and briefly clasping his hand, “that we wait. We are panicking because you and I know how our situation has changed, and we are guiltily assuming that the entire world must surely know also.”

“When in truth, it is only you and I.”

“Precisely.”

“Then by all means,” Watson rose to his feet, came to stand behind this most precious of friends, one hand resting as if casually upon Holmes’ shoulder, Watson’s thumb sweetly touching the skin exposed by the gaping neck of Holmes’ nightshirt, “let us wait. Let us enjoy all of this while it is new, and worry about clouding the trail at a later date.”

“Which leaves us with but one question, John.”

Watson bent down as if to hear more clearly what his companion was saying, and used that as excuse to touch his lips to Holmes’ ear-lobe, an area that he had discovered was of extraordinary sensitivity. “And that question can only be how I shall ever succeed in restraining myself when simply looking at you sets my blood on fire.”

It was probably the closest anyone had ever seen to a blush upon Holmes’ pallid cheeks. “I believe that I should dress now,” he murmured, slipping out of his chair, breakfast abandoned on the table.

“No,” Watson said gently, taking him firmly by the arm and reseating him. “You need to eat, and I,” he smiled self-deprecatingly, “I need to remember that this is all quite new to you, and quite alien to your manner.” He saw Holmes’ discomfort, cursed himself for being so insensitive to his friend’s needs. “Go on,” he urged, returning to his own chair, tucking into his breakfast and doing his

best to make this morning seem like all others. “Eat some of this fine feast Mrs. Hudson has gone to the trouble of cooking for us. I’ll send the maid out to purchase the newspapers, shall I?”

And thus were the comforts of familiar routine established, to be maintained throughout the day when discretion was of the greatest import and to be dropped when Mrs. Hudson had retired to the distant recesses of the house, and they were behind the closed and locked doors of their bedrooms.

LIFE CONTINUED in this pleasant manner, their friendship growing even deeper than before. The subject of an artifice to conceal their secret was never once raised between them, and indeed, their actions of the night-time were never discussed.

All of this changed, however, on the day when into their life came a Miss Mary Morstan.

“But surely you must see that she is perfect for our needs?” Watson demanded as they sat in their sitting room waiting for certain developments.

“I see no such thing, as my mind is firmly fixed on the case and—”

“And you are using this concentration as an excuse to hide from those matters that require our attention. I have told you—”

“Yes, yes, I remember perfectly well what you have told me. Of how the gentleman at *The Strand Magazine* had a certain cast to his features when he referred to me as a confirmed bachelor and enquired how so healthy and vital a man as yourself could share rooms with someone of my singular nature.”

“You do see what that means, do you not?”

“Of course I see! What I do not see is why you feel compelled to bring the subject up at this very moment, when am I deeply involved in a case.”

“Now is the perfect time because Miss Morstan is exactly the sort of woman we need.”

“I have never,” Holmes replied with considerable dignity, “needed a woman in my life, save for birth itself.”

“But we have need of one now if we do not wish to become the subject of gossip, and worse.”

“There is no evidence with which to prosecute us—”

“There was precious little with which to prosecute the Hon. Edward Falsham. Yet he was ruined, Holmes, absolutely ruined, and where would such a scandal leave a civil physician and a consulting detective? Who would so much as pass

the time of day with us?"

"But why this Miss Morstan?"

"Because she has led a retired life, and thus will have little or no expectations from a husband. She has no friends, and no family, therefore there will be no-one to examine her marriage, and no relatives coming for long visits."

"Are you proposing that I come to live in your married residence? Don't be so preposterous."

"It is common sense. Everyone knows that we are friends. If I am married, and have a relatively large establishment, what is to prevent you from eventually coming to stay with your old friend and his family?"

"Surely," Holmes said with silken venom, "even a naïve wife would notice if her husband chose to spend his nights in his friend's bed and not hers."

Watson poured himself another glass of port, drinking it rather faster than a gentleman ought. "In which case, you should stay on here, and I shall come to you as often as I may."

"I dislike this intensely," Holmes said harshly, flinging himself down in his chair and taking up his pipe. "I dislike it all the more for I cannot see a way round it without encountering unacceptable risks."

"That is my opinion. If we were simply two discreet gentlemen, perhaps we could continue as we are. Your position, however, precludes that. As does your acquaintance with the criminal class."

"I can name," Holmes paused to take a long breath from his pipe, "at least twelve criminals who would pay a king's ransom to ruin me. One careless whisper, one idle suspicion, one corrupted maid scared or bribed into lying on the witness stand..."

"Miss Mary Morstan it will be, then."

The atmosphere was heavy between them, and the silence dragged on.

"When will you ask for her hand?" Holmes asked, and already Watson could hear the coldness coming back into his voice. That he knew the reason for this wintriness did not ease him in the slightest.

"As soon as is convincing. I will needs must be most careful in this, Holmes, lest I scare her off. Or indeed, in case I cause her hurt."

Holmes looked at him sharply then, the brilliant eyes piercing.

"Would you have me make her miserable, Holmes?" Watson asked softly.

"No. No, of course not. Just do not make

her too happy."

"You need have no fear of losing my affections," Watson cried, coming to Holmes' side, grasping him by the arm. "You will always be at the core of my very being."

"For those hours when you can escape from married life." He raised his hand in a silencing gesture as Watson would have rushed into speech. "No, no, there is nothing more to be said. You are doing what must be done, and I must be more gracious about this matter. Holmes smiled bitterly, a surprising degree of hurt showing on his face. "I should in fact be thanking you for doing this. However, I'm sure you will forgive me if I do not hurry to offer you my congratulations?"

"Oh, Holmes, Holmes, there is no need for you to be so jealous—"

"I can assure you, my dear doctor, that I am not prey to so irrational an emotion as jealousy. Now, let us put this discussion behind us, and turn our minds to the intricacies of this mystery brought before us..."

"I SHALL BE in Scotland the last few days of this month," Holmes announced over luncheon some weeks later.

"The last few days? But Holmes, the last day of this month is when Mary and I—"

"Precisely," Holmes interrupted icily. "I shall be in Scotland at that time."

"How many times," Watson replied with some display of temper, "must I remind you that I am marrying Mary for your protection and for mine? This is a marriage of convenience only, one designed to free us from the dangers of speculation and to free Mary from being dependent upon the kindness of strangers and the whims of employers."

"Do you remember," Holmes said disingenuously, "when first we discussed this thorny subject? In those days, this marriage was purely for your and my convenience. Now it is for Mary also, and I have heard the way in which you speak to her, and I have seen the delicacy of your dealings with her."

"I do not care for your implications, Holmes. Are you trying to infer that I am not constant in my affections?"

"You, of all people, know my methods."

"Then you may think you have eliminated the impossible to arrive at the improbable, but I assure you, you have arrived at an absolute impossibility!"

“My methods never fail me.”

“In matters of the intellect and criminal mysteries, I cannot deny your boast. In matters of the heart, however,” Watson’s voice was raised in ire, “you are ignorant, willful and blind. You insult me, Holmes, to even suggest that my affections for Mary are greater than my affections for you.”

“And now you have affections for her. How long, pray tell, will you have such strong affections for her that you forget all about this...aberration you have had with me?”

“In God’s name, why are you doing this, Holmes? We both agreed that I must do this, for both our sakes. Why are you now proving so intractable and unhelpful?”

With a disturbing glint to his eyes, Holmes rose elegantly to his feet, and threw a pamphlet down upon the wreckage of their luncheon. “Another fanciful title, I see,” Holmes said coldly, his face impassive as an Egyptian statue. “If you question my behaviour, then perhaps it would serve you well to reread this elaborate exaggeration, and compare it to the tale you told me of your conversations with Miss Morstan. I draw your particular attention to the last page each of Chapters 11 and 12, respectively.”

With that biting, bitter comment, Holmes turned on his heels and left Watson behind to read the doctor’s own words: “*Because I love you, Mary, as truly as ever a man loved a woman.*”

Then, the pages recalcitrant in his trembling fingers: “*The division seems rather unfair,*” I remarked. “*You have done all the work in this business. I get a wife out of it, Jones gets the credit, pray what remains for you?*”

“*For me,*” said Sherlock Holmes, “*there still remains the cocaine-bottle.*” And he stretched his long white hand up for it.

Far from his fictional creation, in the real world of his own sitting-room, Dr. John Watson fully understood his friend’s feeling of betrayal, and understood even better the woes of self-hatred.

NEW, ALMOST UNMARKED luggage littered the room, and the once-laden hamper lay empty upon the table, its treasures of salmon, honey, butter, grouse, venison and shortbread long since disappeared with a delighted Mrs. Hudson to the kitchen. There would be a feast tonight, although Sherlock Holmes himself had more the look of famine. Always a lean individual, his body now

verged on gauntness, and his pale skin had become grey-tinged and unhealthy, hardly the physiognomy of a man just returned from a season in the bracing air of Scotland, even if the trip had begun so precipitously that the gentleman had left with nothing but the clothes he wore.

A discarded telegramme lay crumpled in the unlit hearth, another message from his brother to confirm the transfer of funds from one bank to another. Beside it lay a small mountain of bills and letters, notes from people admiring his adventures as chronicled in *The Strand*, and invitations to dine and play raconteur to socialites whose very names bored him.

Only one item appeared to hold interest for him, and his gaze strayed to it time and time again. After some moments, Holmes left his languid pose by the window, and taking the letter from the mantelpiece, re-read what was obviously the latest in a long list of missives.

The handwriting was strong and firm, the letters large and well-formed, the pen with which it was written had a tiny crack in the nib, and the paper was the printed paper from a doctor’s surgery. It would not take a detective to deduce the anger of the man writing this letter, nor his haste, nor his need for discretion if not outright secrecy. The body of the letter was a repetition of letters and conversations that had gone before, and Holmes did not read those lines. *You must see me*, he read. *You must. You must listen to me, so that I might explain my actions and my words. See me, my dearest friend. I will call upon you at a moment’s notice.*

Holmes suspected that the moment’s notice would take place as soon as Mrs. Hudson returned from an errand so sudden and so urgent that she had not even taken the time to light a fire for him. No doubt, when she returned, there would be traces of reddish mud on her shoes and clinging to the hem of her dress, from the road-workings taking place outside of the post office. How long it would take Watson to come here upon receipt of her telegramme would depend on whether the doctor were out on a call at the time, or if he had guests for dinner, or any number of commitments.

Including, no doubt, his beloved wife. After all, Holmes thought with the considerable bitterness of someone who has already suffered, Watson would not want to hurt his Mary.

Mrs. Hudson returned, and was soon hurrying up the stairs to light a fire, the tell-tale mud giving

her away completely. For a moment, Holmes wondered what Watson had told Mrs. Hudson that she would so hurry to send a telegramme with such an attempt at secrecy, but all it would have taken to persuade her was a simple request, an appeal to remind her of Mr. Holmes' odd ways, and a mention of how anxious Watson would be to discover all the details of the urgent case that had forced Holmes to leave London so precipitously and to miss Watson's wedding itself. No, there was no mystery there, and Holmes waved her away with annoyance. He preferred to await his former friend in solitude, and away from curious eyes.

"So there you are at last," Watson said from the doorway, his figure dim and indistinct in the dusk. "I have missed you, my dear fellow, more than I can say."

Holmes did not turn to greet his guest. "How is Mrs. Watson?"

"Mary is well."

"Surely, a man newly married is to be forgiven a trifle more enthusiasm than that." Holmes left his chair, turned the gas up high that he might better see Watson. "Wedlock suits you. You have put on seven and a half pounds since last I saw you. Your little woman must be gifted indeed in culinary matters if you have gained so much in a mere three months."

"Mary's skills as a cook cannot be overrated. She is a good wife, Holmes, and one that suits me well."

"I am so very glad to hear that," Sherlock Holmes replied with a glitteringly bright smile. "It always does one good to hear of a friend saved from a life of debauchery and sin."

"Don't say such things!" Watson exclaimed, hastily closing and locking the door behind him. He crossed the room quickly, his temper evident. "Our life together had not the slightest trace of debauchery, and I am now inclined to believe that the only sin is that of others who would blackmail or ruin men such as you and I."

"We are not in Greece, Watson. We are in London, where vice is rife but only in the sewers and behind the lace curtains of respectable matrons. Do not confuse yourself with such foolish ideas."

"The only foolish idea I have had, Holmes, is that you would understand why I married Mary. Instead, you have wilfully turned it against us both, even when such an idea occurred to you first!"

"My idea, Watson," Holmes replied with quiet venom, "did not involve you making heart-felt declarations of love for all the world to read, and to a woman who was intended to be nothing more than a useful screen behind which we could continue our lives."

"It is you who have prevented us from doing so, not I—and not Mary. She is a good and decent woman, Holmes, and one who asks almost nothing from her husband save kindness, an income and a name. Those things I can provide in full measure, whilst still having all my love and passion for you."

"I find that I cannot believe you," Holmes replied almost lazily, returning to his chair, draping himself there as he had done during so many unimportant chats, his every action an underscoring of how meaningless this meeting was.

Watson, however, was no fool. He knew this man, had shared passion and tenderness with him, had been permitted to enter the sanctity of his mind and his body. Watson had been accorded privileges given no other, and knew that Holmes felt his every vulnerability and secret betrayed.

"What I wrote in that story was for the benefit of others, not for you and I, nor was it a reflection on the truth."

"I do not believe you."

So simply said, and so complex in its implications. "Holmes, I understand that you are terribly hurt by what you see as betrayal from someone you love—"

"Do you honestly believe that a man so devoted to pure thought and the highest intellect would succumb to the baseness and irrationality of love?"

Watson stared at him with the profoundest discredit.

"Oh, I admit," Holmes said easily, although Watson knew what to look for, searched for and found the minute flicker at the corner of Holmes' eye that revealed Holmes' distress, "that if I needed someone to love, you are the one that I would be thinking of."

"Then you admit—"

"If," Holmes repeated, "if I needed someone. However, I find that my researches and my investigations go all the better if I am free of the distractions and hampering incompetence of a would-be assistant."

"You must be careful if you wish me to believe all this and leave quietly," Watson replied forcefully, "for if you continue as you are, then I



shall think that you protest too much.”

“Really, Watson—”

“If all this is true, that you do not and have never loved me, then prove it. Come away with me for a few days. I have a colleague who has offered me the use of his country cottage whenever I wish a few days’ rest. Come with me. Prove that you no longer love me.”

“I’m afraid I’m far too busy to go off into the countryside. As you can see, I have only just returned from Scotland as it is. If I had some more time to spend, then perhaps I would be with you, but it would be a complete waste of time for both of us. And surely Mary would miss you terribly.”

“Holmes, my dear friend—”

“Of course,” Holmes was continuing over Watson’s protest, “had you called some other day, then it might not have been this way.” The mask slipped for a moment, Holmes struggling to hide behind it once more. “You did not have to say what you did to her, nor did you have to write the cruel things that you did.”

“I do apologise, Holmes, most particularly for making so much of your fondness for cocaine, but I was simply trying to make any untoward feelings between us seem that much more unlikely.”

“Portraying me as a pathetic cocaine fiend was the only way your fertile imagination could provide?”

“I was rushing too quickly, in an attempt to see the tale into print.”

“You should be careful of what you sow,” Holmes said quietly, going to the mantelpiece and taking down the bottle and syringe that was lying there precisely as Watson had so unfortunately described them in his story. “For you might reap far more than you would ever want to.”

With the same deliberation of intent that had been so much a part of the narrative horror of that last printed tale, Holmes prepared himself for an injection, his eyes glinting with both pain and cruelty. “Don’t look so worried, Watson. It is still only an occasional habit of mine, and despite what you have declaimed to the world, I am far from addiction. But you see,” and as he rolled up his shirtcuff, his sinewy forearm and wrist were still half as pocked with needlemarks as Watson had written in *The Strand*, “I have found that I love what is in this needle far more than anything I once mistakenly thought I felt for you.”

Finally, he thrust the sharp point of the needle

home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined armchair with a long sigh of satisfaction. “This,” he waved the glass syringe in the air, the newly lit fire glinting redly on it, “I find to be much more constant than human lovers.”

“I am trying to explain to you! Yes, I am guilty of a terrible lack of judgement in writing of you as I did, and I most willingly admit that it was very wrong of me to do so. But are you really so glad to throw away all that we shared because I have proved myself to be a mere mortal and given to human frailty?”

Holmes did not immediately reply, simply reclined, smiling, in his chair. Dreamily, with a lackadaisical gesture towards the wall with its loyal pockmarking of bullets, he said: “Carve your house-number and street upon my wall, and perhaps I will call on you.” He giggled then, a sound unfamiliar from Holmes, carrying equal parts humour and pain and the thin edge of the drug’s effect. “Carve. Appropriate instructions for a doctor with a bag full of scalpels, don’t you think?”

“I think the cocaine has impaired your mind. I also think that you are reacting emotionally, and without thought, or reason—”

“Then we shall simply have to mark that as my Christian fellowship. Are we not enjoined to do unto others as we would have them do unto us? Think, for a moment, of what you have done to me, and then consider whether or not I should do this to you. My friend.”

The bitterness and hurt contained in those last two words cut Watson to the quick. “I’m sorry,” he said sincerely, kneeling beside Holmes’ chair, attempting to take his friend’s hand in his own, “I am so terribly sorry. It was never my intention to hurt you.”

“No,” Holmes corrected coldly, snatching his hand free of Watson’s grip, “it was never your intention to hurt *Mary*. That is what you said.”

“At the time, I did not think I had to repeat that I had no intention of ever causing you the slightest hurt.”

Holmes turned away from him, curling inward upon himself, in a manner Watson had not seen since the very earliest days of their acquaintance. “At the time,” Watson said softly, gently stroking Holmes’ dark hair from the high, intelligent forehead, “I did not think at all. I have apologised, Holmes, and I will continue to apologise as many times as are required to make you understand. I

will do any penance you ask of me, although I beg that you do not disappear from me for so long ever again. I do not think I could bear that a second time.”

“Go away, Watson.”

“I will, but only for now. I will come back here tomorrow, and the day after, and every day until you forgive me, and embrace me once again.” Reluctantly, Watson rose to his feet, and gathered together his bag and the gloves he had thrown off without even being aware of his actions. He stood, once more, in the doorway for a moment, gazing at this man whom he loved so much and had so carelessly hurt so badly. “You know where I am, if you need me.”

“For what reason could I possibly need anyone?” Holmes sneered.

Watson did not reply, did not think it fair to remind Holmes of things said in the safety of darkness, nor of love confessed. “I will be here tomorrow,” he said instead. “Remember that.”

The door clicked shut, and then after the muted sound of footsteps on the stairs, the front door was opened, and then closed. The man Holmes loved beyond all reason was gone, for the moment at least.

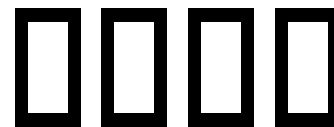
Watson would be back, again and again, and Mary would be left behind. Perhaps, in time, trust could be reborn. Perhaps, in time, love could once more be permitted. But for now, as Watson himself had written, there still remained the cocaine-bottle, and Holmes cradled it tenderly to his chest.

“If I needed someone,” he said from the chair, “then it would be you.”

□□□□□

GAEL X. ILE

# LAVENDER BLUE



*This story has its musical reference only in the title Lavender Blue which comes from an old song whose lyrics include 'Lavender Blue, dilly dilly'. It is a The Crying Game story, but not with Fergus and Dil, the expected choice. No, Gael X. Ile was interested in Fergus and Jody, the characters whose brief and intense relationship drives the rest of the movie. We are shown a lot of their time together, but there is the night before Jody's death when perhaps something like this occurred.*



DUSK WAS SLOW TO usher darkness in that night, daylight clinging on with all Jody's desperation. He had cried, broken, jagged sobs escaping the hood over his head, when Fergus had told him.

"Our man's broken."

"You what?" Jody demanded, spinning his ignorance out for that precious minute longer.

"Your lot broke him. Tried every trick in the book on him, apparently, so now we hear he's spilling his guts for them."

"What's that got to do with me?" The beginnings of unsteadiness in that voice, as ignorance slipped through his clutching fingers like sand.

"It means," Fergus began, then stopped for a minute, and the man with the hood over his head must have been able to hear him pacing the room, feet moving softly over the packed dirt of the old greenhouse floor, a crisp, creaking noise as Fergus came back on the slotted slats that lay round the perimeter. "It means we have to kill you," he said all in a rush, speaking the sentence as if it were the ripping off of a band-aid, made less painful by doing it quickly, and all at once.

"You're going to kill me?"

A minute passed before Fergus answered. "Yes. I am. I asked Peter if I could."

A useless struggle from the bound man, protest against the world. "What'd you go and have to ask him that for, eh? For fuck's sake, what d'you want to go and kill me for?"

Fergus threw himself down in the chair placed opposite Jody's, the one that put them too close together. "Would you like it better if I let Jude come in here and do it?"

"No. Christ, no, that'd be worse—that would be the worst. At least you'll regret it." Jody shifted his head, moving his darkness around until he could sense where Fergus was sitting, so that they would have been looking at each other, if it hadn't been for the hood. Even through the thick fabric, he could smell the fustiness of decayed hot-house plants and old fertiliser, and very faintly, and only because this near the end he was desperate for some sign of another human being close to him, Jody could smell Fergus' after-shave and his sweat. Fear, that sweat smelled like, but then, that could be Jody himself. "You will regret it, a bit, won't you, Fergus."

"And what d'you expect me to say to that, soldier? You think we enjoy going round killing people?"

Quietly, impressive courage over the fear. "I think Jude might."

"Yeh, well...you might have a point there. I'm not saying you do, mind, but she... Well, it doesn't bother her as much as it bothers some."

"It bothers you, doesn't it, Fergus?"

"Not enough to stop me in the morning." If that were what Jody was asking.

"Oh, God," Jody murmured, and it was the bleakest of prayers. "You're really going to do it, aren't you?"

Jody had to look away before he could say it.

“Yes. In the morning, first light.”

That was when Jody began crying, horrible sounds that no human should ever have to make.

“Don’t,” Fergus said, not even ashamed of the pleading in his voice.

“I’m sorry,” Jody mumbled through the tears and the hood, and Fergus watched him helplessly. “Help me,” Jody begged, pride an indulgence he no longer wanted.

“How can I?” A question asked in the absolute absence of any possible answer.

“I don’t know.” Something else, muffled by misery, and then clearly, though Fergus could well have wished him silent. “Just help me!”

There was nothing at all that Fergus could say to that, although he could imagine what Jude would say—what any good IRA soldier would say. Still, it was bad enough that Jody had to die. No point in making it harder on him. On either of them.

“Give us a cigarette,” Jody asked, and Fergus lit one up for him, putting it into his mouth.

“Don’t even smoke,” Jody mumbled, taking his first drag from a cigarette.

Not commenting, expression blank, Fergus took the cigarette back, grinding it out on the floor.

Jody choked and struggled for breath, his laughter feeble, forced, explaining what hadn’t been questioned. “Thought it was the right thing to do.”

He’d be asking to swap his hood for the traditional blindfold next, Fergus thought. This wasn’t getting them anywhere, and Fergus didn’t need Jody talking about it, was trying not to even think about it in his own head. “Go to sleep now,” he said, without much hope. Couldn’t imagine himself wanting to sleep away his last few hours of life and Jody—well, Jody had his photographs, and his cricket, and his Dil. A lot more than Fergus had, at that moment.

“I don’t want to go to sleep,” fear shivered through the words, too many of the euphemisms for death speaking of sleep, the knowledge haunting them both. Silence was too much of the tomb, and Jody had never been a man for quiet. “Tell me something,” he asked, needing to hear another person, needing someone else’s words to drown out his own thoughts. Outside of the darkness of the hood, from where tiny glimmers of light seeped in under the unravelling hem, Jody could hear Fergus shifting, uncomfortable perhaps, or worst, getting ready to leave, perhaps

leave him alone— “A story—”

“Like the one about the Frog?”

“And the Scorpion. No. No. Tell me anything.”

An invitation to tell secrets, the sorts of things you always swore you’d never tell a living soul.

“When I was a child,” Fergus began slowly, the old quote too perfect for him ever to have forgotten it, and his father’s and the Father’s admonitions too bitter to leave behind.

“Yeah?” Jody prompted, wanting Fergus to keep on talking.

“I thought as a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things.”

“What does that mean?”

It meant things in the past that Fergus still couldn’t face, and things in the present that scared the hell out of him. “Nothing,” he said, Jody still too much in the land of the living to confess such things to him.

“Nothing? Tell me *something*. Anything.” The last will of a dying man, the final request, the best on offer since there was nowhere round here to get the condemned man a hearty breakfast, and no hope of the sentence being commuted. Fergus told him nothing, gave him nothing but silent regrets, and the wetness of his eyes that Jody couldn’t even see. With more sadness than bitterness, and the compassion and the gentleness of that hurt more than vicious reproach ever could, Jody said: “Not a lot of use, are you, Fergus?”

“Me?” Fergus asked, looking inwards to a deeper black and more unremitting blindness than anything the hood could do to Jody. “No. I’m not good for much.”

After a time, there was only a slight difference in the darkness inside the hood and the darkness outside it. Night had come, and that meant morning was racing round the planet, coming to put an end to Jody.

“Hell of a fucking golden handshake,” he muttered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that when you leave a job, you’re supposed to get a gold watch or one of those stupid brass carriage clocks in a glass dome. And what am I getting? I’m getting fucking shot in the back of the head for a fight I never wanted—”

“Then you should have thought about that before you joined Her Majesty’s Fucking Army, shouldn’t you?”

“Yeh. I should. But all I was thinking about was

getting some money behind me, mebbe making enough to set Dil up in a shop of her own. I'd've liked that. Called it Dil's Garden or something, play with her name a bit."

"Diligence."

"Daffodil. She's a bit like a daffodil, you know."

"What, all yellow with green legs?"

Jody almost managed to laugh, the sound as strained as Fergus' joke had been. "Nah. I mean, she's a bit delicate, needs looking after. Not that she's not strong, Christ, what she's been through, you'd have to be strong or you'd top yourself."

They both heard it, that unwanted reference to death, and fell over each other trying to drown it out.

"—What is it that's happened to her then—"

"You should get her to tell you her story—"

A pause, necessarily awkward, Fergus the one to take the lead. "I take it she has better stories than me?"

"Yeh. And she tells them better an' all. Good singer too, is my Dil. You should see her, Fergus, all dolled up to the nines, up there on what they call a stage at the Metro. Does this great act, you know, old songs, from the 60s mainly, you know, torch songs..." He drifted off there, voice fading away.

"What is it?"

"Just thinking. Me..." He swallowed audibly, struggled, went on. "About me being dead, and what that's going to do to Dil. Promise me, Fergus, you have to promise me."

"Promise you what?" Playing for time, trying to think what the hell it would be like to tell a woman that her man had been thinking about her just before the bloke sitting in front of her now had pulled the trigger and blown her man's brains out all over the place. Tell her that her man had been brave to the end, braver than Fergus had ever felt.

"Promise me, that you'll take care of her."

"And I thought you just wanted me to take her to the Metro and buy her a margarita?"

"She'll need more than that if I'm gone. She will, Fergus, honest. People don't understand her, and then they hurt her. You're a kind man," Jody said, and despite the hood, despite the gun that rested so easily in Fergus' hand, it was obvious he meant it, that the blindness of the hood had let him see some things more clearly. "I know you are. Go and see her, make sure she's all right. Make sure she's all right for money and everything—"

"I thought you soldiers had a widows' fund or something."

"Yeh, but me and her—well, we're not married, not in the strict legal sense."

"Then you should have made an honest woman of her."

That made Jody laugh, roar with laughter until the hood suffocated him so that he had to stop, coughing. "Oh, that's a good one, Jody. An honest woman of her. Don't think that's something Dil ever wanted, though. Happy to be what she is." There were memories to be savoured there, and Fergus sat watching the bitter-sweet smile that was all he could see of them. "Always looking for the good, is my Dil. Always looking for the silver lining even when she's having a good cry."

"So she's the emotional type then, is she?"

"Name a woman who isn't. Even your Jude's all passion and fire, isn't she?" A pause, remembering other things, the smell of his own blood and fear still heavy in the fabric of the hood, a touch of his lip re-igniting the pain where Jude had hit him with the gun. "Bitch."

"Oh, come on, she's only doing her job, just like you. Fighting for her country."

"Yeh? Only I wear a uniform and let everyone know what I am. You wouldn't find me going round seducing blokes by lying to them, would you?"

"Oh, I don't know," Fergus said deliberately trying to lighten the conversation, arguing with a dying man seeming too cruel a thing to do, and the questions raised having too many doubts crowding round them. "Seducing blokes? You never can tell these days, can you?"

"No, you can't," Jody answered, not rising to the humour, cutting out even the faint hints of what might have been construed as flirting. Handsome, he'd called Fergus. The one with the killer smile. "Are you going to smile when you shoot me, killer?"

"Don't call me that!"

"Why not? It's what you are."

"And I suppose you're not?"

"Not yet. Not ever going to be now, either, am I? Suppose I should thank you for that. Might give me a chance of getting through the Pearly Gates."

"Are you honestly trying to tell me you've never killed someone? But you're a soldier—"

"And this is the first time I've been in a war zone, and I haven't been here over four months,

and I haven't had to kill anyone. I'm telling you, I didn't sign on because holding a fucking great gun turned me on."

Peter had warned him about getting too close to the prisoner, but surely it was only decent, to know the man you were going to execute? "So why did you sign on?"

"Told you already. Needed a job. And there was nothing else to do."

"Pretty much why..."

"Go on. Pretty much why you—what?"

"Signed on with my mob."

"Don't believe in diplomacy then?"

"And where has that ever got us?"

"Christ, I don't believe this. I've got, what, three, four hours to go before some fucker kills me, and I'm sitting here arguing about politics I don't give a shit for in a country I never wanted to come to in the first fucking place. Forget it, Fergus. Change the subject. Go on. Make the condemned man happy."

"All right," Fergus said, stretching out a bit in his chair. "I'll tell you what. When this is all over, I'll go to London, and buy your Dil a drink."

Which 'this'? The Troubles? Or just Jody? "Has to be a margarita. In the Metro. Col knows how to make them the way she likes. And don't just buy her a drink. Take care of her, make sure she's on her feet, and for fuck's sake, make sure she hasn't lumbered herself with some bastard, will you?"

"That's a lot you're asking."

"It's a lot you're doing."

The truth of that was as dousing as winter rain. "Yeh," Fergus finally said, "yeh. When it's over, I'll make sure she's all right."

"Promise me."

"I've just said—"

"Promise me. *Promise me!*"

"All right, all right, I fucking promise."

Even in the near dark, Fergus could see the ironic twist to Jody's lips. "What, not going to say 'cross my heart'?"

Fergus gave him a sour look for that. "No. And don't you, either."

"But I wouldn't, would I? I don't want to die, Fergus. Fuck, Fergus, I don't want to die! I want to live, go home to Dil. See trees and grass again. See people smiling at me."

"I'm sorry." Barely a whisper, scarcely louder than the night breeze stirring the withered vines in the long abandoned greenhouse.

"Not half as sorry as I am, handsome."

Neither one of them spoke for a long time after that, each one lost in his own contemplations.

It was Fergus again who broke their silence.

"Have you made your peace with your Maker?"

"Don't believe in any of that crap. Only person I want to make my peace with is a million miles away."

"Dil." Not a question, a certainty, Fergus remembering Jody and Dil in that photograph, where they had looked like a real couple, an indefinable something that made them look as if they belonged together.

"Who else?"

"Your father, the one that taught you cricket."

"I don't see much of him any more."

"Why not?"

"Didn't approve of Dil, or the way I lived my life. Didn't approve of me."

Another resonance, and Fergus' hand twitched on the gun. "My father neither. Always going on at me to make something of myself."

"And have you?"

Fergus looked away, unable to expose his shame even to eyes made blind. "What do you think, soldier? Anyway, himself and everyone always said I'd never amount to anything."

"And it's easier to prove them right than to try and then fail them, isn't it? Doesn't hurt as much that way."

"You've got it right there." A hesitation, the gun shifted uncomfortably from hand to hand. "You know, it really is a fucking shame we had to meet like this."

A wheezy chuckle. "Next you'll be saying 'd'you come here often?' Yeh, but I know what you mean. I think we could've been great mates, you and me, Fergus. If we'd met at that pub—what's that pub of yours called?"

"The Rock."

"Yeh, if we'd met at the Rock, or better yet, at the Metro. We could've been real pals, you and me."

"Not afraid I'd steal Dil out from under your nose?"

"Nah, she's not your type, not your type at all. But if you did fancy her, and she fancied you, well—I've never been the jealous type."

"Are you telling me that you'd *share* her?"

"Don't sound so shocked. We're not all living in 1916, you know."

"Yeh, I know, but still..." A few moments,

Jody's breath becoming slightly laboured, Fergus' quick, dark eyes alight with speculation. "Would you be wanting to watch? You know, if she did, and I did..."

A definite grin then, and the answer drawn out long and lush. "Yeh. Love watching her. She's got terrific legs, and you should see them when she's got them spread, or wrapped them round someone..."

Fergus shifted, spreading his own legs a little to ease the sudden pressure of his jeans. "Stop that. You shouldn't be talking about your woman like that."

"Why not? She knows I like it, and she only does it when she's the one that wants it. Anyway," and this time the grin was entirely false, tainted with melancholy, "I'm not going to get the traditional hearty breakfast, am I? And we've already tried the cigarette. So why not go out with a bang? Better than going out with a whimper."

"I don't think that's quite what they had in mind when they said that, you know."

"More fool them, then. For fuck's sake, Fergus, a couple of hours from now, and you're going to fucking shoot me! Let me think about her. Let me have that at least."

Silence.

Jody's breath growing heavier, more vocal, and he slid his hips farther forward on the chair. "Come on," he said, sounding desperate. "You've got to free my hands."

"No fucking chance."

"You can tie my feet to the chair—what am I going to do then, eh? Come on, Fergus, untie my hands."

"Are you daft or something? You want me to untie your hands, and then sit here and watch you... Well, watch you."

"Watch me wank? I didn't ask you to watch. All I asked was let my hands go so I can have one last orgasm before you kill me. Is that too much to ask?"

"Course it is."

"Nah. Asking you to take it out and do it for me—now that would be too much too ask."

"Although at least then I wouldn't have to say the pleasure was all mine!"

"That's right, Fergus, laugh at it. It's only a bit of sex, and you don't even have look. Tell you what. Tie both my feet and my left hand to the chair, and just let me have my right hand free."

"No. Peter would have my guts for garters if I did something that stupid."

"Oh, for fuck's sake! Come on, Fergus," rocking back and forth on the chair, making the wood creak and groan. "It's my last fucking chance—"

"I said no, and I mean no."

"You sound like a virgin when you say that."

"Well, I'm not, and I'm still not going to untie you."

No answer, and Fergus came damned close to heaving a sigh of relief, his own tension finally beginning to ease. Untie him and watch while Jody fucked his fist. Chance'd be a fine thing. Fergus could just imagine what Peter and Jude would say if they walked in on *that*.

After a couple of minutes, it broke through Fergus' thoughts that Jody wasn't silent at all. His breathing was harsh, and heavy. His chair was creaking, and his jacket was making a noise where it rubbed against his trousers.

"I don't believe you," he said, torn between dismay and other feelings that didn't bear examining. "I don't fucking believe you. What d'you think you're doing?"

"I'm not doing anything," Jody replied, sounding like something out of the porno video Tim had smuggled in one year.

Fergus tapped his gun against the very obvious bulge in Jody's trousers. "That down there thinks you're doing something."

"I'm thinking, that's all, just thinking."

He should leave well enough alone. "About Dil?"

A very sweet smile appeared beneath the hood, and Fergus felt an unexpected jab of jealousy that even here, like this, Jody could still feel that much love for someone. "Who else? She's beautiful, is my Dil. Wonderful girl, loves me more than anyone..."

In self defence, Fergus sneered at that. "Not so much that she wouldn't get fucked by some fella in front of you. And not so much that you could keep your paws off Jude."

"That's different. That's only sex, doesn't mean anything when you've someone you love."

"Wish the girls I know thought that."

"You'd like some of what Dil thinks. You'd like what she does even more. The things she can do with her mouth—"

They both groaned, which shocked Fergus: he'd thought he'd been in better control than that. But it had been a long time, and Jude's kisses had been a

temptation. After this was all over, he was going to take her and fuck her—

After all this was over, Jody would be dead.

“Don’t you try anything stupid,” he said, getting to his knees, digging in his pocket for the extra bits of rope. “Try anything, and I’ll blow your fucking balls off.”

A slow, nostalgic smile for that. “Dil can blow you like nobody else. Fucking fantastic with that mouth of hers...”

Jody’s feet tied securely to the chair leg, Fergus looped rope around Jody’s left hand and the back leg of the chair before he loosened the other wrist-rope, pulling the new rope tight before Jody could possibly do anything stupid enough to get him killed before morning.

“Here,” he said, grabbing Jody’s hand and shoving it into Jody’s crotch, “and don’t say I’m not good to you.”

“Dil’s good to me,” Jody said dreamily, weaving a web of arousal, his fingers scrabbling to undo button and fly, his smile broadening when Fergus brushed his hands aside, undid his clothes and pulled out his penis for the second time that night. His flesh responded with mindless hunger when he felt Fergus’ hand linger on him for that fraction of a second to long. “First time you’ve ever seen a black man’s dick?”

“What kind of thing is that to ask?”

“Well, it was dark outside when you helped me that time, and the last time, you stayed behind me the whole time. So this has to be the first time you’ve seen a black dick.”

“If you must know—yes.”

“Then you should have a good look at it. It deserves someone seeing it before the worms get at it.”

That was enough to make Fergus want to cross his legs. “Will you stop it?”

“Making you uncomfortable, am I? Is it that much bigger than yours?”

“No it is not. Not that I’ve looked, mind.”

“What? Never looked at your own dick? You are mad, then, aren’t you?”

“Just shut up, will you, and get on with it.”

Slowly, with Fergus trying not to look, Jody began stroking his dick, the flesh incredibly dark, darker even than the skin on Jody’s face. He’d wondered about that, Fergus had, when he’d been a kid sitting watching some film on the telly, American G.I.’s winning World War 2, or bad guys

getting shot to bits by the good guys. Roots, with the black men all half naked, all those muscles, natural curiosity to wonder about the bits that were covered.

Curiosity, that’s all it was. Nothing else it could be, was there? He was a real man, not some prancing cissy, one of those pathetic creatures hanging round public toilets, and not one of those sinners his father and the Father were always going on about.

And it was Jody talking about Dil that was getting him excited. Listening to Jody, talking about his woman, and the things she could do, thinking about that woman...

Fergus leaned his forehead against the outreach of wall next to Jody’s chair. He closed his eyes, but he couldn’t close his ears. Beside him, he could hear Jody’s voice going on and on in erotic detail. Could hear Jody’s hand moving on his dick, faster, then slower, poor bastard obviously trying to make it last.

“She can take you in right down to the hilt. When she sucks me off, she can take every last inch I’ve got, and fuck, what she does with her tongue—” Breaking off there, a gasp, and the sounds of flesh on flesh stopped, Jody’s breath shuddering.

Fergus knew exactly what the other man was feeling, too close to coming when he needed it to last. Like being with a woman who was in no hurry, and trying not to disappoint her. Then—

“And when I fuck her, oh, God, there’s nothing better. She’s tight as a fucking virgin, and she tightens her hole round me, makes it even better.”

Fergus’ hand blurred as he hauled his own jeans open and grabbed his cock, his mind and body aroused beyond all his good intentions. “Is she wet?” he asked, knowing the answer perfectly well, but wanting to hear that detail, wanting to feel that wet slickness in his mind and round his cock.

“Wet? She’s so fucking wet, she’s dripping with it. Especially after I come in her. An’ especially when I fuck her second, after some bloke she’s wanted. She likes me to kiss her when he’s inside her, and I fuck her mouth with my tongue while he’s fucking her the way she likes it.” A long, trembling moan, and Fergus wished to hell he could see what Jody was thinking about. “She’d like you, Fergus.”

“Would she now?”

“Oh, yeh, you’re her type, all right. Dark hair, dark eyes—likes her men dark, does my Dil.”



“So I can see.”

Jody didn't say anything, but he would give his left arm to have that hood off, so that he could see if Fergus was watching him.

“Take the hood off,” he whispered.

“No. I can't.”

“Please, Fergus. It's the last time for me, don't make me do it like a fucking dog rutting in the dark.”

“No.” Fainter now, Fergus' face pressed against the coldness of the wall, his cock hot in his hand, shame burning even hotter. “I can't.”

“Please. Go on, Fergus, you're a kind man. It's in your nature. Take the fucking hood off, man, let me breathe.”

No answer this time at all, save for one ragged intake of breath.

“I won't say another word if you don't take the hood off.”

Jody could hear Fergus' hand moving on himself.

“Don't you want to hear about her, Fergus? Hear what Dil would do for you?”

Another ragged breath, nearly a moan.

“Don't you want to hear how she likes me to fuck her?”

The hood was ripped off his head so suddenly his neck hurt.

“What does she like?” Fergus demanded, still crouched down by Jody's chair.

“She likes it kinky sometimes,” Jody whispered, staring at Fergus, unsurprised when the other man looked away. “Likes being tied up with silk scarves and stockings. Spread out on the bed, naked, so you can see everything she's got.”

“Oh, fuck,” Fergus groaned, spitting into his palm to move his hand more slickly over his cock. “What else? Go on, what the fuck else?”

Jody's hand was moving quickly too, and he doubted that Fergus noticed that they were moving in unison, that the two of them were in harmony. Not much, for a man's last time, but more than he'd hoped for, and better than a gun across the mouth. “She likes it up the arse. You ever fucked someone in the arse, Fergus?”

Fergus' eyes were wild, dilated, and he met Jody's gaze. “What's it like?” he whispered, squeezing his cock hard, his vision not quite straying to where Jody's hand was moving, moving, an endless blur of motion on the dick that had done things Fergus had barely dared

imagine. “What's it like?”

“Tight. Oh, she's so fucking tight, tighter'n your fist, an' so wet, so fucking wet, better'n anything you've ever had before. And she loves it, Fergus, really gets off on it. Wild about it. Loves me too. Says she loves having me inside her like that, says it makes her feel...”

“Makes her feel what?”

“Special.” Abruptly, tears threatened, a wash of misery to ruin even this small solace. Jody shook his head, squeezed his cock harder. “Best thing she likes to do, is come watch me play cricket. Says seeing me bowl makes her shiver cos I'm so powerful. Then we go to the Metro, and she sings for me, and then we go home. She goes down on me, gets me good and hard and wet.”

Fergus could see it in his mind, the beautiful woman in the picture, her mouth stretched wide round Jody's black dick, the thick flesh making her strain. She'd be able to take him easier, but not by much, and he could almost feel her round him.

“And when she's got me hard, we get into bed, and she comes to me naked, God, she's so fucking beautiful, the tiniest little breasts I can cover with my mouth, nipples hard against my tongue—”

Jody broke off, shivering, eyes falling shut, opening them again to stare at Fergus' averted face. “And then she opens her legs for me, and wraps them round my hips, and I fuck her, shove my dick right up inside her, and you should hear her, Fergus, you should hear her when I fuck her...”

“Oh, God,” Fergus was muttering, breath coming in heaves, eyes closed tightly shut to keep the fantasy inside, “oh, God...”

“And she squeezes my dick when it's inside her, and she's so wet and smooth, and she kisses me—”

Jody came, gushing spurts of white against his hand, his cock, his clothes, the groan he made the last thing Fergus needed, his own hand moving faster just as Jody's hand stilled, Jody watching him, Jody needing this.

“Think about being inside my woman, Fergus, think about fucking Dil, and me watching over both of you. She's tight, Fergus, and loving, and generous. Hot and wet and—”

Fergus came, muscles spasming, no sound escaping him as he spilled his seed on the barren wall, droplets dripping down to be absorbed in the dry dirt of the floor.

Silence, then, from the men, the old, dead vines sussurating in the pre-dawn breeze, shifting

moonlight casting dancing shadows amidst the potting plants left to die on the shelves.

A deep breath, a struggle for control, sudden, horrified recognition of what he had done, that thankfully pushed aside by the anger of realising that he'd dropped his gun on the floor beside Jody's feet. Stupid thing to do. Fucking stupid. Basking in anger, he pushed his cock back inside his clothes, wiping his hand against the pipes on the wall. Looked at Jody, sitting there like a man well satisfied, his black cock limp and lolling against his thigh.

"Will you put that fucker away?" Fergus snapped, shoving his gun into his waistband, half turning away from the man he had forgotten was his prisoner.

"Yeh. In a minute."

"Put it away now or I'll fucking shoot the thing for you."

Jody looked away, mouth drooping, fumbled one-handed, tucking himself away. Wincing as Fergus grabbed his hand and twisted it too tightly behind him. "Don't you want me to mop up the evidence as well?"

A pause. A shove that pushed his hand back into his lap.

"Go on, get on with it. And don't muck about," so much anger in his voice making Jody hurry it up a bit, "just get it taken care of."

Jody bit his lip as his hands were tied roughly behind his back, Fergus' hands not quite steady, and Fergus' eyes, visible in the fey moonlight, uneasy, troubled. "Thought that's what we just did."

Fergus looking away, hurrying back to his own chair, pushing it back another few inches.

"Didn't we just take care of it?"

"Just you shut the fuck up."

"All right," Jody said thickly, looking at Fergus, trying to get Fergus to look at him. To acknowledge that they had been better than captive and captor,

that there had been enough tonight that maybe Fergus couldn't pull the trigger in the morning after all. And for the first time, Fergus cocked the gun, the sound mouth-dryingly loud.

"All right, I can take a hint," Jody said, his voice betraying what his eyes were already showing. Lowered his head in defeat, hanging there as if he were already dead.

Fergus finally did look at him, and for a long moment. Weighed the gun in his hand. Silently, not meeting Jody's eyes when the other man raised his head with fine courage, he put the hood back on.

They sat like that for an eternity, the time still too short.

Light was sidling in through the dusty windows. Light, and warmth, prescient of a glorious summer's day.

It was enough to make a man weep.

"It's almost time, isn't it, Fergus?" Jody asked, and his voice was raw as if from screaming.

"Yes."

"This is it then."

"Yes." Fergus eyed the door, and the main house that wasn't quite visible from here, but which was there, still, and in it, still, were his colleagues and compatriots. Men and a woman who knew him. Knew his family. Everything.

"You'll look after her, won't you?" Jody asked, nearly begging.

When it was all over, he had said. Fergus leaned back in his chair and looked at the sunrise with loathing.

There were footsteps coming along the pebble path.

Jody, hurrying, saying it quickly. "Don't forget your promise."

The door handle was turning.

Fergus, bitter, fighting to stop the world from turning itself on its head. "What promise?"

And then Maguire came in, and it was time.

□□□□□

# REVOLUTION



*Beatlemaniacs rev up your brains. The rest of you dig out John Lennon's Revolution. Any version will do; the Scot wrote with both the fast and slow ones in mind. Next, read this story and see how the song's lyrics so neatly describe Blake and Avon's 'discussion'...*



“SO YOU SAY YOU want a revolution,” Avon started the endless argument

again, tone as soothing as nails scraping across slate. “And what’s more, you not only expect us to believe you, but you expect me to *follow* you.”

Blake, seating himself with conspicuous ease, looked up from the sofa to stare, apparently mildly, at Avon. His voice was milder still, none of which succeeded in concealing the banked anger. “If you don’t think I want a revolution, then what do you think I’m risking my life for?”

“Not only your life, Blake. However,” and Avon’s smile was exceedingly charming, his eyes dark and flinty, “we’ll leave that for the moment. We were discussing what you claim is your revolution and which I—” he paused, timing perfect.

Not waiting for Avon’s artful timing, Blake leapt in. “Which you think is some scheme for self-aggrandisement, isn’t that it, Avon?”

“You don’t want a revolution, Blake. All you want is a changing of the guard. With you as despot at its core.”

“Despot?” Still mild, still keeping everything locked silently inside, doubts and fears given not a word. “Hardly that.”

All caged energy, Avon paced once round the small room they used as a galley, stopping the other side of the table whence he could glower down on Blake. “But of course you would think that a benign despot is good for the Universe. A Galactic father-figure, taking care of us all—”

“Giving us the freedom to grow up,” Blake replied sharply. “Anyway,” he added dismissively, idly picking up one of the pieces of Cally and Vila’s endless boring games, “it’s the natural progression of every species, a social evolution—”

“Yes, well, we all want to change the world. Although most of us grow out of that particularly infantile fantasy.”

“And move on to more grown-up fantasies?” Blake enquired quite pleasantly, going for the jugular. “Such as pulling off the greatest bank embezzlement in history?”

“Ah, but that wasn’t a fantasy. It was a success—”

“You were caught!”

Avon gave him a sour look for that, hid it behind his customary disdain. “I said the embezzlement was a success. The escape wasn’t even mentioned.”

“Rather like this dark lady of yours.” Almost lazily, Blake watched the effect of that on Avon, measuring just how deeply Avon was affected, and more importantly, how guiltily Avon started. “You know,” he prodded, “the one I wouldn’t understand about.”

“As you wouldn’t understand, there hardly seems any reason to discuss her,” Avon snapped back. “Of course, you don’t seem to understand about Star One either, but there,” he smiled, “I live in hope.”

“You and hope—now there’s an oxymoron.”

“Actually, no, that’s Vila.”

“All hot air and stupidity?”

“No, that’s *you*.”

"If you think that of me," Blake said very quietly, leaning across the table, "then why are you so quick to follow my every lead?"

"If I'm so quick to follow your every lead, then why am I sitting here trying to talk some sense into your thick skull about Star One?"

"Is that what you're doing? And I thought I was just indulging you in your usual pouting."

Baring his teeth in a caricature of his smile: "Which is probably what you say to Jenna when she tries to talk sense to you."

"Don't forget Cally."

"Cally doesn't argue. She's as gung-ho to blow things up as you are."

"This is not," Blake said with strained control, "a school prank. Destroying Star One is a serious decision, a major move—"

"It is mindless, useless destruction and you can count me out."

Blake stared at him, willing Avon to bend to his will in this. "In."

"Out. No, I have gone along with you on some of your less hare-brained schemes, but this—oh, this time, Blake, I am out."

An explosion of tension held too long at bay, and Blake was on his feet, pacing round the galley, the small room made smaller by the tumult of his emotion. "Don't you know it's going to be all right?"

"All right? All right? Turning space lanes into unsupervised death-traps, throwing controlled climates into natural disasters, killing what Orac estimates will be at least one hundred billion people?" Coming up behind Blake now, forcing him round, grabbing him by the upper arms, and coming as close to shaking him as Kerr Avon would ever permit himself. "A hundred billion people, dead, killed because of your whim."

"Do you think I don't know that? Do you think Orac didn't tell me the same thing? Oh, I know how many people might—*might*—die, Avon, but don't you see? They might die now, but look how many people will be free."

Avon did shake him then. "Will you stop for just a moment and *think*? A hundred billion, Blake. That's a number greater than any of us can conceive as anything but a meaningless statistic. But you're willing to kill all of them—and for what?"

The moment stretched out between them, fractious and fragile, until Blake shrugged Avon off, walked away from him. His back to this most

unexpected conscience, Blake said, his hard-earned cynicism of Avon's motives heavy in his voice, his disbelief of Avon's motivation conspicuously sarcastic: "I'm impressed by your altruism. I don't believe it for a minute, of course, but it is an impressive display."

"There's no need to be so insulting—altruism has nothing to do with it?"

"Oh, absolutely," Blake sneered, turning round so that Avon could see the condescension of his smile.

"I will kill," Avon said clearly, "when necessary. I will kill with my bare hands, if need be, or I'll set a bomb to kill someone later. When necessary. But I refuse to kill a hundred billion people for the sake of your overinflated ego."

"And would you kill them to save yourself, Avon?"

"I already have the Federation and the Terra Nostra after me, killing half the Galaxy would certainly make travel in the other half more interesting than I would care for."

"So it's the consequences of it, then." Blake looked Avon up and down, from the sheen of his hair to the shine of his boots, and then dismissed him with a sneer that even Avon would be hard-pressed to better. "Don't worry. I'll take full responsibility. The blood will be on my hands."

"How very generous of you. But you'll forgive me if I refuse your kind offer."

"Oh, Avon, there's nothing kind about my decision."

Enough despair in that to make even Avon look twice, and reconsider. "Why the hell are you doing this?"

"Because," a heavy sigh that sounded convincing, and which Avon was annoyed to find he believed, "it's necessary. You said you can kill with your bare hands, when necessary. Very tidy, nice and easy, that. But I'm trying to overthrow the most oppressive, most predatory régime humanity has ever known. And I don't have your luxury of being fastidious."

"Lofty ideals. Pity the execution is so tawdry. And as for necessary—Blake, it isn't even a good idea."

"And I suppose you have it all worked out?"

"Naturally."

"Then let's not keep it all to yourself. Go on, Avon," and now Blake was right in front of Avon again, staring down at him, using every millimetre

of height and girth that he had, “tell me your brilliant plan to save the Universe.”

“Whether it saves the Universe or not is moot, but my plan—which *is* brilliant—will at least save my skin, and quite frankly, that’s all that really matters.”

“Ever the humanitarian. Go on, Avon, tell me this brilliant plan of yours.”

“We reach Star One. We take it over, we take control of the computers, I reprogramme where necessary and—”

“Voilà, the Federation throw themselves on their collective swords and Lord Avon is hailed by the masses.”

“Not quite,” Avon replied tightly. “I was rather hoping for a more anonymous rôle in this fiasco.”

“You surprise me, Avon. From brilliant plan to fiasco in less than a minute.” He gazed levelly at Avon, watching the moment when his words hit home. “You used to last longer. With me.”

“That subject,” Avon replied icily, bitter frost coating every word, “is closed. Finished, over and done with. And I’m not here to discuss a momentary insanity in my past, I’m here to stop you from destroying Star One. End of topic.”

Blake gave him an avuncular smile, the sort designed to hide Blake’s own reactions whilst egging Avon into losing some of his *sang froid*. “Back to the safe topic of politics, then. And I say: we are going to destroy Star One. End of topic.”

“Why? Taking control of Star One is the perfect opportunity to defeat the Federation once and for all—”

“And at what cost?”

“Something considerably less than a hundred billion lives.”

“Altruism again, Avon? You really ought to watch that. A man might imagine you had a heart after all.”

“Common sense and intelligence, Blake. Think with your head instead of that great bleeding heart of yours. Control of Star One, and you control everything from the Home Worlds to the Outer Planets.”

“And who will control me?” Fierce, demanding whisper, Blake’s eyes a torment of doubts and self-fears. “Can your common sense and intelligence tell me that, Avon?”

“Do you think the masses really care who holds the reigns as long as their bellies are full and their minds happily empty? Leave them with the illusion

of freedom while taking all their difficult decisions for them, and they will hosanna you from one end of the Galaxy to the next. And all that will be required of you,” he stopped for a moment, looking at Blake in what could have been love or hate, “is to carry on as usual.”

“That’s no answer, that’s an invitation to turn into a monster worse than Servalan.”

Avon seated himself, chair pushed away from table, boots thumping down insolently close to Blake’s glass. “All right, so you reject the only reasonable course of action out of yet more misguided idealism. But all you have to offer in its place is more senseless destruction and meaningless murder.”

“I have a real solution—”

“And we’d all love to hear the plan.”

“So that you can shoot it down the way you shoot down troopers unfortunate enough to get in your way?”

“Ah, yes, but I was only following orders—” A raising of eyebrows, an expression that would have been ingenuous on a face less roué than Avon’s, “—and wasn’t that what you’ve always wanted?”

“What I want,” Blake said, dropping the sparing, coming round the table to lean, one hand on the table top, one hand on the back of Avon’s chair, all of him canopying the other man, “is for your help. For a genuine contribution—”

“Well, we’re all doing what we can,” delivered with fine sarcasm and sharp contempt. “But if you want money,” Avon replied, willfully misunderstanding, extricating himself with a fastidious, insulting moue, “for Shertan and Avalon and all the others with minds so full of hate they have no room left for a single rational thought, then I’m sorry,” he was clinking bottle and glass, his usual tittle exchanged in favour of a Vila-sized drink, “I’m afraid you’ll just have to wait.”

“Don’t pretend stupidity, Avon. Not when it looks so natural on you.”

“A comment worthy of the schoolroom,” Avon replied, refusing to give Blake the pleasure of his reaction, and refusing to yield to the craven impulse to wash his hands of this whole disaster.

“Why don’t you leave?” Blake asked from too close behind him.

“I thought Cally was supposed to be the alien telepath on this ship,” Avon murmured to himself, going back to the table, if only because that would get Blake literally off his back, the other man’s

presence an eternal temptation and constant reminder. "I don't leave," he said clearly, "because the nearest inhabitable planet is a quite a walk from here."

"In other words, you can't finagle the computers into giving you complete override."

Avon was smiling urbanely now, his preternatural equanimity the only sign of the emotions roiling inside. "Either that, or I have a healthy respect for a pilot scorned and a guerrilla foiled."

That caught Blake unexpectedly, making him grin, rekindling the amity they had once come so painfully close to having. "Yes, they would murder you in your bed, wouldn't they?" An uneasy shift in ambience then, two men of capricious and dangerous moods in a world even more fickle, their relationship an endless *moiré*. "Or put your back out at least."

"Really, Blake, must you wallow in your 'man of the people' role quite so much?"

"It wasn't a pose before, when you and I had sex."

"I've already warned you about that. The subject of you and I fucking is closed."

"Fucking? What, no coy euphemisms, Avon?"

"What did you expect?" Avon turned his voice into a sneer. "Making love?"

"I wouldn't turn down a little human warmth right now."

The courage of that quiet statement took Avon aback, and took him back to the beginning, when the two of them had fostered foolish notions that they might one day be friends, that they could share sex and company without ripping the heart out of the other. "Then I suggest you visit one of your little camp followers. Sycophancy is about all the human warmth you can deal with."

"Which implies that you offered me more." No response to that, not that Blake had expected Avon to offer his heart on a silver platter. "Did you offer me more, Avon? Is that what you're saying?"

"I'm saying if I had it all to do over again," hauling back from Blake's implications of Avon having once felt more than merest lust for Blake, "you are the last person I would fuck."

"Regrets, Avon?" Blake murmured into the chinks of Avon's armour.

Avon looked at him pointedly, raised an eyebrow dismissively. "Only a small one."

Blake threw back his head and laughed, the sound too loud for the room, and all the more

unexpected for its rarity over too long a time. "Oh, Avon, Avon, you had better be careful. Your desperation is showing."

"Don't be absurd." A pause, an expression of surprise, as if he had just thought of this: "Why am I asking for the impossible?"

"Because, Avon," Blake said harshly, moving in so close to Avon that the other man couldn't take a deep breath without brushing their chests one against the other, "you still have hopes and dreams, in spite of yourself."

"Now who's speaking about the impossible."

"Neither one of us. Why the hell can't you admit that there are some things you dream of—and that *that* is the reason you're still here with me."

"Your petty excuse of a Revolution? Blake, for all I care, the mindless millions can live the lives of serfs or of drugged zombies, as long as I am free to live as I choose."

"So much for your concern for the hundred billion my plan calls for."

Avon could make amorality seem utterly charming. "I told you not to accuse me of altruism."

"Then I was right. You want Star One for the power—"

"No. I want Star One because then the Federation will be finished, and I will have enough resources that no one and nothing can touch me."

"No man is an island, Avon."

"Although you do a very good impersonation of a lump of rock. When it comes to thinking."

"Why do you refuse to see? Star One is absolute power, and—"

"Yes, yes, I've had a classical education, I know the rest of that sorry quote, there's no need for you to repeat it yet again. You're so proud of your idealism and your humanitarianism, and yet you're as sure as I am that you would turn into a despot the moment you got your bloody hands on the controls. In that, at least, we are in complete agreement. But when all is said and done, what does it matter to the average citizen, whether it's you or the Council in control?"

"It matters to *me*. People were meant to be free—"

"You seem so very certain of that, and with an absolute lack of evidence. Pure faith, Blake. Blind faith, and for that, you want to destroy half the galaxy."

"I don't want to destroy anything. But Star One has to be eliminated—"

“Put temptation from thee? Do you know *that* classical quote as well?”

“I know,” and by now, Blake’s temper, in league with his doubts and his fears and the horrible truths Avon so lightly bandied about, was threatening to defeat him, “that if we don’t destroy Star One, if I don’t at least give the people a chance of freedom—then all this will have been for nothing. Futile, meaningless—”

“Don’t forget pointless, useless, wasteful—counter-productive.”

Blake allowed the words to die away, stood there looking at Avon, until the other man glanced away, looked back once more at Blake. “Do you really hate me so?” Blake asked softly.

“Can’t you tell?” Avon asked just as softly, although there was a hardness to his eyes and the set of his jaw.

“Sometimes... Sometimes I think you might love me.”

“When you’re sound asleep and dreaming, presumably. Either that or hallucinating as a result of your delusions of grandeur.”

“Because you look at me, sometimes... Because you hover around me—”

“Like a moth round a flame, fascinated by what’s going to ultimately be the death of me. That’s the sum total of my fascination with you.”

“Do you really believe I’ll get you killed?”

“Do you really believe you’ll do anything else? A hundred billion—what’s one more amongst so many?”

“But it’s different with you.”

“Only because you have a face to go with the statistic.”

“No. Because you and I—” Blake swallowed, almost reached out to caress Avon, in memory of what had been and as talisman against the deaths that were yet to come. “Because you and I, if we had met differently...”

“Would still be at each other’s throats, jockeying for position.”

“Why won’t you admit it?”

“First dreams and hopes, and now love,” Avon tut-tutted as if he honestly didn’t care, giving lie to the fears that lurked behind the ire. “You really are fond of the impossible, aren’t you?”

“But I wasn’t the one who mentioned love—and it wasn’t impossible. Not in the beginning.”

“Don’t confuse rutting sex with the so-called finer emotions,” Avon snapped, finally giving in

enough to step backwards away from Blake only to end up against the wall. “The only thing they have in common is the temporary suspension of rational thought followed by periods of regret. Rather serious, in some cases.”

More than Avon was wont to admit, that last comment shed light on what Blake hoped had been true all along, that Avon regretted their failed relationship as much as Blake himself did, that the sex had held the promise of much more than venal satisfaction. Intent on recapturing the recent past that might not be as dead as he had thought, Blake stepped forward, took Avon’s chin in his hand, holding him firmly, knowing perfectly well that Avon would never humiliate himself by struggling to free himself, not when Blake would win this particular skirmish, Avon’s attempted façade of distant disinclination fooling him not one whit. “Then what we had,” Blake eventually said with utter certainty and the depths of regret, “wasn’t just fucking.”

“Don’t be stupid, of course it was just sex. And while we’re waiting for that to penetrate the sarcophagus of your skull, let me go.”

“Why?” Blake asked, ignoring Avon’s protests, seeing instead the unwilling, struggling compliance in Avon’s eyes, remembering times not so long distant when he and Avon had met in kindred hunger. “If you wanted me to let you go, you would have left *Liberator* long ago.”

“Leave the ship that is as much mine as yours? Not a chance. And I won’t say it again. Let. Me. Go.”

Blake wasn’t smiling, his eyes darkening as he closed the small distance between his mouth and Avon’s. “No,” he murmured, breath warm against Avon’s lips, thumb caressing Avon’s cheek.

“Then don’t say I didn’t warn you—”

Avon brought his knee up, but Blake knew him, had twisted aside, the two of them scuffling, Blake parrying every dirty move Avon made, Avon pulling more punches than he would ever want to admit. The mortality he carried around within him was alive and kicking, reminding him of what today, or tomorrow, or the day after would bring. Reminding him that it could well be more than just this intolerable ensnarement that would be over and finished. Blake would be gone: changed forever, as good as dead, if not physically dead. And Avon himself—he dodged a glancing blow, one that was designed to tame and not to hurt, felt

the heat of Blake's body against his, felt the adrenalin pounding through both of them until he couldn't tell where anger and hate left off and lust and desire began—Avon himself felt the atavistic shiver of premonition, the irrational fear that screamed that it would all be over, and that there would be nothing but void left behind.

They lurched against each other, each one pulling the other close, battle as disguise for passion, struggle as ruse for closeness, each one wrestling the other until they were plastered together, arms straining tightly around the other, their breaths commingling, this fight their excuse for the need neither one of them would admit in himself, blaming the rising heat of lust on the other. Blake's mouth on Avon's neck, his words a sibilant whisper kissing Avon's flesh. "Don't you know? It'll be all right."

Avon's hands inside Blake's shirt, fingers twisting nipples, Blake groaning, rubbing his groin harder against Avon. "Will it?" Avon demanded. "All right? How can it ever be all right between us?"

Blake stared at eyes that were gimlet sharp, piercing him with knowledge Blake did not want: he had demons enough of his own. "Accept me, let me—"

Avon turned the words aside, refused the offer before it could be made, rejecting any more hurt at Blake's hands, refusing to allow this to go beyond meaningless sex, needing to prove to himself and Blake that he didn't love Blake, didn't need Blake, didn't see him as anything more than a convenient cock. "Fuck me," he demanded, hands wrenching Blake's clothes open, too-strong hands grabbing Blake's cock and pulling it free from his clothes, not painful enough to do anything but inflame Blake even more, Avon's hunger and Avon's strength a potent lure. "Fuck me," Avon demanded again, his hands full of Blake's cock, his mouth biting on the exposed skin of Blake's shoulder.

"Not just fucking—"

"It's that," Avon sweetly squeezed Blake's cock, rubbing his thumb along the slit the way that had always made Blake tremble, "or nothing at all."

"In that case," Blake had to stop to gather his breath, Avon sucking on his nipple and pulling on his cock more than he could control, "you can call it whatever the fuck you like."

But Blake would know the truth, even if Avon never would, or never could. Hurriedly, driven by

passion and the dread that Avon would come to his senses and stop this, Blake fumbled with Avon's clothes, fighting his way through leather and fabric and fasteners, coming at last to the silken heat of Avon, exposed and hard and haughty in his hand. "Oh, yes," he sighed as he matched the movements of Avon's hand on his own flesh, "you love it like this, don't you?"

"Get on with it," hissed at him, intended probably to sound supercilious and cruel, but revealing all the pent lust and unadmitted emotions that had been within Avon from the start.

"Like this?" Blake asked, shoving Avon's trousers down his thighs, the leather catching on the dark hair, Avon's cock bobbing redly against the whiteness of his belly. Another struggle, this time with no pretence of battle with anything but recalcitrant clothing, mouths and hands frantic on every atom they could reach, Blake's hands finally settling on Avon's buttocks, fingertips pressing against the opening of Avon's body. "How do you want it?" Blake asked breathlessly, rubbing his cock against Avon's, the flesh bumping and sliding with the slickness of precum.

"Do I have to tell you even that? So much for our little fling being unforgettable."

"I haven't forgotten," Blake snapped back, the anger coming back that Avon was turning this into a cheap, tasteless encounter, something less than even the honest transaction between prostitute and customer, a sickening feeling beginning that Avon had demanded a price Blake couldn't pay. "The question though," he pressed one finger, hard, into Avon's arse, grinning bitterly as Avon's eyes fell closed and his mouth fell open, soundless, silent passion, "is do you want it the way we began, or the way we finished? With you wrapped around me, looking at me—"

"Shut up," Avon hissed. "Just shut up. Come on, Blake, can't you even fuck any more? Go on, do it, fuck me—"

And Blake knew what Avon was doing, understood Avon's need to deny the tentative threads of love that had turned into something so close to hate. Knew that turning it into the mindless rutting of Avon's claims would sully the past beyond all hope of redemption, a retroactive truth. "Oh, no," Blake said, finger moving inside Avon, stroking him where Avon was most tender, making Avon vulnerable in pleasure. "It's more than that, always has been—"



And he kissed Avon, lips soft against Avon's, tongue sliding wetly into Avon's opened mouth. Took the groan that bled Avon's pain into himself, following as Avon moved so that the table was at his back, followed once more as Avon lowered himself, Blake withdrawing from his body only with the greatest reluctance. Kissed Avon again, not yielding this tenderness for fear of what would be unleashed, lifted the other man's legs up, Avon co-operating, his back on the table, his arse lush in Blake's hands, Avon's hands in Blake's hair, clinging on, mouth demanding, arse hungry, widening easily at the first pressure of Blake's cock. Avon wasn't tight, must have been fucking Vila, or using a dildo, and the errant thought lodged in Blake's brain: I wonder if he thought of me...

And then he was inside Avon, hot, moist inner flesh taking him in, more, more, until all of him was inside, and he couldn't help but move, fucking Avon as Avon had demanded, their mouths separate, their bodies conjoined, moving in desperately remembered rhythm. Avon's eyes were closed, shutting Blake out, as he had at the beginning, as he was, now, at the finish.

The thought shattered through Blake, and he poured himself into loving Avon, into making this more than even Avon could deny, trying to transform this into what it had never, truly, been. He suckled wetly on Avon's nipples, smoothed Avon's precum over his cock, dandled his balls, pressed the skin shining tight, rubbed Avon's cock in the coarseness of Blake's own pubic hair, fucked him all the harder, until Avon was thrusting back onto Blake's cock, raising himself so that Blake was in him deeper, deeper, Avon wrapping himself round Blake, the barriers down now, the lies as forgotten as dust, Avon's voice a hoarse litany of praise and pleasure, triumph and joy coursing through Blake at the sound and the sight of him.

All around Blake, Avon's body was spasming, helpless in orgasm, belly muscles rippling, arms too tightly round Blake, arse contracting, Blake holding himself perfectly still inside Avon as the other man succumbed, releasing himself to pleasure, cum erupting from him, wetness on Blake's belly, Avon replete in his arms. Then, with Avon limp and pliant, Blake gave himself over to his own pleasure, feasting his eyes on a sated Avon as his body feasted itself on Avon's inner heat, his heart pounding as he pounded into Avon's body. Almost

there, and he leaned down to kiss Avon again.

Avon turned the other cheek, a profoundly uncharitable act, and closed his eyes, denying Blake anything but physical pleasure, denying what had happened while his cum was still wet on Blake's belly.

"Avon," Blake gasped, unable to stop either his words or the needs of his body, "don't."

"Get on with it."

Gritting his teeth, Blake stilled his body, deep in Avon's heat. "You love me," Blake said, knowing it to be true.

"And you're a fucking fool," Avon hissed, meaning it, twisting himself free of Blake's body, sparing a contemptuous glare for the erect symbol of the illusion he had so nearly believed.

Quivering with pain and the misery of his body, Blake shouted. "You love me."

Avon didn't even deign to look at Blake as he said it, the words still hurled with unerring, poisonous accuracy: "I *hate* you."

And with the light glinting on Avon's skin as it disappeared beneath the all-concealing leather, Blake came joylessly into his own fist, Avon's lie still ringing in his ears.

Embarrassment now, and humiliation, Blake struggling to refasten trousers and shirt with fingers that trembled, one sticky hand wiped surreptitiously, bitterly, on rough fabric. Silence for some moments, underscored by the soft sounds of leather creaking against leather as Avon pulled on his boots, and Blake's ragged breath slowly coming back under his control.

"So I was wrong, was I?" Blake asked, thinking about the past, about the words murmured in the extremity of the moment, Avon's body tight round him. "Wrong about how you feel?"

"Oh, Blake," Avon's smile was his cruellest, sharp enough to draw blood, "you have no idea how wrong you are."

"I don't believe that—"

"I didn't expect you to. You have, after all, a considerable problem with the truth."

"Only when you ask me to pretend that everything I know is true is nothing but base lies."

"Base. Yes, back to Star One already. So much for passion." Going on before Blake could voice the protest thundering in readiness: "You said you would change the Constitution—"

"Is that how this is going to be, Avon? Wiping the slate clean as if it never happened?"

“As if what never happened?” Avon asked sweetly, his eyes darting involuntarily to Blake’s hand, the one that had held Avon safe and sensual in its palm, the one that had been unhappy haven for Blake himself.

“What we just did. What you tried so desperately to turn into fucking—”

“Wasn’t it fucking?” Avon asked, the perfect picture of incomprehension, never a convincing expression on his face. “Oh, well, of course, I suppose for you it was just another masturbatory session. Rather like your so-called planning conferences with the rest of us. Change the Constitution!” he sneered. “The only thing I want to change is your head. Get you a new one with a brain in it.”

“At least I have a heart.”

For one unguarded moment, it showed, all of it, on Avon’s face, every ounce of confusion and chaos and misery, so much that Blake realised that he could never comprehend Avon—doubted that Avon even knew himself, and then Avon was back to his usual self, dark eyes glittering.

“And once you’ve changed this Constitution—how long do you think it will be before the military regroups and sends you the way of Star One?”

“It’s not the people,” Blake replied, staring at this man he had just fucked, whose sex he could still smell in the air, the man who had tormented him with love and rewarded him with hate.

“It’s not the people?” Avon prompted politely, when Blake had stood staring at him far too long for comfort. “If it’s not the people,” he went on, scrubbing his hands with skin cleanser over the sink unit, “then what is it?”

“It’s the institution. The status quo is the enemy,” Blake said.

Avon, never a fool in anything but the realms of the heart, knew what Blake was getting at, rejecting it as thoroughly as he rejected the dangerous appeal of loving Blake, of being loved—no, once had been enough, and Blake had come along on Anna’s heels like a comet, threatening to burn them both to cinders. Avon wanted none of that, wanted no more of this emotional fiefdom to Blake. Wanted nothing more than to have this over, and to have Blake consigned to the past where he belonged, for with him there, Avon could feel himself safe once more.

“Spoken like a true revolutionary,” Avon said drily, forcing all the passion aside, bringing his anger to the fore where it would hide all the other,

less acceptable emotions. “But if after all this, you go around carrying pictures of Star One and the starving millions left behind, well, you won’t make it far anyway.”

“I can make it to Earth, and restore order there first.”

“And only last week you were vilifying the Domes. My, my, you are a fickle fellow.”

“If you would stop being such a coward, you’d find out I’m not fickle at all.”

“It’s all right, you don’t have to cajole me with slurs of cowardice, I’ll help you with Star One.”

“That’s not what—”

“You mean you don’t want my help after all?”

Poised on the sword edge of Avon’s dilemma, that one small sentence forcing him to choose between the Cause that gave meaning to his life and the slim hope that Avon might one day permit something more than armed neutrality. For a long time, they looked at each other, Avon almost smiling, Blake chewing on his thumb-nail, neither one of them willing to give an inch unless it was to hang Blake or leash Avon.

“Well? What’s it to be, Blake? Do you want my help with Star One or not?”

“Only Star One?”

“It’s all you’re going to get.”

No. Unacceptable, not with the fading echoes of Avon saying those things to him, words that could only mean that somewhere under it all, Avon harboured love for him. Somewhere under what might not be hate at all. I hate you, Avon had said, and Blake had known it for the pathetic lie it was.

“After Star One, you’ll come with me to Earth—”

“And then it will be over and done with.”

Blake would not answer that, would not add his own lies to Avon’s.

“Oh, don’t look like that,” Avon jeered, going over to the door as if nothing at all had happened between them. “Don’t you know? It’s going to be all right.”

“And you’ll be free.”

At the door, Avon stopped for a moment, looked back once. “As free of you as I’ll ever be.”

And Blake felt a flutter of hope and of fear as he heard the unwitting challenge in that, heard the unspoken admission that Avon was tied to him, chained by more than mere necessity. Heard again what Avon had said with Blake deep inside him, remembered the touch of Avon’s tongue against

his, the fire in Avon that had flared, as always, as soon as they had touched each other.

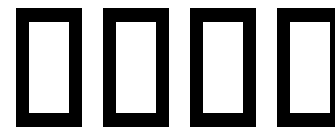
A challenge, then, of the sort only Avon would issue.

Remembering the way Avon had said 'I hate

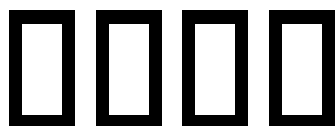
you', remembering how sweet it had been before Avon's fears had turned emotion to venom, Blake sat there for a long time. "All right, Avon," he finally murmured, going out to find Avon and rejoin the battle once more, "all right."

□□□□□

# HEAD IN HANDS



*Being editor has its perks, and sometimes M. Fae will listen to pleadings and threats and give the editor one of her favorite pairings. Yes, this, too, is Avon and Blake. It's a strong story, slow to build but powerful when it gets there. The setting is early fourth season, and we all know what happens at the end of fourth season, now don't we? Again, the title comes from the Beatles—one of the lines in You've Got to Hide Your Love Away.*



HERE HE STOOD, head in hand, his face turned to the wall. Not until the footsteps

came too close did he slowly lower those hands, his mask, cracked and battered but all the protection he had, falling into its familiar place seconds before the others came into the room.

"You're late," he said, catching them all in the variegated heat of Vila's failings.

"Late, he says, late! I'd like to see Mr. High and Mighty there not be late if he only had five minutes notice."

"You had considerably more warning than that," Avon said, casually ignoring the fact that Vila hadn't, and that the only reason Vila was late was that Avon had wanted to talk to him privately first, "and I can't possibly be held responsible for the length of time it takes a message to penetrate your thick skull."

"Glad to see you too," Vila muttered, throwing himself down onto the plump sofa, a glass of wine appearing in his hand almost faster than the eye could see. "Be gladder to see the back of you though, the way you've been."

"Shush, Vila," Dayna said not quite quietly enough, removing Vila's glass with an admonishing glower, "you know how he's been since, well, since..."

"Yeh, I do know how he's been *since*. And you think I haven't been the same way *since*?" Vila snatched his wine back from Dayna, proving he wasn't quite the coward he liked to pretend. "He

doesn't have a monopoly on suffering, you know."

The effort it took all of them not to stare at Avon was almost palpable, and it made Avon's skin crawl almost as much as feeling their eyes upon him every time he turned his back. Staring, endlessly, at him, their busy little brains fervid with activity, and the only bright spot amongst all this was that Avon knew the fools had no idea of the real truth.

"Yes, but he lost *her*, you know," Dayna had lowered her voice, too busy sorting Vila out to see the vicious amusement in Avon's eyes, "Cally, on Terminal. You can't expect him to just snap out of it the way the rest of us can."

If bitterness could be amused, then Vila was positively chortling. "Yeh, I know. I knew *her* an' all, don't forget that." He glanced at Avon, saw the expression in those eyes, turned back to Dayna, his own expression a picture of conflicting reactions. "You really don't understand, do you? You've absolutely no idea—"

"All right, all right, I know you were friends with Cally as long as Avon was and you're just as upset about losing her," Dayna said with audibly thinning patience.

"Near enough," Vila muttered. "Suppose that's as close as you're going to get." He looked once more at Avon, raised his glass in mocking salute. "Isn't it, Avon?"

"Shut up, Vila, and listen. The change will be as good as a rest for all of us. Now," Avon went on, voice brisk and cold as the surface above Xenon base, "I have had Orac do a thorough inventory of

supplies, facilities and *matériel*, and I have come to the conclusion,” he looked pointedly at Soolin who returned the look with her own twist of cold superciliousness, “that Dorian had some rather more...esoteric needs than most of us here gathered, and that this base is lacking in some items I consider to be essential. Such as basic nutrients and adequate fuel for *Scorpio*.”

Soolin’s voice was drier than Dorian’s wine. “Yes, well, Dorian was expecting to pick up one or two useful bits and pieces on Terminal.”

“One or two? Is that all?” Vila interrupted, gulping down another mouthful of appropriated wine. “I thought it was five of us he was after.”

“Regardless of what Dorian wanted,” Avon said before Soolin could use Vila for target practice, “the fact that we are here and he is not, shows that he didn’t succeed. Which means that we have to acquire certain items.”

“Oh, that’ll be nice,” Tarrant spoke up for the first time, stepping forward close enough to annoy Avon. “We’ll just pop into the nearest supply station and ask them to fill our shopping list for us, shall we?”

“Tarrant,” Avon said and his tiredness was uncommonly visible, “you really shouldn’t try to be witty until you have found some wit to use. As for acquiring *matériel*, we will do that on Stavros.”

“Stavros?” Vila demanding, sitting up straight, all his air of misery shed like snake’s skin.

“Stavros? As in, Outer World Stavros?”

“As it is the only Stavros in our Galaxy, that would seem a safe bet.”

“A man with my talents can win a fortune in the betting dens on Stavros,” Vila sighed happily.

“Stavros, a planet that anyone in his right mind would call Eden.”

“Hardly,” Avon replied, with less of a cutting edge than might be expected, his mood fractionally thawing for a moment before the recent frost returned. “Stavros has a considerably higher density of population. And you won’t be thrown out for sampling anything that grows on the local trees.”

“Won’t be tossed out for sampling anything at all on Stavros. Anything goes—and I do mean anything. Wonderful, isn’t it? Stavros,” he repeated happily, grinning with enough lewdly libidinous delight that even Soolin managed a genuine smile. “Pubs, casinos, talented professionals in the brothels, gifted amateurs in the parks...”

Dayna, however, wasn’t smiling, and she was looking concernedly at Avon. “You’re disgusting, you know that, don’t you, Vila?”

“Oh, come on, Dayna, Avon’s no prude. And just cos you’ve never sampled the joys of the flesh, there’s no need to put a man down because he’s well experienced. Not to mention talented,” he added, sidling along the sofa to her, drenching her with his most charming smile. “And so that you’re not a fish out of water, I could give you a few lessons. You know, so you won’t be embarrassed by—”

“The only thing any of us are going to be embarrassed by, Vila,” Tarrant neatly intercepted Vila’s more winsome—or repugnant, depending on viewpoint—wiles, “is you and everything about you. In fact, I think we should leave you on *Scorpio* to make sure this teleport works. Don’t you, Avon?”

“I think,” Avon said, heading for the door, resolutely ignoring the others staring at his sudden departure and the blossoming of sympathy behind him, “which is more than can be said of you. The four of you can sit here and discuss the charms and sins of Stavros for as long as you like. Providing you remember that we leave in twelve hours. And Vila,” he said from the doorway, “if you’re late again, we’ll leave without you.”

“Fate worse than death,” Vila muttered under his breath, then he leaned over and whispered into Dayna’s ear, distracting her from her obvious intent of pursuing Avon. “Which is what I’d be saving you from if—”

TWELVE HOURS later, everyone was aboard *Scorpio*, with one notable and entirely predictable exception.

“Wait!” they could hear wailing down the access corridor. “Don’t close the door!”

Avon toyed with the door mechanism.

“Avon, don’t be cruel,” Dayna said, sounding remarkably, and unnervingly like Cally, the echoes of his old comrade shivering through Avon. He stared at Dayna harshly, and she met his gaze levelly. “All right, so I’ve been going on at him as much as everyone else, but perhaps he needs this trip to Stavros more than any of the rest of us. Anyway,” she said, her own expression saddening, her sympathy tangible, Avon not, quite, shaking off her hand from his arm, “we could all do with something to take our

minds off what happened on Terminal.”

“Oh, yes, the loss of the *Liberator*,” Avon said with deliberate and pointed misunderstanding, and then he smiled his most charming smile, the one that tended to make people check that both their finances and their backs were still intact. “We all do need a break from that, don’t we? Hurry up, Vila, or I really will leave you behind.”

“You wouldn’t do a thing like that, would you, Avon?” Vila demanded breathlessly, clambering on board and making it to a seat in a display of considerable speed. “I mean, if you left me behind, who would break into all those places that you’re going to steal all that stuff from?”

“Ever the elegant turn of phrase, Vila. Now, make yourself useful or I’ll let Slave practice the teleport on you.”

“Slavedriver,” Vila muttered, managing to pilfer a smile from Avon.

“Just check the flight plan, Vila,” Avon said, starting the count-down procedure for launch. “And while we’re underway, you just might want to ponder that until every last item on this list of necessities finds its way onto *Scorpio*, you won’t set foot off this ship without myself or Soolin keeping an eye on you.”

“Oh, come on, Avon, even you couldn’t be that horrible. Anyway, you know what they say about all work and no play.”

“Well, in your case, it’s already too late so it shouldn’t make any difference. Tarrant,” he said, effectively shutting Vila out, dismissing the other man to where Vila could as well not have existed, “double check the data coming from Slave. I still don’t trust that machine, no matter how pleasant a manner it has.”

“Well,” Tarrant said, eyes and fingers busy with the flow of data across his station, his voice sarcastic, “at least now we know to grovel and snivel like Slave if we want to keep you happy.”

Avon’s sudden laughter was chilling, and unpleasant. “Oh, would that it were so easy,” he murmured. “Life would be almost as simple as you.”

Avon bent his attention to his screen, but still, he could feel all of them staring at him, the force of their gazes washing over him like radiation, and almost as burning. Face hardening, Avon looked slowly from one staring face to the next. “We have a ship to fly,” he said harshly, wincing inwardly at Dayna’s expression of sympathy that never seemed

more than a whimper away, “so I suggest we get on with it.”

There was a scurry of movement, and then the carefully modulated read-outs and followings of procedure, but still, Avon’s skin crawled with the memory of them all, staring.

THERE WAS still a long way to go, and the lights on *Scorpio*’s flight deck had been lowered, so it would seem, for the benefit of the three sleepers, Soolin on Dorian’s lateral sleep couch, Dayna and Tarrant less comfortably on the loungers on the foredeck. In the near dark, a false night that Vila knew was more for Avon’s ease than for any notion of comfort for the sleepers, Vila cast small, interrogative glances in Avon’s direction.

“I heard her, you know,” Vila began in that most casual of tones reserved for those most serious of topics. “When she died.”

No need to ask which ‘she’, nor which death, not between these two.

Avon, giving nothing but ice away. “I imagine half the planet ‘heard’ her.”

Another one of those looks from Vila. “Could feel a bit of what she was feeling as well.”

The muscle along the side of Avon’s jaw jumped and twisted, and Avon swallowed hard. Of course, when he spoke, his tone was light, deceptive, camouflage for the tension bleeding from him. “You’ll forgive me if I’m not consumed with jealousy.”

“Ah, but I didn’t expect you to be jealous, did I? I mean, I’m not Tarrant, am I?”

“Apart from the obvious, starting with your hair and going all the way to your age, what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Temper, temper,” Vila said mildly, handing Avon a brimming glass of wine, relaxing a trifle when Avon took it, and drank deeply. “I’m talking about Tarrant’s little theory.”

“Apart from his head and his mouth, I thought everything about Tarrant was small.”

“Well, this theory’s smaller than most. As small as...” he broke off, Avon a funny bugger about some things, especially these days. “Well, small anyway. But this theory of his—”

“Oh, do get on with it, Vila.”

“Tarrant,” Vila said with relish, watching for Avon’s reaction, “thinks you’re upset because Servalan’s dead.”

It was the first time in ages that Vila had

heard Avon laugh.

“Yeh, thought you’d like that one.”

“And what about Dayna—as if I really needed to ask.”

“Ah, the lovely Dayna. Very inhibited that girl, did you know that? It’s shocking.”

“Now there I just might disagree with you.”

Vila sank a little more comfortably into his seat, positively basking in this return of the Avon he had known and—well, he wasn’t going to say ‘loved’. He wasn’t stupid enough to think a thing like that, not about Avon. Beyond his volition, one hand strayed out and touched, briefly and with a lockpicker’s delicacy, the cool, smooth skin of Avon’s hand. No rejection, but Vila wasn’t going to push his luck. “The question is if you’re disagreeing with me cos it’s shocking that someone as lovely—not to mention deadly, remind me to tell you about her little trick with the explosives—someone as lovely as our Dayna is as inhibited as our Dayna. Or you’re telling me our Dayna isn’t inhibited at all and maybe I should try decking myself out in black leather and studs.”

A month or two ago, and Avon would have had a come-back for that comment, something perfectly polite and respectable, until the double entendre sank in. Tonight, ship’s night, there was only a faint smile.

Oh, well, Vila thought, at least I tried, and at least he didn’t bite my head off.

“Has Soolin advanced her own theory?”

“She just thinks you’re a foul-tempered, bad-mooded bastard completely devoid of scruples or any of the finer feelings and what’s more, you’d cook your granny for dinner if you had to.”

“I thought she was a sensible, perceptive young woman.”

“Either that or she’s met your granny.”

“That’s always a possibility.”

Silence for a few moments, not comfortable, not the easy silence these two had once enjoyed together, but then, it wasn’t the fraught tension that had become a daily routine.

“And you, Vila,” Avon asked softly. “What’s your theory?”

He could, of course, not answer, or lie, but where would that get him? Avon had an aversion to being lied to, unless it suited his purposes, and when he asked like that, in that precise tone of voice, it didn’t do well to doctor the information. “My theory?” Vila temporised, trying to come up

with the best way to phrase all this. “My theory. Yes, well, em...”

“Vila...”

“The way I look at it,” Vila began slowly, thoughtfully, picking his way carefully, “is that it’s a lot more complicated than you nursing a bit of a broken heart because Cally’s dead, or because Servalan exploded with the *Liberator*. Me, I think it’s Cally, and *Liberator*, and with Servalan gone, well, it’s hard to feel like the big, hard man when all you’ve got to go up against are a bunch of low-level flunkies trying to hold the Federation fleet together, isn’t it?”

That would have been more than enough for anyone else, but this was Avon, and he knew Vila, recognised the minute markers that said Vila was throwing just enough to the lion to keep himself in one piece. “And what else, Vila?”

“Nothing much, nothing at all, really, you know, just idle speculation to keep my brain ticking over, and you know how idle my brain is, I mean, how many times have you called me a stupid fool, so that just goes to show you that the rest of it is just a pile of crap and—” he paused for breath, and cast a quick glance in Avon’s direction. He knew that inimical expression, which meant that he had a choice: make a clean breast of it now, or have Avon wear him down with all the comfort and pleasure of the Chinese water torture. “Oh, all right,” he said ungraciously, “but just you remember, you asked for it.”

“Yes, I did, and I would like to hear it before Tarrant can use senility as his excuse.”

“Blake,” Vila said baldly, startling a glare out of Avon.

“What?”

“Blake. Remember him? Big bloke, curly hair, had this thing about overthrowing the Federation.”

“I know who you’re talking about,” Avon all but snarled, teeth exposed in atavistic threat. “Now tell me *why* you’re talking about him.”

“I told you,” Vila said rather gently. “I heard Cally, on Terminal. I *heard* her, Avon,” he said more strenuously, tapping his left temple, “in here, and I heard what she said.”

“Blake.” Barely breathed, Avon’s eyes focussing on some internal field of conflict, and dark now with pain.

Very gently now, treading very carefully lest Avon should snap back to himself and bite Vila’s head off. “He was there, wasn’t he?”

“I don’t know.”  
 “Cally thought—”  
 “Cally couldn’t have had time to see much, never mind think about it.”  
 “But she saw—”  
 “We don’t know.”  
 “Right, so if we don’t know what *she* saw, then what did you see?”  
 “Tranquilised dreams,” Avon said slowly.  
 “Tranquilised dreams of a man whose feet were dirty.”  
 “Eh? What’ve his feet got to do with it?”  
 All of a sudden, Avon came to himself again, gathering his defences around him like a cloak. “Nothing. Nothing at all,” he said sharply. “Have you checked our flight plan?”  
 “Of course I’ve checked our flight plan,” Vila said disgustedly, abandoning his efforts to reach Avon and concentrating on his efforts to reach Stavros. “What I want to know,” he mumbled into Avon’s distraction, “is whether you’ve had your head checked.”

BY THE TIME they reached orbit round Stavros, Avon’s temper was more than a little frayed by the endless presence of the others in the confines of the flight deck. It didn’t help that Vila constantly found it necessary to share another bit of his lore, about why these old freighters pressurised only the control area in transit, and it helped even less that Vila was now staring even more than the rest of them. There were times, turning away from Dayna’s sympathy and Soolin’s speculation and Tarrant’s evaluation, that Avon would catch Vila’s eyes on him, and unlike the others, Vila never looked away. Avon could almost hear Vila laughing at him, if only because Avon suspected that Vila, with his gossiping and his confidences and his sharp eyes, knew more about all this than Avon did himself.

Avon was sure that Vila knew one thing the others didn’t. Blake. Every time Vila stared at him, Avon heard that name ricochet round his skull, and weaving in amongst it, his own comments, delivered over the years with varying degrees of vitriol, his never-ending condemnation of Blake’s actions and his contempt for his goal. And every time, every single time, Vila stared at him, Avon heard Blake’s name, and he heard his own voice, sneering at him now with its cynicism. Sometimes, amidst the din, he could even remember the precise tone of

voice Blake had used, when he had asked why Avon was still following on...

“I said,” Tarrant repeated loudly, “we’ve arrived. I’ve done all the proper procedures,” and no-one needed him to add ‘because *you* didn’t do a damned thing to help, Avon’, “and if we’re willing to trust Orac, then we’re free to go planetside.”

“So you think we’re free, do you?” Avon replied, with that abrupt upswing of nastiness that was more and more often his mien these days.

“Free?” Vila butted in, reaching across Avon to grab a teleport bracelet. “I’ll have you know I used to make a pretty penny, back in my young and pretty days.”

“You? People paid you money to—”

“Oh, Tarrant, must you?” Dayna asked, picking up a teleport bracelet for herself. “And right before lunch, too.”

“Dayna, you just don’t know what you’re—”

“Orac, operate the teleport as required,” Avon cut through them all as if they weren’t even there, “and keep me informed of all pertinent developments. Which should keep it quiet about you,” he added to Vila as he passed them. “We meet in three hours, there’s a printout map beside Orac. Now, this may be about the safest planet for us to be on—well, safest of those actually inhabited. But that doesn’t mean any conspicuous behaviour. Understand, Vila?”

“What d’you mean, ‘understand, Vila’? When’ve I ever done anything to draw attention to myself—”

He was still going on and on when the teleport, mercifully in some opinions, cut him short.

THREE AND A half hours later, Vila dragged in by the scruff of the neck, they were all met, in an eatery as famous for its food as for its entertainment.

“I can hardly wait,” Tarrant was saying. “Real food, cooked properly—”

“Fresh fruit,” Dayna added, engrossed in the menu display, “and crisp vegetables—”

“Not to mention something a bit stronger than Dorian’s wine”

“Soolin!” Vila declaimed, adding a florid gesture just for good measure and it wouldn’t have upset him at all if Avon managed to crack a smile over the performance. “A woman after my own heart! A fellow connoisseur—”

“Judging by the way you knock that wine back, somehow I doubt that you have time to



connoisseur anything, Vila.”

“I’ll have you know I’m an expert on the portables of a dozen worlds—”

“Sometimes in the same day,” Avon put in, cutting Vila down in mid spiel. “And usually to the regrets of anyone forced to be around him.”

“You know something, Avon,” Vila replied nicely, all the better to point out the nastiness of his words, “you can be a real bastard sometimes.”

Avon’s smile was perfectly urbane. “So my father always told me. Ah, look, our servo is finally here.”

“Saved by the bell, Vila?” Tarrant whispered.

“Who needed saved?” Vila demanded, staring pointedly at Avon. “Whoever it is, it definitely isn’t me.”

With the appreciation of real food luxuriating through them, a person would be excused for not recognising them as the bickering troupe that had first sat down at the table. Conversation clustered round the topics of how good the food was, and what a wonderful change from rehydro rations. Even Avon was seen to tuck into his meal with some enthusiasm, which was perhaps the pleasantest sight of all. Dessert had not yet been brought when the floor show started, the lights above the stage brightening, the lights over the dining area dimming, the *Scorpio* group isolated into the small pool of light cast by the flickering faux-candle on their table.

Vila, needless to say, was enthralled by the spectacle. “I haven’t seen this much bare skin since that tape of the Auron crèche Cally showed us.”

A habit by now, Dayna shushed him, the sound abruptly cut off, her expression changing as she looked at Avon.

She wasn’t the only one reading expressions. “What is it?” Vila hissed, making himself smaller in his chair: when Dayna got that look, it usually meant something very nasty was about to happen. “What?”

“Over there,” she replied almost absently, her attention homing in on something several yards away. “By the door.”

Vila struggled to see what she was talking about, muttering, “I don’t see anything.”

“You never do,” Avon said icily. “And this is not the time to improve your track record.”

“What the hell was that all about?” Tarrant asked, staring after the now departing Avon.

“Nothing,” Vila said, making sure that he

definitely did not see the man he thought he saw Avon stalking, “not a fucking thing.”

THROUGH DARK streets and along a bright esplanade, the salt lake rushing on to the shore, high-flung spray tangy on his tongue, Avon hurried after the man he could not, entirely, believe he had seen. Strolling in like that, as casually as if he did it every night.

Of course, Avon reminded himself, this fellow just might do that. Either because he was simply some poor innocent and not the man Avon thought—feared—he might be. Or because it really was a man Avon had last met when Servalan had his veins full of drugs and his mind full of visions.

Nightmares, he amended, remembering less the dreams and more the awakening. Definitely nightmares.

Down a side street now, past shops and discreet brothels, narrower streets now, with pubs and knocking-shops, on to yet older streets, with tired buildings lining the pavement, and tireder prostitutes lining the walls, catering now to the passing trade who liked it rough, or sleazy, or both.

Still, the man walked on ahead, never once looking back, not even a glance over his shoulder, suspicious behaviour in so despoiled a place. Surer with every step, less sure with every passing moment, in a turmoil over whether this was reality or just another falsehood, Avon followed on, the darker underbelly of his mind amused that here he was, one glimpse, and he was trotting along behind Blake as if nothing had ever changed.

But it had changed and not for the better. Not even close.

The street was curling round now, the Blake-figure rounding the curve so suddenly that Avon lost sight of him for a moment. Long enough, it would seem, for a master of disappearance like Blake.

No one here was stupid enough to stare, but Avon knew every movement was watched by greedy eyes, and he didn’t give a damn. Strangers didn’t count as anything but bodies blocking his line of vision, and it was only when a group of flamboyant young men moved on that Avon saw the only place Blake had enough time to disappear into: the dark mouth of a close, the gate not fully shut, the hallway dark as a maw. Cautiously, Avon entered, weapon drawn, hackles risen.

Off to the right, there was a bank of lift doors,

and on the left, another passageway led off the main hallway, a staircase spiralling upwards to where the light panels glowed at minimum power. Beyond that opening, a battered and graffitied door opened unwillingly under Avon's hand. A small courtyard, rife with the smell from the uncollected recycling units, and beyond, a door to match the one he'd come through, and another hallway like the one he'd just walked, and beyond even that, another street, with another group of young people hanging about waiting for life to happen to them.

Of Blake, or the man who had looked so like Blake in the diffused light of that eatery, there was not a trace. Disgusted, Avon began to retrace his steps, the mere thought of his reception turning him off his intended path. Back to the ship, he decided, all interest in replenishing supplies completely absent now that he'd seen Blake. Or a man who looked like him. Yes, back to the ship, and he'd get an answer from Orac if he had to threaten the recalcitrant machine with a blunt screwdriver.

And yet...

The man he'd known... That Blake would have doubled back by now, returning to the place least expected, namely the very place where he'd shaken his pursuers. An old trick, and Avon could well remember the when and the where of him teaching it to Blake. Grim determination unpleasant upon his face, Avon went back to whence he had so recently come. Rationally, in logical progression, Avon checked the possibilities, respecting neither locked doors nor the privacy of the people within.

It seemed fitting that Blake, with his lofty ideals and loftier attempts at rhetoric, should have found himself an aerie, the last door perched on the top floor, no one near enough to intrude or threaten.

If, Avon reminded himself against the thudding of his heart, it were Blake and not merely someone who looked so like him it made Avon's bones ache.

The lock was simple enough, for a man taught by Vila. Smoothly, the door slid open, a subaural signal setting Avon's teeth on edge and making the man by the window whirl round, his hand blurring as he reached for a gun.

"You never were fast enough," Avon said, and was inordinately relieved at how terribly normal he sounded.

"I'm fast enough," Blake replied, "unless the other man already has his gun in his hand." Unhurriedly, Blake sat down at the window-side

table, his gaze unwavering. "Not a nice way to greet an old friend."

"Not a very nice old friend. Running away from me the second you saw me—"

"Now you're wrong there," Blake said calmly. "I didn't run."

Avon's mind was only half on the conversation, the rest of him marking every detail of Blake's appearance, from the springiness of his hair, to the smooth paleness of his face, to the burliness of his body. "I was being metaphoric."

"And how is Vila?" An echo of an old conversation, and ancient laughter, memorial of a time when they had been both more than friends and nothing less than enemies. "Our metaphoric flea."

"There's nothing metaphoric about him, although he is still forever trying to flee. And you haven't remembered that particular conversation clearly." With measured tread, Avon came all the way into the room, unflinching as Blake used a remote to reset the lock.

"A sensible precaution round here," Blake said blandly.

Avon gestured slightly with his gun, and smiled, nastily. "I'm all in favour of sensible precautions myself. As you can see."

"Do you want to know what I see?" Voice low, hypnotic, drawing Avon in and changing all the rules of the engagement.

"No." Defiant, a droplet of desperation hanging from that one strangled shout. "I've had more than enough—" He stopped then, wry amusement lightening his eyes, incipient confession aborted before he could fall into the old pattern of telling Blake more than good sense would ever choose to. "I have a mirror, Blake, and unlike you, I'm not blinded by blinkers. But there is one thing," he said quickly, filling the slight pause before Blake could speak, "about which I confess I'm very curious."

"Let me guess," Blake said flatly, looking downwards, his hands held out for his own inspection. "What I've been up to for the past year."

Nothing more, Blake staring at his hands, forehead furrowed in thought.

"If an entire year is too much for your limited abilities, then I'll settle for where you were a month ago."

"Meklos."

"And not Terminal?"

Blake reacted sharply to that. "The psycho-manipulator research facility."

“Oh, I wish you’d told me that before.”

Slowly, very carefully non-threateningly, Blake rose to his feet, approaching Avon, stopping a half a metre away. “What did they do to you, Avon?”

“What makes you think—”

“Don’t you remember the old adage—it takes one to know one?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Blake, I haven’t been mindwiped.”

“They did more than that to me. A lot more. And they left most of it buried deep inside my brain...” A deep breath, a hint of movement towards Avon. “What did they do to you?”

“They did nothing.” Stony, implacable, and not up to concealing the pain behind the words.

“Then what do you think *I* did to you?”

“What makes you think that you were the bait?”

“What else would make you go there?” Blake asked, spreading his hands in enquiry. “What else would make you come here to find me?”

“You know, it’s almost reassuring to find that even the megalomania is still the same way it has always been.”

“I asked you a question, Avon.”

“So you did. And I asked you one first.”

“Oh, come on, Avon, surely we’re both a bit too old to be indulging in childish one-upmanship?”

“True enough. But I notice you still didn’t answer my question.”

Blake looked at him steadily then, perhaps cataloguing the changes the past mountain of months had wrought on that face. “I suppose I owe you that much.”

“It’ll do as a down-payment. So go on, Blake, tell me. What *have* you been doing that was too important to return to *Liberator*?”

Blake examined a cheap print on the wall, a cheerfully bucolic scene, the sort of thing that was still banned in the Domes. “When I regained consciousness in my escape pod, I realised that not all the blood on me was my own.”

Avon didn’t really need to ask, but some small kernel of pity moved him to say it to save Blake the obvious pain. “Jenna.”

“Yes. As far as I can remember, there was only the one functioning pod left, and she had to all but bundle me into it. I think that when she was trying to programme the release sequence, there must have been another explosion, or perhaps something had already been shaken loose.” The dry recitation hesitated, but only for a moment, Blake going on,

repeating the story as if it were some distant, rote history lesson. “She must have been hurt then, must have fallen forward into the capsule, and with the door mechanism being automatic...”

“The capsule was launched. And after you woke up—then what?”

A shrug, weary, miserable. “I disappeared. I needed time, Avon, to heal. Not just physically. Waking up with her dead...”

“Yes. Oh yes, I know.”

Blake’s laughter was cruel, laced with contempt. “I doubt that, Avon. I seriously doubt that.”

“Cally’s dead.”

Blake became very still, his head lowered, a sharp intake of breath marking this new burden.

“I’m sorry.”

“Not as sorry as she was.”

“Avon—”

“What else did you expect from me? A completely reformed character?”

“I expected...”

“Yes? You expected, what, precisely?”

“I expected that you would take over and do better than I ever managed.”

“My god, do I hear an admission of fallibility?”

“You hear an admission of defeat.”

“You? And what was it that finally defeated our Great and Fearless Leader?”

“The one thing that no-one can win against. Time.”

Avon looked at him, refusing to let Blake off with so facile an explanation.

“I got old, Avon. Old and tired, and disillusioned. It took me months to recover from the crash, and the whole time I was ill, all I heard were people complaining about the interim government, and how wonderful it would be to go back to the good old days when the Federation took care of everything.”

“Which would certainly be galling for the man willing to destroy Star One to prove himself right.”

“I was much younger then.”

“No matter how lively, a year isn’t—”

“But it wasn’t a year, it was an entire fucking lifetime.”

“Oh, bravo,” Avon said languidly, his tone of voice a slow hand-clap. “Your amateur dramatics really have improved.”

“Thus speaks the man who enters rooms with his gun already in his hand. If that is your idea of restraint...”

“Then I surely learned it from you. Very well,” he went on brusquely, circling round Blake, never letting the other man from his sight. “If you won’t tell me what, then you can tell me why.”

“If I knew the reason why,” Blake said heavily, “then you’d be the second person to find out.”

“Are you honestly—if you still remember the meaning of the word—trying to tell me that you simply...grew tired of the Cause—of the Rebellion *you* started?”

“Not very heroic, is it? But then, you never did believe in my heroics, did you?”

“I believed—” Once again, Avon pulled himself up short, unwilling to give another thing to this man. “I thought you were the one who was supposed to have faith?”

“Was I?”

“Blake, you were always so certain.” A silky sibilance of sound, a dangerous mildness in Avon’s voice. “So all that was a lie also?”

“That was the only lie.”

The atmosphere charged with Blake’s intensity and Avon’s tension. “Why the hell should I believe that?”

“Because it’s the truth.”

“Really? Unlike everything else you ever said.”

“I’m telling you, some of it was true.”

“What, precisely? The part where you said you would never rest until the Federation were defeated and the masses free? Or perhaps it was when you said that destroying Star One was in the best interests of the largest number of people. Or perhaps,” and Avon stepped forward, crowding Blake, lips drawn back in a vulpine smile, “it was when you said that you had always trusted me. From the very beginning.”

“I left you with the *Liberator*. I would think that was proof enough—”

“Oh, no, you abandoned the *Liberator*, you abandoned Cally and Vila and—” a quick verbal swerve and only someone extremely well-versed in Avon-watching would ever notice the shift, “Gan. Jenna, Cally and Gan are all three of them dead. Vila’s drinking himself into an early grave.”

“And you?”

“Me? Unlike you, I take my word seriously. I made you a promise, and I’ll keep it. No matter how much I want to wash my hands of the whole bloody mess, I’ll keep my promise. Even,” the words hissed with snaking venom, “if it means doing all the work while you sit here on your

spreading backside—”

“Don’t you dare say that about me!”

“True. Being out of the revolution business obviously agrees with your health. All right, I concede that you are not growing fat on my labours. But you are still doing nothing, while I lose Cally—”

“I am sorry.”

“So you’ve already said, and it didn’t help then either, but then, empty platitudes so rarely do.”

“What the hell do you expect me to do? Fall on my sword?”

“Well now, that would be a start at least.”

“I am not responsible—”

“Aren’t you?” Sharper than nails and twice as piercing, pinning Blake down for an answer. “You still haven’t convinced me. Where were you last month?”

Reluctantly, with thumb nibbled thoughtfully. “I was on Meklos setting up another cell.”

“Ah, now we really are getting to it. Another cell. How delightful. Now, were you going to tell me you were back in the Revolution before Vila gets killed, or were you planning on waiting until I’m dead and out of your way?”

“That’s unfair—”

“Oh, it certainly is, but when did unfairness ever so much as delay you?” Avon sat down suddenly on the old sofa, the cushions yielding what little give they had. “You made me promise not to let your damned Revolution die until I could be sure that you were dead, and now you tell me that while I was fighting a battle I didn’t want, you are not only alive and well, but enjoying yourself?”

Give credit where it is due, Blake didn’t bluster, his retreat to defectiveness not yet a rout. “No-one could claim this past year has been a pleasure—”

“Grass-roots rebellion? That, Blake, was always your idea of heaven.”

“Not exactly. But the simple fact is that what’s done is done, and now you’ve found me.”

It might have been a stirring of laughter, but it was too rusty and dry to sound like Avon. “I spent months actively searching for you. I had this...absurd notion that you might need help. And if you didn’t need help, then you would *want* to be found.”

“And there is the crux of the matter,” Blake said, voice rich and mellow and full of regrets. “It wasn’t being found I didn’t want. It was what would follow.”

The slightest hint of friendliness drained instantly from Avon, his mouth thinning down to a narrow line, his eyes flinty. “Well, you don’t have to worry about that. I’ve come to my senses and the only interest you have for me is how quickly I can give you back your—”

“That’s not what I meant, Avon. You weren’t the problem. You were never the problem.”

“Now this is interesting,” Avon said, shards of pain sharpening his words. “I was never the problem? But you didn’t want me finding you—”

“Because if you found me, then so would everything I had been able to leave behind.”

“Compliments and reassurances never were your strong suit, were they?”

“All right, so I phrased that badly. Look at it from my point of view. I was incapacitated for months, with nothing to do but think. Especially about some of the things you said, about Star One. Out of the heat of battle, I had to look at myself, at the things I had been willing to do, for no better reason than proving myself right. Don’t you see, Avon? I had become as evil as the people I was fighting. Absolute power—”

“The others may have flocked round you like sheep at times, but absolute power? A pretty enough excuse, but not the most convincing.”

“Convincing or not, it’s the simple truth.”

“The truth is rarely simple, Blake.”

“We could go round on this for hours, and that’s a waste of time. That’s the way of it, and if you don’t like that, then I’m sorry, but there’s nothing I can do. Tell me,” Blake said, cutting off Avon’s arguments, “what happened to Cally?”

“Servalan.” Succinct, dry, to the point, and simplifying a truth *ad absurdum*.

“I gathered that. But what did Servalan do—”

“You already said it yourself, interestingly enough. A trap, with you as bait, although it was Cally who was caught, not me.”

“And now?”

“Now?” Avon did laugh then, the laughter fading into an unreadable expression. “They watch me endlessly. Since Cally died, I have been...not quite overflowing with *joie de vivre*.” More laughter, mocking himself, his bitter eyes staring at Blake. “They think I’m wearing my heart on my sleeve.”

That gave Blake pause, clouded his expression. “And are you?”

“I’m hiding something in plain sight.”

Blake looked at Avon then with the old, need-

fully remembered compassion. “What did Servalan do to you?” Blake asked again, softly, his voice a burr of kindness.

“Well, she didn’t throw a party. She did, however, kill Cally and destroy *Liberator*. Although as a consolation prize, she did manage to blow herself up—”

“Did she?” Blake broke in sharply, backpedalling the instant he saw the naked suspicion in Avon’s eyes. “You were the one always telling me not to underestimate that woman.”

“Yes, I was, wasn’t I?” A swift shift of mood, Avon seemingly suddenly tired. “Pleasant though this little chat has been, I think it’s time you met the others and start making plans to retake the leash—”

“I’m not coming back, Avon.”

The words dropped gently like a smooth stone into water, the effect rippling out in waves, washing over Avon slowly, then more quickly, anger leaping and gambolling. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Don’t pretend to misunderstand me, Avon. I said, I’m not coming back.”

“Oh, I think you’ll find that you’re wrong about that as well. I have had enough—”

“And you think I hadn’t? I turned into a monster—”

“You didn’t turn in to anything. You were simply revealed as what you were, and if you can’t cope with that—” He stopped, breathing quick and shallow, his temper wrestled under control. “Then you have my sympathy. You also have the leadership of this damned Cause of yours back in *your* hands.”

“No. You stay in the public eye, and let me do the real work behind the scenes.”

“In other words, set myself up as target—”

“Only if you’ve suddenly lost every talent and brain cell you ever had. Fight the Federation as you have been, and I will organise indigenous rebellion on key planets. I’ve been setting this up, Avon, and in a matter of months—a year at the most—it’ll be ready. *I’ll* be ready. Don’t you see? That’s the way we can both win this and survive it. You saw what happened to me when I was the one leading the whole thing. Let me have these few months to finish setting this up on a level that doesn’t corrupt me—”

“You know, that’s stretching credibility, even by your standards.”

“Why the hell won’t you believe me?”

“Because I haven’t yet lost every talent and every grey cell I’ve ever had. Because, Blake,” his tone was a caress, a haunting reminder of what had once been, “you are lying to me. And I don’t like it when you lie to me.”

Blake lowered his head, resting it in his hands, so perfect a picture of dejection that Avon automatically suspected it, even while a dim part of his mind was admiring the light on Blake’s curls, and remembering how that hair had felt, moving lightly over his belly as Blake’s mouth—

Not quite the thing to think about, given the present circumstances. Avon took a deep breath, and consigned his libido to purgatory.

“All right,” Blake finally said, raising his head and looking at Avon. “The truth... Oh, Avon, how can I even try? I can never win, that’s the only thing Star One proved.”

“I won’t argue with that. But then, I thought the whole idea was to struggle on until the right side, if not the right man, won?”

“Yes, but... Hearing everyone talk about me, whispering behind my back, seeing the state I’m in...”

“It’s what you condemned me to.”

“Oh, no, you can’t blame me for this. I didn’t force you to promise—”

“No?” A single word, scything through Blake’s defensive bombast.

“Coerced, perhaps. But you could have said no.”

“Which I thought, at the time, would result in the whole nightmare dragging on forever. Or until you finally turned yourself into a martyr.”

“I didn’t know you cared.”

Utter incredulity, and outrage, underpinned by dismay and hurt. “You didn’t know? So much for the communication of passion.”

“So much,” Blake corrected sharply, “for lust without a single declaration—”

Which was not how Avon had seen it, not at all, and not something he chose to dwell on, hastening away from that pain as surely as Blake had run away from the perversions of power. “What is to stop me,” Avon asked musingly, “from revealing your location to Avalon and all the others?”

“Nothing,” Blake replied easily, the old ability to follow Avon’s every twist and turn not one that he’d lost. “But then again, what’s to stop me disappearing again?”

“The fact that I know that you’re still alive.”

The comment hit Blake hard, driving the breath

from him. “You thought I was...”

“When even Orac couldn’t find you, what else was I to think?”

“Orac had instructions—”

“Which I countermanded. And he still couldn’t find you. Which makes me wonder: where were you, Blake?”

“I have told you—”

“Nothing. A single planet, a vague fairytale about being injured and Jenna dying in transit—” The anger, too long controlled, was boiling over, Avon’s gun coming slowly, with inexorable purpose, to press against Blake’s neck, under the chin, where a single pulse of energy would fry the brain. “Do you remember discussing this? The morality of killing the enemy cleanly,” he moved his gun, caressingly, obscenely, along Blake’s cheek, to his temple, “or of partially destroying the brain with the initial burn,” the gun slid languorously along Blake’s skin, the tip pressing against tightly-closed lips, “and leaving them to suffer incalculable agonies for a few seconds. Or possibly a full minute.”

With a gun lapping his lips, Blake could not answer, was forced to stand there, mute, his eyes speakingly furious.

“I was never entirely sure that we were friends or allies,” Avon went on, gaze fixed on where the tip of his gun was growing moist from its slow invasion of Blake’s mouth, “and now I’m not quite certain that we’re enemies.” He smiled, his eyes alive with pain and betrayal, his free hand coming up to stroke Blake’s cheek in a way that should have been seductive. “Oh, I am surprised,” he went on, sarcastic now, the gun pressing harder, “it’s so unlike you to have so little to say.”

Avon’s hand strayed to the nape of Blake’s neck, holding him firm, giving him no leeway at all, and the gun pressed forward, harder, until even Blake could not resist, lips opening, teeth parting, the gun entering Blake, and Avon, smiling, watched it all, feral grin on his lips, desolate fury in his eyes.

“I could kill you,” Avon whispered, his body against Blake’s. “I could kill you with the simplest movement of my finger.”

Blake covered Avon’s gun hand with his own, and pushed the other man back, the gun leaving his mouth, the long barrel glistening moistly in the light. “You’re a sick bastard, Avon,” he murmured, but any venom in him was well hidden. “But at least you’ve made it clear what you want.

What you always want.”

“Stupidity is hardly an appealing trait—”

“True, but I love you anyway.”

Such mockery, and so much truth disguised so well. “Love me? Blake, you—”

“Shh,” Blake whispered, leaning in closer, the heat of his attention freezing Avon in place. “We both know what we want, and we’re grown men, why shouldn’t we indulge?”

Because Avon had come here for answers; because Avon had come here to dump the Cause back where it belonged; because Avon had come here for revenge.

But then, when had he ever been able to resist, when it came to this man, and his passions?

“No,” he said loudly, jamming his gun into Blake’s belly.

“Yes,” Blake said quietly, knowing what Avon wanted, surer of him now than he had ever been.

“No.” But more softly, the protest dying.

Blake enveloped Avon in his arms, the gun between them harder than their bodies could ever be, but hot now, latent power leaching along the barrel.

“Put it away,” Blake murmured against Avon’s ear, his tongue briefly tasting the salt-sweat skin of Avon’s neck. “Put the gun away.”

A movement, Avon beginning to reholster his weapon, then an abrupt twist, the barrel hot against Blake’s throat. “No,” Avon repeated, and perhaps only he could hear the desperation in that defiance. “On your knees, Blake,” he said coldly, even though his blood was running hot and his mind was on fire with a lust he had long wished dead.

With grace, Blake knelt, face close to Avon’s groin, the black fabric devouring light. “Is this how it has to be now, Avon?” Blake demanded. “And you still claim you don’t believe that power corrupts?”

“Ah, yes, but I was corrupted a long time ago, and not by power.”

Not waiting to be told, hurrying as if fearful that the moment would pass and Avon’s twisted sexual desire would fade, Blake undid the fasteners of Avon’s trousers, his hands so white against the black, Avon’s skin paler still. Trousers tugged down to the tops of his thighs, jacket pushed open, black sweater shoved upwards so that the thin line of hair on his belly was exposed, Avon stood there, staring down at Blake, cock in Blake’s hands.

He wanted this. More than he had thought,

more than was wise, but still, he wanted it.

And what price could be worse than that already paid?

“Suck me,” Avon said hoarsely, hating himself for this ineluctable addiction, hating Blake for making him feel love in the first place. “I want to see you take me inside...”

Blake’s eyes were large, and preternaturally knowing. “I’m going to eat you alive.”

“You did that years ago.” One hand holding Blake’s head in place, Avon rammed his cock into Blake’s mouth, his tumescence thickening at the first touch of moist heat, his cock lengthening rapidly to beat at the back of Blake’s throat, the wet sounds of gagging and the massaging spasm of throat muscle a joy to Avon, revenge and release in one sweet package. He thrust harder, fucking Blake’s face, not listening to that part of himself that was horrified, refusing to hear that small voice that mocked him for doing only this because he feared not being able to take Blake, feared that if it came to fucking, it would be Avon, a willing Avon, on the receiving end. And Blake had fucked him more than enough.

His gun still hot against Blake’s flesh, his other hand holding Blake’s head rigidly in place, Avon kept on thrusting into that wet mouth, again and again and again, frustration building as orgasm eluded him, not even the pressure of Blake’s chin on his balls helping. He thrust harder, held himself deep inside Blake, felt the convulsing of muscles around himself, the tremble as Blake struggled for breath, and it still wasn’t enough. His cock an equal measure of pleasure and pain, Avon hammered himself into Blake, humiliation threatening.

And then Blake reached his hands around, and spread Avon’s cheeks, and slowly pushed a finger inside him.

It was, almost, enough, and even as passion set him alight, shame burned even hotter.

Taking advantage of Avon’s distraction, Blake pulled his mouth free for a moment, and waiting until Avon was staring at him, sucked on two fingers, their wetness cool as they entered Avon, the ingress of the fingers matching the entering of his cock into Blake’s mouth again, wetness within and without, hardness within and without, and it was almost as good as being fucked.

Close now, so close, and Blake abandoned Avon, but only long enough to wet three fingers, a hard wedge of flesh forcing its way into Avon’s arse,

Avon's body still tight after all these months of allowing no-one that particular power. Three fingers, spreading, opening Avon up, and a wet mouth sucking him in, pleasuring him, and Blake was all around him, and in him, and there was no room left for doubts or fears or anything but the singing, stinging pleasure of orgasm dissolving him, Blake's fingers on his prostate, every pressure of that hand making the cum erupt from Avon's cock, emptying him into Blake.

And then it was over, and he was standing there exposed and limp, and Blake was climbing to his feet, unruffled, his mouth wet and swollen from sucking Avon's cock.

It seemed then, at that moment, that it was Avon who had been debased.

"Come on, Avon," Blake was saying, undramatically tidying Avon's clothes, smoothing over both the nakedness and the awkwardness. "Have a drink, and then a lie down. We can talk again later."

"The only thing," Avon began, had to stop, clear his throat until his voice once more sounded like his own. "The only thing I want to do is have you take over the mess you left me—"

"And I will," Blake said kindly, and Avon knew better than to listen to that, but kindness was rarer than gold, and more precious to a man starved for it. "All in due time," Blake went on, urging Avon into the bedroom, sitting him on the edge of the bed and pulling his boots off, repeating a pattern they had perfected on the *Liberator*, the once-familiar rhythms a balm to the spirit. "First, though, you need some sleep."

"But you didn't—"

"Shh," Blake soothed, fiddling round with the bottle and glasses he had taken from the wall cupboard, "there'll be time enough for that later."

Avon, trusting as ever, waited until Blake had taken a drink from the glass before he himself took it, draining the sweet local wine in a single draught. "Will there ever be time enough?"

"Oh, yes, Avon, plenty of time," Blake said, stroking the frowns away from Avon's forehead, watching as the eyelids quivered and drooped, and then the eyes flaring wildly, furious and betrayed, only to close against even Avon's will. For a long time, Blake sat by Avon's side, stroking his skin, sliding his fingers through Avon's here. "Oh, yes," he murmured, giving Avon the only kiss permitted him this time, "there'll be time. I've

set it all up, you'll see..."

COMING TO, mouth like a sewer, mind like a dungeon, more pain and shame than he had ever known. With economy of movement, Avon pulled his boots back on, re-donned the jacket that he had been unaware of Blake removing. After some searching, the beeping of his teleport bracelet led him to it, and he snapped it on viciously.

"Bring me up," he snarled, ignoring the questions coming at him through the tiny speaker. "Now."

The light round him faded, and he stepped from the teleport dock to face not the music, but the disharmony of four people staring at him with expressions varying from pity to contempt to anger to the most galling intuition.

It didn't matter that Vila was wrong: the very fact that the idiot knew enough to guess it was Blake who was the root of Avon's pain was abysmal enough.

"I've warned you, Tarrant," Dayna said in the tone of an oft-repeated refrain. "Don't say a word."

"My lips are sealed," Tarrant replied, but his expression spoke volumes.

Not that it mattered to Avon. He took a chair, engrossed himself in examining the data, behaved as if he hadn't disappeared for—he checked the chrono—fourteen hours, Blake having given himself more than enough time to disappear.

"Are you all right?" Dayna asked him.

"Yeh, I was getting worried about you," Vila put in. "Must be the company you keep."

Avon looked at him then. "The pot calling the kettle black?"

"Something like that."

And it was the sympathy in those eyes that made Avon look away, spine crawling as if Vila knew, as if Vila could smell Blake on him, and would *know*.

"Look, Avon," Dayna was saying quietly while Soolin kept Tarrant otherwise engaged, "We didn't come after you this time, but another half hour, and we would have had to. We were really worried about you, and that's just not fair. And I know it's hard for you, but you shouldn't just disappear like that. You shouldn't just shut us all out. My father always used to tell us not to let things get to us, and it has to be true even for all of us: love will find a way."

"How wonderfully reassuring," Avon grinned,



and his eyes glittered. “And if it doesn’t, hate surely will.”

He began the sequence to take them out of orbit, his mind already working on ways to trace that bastard Blake, and under it all, the festering suspicion worried like a hungry dog at the bone of contention: where the hell had Blake been, and had he simply guessed certain details? Or had he known them?

A man, bearded, lying on a bed, his feet dirty, although he was supposed to be no more than a figment of some psycho-manipulator’s induced nightmare.

Avon smiled to himself, as the others gathered round, protesting the course he was setting, complaining about leaving, kicking up quite a fuss, all of it as water on stone.

Let them. Let them gather round, clowns in a choreographed circus. Let them babble on about whatever they wanted, Avon knew what they were really saying: get over it, put it behind you, and hide this love away where it wouldn’t be either so embarrassing or so dangerous.

Avon let them think whatever they wanted to. He welcomed the ice as it crept through him, the familiar numbing that eased him through horrors such as this. Felt the cold creeping into every dark cavern in his mind, freezing the pain and the hurt and the humiliation, until only one thing was alive and warm and pulsing.

Revenge.

If it took him a lifetime, he would find Blake again.

And then they would see who had been set up.

□□□□□