

arms.

“I suppose it’s pointless to hope you’ll respect me in the morning,” he told the darkness, whimsical.

Murmuring unintelligibly, Avon burrowed further into his shoulder. An unexpected wave of affection washed over Blake. In spite of everything, in spite of all the pain and frustration and grief, in the deepest recesses of his heart he was honestly fond of the technician. There had been a time when he’d felt he would have done almost anything to secure Avon’s friendship. Only when it had become clear that two years of battering at the man’s walls had come to nothing (“You wouldn’t understand.” “Wouldn’t I?” “I doubt it...”) had he given up the siege.

That and the fact that his mind was fully occupied these days with the search for an expatriated cyber-surgeon.

Warmth bled from the inert body into his. It was pleasant, for once: the human contact, the tactile satisfaction that he denied himself with Jenna. Shutting his eyes against the absurdity, he patted Avon’s shoulder benevolently and let his mind drift. Within minutes, without meaning to, he had drifted into sleep.

Fortunately, he was the first to wake the next morning. His right arm, trapped under Avon, was dead. Avon himself was deep in REM sleep, lips parted, lashes fluttering. He put up no resistance and showed no signs of consciousness when Blake slid him off the arm and then across the short distance onto his own blankets.

Well now. As long as you don’t remember, you won’t find anything suspicious about being on top instead of underneath. I have a hunch that normally you’re a restless sleeper.

The thought of Avon’s reaction if he *did* remember made Blake first wince, then bite his lip and shake silently. Rubbing his tingling arm, he barely managed to escape the tent before the laughter choked him.

At midday Avon swept into the central office where Blake was directing clean-up and salvage operations, eyes like the dark ice at the

bottom of a glacier, body knife-poised for battle. He launched into a series of complaints, demands, and threats about the workers (incompetent), the equipment (barbaric), and the time-schedule (preposterous) in his section. Blake, with bland equilibrium, agreed with everything he said, then released his breath and rubbed a hand over his eyes as Avon prowled out again. Safe. Thank god. The man didn’t remember a bloody thing.

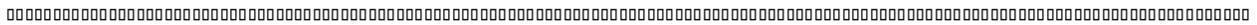
The next night, he was more prepared. He was not so *very* much surprised to wake and find Avon nestling against him, and he found it less awkward to return the embrace. The technician was a most tractable bed-mate, willing to do anything Blake urged as long as it didn’t mean breaking body contact. Immediately they were settled, Blake went straight back to sleep.

The third night he hardly opened his eyes. When the intrusion came he reacted automatically, mind skimming the surface of consciousness and then re-submerging once Avon was safely stowed. He was, he realized the next morning, getting spoiled. Even in slumber the computer expert was a fast learner, and somehow managed to get cuddlier by the hour. He didn’t kick, seemed to have no sharp edges, and never trapped Blake’s arm anymore. And he *was* warm.

“You know, I think I’m going to miss this when we get back,” Blake informed him solemnly on the fourth night of their stay. The rebel had an impulse to ruffle the immaculate brown hair, but quelled it, feeling it somehow unkind. It was at times like this, when Avon was unconscious or otherwise utterly incapacitated, that Blake’s latent protectiveness for him came out. He felt Avon wanted taking care of.

His second waking that night was abrupt and unpleasant. Feeble gray light showed under the edges of the tent. Avon’s breathing was quick and shallow, his head tossing, limbs strained wire-taut. Blearily, Blake hitched up to look him in the face, then moved a hand to Avon’s shoulder and shook gently.

“Avon, wake up. It’s only a nightmare.”



he came out of a fitful doze and heard Avon’s breathing. By now he knew well all the different rhythms of the tech’s somnolent respiration, and this wasn’t any of them.

The man was wide awake.

So. Don’t trust yourself, eh? No...that isn’t really it, Blake thought. Deep down, on a gut level, you genuinely don’t trust *me*. You’re convinced that I’m somehow responsible for what happened, and you aren’t going to let anything so trivial as the evidence persuade you otherwise. So here you are, keeping vigil until dawn over your chastity like a knight over his sword. At worst it will demonstrate that you’re in control, that yesterday was a unique aberration. At best...at best, I think you hope to catch me sneaking over for a quick cuddle whilst I suppose you to be unconscious. A Blake trap.

And perhaps, Blake mused wryly, the man was right to be suspicious—if not of Blake’s actions, then at least of his intent. He *did* wish Avon would let him get closer. Wished it with a renewed fervor because if the last week wasn’t proof that Avon needed some closeness from *someone*, he’d like to know what it was. Even in the tolerant darkness he found it hard to believe Avon found him personally irresistible.

It had been hard enough trying to relax before. The knowledge that Avon was lying a meter away in ambush made it well-nigh impossible. When he finally lapsed back into a restless half-sleep, his dreams were so bad that the gentle nudging was a welcome interruption—until full awareness came.

Oh, hell, he thought, rousing with a start and blinking down into the pillow. Damn you, Avon; this time I swear...

But when he turned to confront the trespasser he softened. That adamantine will had submitted at last to the only thing in the universe capable of conquering it...Avon himself. Eyes tightly shut, face shadowed, the man’s need was still clearly apparent.

“All right, Avon. All right.” He relaxed and drew the smaller body in close, settling it against him. “Just no nightmares this time,

hmm? Or I send you out to cuddle with the black beetles.”

Curious that his anger at the daytime Avon didn’t seem to carry over to this midnight companion. Curious, too, that the sleep which had eluded him before was now so easy to find.

He came awake a few hours later out of sheer necessity. Avon’s opinions to the contrary, Blake was a survivalist. He scooted the unconscious tech across the room, straightened his own blankets into pristine order, and departed the tent before Avon could so much as flicker an eyelash.

Safe again.

He sighed.

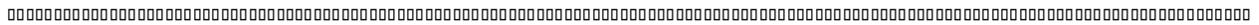
Though he saw Avon from a distance, they had no chance of conversation until the rendezvous with *Liberator*, at which time the man was cool but civil. Blake puzzled a few minutes over this, then understood. The night Avon had awoken in his arms had never happened. It had merely been an hallucination on Blake’s part. Avon was willing to forgive such an unfortunate delusion—especially coming from a man who had, after all, had a mindwipe—just as long as Blake had the good sense never to mention it again.

What Avon didn’t know, of course, was about all the other nights which had also never happened. And Blake, jumping at the chance to restore even a precarious status quo, had no intention of undecieving him.

After the hard-packed earth and chilly, whistling winds of Instareth, the narrow *Liberator* bunks should have seemed like heaven. But Blake, finally approaching Cally after three nights of tossing and turning, discovered from her that Avon had been along not an hour ago for the same reason.

“Just nothing too strong, please. Soma makes me groggy the next day,” he said in conclusion.

Cally had heard it all before. “Lethe is as potent in its own way as some—but it is derived



from a substance which occurs naturally in the human body. The effect is quite specific.”

“Addictive?”

“Not physically.”

“Harmful side effects?”

“I do not think so. It was created by the Spaceworlders, but Zen and Orac have approved it for human use. It should help you re-adjust to your normal circadian rhythm. As I told Avon, that is all I can promise.”

Well enough satisfied, Blake twirled the little vial of bilious orange liquid thoughtfully between thumb and forefinger.

“The proper dose is twenty milliliters. About a fourth of that vial. And, Blake...it takes effect almost immediately. I wouldn’t drink it until you are actually in bed.”

“Yes, Nanny.”

“And should the problem persist I would advise a daily routine of exercise and meditation instead of drugs. My people have—”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure they do,” said Blake hastily. “But I’ve bothered you enough already—best be getting on to bed.” And vial in hand, he beat a strategic retreat.

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The galley first, he thought, as he emerged into the corridor. A small late-night snack would not come amiss and he wanted something to wash the medicine down in case it tasted as vile as it looked. At the rest room door he paused. Sitting at a table, head on folded arms, was Avon.

The tech had permitted only minimal contact between them since returning to the ship, and Blake had not pushed him. But now seemed as good a time as any to call a truce.

“Surely a bed—even a *Liberator* bed—would be more comfortable,” he said, using the wryly indulgent tone which occasionally got past Avon’s barriers.

The figure stirred, but did not otherwise acknowledge his presence.

Blake’s good humor disappeared. Lack of sleep had thinned his patience and shortened his temper.

“I would never ask you turn around and

actually look at me,” he continued, striding forward, “but an occasional grunt of recognition would be quite—” He broke off, frowned, and leant forward. Then, hesitantly, he pulled at Avon’s shoulder to lift him and peer into his face. The reason for the even-greater-than-usual rudeness was immediately apparent.

Blake picked up the little vial which had dropped from Avon’s nerveless fingers. Half-empty. Tch. The man’s ego was beyond belief.

“Can’t do things like the rest of us, can you?” he chided gently. “Normal rules and restrictions don’t apply to Avons, I suppose. Except tonight I’m afraid they do.” He pursed his lips, considering for a moment whether his conscience would allow him to leave Avon like this, to waken the next morning stiff, chagrined, and possibly even rumped. The messages his conscience sent back were not encouraging, so he pulled Avon’s arm over his own shoulder and hauled him to his feet. The tech’s eyes remained slitted, but he was able to partially support his own weight.

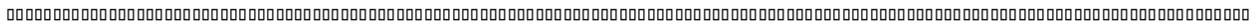
“This way, old boy. Your Uncle Blake is putting you to beddy-bye.” Avon accepted the support and guidance without demur—and without awakening.

Inside the tech’s cabin, Blake sat him on the bed and knelt to remove his boots.

“You don’t need these. Or this...or this...or this either, I shouldn’t think.” Disposing of belt and outer tunic, he tugged the high-necked sweater over Avon’s head, clicking his tongue at the sight of a sleeveless black under-shirt beneath.

“The wonder is you don’t roast,” he said conversationally, undoing the first two buttons at the waistband of Avon’s trousers to loosen them. “Perhaps you’ve got some obscure vitamin deficiency you ought to see Cally about. On the other hand, perhaps when we call you cold-blooded we are just speaking more truly than we know...”

Good temper restored, he started to urge Avon down flat, reconsidered, and guided him to stand instead.



“Haven’t tucked anyone in for a long time,” he admitted, turning down the bedclothes with one hand as he steadied Avon with the other. “All right, Sleeping Beauty. Down you go. Sweet dreams.”

Avon sat but resisted the continued gentle pressure on his shoulder to lie down. Instead, he put up his lips for a kiss.

The gesture was so natural, so unself-conscious, that Blake had bent halfway down to oblige before he realized what he was doing. He froze in shock, not breathing, feeling heat explode in his face. He stared.

Avon’s eyes were closed, all the chiseled lines of his features smoothed over, making him look very young indeed. His face was still upturned expectantly.

“All right. Just lie down now,” Blake muttered, forcing himself to take a deep breath and straighten up. His stomach was knotted in embarrassment. He pushed hard on Avon’s shoulder and the slighter body yielded, but a hand came up unerringly to capture his and hold it fast.

Blake, after one or two tries at extricating himself, did not have the heart to pry those clasping fingers open by sheer force. His embarrassment was fading as he realized that there was no one here to observe him, to judge, to mock. Not even Avon. He was quite alone.

“Oh, hell.” Looking down at the sleeping man, he stood for a bit, then he sat for a bit; then, finally, he lay down awkwardly beside him, crowding Avon against the wall.

He could not exactly decipher his own emotions, but he recognized protectiveness as one of the major components. Ridiculous to feel so protective of someone who was always bent on threatening him...except that this Avon was no threat. This Avon needed him—and showed it.

Just for a minute or two, he promised the Greek chorus in his head which was debating vigorously as to how many different kinds of fool he was. I’ve still got my boots on, he explained to them reasonably; and this seemed

to be a definitive point because the voices grew fainter and he settled into a velvet darkness in which there were no troublesome, demanding stars.

His dreams were pleasant, and getting pleasanter all the time. Quite a drug, that Lethe, he thought languidly, glad he was half-awake to appreciate the feeling of well-being—almost of euphoria it provided. Vila would love it.

Except that he hadn’t taken any. He was suddenly sure of that, if nothing else. His head was clearing, but he felt disoriented, floating as he was on a sea of sensations. Pleasant sensations, yes, even delicious, but still—

He was fully awake. In Avon’s cabin. In Avon’s bed. His boots were still on, but this previously important fact was now immaterial, because everything else was different. They had changed position; Blake was now lying on his side, with Avon’s body spooned to his so he could feel a warm pressure against his back and legs, and Avon’s hand was inside his shirt. The touch was not at all fraternal.

“Avon!” It came out in an undignified croak. The feeling uncoiling in his stomach must be shock, must be mortification—but it was sweeter and more fierce than either. Something hard and hot was pressed between his buttocks. Unable to stop himself, he tensed and moved his hips back slightly against that hardness, suddenly, excruciatingly aware of nerves he had never fully realized existed before. The hand inside his shirt was moving in unhurried ellipses, leaving the hairless skin sensitized and tingling as blood rushed to the surface where it passed. A flattened palm centered on one nipple and made a smaller circle and Blake drew in his breath sharply.

“Avon, stop it. Stop.” Still hoarse. He reached a quelling hand behind him only to discover how sensitive his own fingers were to the feeling of silky material stretched tautly over rigid flesh. He should, he thought dimly, be angry, but what he felt was closer to panic.

“Avon, you don’t know—” He lost his

up the length of first one inner thigh, then the other. Extraordinary, the feel of it—such softness stretched over the lithe hardness of muscles. When he reached the flushed, half-roused flesh at the junction, his appreciation deepened, and almost without thinking he leant down, cupping it toward his lips. Then he stopped.

He wanted to please Avon and he was keenly aware of how much this act had just pleased *him*. But he was also keenly aware of his own inexperience. However much he had liked having it done, he was not at all sure he would like doing it.

That, he decided, was beside the point. He had at least to try. He owed Avon that much. Gently, somewhat awkwardly, he cupped once again, and bent.

The head was warm against his lips; the skin, with its delicate latticework of raised veins, thin and silky-soft. Tentatively, he let his tongue trace around the corona, and then along the ridged underside. Avon's cock stirred and lifted itself in his hand, as if seeking further attentions. Endearing—and intriguing. All at once it seemed quite natural to take the head fully in his mouth, and he was surprised to find how good it felt there, just the right size and shape to fit him—and to lure him into wanting more.

He relaxed and pulled it in deeper, then, emboldened, began to suck. Shudders rippled through Avon, and Blake heard the sharp, distinct intake of breath. He felt a surge of responsive pleasure in himself and almost laughed, his qualms evaporating. How could he have been so foolish as to fear this? He, of all people. Far better than gnawing a fist or finger, far more satisfying and distracting. In fact, he was stunned at how good it was—by how much he enjoyed the feel of the slick hardness moving in and out of his mouth, how much it excited him.

Avon was fully erect now, his hips rocking very slightly in counterpoint to Blake's bobbing motion. Looking up, Blake drank in the sight of those heavy-lashed eyes tightly closed, those molded lips parted and quivering with

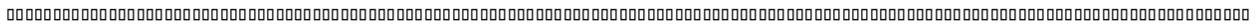
rapid shallow breaths. When the sighs became longer, more vocalized, verging on moans, when the dark head began rolling from side to side on the pillow, he quickened his pace. Sucking hard, insistently, he found himself holding Avon's hips to restrain him, then reaching behind to do what he'd not let himself do before, fondling the firm curve of a buttock. Exploring blindly, one finger slid into the crevice to encounter a tight-drawn bud of flesh. Before he knew it, the finger had pressed in slightly to encounter the plush texture of velvet ribbon.

Avon froze.

For a long moment he held himself still, unbreathing. Then his whole body trembled, and the next minute he was gasping in ecstasy. Recklessly, he thrust down to impale himself further, and Blake felt a twinge of alarm. Avon had not done this to *him*, no one ever had, and he wasn't sure he understood why it should bring pleasure. He flexed the fingertip, stroking as gently as possible, but sensing that Avon wanted motion. Inner muscles gripped at him demandingly, like a small hungry mouth, and he slowly advanced another centimeter, and another. His sucking and fondling had slowed to a stop, and Avon too had ceased moving, both of them concentrating on this painstaking invasion of Avon's body.

After the initial concern Blake found that he liked this too—liked touching Avon this way. It was not at all like penetrating a woman; there was nothing routine or facile about it. Fortunately, his finger had already been slippery with his own spilled saliva and Avon's sweat, or even this careful invasion could have been terribly painful. He still needed to be cautious: the tight passage felt so fragile and his own finger so large.

Tentatively, watching Avon's face, he quirked the buried finger again. Avon remained motionless, transfixed, his attention still engaged in analyzing the feel of Blake inside him. Blake flexed a little harder and dared try a shallow circling motion. Avon's head fell back. His lips opened and shut, as if blindly seeking to



kiss him, then made himself stop.

“It’s as much for your sake as for mine,” he whispered, leaning over Avon, knowing the words went unheard. “Because you’ll hurt yourself, too, trying to run from this. And I’m not sure I can stand to watch you do that.” Rising, he was surprised to find his knees weak, but the feeling passed quickly and he went into the lavatory, returning with damp towel in hand.

And then, methodically, he set about erasing every sign that he had ever been in the room.

He maneuvered Avon—a heavy but unresisting bundle—so he could strip off the sheets and replace them with fresh ones. He cleaned sweat from Avon’s body and the traces of spent passion from Avon’s belly and thighs, and zipped him securely back inside his clothes. He even smoothed the ruffled hair and arranged the discarded tunic and boots neatly by the bedside, in what might safely be assumed as Avon-ish manner.

At the door he paused, and then moved back to look down once more on the sleeping figure. Sleeping a true sleep at last.

“You won’t remember in the morning,” he said softly, somehow certain of this. Avon would not remember—and he himself would never forget. Tonight had changed nothing, and yet nothing would ever be quite the same.

“I think I understand.” It was all he could offer in parting. This odd tryst had given him some insight, not into Avon’s mind, but into his heart. From now on, in the depths of Avon’s most bitter diatribes, in his most searing indictments, Blake would see the shadow of something else. He’d had a glimpse of what went on behind the walls.

And it was possible that though Avon never did remember, something inside him would not entirely forget. It could be that some trace of warmth and trust might linger, and speak to him when Blake was near. In some far distant future Blake might even be able to tell him about it.

Looking at that lovely face, waxen with

heat and utterly distant, Blake felt his own shoulders slump.

The man asleep was not the one who was dreaming here. And, Avon’s comments notwithstanding, Blake *could* recognize dreams.

With one last glance around the room for disorder or betraying evidence, he left.

PART TWO: FUGUE

Fugue: In music, a piece consisting of two harmonizing melodies.

In psychology, a state in which a person performs acts which are not remembered upon returning to normal consciousness.

THE ONLY THING FOR IT, BLAKE TOLD HIMSELF THE NEXT MORNING, WAS TO GO ON AS HE’D BEGUN.

This immediately started up the chorus of voices in his head, this time all yammering different things. He cut short the ones doing the wet-eyed pleading.

Of course it was good, he told them harshly. I hadn’t ma—had sex for god knows how long. It was good because I needed it.

He dealt as savagely with the others which pointed accusing fingers. Perhaps he shouldn’t have allowed it to happen—but he had *not* taken advantage of an innocent. He had practically been raped. And he was damned if he was going to have trouble looking Avon in the eye because of it.

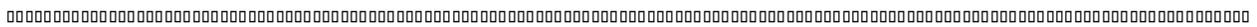
Which was all very well in theory, but when the actual moment came on the flight deck, his stomach churned. It wasn’t until he was certain that the computer expert was regarding him without suspicion and resentment—or at least with no more than the usual degree of suspicion and resentment—that he was able to relax.

Actually, Blake thought, massaging one shoulder reminiscently inside his shirt, Avon looked quite fit today. Very...alert. He couldn’t ask it, and he was half-glad and half-horrified when Cally did.

“You slept better last night, Avon?”

Blake held his breath.

“Passably. Why?”



One final effort: “Avon. Oh, damn you. If I could just believe you really—” ...and heroism whimpered and yielded.

“All right, then, all right,” he said huskily, his arms tightening around their limber burden as he sat up. “Have what you want, but—this time we’ll do it my way.”

It was indescribably erotic to peel layer after layer of cloth armor off Avon, revealing pale luminous skin and small nipples which hardened at his touch. Avon’s body was a sculptor’s dream of planes and curves and pure lines, a spare, economical work of art. To Blake’s eyes everything about it was pleasing: the supple limbs, the flat belly, the neat thatch of dark hair surrounding an elegantly proportioned cock. Blake felt the tenderness well up again, driving back his fierce arousal, and something close to awe at the way every inch of that smooth flesh responded to his lightest touch.

Meanwhile, an infant tiger was nuzzling and suckling at his neck, imperiously butting a sleek head against the hand Blake raised until Blake petted him as he wished. Below, curious fingers cupped and measured, sending electric shills up Blake’s spine.

Rapt, he held Avon’s face between his palms, looking into dazzled eyes which already seemed lost in passion. He bent to touch that mouth with his own.

Avon met him willingly with lips moist and parted, inviting entry. Entranced, eyes shut, Blake lost himself in the pleasure he was giving both of them, in the hungry response he was able to elicit. The power of it was overwhelming.

Pulling back for air, he smiled down at the sight of flushed skin and kiss-swollen lips. He whispered, “Shh. Just be still.”

Any fear he’d had, any discomfort over experiencing such intimacies with another man, had been banished last night. His hands knew what they wanted: to stroke the length of this tantalizing body that was so unexpectedly put at his mercy, to make Avon tremble for him, to lay his own ineradicable claim. His mouth followed, ragingly eager to discover all the different tastes

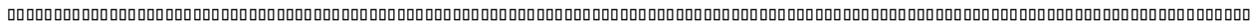
and textures of Avon, the salt of sweat, the smooth resilience of pale flesh, the prickle of chest hair. He worked his way down from throat to groin and back up again, meaning to tantalize, to draw out pleasure until the smaller body was stretched trembling-taut beneath him, breathless and aching for release. But as he lapped gently at a nipple he realized he’d badly miscalculated Avon’s powers of endurance. The first wracking shudders took him by surprise and he pulled back uncertainly to look.

What he saw stopped his breath. He’d known, intellectually, that Avon was beautiful since that first day on the *London*. But he had never seen him like this. At the moment of climax Avon was transformed, skin suffused and glowing, eyes shut, lips parted in rapture. In wondering joy. That face, usually so unreadable, was utterly open.

He whispered, “Blake.”

Blake’s heart gave a violent lurch and leaked out his fingertips. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he clawed the slighter body into his arms, pressing kiss after kiss to those half-open lips, across those trembling eyelids, longing to capture that beauty and hold it forever. As the spasms eased he regained enough volition to stroke carefully down the heaving sides, across the quivering thighs, his touch soothing as he alternated whispers and kisses. At last, spent and sated, Avon collapsed bonelessly in his arms.

They lay together a while after that. Blake thought the other might drift into normal sleep as he had the last time after orgasm. And he would have allowed it. But presently there was a sigh, then a stirring, then the touch of light, precise fingertips. Letting out a hiss of pleasure as they reached his groin, Blake released Avon and shifted to prop himself up, needing, as before, to *look*, to gaze fascinated as those clever hands fondled him with the same meticulous care they gave a computer circuitboard. They seemed to seek out his most sensitive places by instinct, wringing gasps of startled pleasure from him. And so he obeyed willingly when they urged him to change position.



Yes, this was a good vantage point, looking down into that haunting face still tinged with the glamor of orgasm. He murmured in delight as Avon parted his own legs, causing Blake to slide between, exquisitely responsive flesh against hardening flesh. And when Avon then drew his knees up almost to his chest, maneuvering so that Blake was kneeling between his thighs, the rebel merely accepted the new placement as he had the other, acquiescing without thought. It wasn't until hands were gripping and guiding him that he understood exactly what was going on.

"Avon, no." Recalling just how efficacious verbal commands had been before, he followed this one up physically, trapping Avon, holding him still. "No, Avon. Please. I don't know how. And you're not prepared and I don't want to hurt you—" Despite himself, the picture came to him as it had last night: Avon's body open to him, suppliant, shuddering in ecstasy as he entered. He imagined sinking himself into that fragile, forbidden portal, groaning with the effort to hold back, watching Avon's head begin to rock mindlessly from side to side on the mattress as Blake reached up into him, touching his deepest pleasure-places. Imagined thrusting into that pliant softness, so gently at first, and then harder as Avon rose greedily to meet him, finally spilling his seed in the secret recesses of Avon's body as they both sobbed in release. And Avon wanted it, was willing, even eager for this ultimate trespass. He would not only allow it, he was begging for it, desperate for Blake to take him...

"No."

Avon ignored this completely, and merely continued undisturbed about his business of trying to make the anatomical conjunction work. Blake wrestled with him, pulling him flat, grunting in surprise at the new flair of pleasure when sex once again bumped rigid sex, trapped between their straining bodies. Neutral territory. His mindless urge to grind himself against Avon proved to be exactly what was needed to distract them both from the contest.

Avon arched suddenly against him, mouth wet and open and seeking his blindly, and this time he gave in gladly, having no desire to deny Avon anything else. Friction did the rest. Minutes later something like sheet lightning hit him and he forced his own breath into Avon's lungs, crying out uncontrollably as he came.

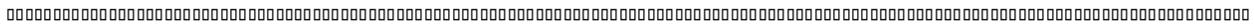
Afterwards they lay in gluttonous content, Blake cradling the smaller body, holding Avon, holding the moment. Gentle fingers strayed through his wet and disordered curls, carding out tangles, and he smiled at the lush sensation, and then smiled again at the way Avon kept doing it, giving the task his full if groggy attention, seemingly captivated.

"And how long have you been wanting to do that?" he said, his own voice blurred with pleasure. "And how long have I been wanting to do this," he traced the curve of Avon's lips which parted responsively, trying to take his finger in, "and never daring to even think about it?" He took another kiss from those molded lips, feeling quite comfortable soliloquizing. Avon, though showing no sign of comprehension, seemed to enjoy the sound of his voice as it was now, pitched low and velvety-rough with emotion. "Gods, I don't believe this. If anyone else knew you could be this damned sweet... You don't mind if I call you Kerr, do you? Under the circumstances it does seem rather appropriate. Feel free to call me Roj, or anything else you like..."

Suddenly, he *did* mind the soliloquy, minded it dreadfully. Pulling Avon's hands down from his hair he sank his fingers into Avon's upper arms and looked into those dazzled brown eyes, demanding that there be recognition, acknowledgment in them. Instead, dark lashes swept down at his expression. Making the achingly beautiful lines of Avon's face look so fragile, so young.

"Look at me, damn you! *Look.*" He shook Avon hard and then harder, but the only response was a slight quickening of breath and of the axillary pulse which beat beneath his fingers. When he eased the pressure Avon re-

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laxed and at once burrowed back into the hollow of his shoulder. All forgiven and forgotten. Blake was ashamed.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. That was wrong of me.” He stroked the reddened imprints of his fingers on the white skin. “It’s just...what in hell’s name am I going to do with you, Kerr? Tomorrow, when you start trying to swap insults with me on the flight deck, what am I going to do then? And what, god help us both, am I going to do tonight if you wake up *here*, like this?”

In the end, again, there was only one solution.

Avon—Kerr—seemed to be lapsing back into that semblance of ordinary sleep. Gently, apprehensive of truly waking him, Blake shook his shoulder and urged him out of bed.

“I would love,” he said, steering his stumbling but unprotesting partner to the bathroom, “to have you stay the night. But considering we’d both end up wearing our guts for garters, tomorrow, it’s just not practical.” Leading a freshly scrubbed and squeaky-clean tech back out he added, “And now, on with the bunny suit.”

Minutes later, Avon was encased in his second skin of leather, safe and snug. Presumably warm.

At the door, Blake paused to look at him.

“Go straight back and get some proper rest, hmm? No detours. And try to make sure none of the others see you, and try—” His voice failed in mid-sentence. “Just go now, Kerr.” He finished it with a kiss, because that seemed to be expected, and—as Avon went out the door—with a pat, because he just couldn’t help himself. There was no backward glance.

Well now, Blake thought, leaning against the doorway, it seems *your* problem is solved. But what about mine? Am I really capable of carrying on tomorrow as if all this was just a dream?

I expect, for both our sakes, I’d better be.

Whatever the future brought, this memory was safe. No one could take it from him.

He slept.

He was still in his cabin, drowsing softly and deeply, when the message came. He reached the flight deck at a run, but Jenna looked up and shook her head at him.

“We’ve lost it again,” she said, replacing the headphones she had been holding, one-handed, to her ear. “But it was Instareth. A distress call, I think.”

Blake cursed and picked up the headphones himself, hearing only the clash of interstellar static. “Orac. Get a fix on this signal and try to augment it.”

**Liberator* possesses equipment perfectly adequate for the purpose—*

“Just *do* it, Orac.” And, presently, through the hiss and crackle, Blake could distinguish a voice. He could make out only fragments of sentences at first, sometimes only single words, but from the start the import was grimly clear.

...scoutship Cantor...spacials above the planet Instareth. ...of the base there...due to a massive generator explosion. Damage is... We do not expect to find...but...to the surface anyway. The level of radiation... This warning is to...from the area. Stay away! ...repeats. This is the scoutship Cantor, in orbit one thousand spacials above the planet Instareth. We are reporting the total destruction of the base there...

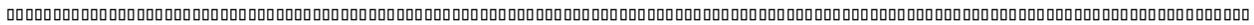
“Blake, is it a distress call?”

“No, it is a warning.” Above them, at Gan’s station, Avon had another set of headphones and was listening intently. Blake hadn’t even noticed him come in.

“There’s been a failure of the generators.” Blake gave the phones back to Jenna.

“A *massive* failure,” corrected Avon from above, still listening. “A runaway nuclear chain-reaction, resulting in the annihilation of the base.”

“The whole base?” gasped Jenna, turning to Blake. He nodded, feeling an ache begin at the base of his skull.



He was searching for a trace of the man he'd seen last night, for a hint of the warmth and tenderness that had lit Avon's face then. For any sign of compassion or grief.

There was none.

He could sense nothing at all of the vulnerability, the complaisance, the—humanity—of Kerr. The entire episode last night might indeed have been a dream, for all the evidence it had left. Avon was as steely and self-sufficient as ever, and looking at him now, Blake felt the picture of the sleep-drowned lover he'd held in his arms fade away. He could not keep Kerr in mind while watching Avon.

"Doesn't it mean anything to you, what happened back there?" He continued staring into that basilisk gaze, hoping against hope for some reaction.

"Of course it means something. Nearly seventy hours of work blown up in a second. Scattered to Instareth's winds by what may very well have been your zealot friends' impatience."

Slowly, Blake said, "You mean that. You really couldn't care less about what becomes of those people, as long as you are safe."

Avon stared back at him. "Oh, you've grasped that, have you? Very good. After only a year and a half of constant repetition."

Two different people, two separate beings. And nothing was as real as the reality before him, which meant that the other—the gentle one—had been an illusion.

He'd remember that. That was important.

Clenching his teeth on something like pain, he turned to Cally. "Get an estimate from the medical computers about what equipment we're likely to need. And run a check of the protective gear; we'll need suits for possible survivors as well as ourselves."

She nodded. Then, as she turned to go, hesitated. "I am afraid—the protection will come too late."

Looking into her clear, regretful eyes, Blake felt mourning uncoil in his stomach. Cally's own group on Saurian Major had died

for lack of protection the *Liberator* might have given—if it had not been over before they arrived. "If we had only been there when this happened—"

"—we'd have been dead, too," the biting voice cut in, "all of us that were on the ground. Or did you plan on halting the firestorm with a wave of your hand?"

The firestorm inside Blake reached flashpoint. "Avon enough!" he thundered, aware that he was looming over the technician as if his three inches advantage were three feet. Avon never backed away on such occasions; if anything he seemed to bask in them, but this time after several seconds of defiance, he dropped his eyes.

Blake held onto the anger, knowing it was the only power he had over Avon at such a moment. He kept it hot as Avon turned away and went to his post; and only when the man was scrutinizing detector readings, making every move a studied insult, did he let it go.

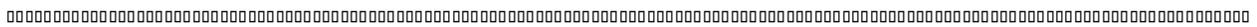
Long, weary hours later, he sat staring dully at the reports of the last scans they'd made before leaving Instareth. They did not paint a pretty picture.

There had been no survivors. A blackened crater, Avon had said, but in reality it had been a window into hell, a fused and molten hell still steaming in the noxious energy of its own destruction. The scoutship, whose crew had stood unprotected in that energy under the clouded stars, had left before *Liberator's* arrival, still broadcasting its message of despair.

So there had been nothing to do after all. No magic to save Avalon's group. Mourning was a familiar feeling to Blake, but tonight he seemed to be grieving for something else besides his dead comrades. Some other...loss...which made him both morose and restive.

He didn't want to be with anyone. The thought of company was abhorrent. But he didn't want to be alone, either.

When the door chimed, his breath caught



of his and rested it against his own cheek. Then, eyes shut, he began to softly lick at each finger.

Blake lost his train of thought.

“You’re not remotely interested, are you?”

Kerr inserted the tip of one finger in his mouth and tasted it meditatively, swirling his tongue around it.

“I take it, then,” —Blake could hear the growing strain in his own voice— “that I have your unconditional approval and support, no matter what my decision?”

Kerr removed the finger, dabbled it and its fellows in the viscous whiteness on Blake’s belly, and conveyed them back to his mouth, this time sucking hard enough to exert pressure.

“Even,” said Blake hoarsely, utterly fascinated, “if it means tying you up, donating your share of the treasure room to the Cause, and selling you to the Amagons?”

Having cleaned the hand thoroughly, Kerr placed a kiss in the palm, then folded it and nipped the loose skin on the back of a knuckle with sharp teeth, hard enough to make Blake start. Tiring of this, he tucked it under his arm and crawled up Blake like one of the smaller jungle cats, searching for some new section of anatomy to devour. Reaching Blake’s face, he bent his head in a soft lingering kiss, tongue tracing the contour of closed lips and then pressing gently as they parted, to probe between the barrier of teeth.

There was, thought Blake hazily, eyes losing focus, only one possible thing to do.

He did it.

They both enjoyed it very much.

The double life had begun.

Whatever qualms of conscience Blake had originally had died quietly that night in Kerr’s arms. Kerr needed him—Orac had said it. And he needed Kerr, needed him as much as he’d once needed a crew from Vargas. Once he had fully realized that, there was little else to be said. The difficulties would just have to be got round somehow.

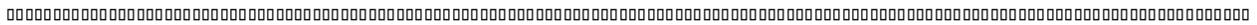
Once arranged it was as simple as this: he spent his working hours fighting with Avon on the flight deck and his leisure hours sleeping with Kerr in his cabin. Locked in combat, locked in passion, all the livelong day.

Not passion. By the end of the second week he could no longer cloak the feeling in words like ‘protectiveness’ or ‘affection’ or even ‘desire.’ However this had started, in whatever vein of pity or confusion or lust it had begun, it was different now. This was *love* and about as real as it was ever likely to get for him. What that implied he did not care to think about, but the feeling, the raw emotion, was unmistakable. This rush of tenderness and intoxication was what he’d seen in other people when they talked about ‘being in love.’ He’d looked on then in mild bewilderment, sometimes stifling impatience or jealousy, but now he could step back and, with wary awe, regard the symptoms of it in himself.

It was amazing what Avon could do to him these days. His heart quickened at Avon’s footsteps, his body tensed and his attention fixed immediately at the sound of Avon’s voice. The first sight of him on any given day always caused a pleasurable jolt to Blake’s stomach, which did not seem to diminish as time went on, but rather grew stronger. In between seeing him, Blake often convinced himself that Avon was not, could not be, as beautiful as he’d imagined. Each rediscovery was exquisite torment.

He found a new hobby in just watching the man. Watching that sleek brown head bent over some electronic gadget or other as talented finger worked magic on insensible circuitry. Blake would fix his eyes on one part of the compact body, the tender nape of the neck, perhaps, or the faint blue shadow in the hollow of a temple, and think, tonight my lips will be there; you’ll feel my breath on your skin and you’ll shiver. It was a dangerous game, he knew, but the wicked pleasure was worth it.

Other times he could imagine that it was Kerr bent over the components, Kerr who might at any moment raise his head and smile a small



Avon even as he cherished Kerr? He hated to believe that of himself. But otherwise why should it distract him so? Why should it...excite him? Certainly, he had no need of proud, unreachable Avon now. In the blithe and irrepressible spirit that was Kerr he found more delight and satisfaction that with any other bed-partner in his life.

What more could anyone want? Kerr was interested only in bringing joy to both of them. He accepted anything Blake did without qualm, and seemed to take his greatest pleasure in pleasing Blake. As time went on, he seemed more concerned with Blake's responses than with his own. Perhaps most meaningful of all, he adjusted himself to Blake's moods and needs as if in telepathic rapport.

And because of that the fabric of Blake's life was changing. The Federation was no less persistent, the search for Star One no less frustrating. But at the end of each day was a haven of warmth and peace where he could sink into receptive arms and drink comfort until he was full. And that...made all the difference in the worlds.

The night after attempting to weave an alliance between two warring revolutionary cells on Voltara—twenty two hours of walking-on-eggshells negotiations which ended in abysmal failure—he'd stumbled into his room exhausted, falling onto the bed wearing everything but his boots. He roused to fuzzy awareness some indeterminable time later by the mattress sinking as it took weight.

"Kerr," he slurred, eyes lidding shut again even as he stretched out a gathering arm. "I'm sorry. Too tired t' even sleep properly..." But the explanation was not needed; already he himself was being clasped in a comforting, comfortable embrace. He relaxed into the undemanding arms with a sigh of gratitude and slept sound and warm—to awaken the next morning alone. That settled once and for all the question of whether Kerr was able to 'wake' himself and do whatever else was necessary to keep them safe. The thought brought a slow smile to

Blake's lips and he had trouble keeping himself from turning it on Avon the next day and thanking him for his consideration.

Orac had said that in a fugue state Avon became almost exclusively right-brained, leaving left-hemisphere abilities such as deductive logic, formal operations, and linguistic skills far behind. What remained was motor memory, intuition, and a sensitivity to affect—emotion—that was almost preternatural. Kerr did not understand words but it was impossible to lie to him. Focusing only on tone and stance, he felt the emotion under the strings of phonemes and responded to it. Though he did not always retain what he learned, he was in many ways extraordinarily competent, gifted. A classic example of what had once been called an 'idiot savant.'

Sometimes Blake wondered just how far that competence extended. There was the day the door chimed while he was fiddling unsuccessfully with the intercom, which had broken.

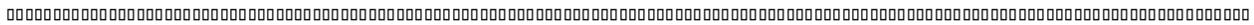
"I didn't realize it was this late," he said, after the traditional greeting had been exchanged. The routine never altered; Kerr walked up and laid his head on Blake's shoulder, no other parts of their bodies touching. It had a vaguely mystical quality, returning to haunt Blake at odd moments.

"Make yourself comfortable. I'll be right back." Tossing the probe onto the desk in disgust, he strode to the bathroom. He emerged, minutes later, to find Kerr lying peacefully with closed eyes on the bed—and the intercom fixed.

"Did you do that?" He bent over the recumbent form trying to pierce through the wall of those long lashes. "My inter—" He was cut off as strong slender hands caught two fistfuls of his robe and pulled him down.

After some indeterminate time he removed his tongue from Kerr's mouth and finished the question, more out of stubbornness than anything else. "My intercom. Did you mend that?"

But Blake had nothing on out-stubborn Kerr. Those slender fingers got hold of one end of the tie to Blake's robe and pulled as



was now trembling all over, held rigid with horror and dismay. Dimly, through his own torment, Blake felt sympathy for him: Kerr would hate nothing so much as seeing his lover in pain, and just at the moment there was nothing either of them could *do* about it. A sudden withdrawal would be as bad as the entry. They were trapped, welded together in a cycle of agony.

Desperately, Blake willed himself to relax, to go with the pain, calling on techniques developed long ago, during his first bout of interrogations. And, slowly, sinew by sinew, he succeeded. The benefits were twofold; first, it went some way toward easing the immediate torture, and second, without the stimulation of vise-like confinement, Kerr’s arousal plummeted. The white heat in Blake’s gut abated suddenly as Kerr’s erection collapsed inside him, and gradually, carefully, he was able to work them free of the predicament he’d got them into, easing Kerr out and away.

He did it without much more than numb and automatic cooperation from his partner. Kerr seemed not merely dismayed but soul sick, and he clearly no longer trusted himself to take any definitive action. When they were finally lying side by side again, Blake shivering in the sudden chill of sweat that had broken out on his body, he was struck by the reproach radiating from the smaller body. Reproach and something like bitterness. Something Blake had never sensed before from this quarter.

It was his own fault, he had engineered this and he should have anticipated the result. He gathered Kerr to him, helplessly, the lingering physical pain dwarfed in comparison to the haunted look on Kerr’s face and the unprecedented stiffness and resistance in Kerr’s body. Kerr was angry with him, hurt and angry and confused, and he had no way to explain.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, and then said it again, stroking over the smoothly muscled back as much for his own comfort as Kerr’s. And, eventually, the taut resistance began to fade and Kerr’s arms slipped around him, his

body gentling, resettling to lie against Blake’s and offer what consolation he could. He pressed his forehead to Blake’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry.” One last time. There was nothing sexual in the touching now; it was merely tenderness and comfort as the two of them tried to soothe each other into sleep. It was fortunate, thought Blake, as a wave of weariness swept over him, that desire had left them both at once. He could lie here and take what he needed, without guilt.

Kerr, as always, forgave him. But this time he did not forget. Their parting kiss that night was lingering and tinged with sadness. And nothing, Blake knew, would induce his lover to try that particular act of love again.

After that, the cedarwood lotion stayed in the bedside drawer, and Kerr’s attempts to drag Blake on top of him became almost perfunctory. Blake, relieved did not question too closely what connection had been made or whether Kerr could really extrapolate from another’s experience to his own. What he did know was that Kerr was unlikely to be bothered by anxiety or recrimination, because Kerr lived entirely in the present. Like a primitive hunter-gatherer—or a small child—he focused his energies on the moment. Blake grimaced at the unwanted intrusion as he finished the thought.

Why did such unsettling phrases spring up now, when his original doubts and fears had finally faded? When Kerr had been integrated into his life at the most fundamental level, meshing with the threads of Blake’s very existence? There was no going back at this point, and bar Avon discovering them, no reason to worry about the future. Kerr needed him and he...

Needed Kerr. In a way that would have been terrifying if he had not learned to trust so completely.

In fact, he needed Kerr badly at this moment, Blake thought, shifting impatiently on his bed. The wall chronometer was four fifths blue, shading to deep amethyst, a Spaceworlder message he had long ago learned to interpret. Once Avon had set the chronos to an optimal 25-

hour cycle, all the crew had become proficient at the conversion to ship's time.

And this clock was telling Blake that Kerr was late. Over an hour so. Tomorrow they would be skirting the edges of a Federation system in a new test of Avon's augmented detector shields; it wasn't a day for sleeping in. And where *was* Kerr anyway?

Blake frowned at the twilit chrono and bit at his finger while he mused. When he found himself brushing his tongue back and forth over the joint he decided it had been long enough. With a sharp sound of impatience, he stood.

Kerr, Blake knew, paid attention to neither Spaceworld chronometers nor Terran watches; he lived by his own internal clock. Tonight something had obviously happened to throw that clock off, and Blake was tired of waiting. He needed Kerr *now*.

Thrusting his arms into the sleeves of a robe, he yanked the belt in tightly and stepped out of his cabin. More discreet to dress fully, of course, but he didn't plan to be wandering the corridors for long. In fact, having woken Kerr, he just might stay with him in Avon's cabin.

The thought brought an involuntary grin as he turned the corner—and a rush of blood to his groin. He had not been back, to the place where it all had started, since that first time when he had been seduced. Kerr came to his own room every night like an incubus or a dream and departed alone every morning, in an arrangement satisfactory to both of them. Just now, though, the thought of doing it there, in Avon's cabin, in Avon's bed...held appeal. It had the same spice of forbidden pleasure as looking at the soft leather over Avon's crotch by day, letting his eyes linger importunately over the sweet line of inner thigh when he knew Avon wouldn't catch him. Yes, definite appeal. He and Kerr would have to be very careful, of course—the inherent danger was great. But the picture of it, of exchanging moist clinging kisses in the sanctity of Avon's spartan quarters, of lowering Kerr onto that narrow bed and letting him come all over Avon's sheets, was too exciting to be

easily put aside.

And perhaps, though the evidence was erased by morning, Avon would wake up and be stirred carnally without knowing why. An indefinable electricity left in the air, a spot or two of dampness on the coverlet, which when brushed yielded the sudden perfume of musk and male sex. Avon might ponder that, trying to connect it with the languor of his body, lying all the while in the very place where Blake had caressed that body into ecstasy the night before...

Blake's thought pulled up short in shock. This was madness. Did he *want* Avon to find out? Of course there would be no clumsily concealed evidence as grist left for the ice-cold mill of Avon's intellect. The idea was just as mad as standing here outside Avon's door, with the chill of the metal floor seeping into his bare feet, and a hard-on threatening to burst through his robe.

Angry with himself, he fumbled for the keypad, glancing uneasily over one shoulder. He side-stepped into the room quickly, still looking out as the door slid open. As it began to slide shut, he turned gratefully to smile at—

Avon.

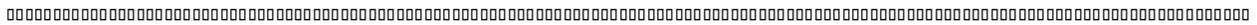
Shock robbed his senses, made him lightheaded. Avon. Still wearing the same chaste gray outfit he'd worn all day, he was sitting at his desk with a gutted detector shield before him. Astonishment and disbelief held him as frozen as Blake, his face curiously open in its blank disconcertion.

And that worked in Blake's favor, gave him the seconds he needed to mentally scramble for an explanation, to think of something—anything—to say.

What he lit on finally was that the best defense was a good offense. He therefore made his voice as offensive as possible and his face as pointlessly belligerent.

"I'd been wondering where that had got to." Flat and antagonistic, he jerked his head toward the disassembled device. As he'd hoped, Avon's eyes dropped to it, then raised, along with his hackles.

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“I’m making some minor adjustments. It will be ready when we need it—”

“It had better be.” He’d succeeded in his bid to distract, shifting Avon’s attention from his own astonishing entrance and extraordinary state of undress to his current obnoxiousness.

“I said it *will* be, Blake.” Muscles stood out in Avon’s jaw. Blake, still giddy, watched him without really seeing, tiny details of Avon’s appearance impressing themselves raw onto his memory, to be taken out and given meaning later. Avon’s hair needed cutting. The gentle waves curled over his forehead to brush the skin just above his eyebrows. The eyes themselves were smudged with shadow, and just now beginning to narrow with anger.

“All right, Avon,” sharply. “Be sure that it is, and that it’s in working order. Minor adjustments are a luxury we can’t afford if it means a delay.”

“Why the sudden rush? What makes this system so special?” Slitted eyes added, *What are you up to now?*

Relief eased the fist clenching Blake’s gut. Avon’s own ceaseless suspicions were leading him astray.

You’ll never know just what I’m ‘up to’ right now, he thought, gaze fixed incongruously on a wisp of Avon’s hair that was anchored damply out of place. There was a loose thread in the embroidery of the high collar.

“Routine reconnaissance. That’s all,” he said in what he hoped were suitably unconvincing tones. It was time to leave. He’d recovered a difficult situation, but to stay longer would be pushing his luck. Somehow, though, he couldn’t make himself turn, couldn’t wrest himself from mindlessly cataloguing Avon’s every eyelash, every pore. He was suddenly struck by the sensation of his own nakedness under the robe, by the gentle airflow up his legs, the graze of cotton on his cock. Still lightheaded, under Avon’s brooding gaze, he felt the surreal indifference one does in dreams, as if nothing that befell here would matter. As if he were standing outside himself, asking strangely, ‘What would happen

if—’

Madness. Taking one last picture with him—Avon’s hand, oddly elegant among the secret inner workings of the shield—he swiveled to the door.

His indecision had given Avon sufficient time for a parting shot. “By the way, it *is* customary to knock, Blake.”

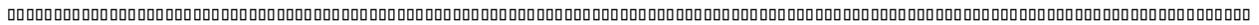
“Next time, lock your door.” And without waiting to hear Avon’s acid analysis about the possibility of there being a ‘next time,’ he was out and away.

The whole thing had been a scene out of a nightmare, out of Blake’s own particular and individual nightmare. On the flight deck the next day, long after Avon’s improved gadget had passed its test, he sat alone and let his mind worry at it as his teeth worried at a thumbnail. Had he really stood there, pulse hammering and cock swelling under the harsh artificial light of Avon’s cabin, thinking it didn’t matter?

It was the physical reaction which continued to nag at him like an aching tooth, even now when it was clear that he and Kerr were not discovered. Why had his arousal not been quenched in the ice-water of Avon’s shocked regard? It wasn’t Avon he cared for, wasn’t Avon he wanted to bed. So why the thin chills of excitement shivering through his nervousness, last night, why was the memory of chestnut eyes—alert and frighteningly cognizant—etched into his brain with obsessive precision?

One thing was certain. From now on he waited in his own cabin. Avon should be tired this evening; by his own admission he had scarcely slept the night before, but Blake was taking no chances. Kerr would have to come to him.

The deserted flight deck bore no resemblance to the turbulent place it had been a few hours ago. Blake, trying to let go of the tension which gripped him, found it restful. Behind him dawn-colored panels shone rose and green; in front, Zen was a rich umber lit by an occasional flicker of gold. The room, not built for human



comfort or aesthetics, was both spacious and surprisingly beautiful. Blake had finally managed to relax and lose himself in the rainbow radiance of the systems monitors when a foot-step made him turn.

Avon stood in the white hexagon of doorway. Blake straightened automatically, feeling impatience and a familiar tightening of stomach muscles. He'd taken Jenna's watch after his own precisely because he's wanted to be alone to wind down. Besides, if Avon was planning to spend another night wakeful...

Kerr.

How he knew he could not have explained, but even before he saw the face he was certain. The slight tilt of head, the languorous ease of body, the untroubled rise and fall of chest beneath the black silk shirt...all said 'Kerr' to him.

Nonplused, he stood and struggled to put his mind in gear. A bubble of irritation was rising in him, as much at Avon's unaccommodating behavior last night as at this new difficulty, and he remained still, unyielding, as Kerr laid a damp head on his shoulder. Nor did he move when arms slipped slowly, almost tentatively, around him.

"You gave me a hell of a scare," he said to the back of Kerr's neck, which, rather touchingly, was not yet dry. Avon had showered and gone straight to bed, then—and Kerr had wasted no time in coming after what he wanted.

By way of rejoinder, Kerr leaned farther into the one-sided embrace, giving Blake a little of his weight. And Blake thought, No, *you* didn't, did you? *He* did, and you were probably just as miserable as I was the whole time. We are both at the mercy of his whims.

Kerr made a soft sound as Blake's arms came up to cradle him, everything right with his world once more. He was so dependent on Blake for his happiness, so full of need. Blake shook his head, feeling his vexation dissolving. It was good to hold and be held like this, so easy, so uncomplicated.

Kerr's hands slithered down to his but-

tocks.

Blake came out of *that* reverie in record time, tingling with alarm as he cast a hunted look up at the doorways. He and Avon hugging on the flight deck could possibly, through some gymnastic stretch of the imagination, be explained. *This* could not.

"Enough, Kerr." He reached behind to detach the hands and forced Kerr lightly away. "We're both going to have to wait."

And do *what*? On occasion, Kerr might amuse himself for a few minutes tinkering with familiar machinery, but for the most part the outside world did not exist for him. The prospect of trying to keep him decorously entertained for nearly two hours was staggering.

And Kerr intended to have none of it anyway. Catlike, he would perform only when *he* wanted to, and he refused even to consider the circuit board Blake put under his nose. He pushed it away without looking at it and closed in on Blake again.

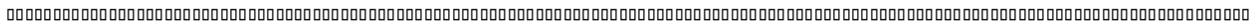
"No, Kerr." Blake knew he was radiating discouragement and disapproval. Kerr, however, apparently chose to take this to mean he just wanted convincing. And by now Kerr was an expert at convincing Blake.

He came docilely enough when Blake led him to his station—to Avon's station. But he wouldn't look at that, either. Instead, he leaned against Blake and let Blake look at it. And Blake, enervated by the last twenty hours and grateful of any respite, let him rest there, ready to spring away at the sound of footsteps behind him.

He should have known better.

In the hope that one of them might catch Kerr's capricious interest, he began calling up systems check after check, but every time his hands were occupied Kerr found something new to do. He ran a thumbnail down Blake's inner thigh. He let the side of one hand brush Blake's lower abdomen. When Blake turned to look at the doorway directly behind them, he swabbed the back of Blake's ear with his tongue. Each time returning to obedient stillness when Blake rounded on him.

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It might not have been so disturbing except that Blake was in a moderately precarious position to start with. The smell of freshly washed Kerr, the warmth plastered indiscriminately along his flank, the brush of fine, light hair on his cheek, all were evoking conditioned responses from him. And he'd been aching since last night—in the aftermath of that debacle he hadn't had the heart to masturbate.

Nor had he been able to sleep. It had taken a long time to wind down from the experience, and, at last, turning to what had been his usual panacea before Kerr, he had buried himself in work. Now, he fought the stimulation, and fought the temptation to relax, to let Kerr's warmth soak in and ease tired muscles.

Kerr would have to be wearing his black lounging outfit, of course. No cold, unyielding leather tonight, but raw silk which caught Blake's finger fast whenever he tried to push an encroaching hand away. It tempted Blake to stroke the length of that enticing body, to move the whisper-thin fabric over the bareness of Kerr underneath. In spite of himself he wondered how it would feel to tease each nipple erect through the fragile barrier, rubbing the material in a circle around it, then stepping back to admire the effect. Kerr would hold still for that.

And, he added mentally to the companion who was leaning more and more heavily on him every minute, you must have dressed yourself, because you aren't wearing a thing under it, are you? The swell clearly visible between Kerr's legs attested to that. Bemused, he daydreamt about stroking Kerr firm and then—

—then *what*? He'd have them on the flight deck couch next. And that was sheer insanity, unless he really did want to be found out. Resolutely, he took Kerr's hand, which was at this moment slyly investigating the clasp of his trousers, curled it firmly into a ball, and held it that way. Simultaneously, he shifted Kerr's weight away from him to rest on the back of the flight chair.

He'd expected Kerr to be grieved, possibly even to look piteous and accusatory. But

such manipulation was far beyond Kerr's scope. Direct action—what Avon had once told Blake *he* was good at—was the only way he knew. And Blake had forgotten how strong the man was, forgotten for an instant that beneath that enticing silk outfit were the sinews of a lean and hungry predator. Quite suddenly he found himself pinned against Zen, balance compromised, mouth covered in a devouring kiss.

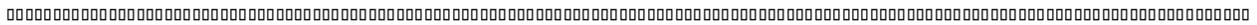
Exasperation—and embarrassment, for Zen seemed to count as a spectator here—put the necessary steel in his will to resort to sheer strength. A surge and jerk later he had Kerr's arms securely pinioned from behind, with Kerr's body safely turned away from him. At which point that body simply went completely and utterly limp in a gambit that had worked very well once before...

It was the last straw. Blake let go so as not to dislocate both Kerr's shoulders, hauled Kerr back up almost before his knees could hit the ground, and had him bent forward over the flight deck couch before either of them knew what was happening. It wasn't until his free hand was raised, flattened, ready to make stinging contact with silk-encased buttocks, that he came back to himself.

What was he *doing*? Kerr wasn't a child. But Blake realized that that was exactly how the last twenty minutes had played out, as if he were with a recalcitrant two-year-old, a little hellion bent on mischief and utterly intractable. The impulse to get in a couple of good whacks now, and save the regrets for later, was strong. Stronger, however, was the prickling uneasiness which rose at the vision of doing such a thing, and the sudden rush of calm which swept over him like a cool breeze.

He'd been the one in the wrong here, to expect things of Kerr which were beyond Kerr's ken. He'd accepted the joy and contentment this liaison had brought him; now he had to accept the occasional frustration. If he meant to love Kerr he would have to be the one to adapt.

Gentling the grip on that silk-clad shoulder, he lifted the unresisting body to an upright



The feeling started liquid heat seething in Blake’s groin. When he moved away and down, Kerr made a faint sound of protest, reaching with his limited mobility and catching only a handful of disordered curls. But he quietened when Blake made an *o* of his lips and sucked him smoothly, sweetly in.

Just doing this was a ferocious pleasure: Kerr soft around his finger, hard inside his mouth. He broke off to nibble at the flushed, heated testicles, compressing them with his lips, trying to stave off the final moment. But though Kerr was sighing and submitting, running his fingernails along Blake’s scalp, soon he began to thrust forward helplessly against Blake’s face.

Mischievous, Blake pretended to ponder the question for a time, depositing tiny dry kisses on whatever flesh was nearest, driving Kerr nearly frantic by degrees. When at last Blake relented and caught the blindly seeking cock, the grip on his hair tightened almost painfully, easing quickly as if Kerr had just then remembered his own strength.

The thought filled Blake with stinging gratification and pride as he proceeded to torment Kerr, slowly, to orgasm. All that lean power held hostage to love. And presently he sucked hard, *hard*, keeping it up until Kerr’s cries came broken, until Kerr fought the fabric which restricted him, trying uselessly to get free. Until Kerr struggled and arched his back and jerked in Blake’s mouth and came.

Blake crouched up to watch the last of it, as Kerr finished, knees jerking, loving as always the rapture that lit those carven features from within, beatific, transfiguring. As if orgasm were not earthy pleasure but some mystery beyond definition.

Afterwards, as the glow gradually faded, he looked simply beautiful and lazy and very, very much self-satisfied. When Blake released him he sat up, neatly and deliberately shed the shirt, and moved forward to rub his cheek against Blake’s chest. As if to say, *now* aren’t you glad you listened to me?

“Wanton and *smug*,” muttered Blake

into the ruffled sea of hair. But he *was* glad; he felt irresponsible and unfettered and *young*. Like a child eating cake before supper, and scattering the crumbs, laughing. Kerr filled him with life and joy and a passion that took his breath away.

And then Kerr was moving, leisurely but precise, not kissing but rubbing his face on Blake’s belly. And Blake was speaking to him softly and fiercely and it was hot and sweet and satisfying all night.

He woke briefly when Kerr left, and wrapped himself in bedclothes against the chill.

“...Garth, not Goth, Blake. The star charts and Orac’s information are quite specific.”

“And quite old, Avon. By all accounts it’s been nearly a hundred years since anyone from outside has visited this system. The early explorers weren’t always particular about recording names in primitive languages; there are dozens of examples of their mistakes. Don’t you think there’s a chance that this could be one?”

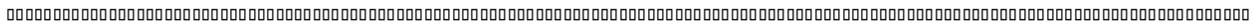
“What I think is that you’re grasping at straws.” Self-possessed and immaculate, Avon paced the few feet between Zen and his station. Jenna, Vila, and Cally looked on from the couch, while Blake stood before the main screen, arms folded across his chest. He was not about to be dissuaded on this, not by anyone, especially not by Avon. It was Avon who’d taken Kerr away last night. But for him, they could have lain close and warmed each other until morning.

“I think,” Avon was continuing, now, “that you are so eager to find what you want that you are losing your sense of reality—modest as it is under the best of circumstances. You’re seeing mirages in the desert, and you’re dragging the rest of us with you while you chase them.”

Jenna stirred, half turning her head over her shoulder. “Avon, does it really matter? If it’s not the right planet, it’s not the right planet. We’ve made mistakes before.”

“Oh, *we* have—?”

“*I* have, Avon.” Blake was flat, seeing



shaking his head speechlessly.

“Why the hell did you jump on me like that? I *know*,” —following Avon’s gaze to the blistered rock behind him. “But a simple ‘duck’ might have sufficed.”

“And it might not. I hesitated to take any risks with your sacred life—”

“—and it probably was just too good a chance to pass up.”

“Probably.” Avon glanced around, but Blake’s Garthian escort group had scattered. Keeping well to one side he swung the door of the shrine a little farther open with the tip of his blaster.

“A mini laser cannon. Rusty but obviously still functioning—and set to activate when the door opens. Small wonder no one can look the Great God in the face.”

Blake was looking back over the mountain path. “I’m still not satisfied that they don’t have any information—”

“Oh, come on, Blake. Don’t be more stupid than you can help. They’ve seen that you’re human enough to get knocked flat, and I’ve just taken a potshot at their God. How much information do you think they’re going to give a couple of apostate pretenders?”

Blake put a skinned knuckle to his lips and sucked it reflectively. “I gave them my teleport bracelet,” he pointed out, making it not quite an accusation.

Avon simply gave him a patient look and pushed up a silver sleeve to reveal two bracelets. He snapped one off with a flick of his wrist and proffered it.

“Nice,” said Blake dryly. “Taking lessons from Vila, are you? Lift anything else?”

“I brought it down with me from the ship.” At Blake’s expression, he added, “A standard precaution.” Before Blake could ask ‘since when?’, the other man had put his lips to his bracelet. “Vila, teleport now.”

Vila goggled openly at the sight of Blake. “What’s *that* get-up supposed to be?”

“It has finally happened, Vila. Our fear-

less leader is no longer merely a saint. He has transcended into his true semi-divine status.”

Vila mulled that over. “Why is it,” he said to Blake in tones of compassionate comradeship, “that when *he* gets to be a god it’s all prophecies and pretty women, and when you do it’s all muck and bother?”

“One of those small mysteries which make life so intriguing,” said Avon. “The muck can be washed off, at least. As the delicate aroma of camel is another story, I suggest we hold your next prayer service in the open air.”

Blake vanquished the robes at last and threw them across the room, panting. “I’m considering re-instituting the practice of human sacrifice,” he said meaningfully, and then, under Avon’s eye, he grinned. “Avon. I don’t recall whether I said thank you before.”

“You did not. As usual, you took it as your divine right to be rescued.” But as he returned his bracelet to the rack, he cocked an inquisitive eyebrow. Blake realized that he himself was smiling at Avon without the edge of tension which usually accompanied his gratitude. Usually thanking Avon meant conceding a point, incurring a debt. But just now all he felt was affection and appreciation. He’d forgotten how good it could be to just *be* with Avon, during the rare interludes when the two of them were not jostling for position. The rare moments when they were in tune.

Avon, none the wiser for Blake’s continued beaming, raised a shoulder and went his way. But Blake stared after him, grin slowly fading. The good feeling was gone now, and in its place a coldness, a sense of dread. Of impending doom, even.

What could be so terrible? Nothing had happened. If anything, today had proved that they could still work together, perhaps better than ever before.

But his stomach was ice. He did not want to question why, to examine it. He did not want to *think* at all.

He had no choice.

Advising Vila he would be unavailable

until his next watch, he made for his cabin. The maelstrom was already whistling in his ears as he stepped through the door. Once inside, it hit him.

When the door chimed, he was sitting on the edge of his bed, elbows resting on his knees, hands dangling uselessly between. He couldn't stir as he watched it slide open, any more than he'd been able to stir since he'd first lowered himself down here hours ago. Instead, he watched neat black boots move until they were directly in front of him. Then he looked up at Kerr.

It had been a while since he'd taken time to fully appreciate the heavy-eyed beauty, the unabashed sensuality, the sweetness he now saw so clearly. Or at least that was how it suddenly felt. He'd forgotten to be grateful, to savor, and now...

Kerr, adjusting to this new greeting position, knelt on one knee between Blake's splayed legs and leaned his head against Blake's arm. He sighed. Without haste, Blake curled his hand to work fingers into downy hair.

He'd thought they would make love, thought that that would be important. It wasn't. He felt no sexual response at all, only the unbearable tenderness which had terrified him at the start.

And rightly so.

Blake slid off the bed to kneel, himself, drawing Kerr into the protective valley of legs, encompassing him with shielding arms, holding Kerr against his heart. And then he simply held on, as if he could save them both, as if he could stop what was about to happen, if he could only stay like that forever.

Avon was a dark silhouette at the rest room table, his back to the door. In the doorway, Blake traced with his eyes the sleek line of bent head, the brown hair nearly touching the discreetly high collar, the studious set of shoulder.

And felt nothing.

That wasn't right; surely there should be

grief or anger or trepidation, some visceral reaction, some sense at least of regret at an unpleasant task to be done.

Nothing.

He was only very tired.

"Avon." He stopped a few paces away, thinking for a moment with a kind of hushed delirium that Avon was not going to respond to him, was not going to turn around. And then Blake would move forward and find him asleep, and would leave him there, peaceful on the cheoplastic table, and none of this would have happened.

Avon turned. He'd simply been absorbed in his perspex readout. "Yes?"

There were dark circles under the dark eyes. No, neither of them had got any sleep last night. Did Avon even realize that much?

"I want you to come with me, please." Vitality enough to form the words appeared out of nowhere. He would be able to say whatever needed to be said. "I'm afraid it's important."

"What's gone wrong?" —sharply.

"Noth—" Blake caught himself and gazed into the dull gloss of the table, almost smiling. Oh, there was irony for you.

Avon was staring at him, lost as he was in the contemplation of bits of alien furniture. "Avon, I need to speak to you now, in private. Please come with me."

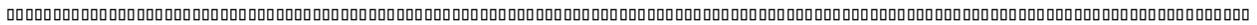
And Avon weighed the printout in his hand, then tossed it aside resignedly, and followed.

The vial of Lethe was on his desk, an island in a sea of clear space. Blake could not detect any change in Avon's expression when the brown eyes rested on it, and when they lifted to his they were unconcerned, unspeculative.

Avon showed only a composed and mild curiosity as he glanced around the room—that of a man surveying a room he'd never seen before.

With that, in that instant, emotion returned to Blake. Muted but entirely recognizable, a hurricane outside the door. And it was pain, an ache that went deeper than bone or

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muscle, into the very center of himself. Words were suddenly easy; there were going to be a lot of words before this was done.

“Do you recognize anything?” he said, driving the hurt in deeper.

Avon made a show of looking around, tilting his head to eye each corner. “Should I?”

Oh, the walls were very high today. But Blake had the battering ram. After so many weeks of lies he would now speak nothing but the absolute truth.

He said, “Yes.”

Avon waited for the follow-up, first patient, then impatient. He made a gesture of turning to the door. “Blake, if you brought me here just to ask me about your interior decoration...”

“You really don’t know, do you?” Blake looked away and spoke quietly, hearing for the first time the strain in his own voice. “Odd. There were times when I hoped that at some level we had at least your...tolerance, if not your cooperation. But that wasn’t the case, was it? You really don’t have the first idea of what I’m talking about.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, yes,” said Blake softly, and sighed. He thought for a minute carefully. Only the truth—which meant that Avon had a right to understand about the ache, about the cost of this.

He met Avon’s eyes again. “Before I explain, there is something you must know. I doubt you’ll believe it, but I have to say it anyway. Right now I’m...rather distraught. Offhand...I can’t remember anything that’s hurt quite as much as this, or—or that’s been quite so difficult to do. So if that vaunted resentment of yours is real, if you really do hate me as much as you say—well, you needn’t look any further for revenge. You’ve had it already, Avon. In full measure.”

“Am I to infer from that that you are off on another bout of martyrdom? Or are these merely the ravings of a noble mind destroyed by drugs?”

“Funny you should say that.” There was

no humor at all in Blake’s voice. He gestured toward the desk. “That isn’t mine, Avon; it’s yours.”

The composure was breached at last. Black fury welled up in the hooded eyes, a tidal wave of menace and repudiation.

“I still cannot fathom what you are talking about,” he said evenly, giving fair warning. No demon had ever looked more menacing.

Blake was unaffected. “I don’t know when I’ve ever heard you lie before,” he said dispassionately. “Not outright lie. And something important enough to lie about must be very important indeed.”

Avon bared his teeth briefly, back on balance again and ready to rejoin the dance. “Well now, we can’t all have your sterling character, can we? But disregarding that for the moment, I’m curious as to why you insist the vial is mine.”

“Because I got it from your room, of course,” said Blake quietly. “Last night.”

There was no mockery in the dark eyes now, only a killing light. “You broke into my quarters to—”

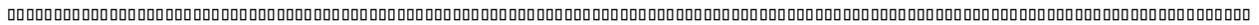
“Of course I didn’t. Even you know me better than that. I was let in—by you—as I was escorting you back from *here*.”

A pause. Then Avon rose. “I have been expecting this for some time...”

“Well, if it has happened, if I have gone mad, there’s no harm in hearing me out, is there? No danger. Sit down, Avon. All right, then, stand—”

Avon sat. Blake sighed. When he spoke again it was flatly and slowly. “You’re not going to like this. Avon, I know that you have been drugging yourself to sleep every night for the past month. I know this because I have *seen* it. Because, Avon, when you take Lethe, you sleep-walk. No, that’s not quite right; when you take Lethe you enter a fugue state. A state in which you do things you don’t remember afterward.”

Avon had settled into perfect stillness. Blake looked at him, then away, still speaking levelly. This was as bad as he’d imagined it, and



worse.

“In that state, you come here. And that is why I know about the drugs, that is why I have seen it, because I have seen *you* every night for the past five weeks.”

He looked back now, into a face that was drained of color, and felt a brief gratitude that the eyes were so opaque, reflecting his own image back to him, revealing nothing of what was going on beneath. He wasn't sure he could stand to see that. He answered the question that Avon would not ask, quickly, to get it over with. “Yes, you come here, to me, Avon. For sex.” Quietly he added, “Not sex. That's unfair to us both. For lovemaking, I should have said. I think the—caring—is more important than the physical side. Though that—has been satisfactory as well. The whole relationship has been...satisfactory. It's very difficult to think of losing it. God, you're so damn sweet, so gentle—”

He had dropped his eyes during the last few sentences, gazing unseeingly at the floor, lost in the host of images that rose unbidden to fill his mind. He had no warning of the fist until it slammed into his mouth. Caught off guard, he rocked backward with the blow.

He made no attempt to retaliate. Feeling the numbness and then the pain, tasting copper, he was relieved that one thing at least was settled: he could not hurt this man. He'd wondered about that, knowing Avon, anticipating this reaction. But now, looking into that drawn white face, those eyes that burned like dark ice, he saw also the fine-etched beauty and heavy-lashed gaze of his gentle lover. Hurt Kerr? Smash a fist into that trusting face, shatter that velvety brown gaze? Easier to say just cut your own hand off and be done with it. He was glad of the knowledge that he was worthy of Kerr's trust.

“I told you you wouldn't like it,” he said, ignoring the trickle of blood from his split lip. “You don't have to stand there like that. I won't touch you. I don't even blame you for hating me.”

“Hating you?” Avon whispered. “For a lie like that? Merely—hating?”

“It isn't a lie, Avon. You know it isn't, or you wouldn't have struck me. You'd be laughing at me right now.” Then, as the other man simply continued to stare at him: “Think, Avon. Can you remember anything you've done on any night after you've taken Lethe? Or do you merely wake up in the morning with eight blank hours behind you?”

Avon's eyes were wide on his, dilated and almost sightless. “This is—a ruse to get me to admit the drug.”

“Oh, Avon. No. If anyone is guilty of encouraging you to take it, I am. I let myself think...it would all come right somehow. I believed that...the benefits were worth the risk. You needed love so much—needed to give it as well as to receive—”

“*You're lying.*” But in that instant he saw that Avon believed. That Avon knew. Perhaps the diamond-bright mind was putting together a hundred little anomalies from the past month, a hundred little mysteries suddenly solved, or perhaps the truth was too terrible to be denied. But Avon knew.

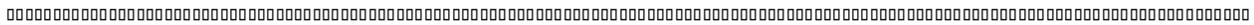
And so, Blake simply shook his head mutely in answer to the accusation, and waited.

It took some time for the last desperate defenses to fall of their own structural weaknesses. For the last doubts to slip through Avon's grasping fingers. And then Avon went very still again, leaning back with a gut-wrenching composure.

“I'll kill you for this, Blake.” He said it quite calmly. And with that, even through the numbness, Blake felt a sudden shiver of fear. Because, just then, looking into eyes as dark as black pools under a new moon, he realized that no act would be too extreme to erase this. His death, Avon's own, the destruction of any living being who had witnessed the violation...nothing was beyond bounds. As if those eyes saw an abomination that could not be tolerated.

“You don't understand,” he whispered,

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him. "Please believe that, at least. I never meant to hurt you."

Avon yielded to the pressure as Blake pulled at him, shuffling a quarter of a pace back so that only their upper bodies were in contact. His head still sagged forward, and Blake coaxed it up, one-handed.

"Avon. Please let me make it stop hurting..."

Avon's moan was the sound of defeat, of despair, and there was no resistance left in him. His eyes were glazed, half-slitted. And Blake took his mouth gently, so gently, because it was the first time. The sourness, the scald of bile he encountered, were the taste of a sick man, a man who'd been ill a long while. Blake drank it in and stroked Avon's tongue with his own. He drew Avon's hips to him, felt that hardness again pressing low into his belly. When he rocked Avon's pelvis, he made that gentle, too.

A new scalding met his lips, and he felt Avon thrust helplessly back at his tongue. Avon's hips had taken over the flexing motion. There was another sound, a broken one. And Blake realized suddenly how close Avon was, about to orgasm just like this, standing on his feet, fully clothed in Blake's arms. His whole body was rocking slightly back and forth in rhythm with his breathing. His face was burning with blood, his eyes shut.

Oh, yes...Avon, do it, Blake thought. Come for me, spill yourself. Prove it was you all the time.

Dazedly, as if in a dream, Avon continued to pleasure himself, as if he had forgotten the existence of anything but his need and the means to fulfil it.

And Blake simply held quite still and let him, let everything go but the feel of Avon against him. He wanted so much for Avon to achieve release this way.

Just a little longer, he thought. You're almost there. Almost...yes. Now. Now, if you try; try and it will be so easy...

The taste of Avon's mouth changed again, unmistakably. Through the moan that

went up and up, just before the peaking of passion, there was a peaking of fury. Of repudiation and bitterness and pain beyond endurance. Blake was careening backwards before he even grasped that it was Avon who had sent him flying.

Uncomprehending, vertiginous, he stared at that familiar face, now unfamiliar in its dreadful weltering of emotions. Avon's lips were swollen with kisses, Avon's face was feverishly flushed. But the eyes that should have been yearning and heavy-lidded were poisoned—blazing too bright with anger and anguish and hatred.

"You will *never* use me again," Avon whispered raggedly. The rejection was complete.

"Not even if we both suffer?" said Blake, reaching out to him, trying to bridge the chasm between them.

"Not if we both die of it," said Avon harshly, as if completing a curse. His face altered, the sensuousness twisting and freezing, becoming cruel and bitterly hard. "This is the end, Blake. We will never speak of it again."

He turned to the door.

Blake had one last chance, and nothing left to lose. "Avon."

Avon did not turn back. But he was listening.

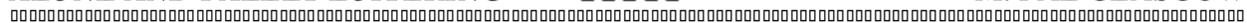
"In all the time that I have known you," said Blake, carefully, deliberately, weighing each word, "I have never known you to be a coward."

Avon came near to striking him a third time, even with the perils of such close contact fresh in both their memories. But he was fighting again, he was facing Blake once more. "There is absolutely nothing further to be said."

"Oh, but there is, Avon. We were in the midst of a discussion. I had just pointed out to you that you *did* know me. And that's what's unbearable, isn't it; not just that you loved, but that you loved *me*. That you love—"

"Nothing," Avon hissed.

"Why should I be so important, so threat-



him his escape from the harsh reality of Liverpool’s docks had introduced him to the equal callousness of Glasgow’s reality, demanding payment in kind for the transport, making Bodie kneel in the doorway’s dark and damp, enveloped by the rain-borne smells of the city, diesel and smoke and grit. Just another dock, and after the lorry driver there had been just another docker, like his own father, the man whose name he had slowly asphyxiated with a kind of slow-boiling joy. He had spent over a year in this city, growing up as hard and as calloused as his hands, the tough skin his only protection against the softness inside. Skills learned here and in his home town had carried him far, first here to Glasgow, then all the way to Africa and back, thence to the well-bred cannibalism of the City, pin-striped suits and umbrellas, paper weapons concealed in well-tooled briefcases. Oh, you needed to be hard to survive Whitehall, but the callouses had to be on the inside for that, far from what he had learned when he was growing up.

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And now he was back up North, back to where it had started and ended, following Cowley’s orders and waiting to see if the Scottish contact would come forward to inform on his co-conspirators and confess their sins. Cowley wanted them, wanted the gun-running to Ulster stopped, wanted the money stopped, wanted the foreign contacts stopped. Wanted the whole mess cleaned up before the Troubles crossed the water to his own homeland, and wanted Bodie to be the one to do it. Oh, the Old Man knew it was pie in the sky to stop it all completely, but at least this one organisation would be stymied and there would be a breather before the ugliness began again. It would stop, if only for a day, but stop it would.

“He’s going. Alone,” the old man had said, glowering at Doyle, knowing perfectly well why that young man had wanted Bodie to stay, or for himself to go with Bodie: knowing perfectly well and liking it not one jot. And what Cowley didn’t like, stopped. Just like that.

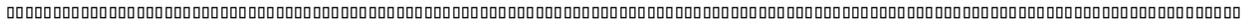
Bodie stared up at the broken-tooth

windows of the old warehouse, the old memories tangling with the newer ones, snaring his feet and bringing him to a halt. Doyle. They were getting careless, too openly sexual with each other, too blatant. Mustn’t forget the rules: do whatever the hell you like, just don’t get caught doing it. And they were perilously close to getting caught *in flagrante delicto*, so to speak. Too casual, too friendly, too complacent. So Cowley had done the best thing: split them up for a while, cool them down, make them appreciate what they had too much to risk losing it all for the coveting of an open life.

So he was here, in a city that harboured too many ghosts for Bodie, and above all the echoing whispers came the banshee wail of what he had been and what he might have become.

The picture chilled him to the bone. The man he would have become... Staying with his family, taking the blame, going to borstal, learning his lessons there... Better this school of hard knocks than that hard school.

He walked on, going past all the derelict monuments to past glory, down to where the city was still alive, joining the Saturday evening hordes rippling down the Gallowgate, the richness of language surrounding him amidst the absence of wealth. On, he walked, through the city centre with its fancy pedestrian precincts, up past the motorway flyover that stopped midair, a modern day Folly. Fancy buildings now, all imbued with the sheen of money, all of it overlain by the patina of pollution, the sand-blasting companies not yet come this far. And then the newly refurbished beauty of the old city, all sandstone and sunset, rose bushes in bloom, heady fragrance filling him with affection. Children still played the game named after this country, although none here called it that. Hopscotch, north of the border, became ‘peeveer’ or ‘beds’, and he remembered some tightly passionate nights spent playing a rather more adult version of the game. His group had been as multi-racial as the children marauding these streets, and their voices just as indistinguishably Glaswegian. But when *he* had ‘played’ round the



back of Woodside Comprehensive, his goal had been far different from the cries of these children.

The park now, trees older than many cities, rhododendron bushes taller than a man, a wonderland wrapped around the ‘cottages’, the public toilets Victorians had disguised from their delicate sensibilities. He hesitated a moment at the foot of the Great War memorial statue, pausing, remembering, then finally moving on. Too dangerous, now, for a CI5 man to have sex in the bogs. If Cowley didn’t kill him, Doyle would—for the sheer stupidity of it, if nothing else. Bodie smiled, not nicely, earning himself a wide berth from the locals, who knew how to handle a hard man.

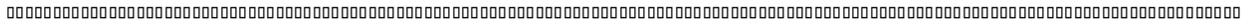
No, Doyle would be furious with him for doing something that thick, but wouldn’t allow himself to care that Bodie had been having it off with some stranger in the toilet. It always struck Bodie as hysterical that it was Doyle who was forever thinking about marriage, but it was Bodie who was forever signing on the dotted line of commitment: Army, Paras, SAS, CI5. Doyle, for all his talk, had never signed a thing in his life before, until Cowley had finagled him into it, and even then, Doyle was the only agent with a 6 months contract. No, Doyle would fight settling down tooth and nail, no matter how much...

Bodie stopped dead, cheeky comments passing unnoticed right over the top of his head. A dunt, and he moved on, joining the exodus as night slid ethereal dark into the park. He simply went with the flow, finding himself buying a ticket at Byres’ Road subway station, then going down the labyrinthine steps to the platform, the unique smell bringing back so much more of his past to war with the sudden ambush of the present. Mechanically, he stepped onto the royal red carriage, grabbing a pole, letting the old wifies sit, parcels and carrier bags heaped on the floor in front of them, as the younger women sat with children piled all over themselves, prams propped precariously beside the doors. He let the talk eddy around himself, listening not to the

content, but to the rich melody and cacophonous tones. He wanted Doyle. No surprise that—he doubted many people who had seen them together could ever not realise that—but it was *what* he wanted from Doyle. What he wanted *with* Doyle. Commitment. Settling down. Cleaving unto each other and to no one else. Ever. *For ever and ever amen so help me god*, he thought, a fine sweat beginning to chill on his skin.

He clung onto the stainless steel pole as the subway ‘shuggled’ and swayed, hurtling through black tunnel, the train lights flickering out for a breathless heartbeat every time they went over a set of points. In each fragment of darkness, he could see his own reflection, a white face swimming, lost, in the dark. *Oh what can ail thee, knight at arms, alone and palely loitering*, he thought, mocking himself. To want to settle down, in *his* line of work, and with a man as skittish as Doyle, with a man who ran like the wind from every mention of conforming and belonging... Just look at the way Doyle dressed: silently thumbing his nose at everything that could declare his commitment to CI5 and the civil service. *Shall just have to wait until he starts dressing proper before I propose then, shan’t I?* But there was no smile for that thought, barbed as it was, for it would hurt even more being removed than when it had taken root.

Commitment. With Doyle. Risking letting Doyle know just how much Bodie needed him. Risking telling Doyle the truth about his past, when he knew the reaction the prettied-up version had gleaned. The doubts started crawling in then, turning his stomach, twisting round and round like cats settling down for the winter. Moments, always easily explained away as just Doyle being Doyle, just Ray being a funny bugger when it comes to relationships. But what if it weren’t? What if the awkwardness was because Bodie’s feelings made him awkward? What if his reluctance was because he simply didn’t feel as much as Bodie thought he did...as much as Bodie *hoped* he did. What if it were so much more one sided than he already realised?



a taste, a soupçon, a wee dram of the hard stuff, and he'd be able to laugh at his own needs. He would realise that he didn't need all that crap with Doyle. Just the sex. Just the friendship. Just the fun. He wasn't drowning, only waving...

Not only had the old pub survived, it hadn't changed, not deigning to give so much as a nod to the passing of years. The outside was the same, black, glossy wood with only a tiny patch of thick, leaded windows, their light gleaming off the black in minute specks of liveliness. It still looked more like a funeral parlour than a pub, and the door was still as heavy and creaked just as loudly. He took a deep, deep breath, filling his lungs with the remembered air of dockland dirt, a swimmer about to take the plunge. Not drowning, only waving...

There was a wary silence to greet him, hostility barely leashed under the surface, the unspoken 'an' who the hell are you?' swelling around him. So he put on his toughest face, his best sneer and strolled in, a slight sway to hips and shoulders, the 'gallus' walk recognised in docklands all over Britain. And they saw him, saw his strength, saw the way he was eyeing them back and they knew, relaxing into another one of them come home to this pub, another man here for company, another body here for pleasure.

As perfect as the mating ritual of the big cats, a space cleared at the bar and he took it, accepting them as they accepted him. As a newcomer, it would be several minutes before he'd be served, so he spent his time renewing his memory of this place. The walls were ancient, moulded mahogany, arches curling and soaring up to the dark ceiling, neither paintings nor photographs here, just the gleam of the years lingering in the wood. Tables, round and small, equally dark, equally old, even if they had been bought only last week, for everything here was of a muchness, as were the people, the instant they walked through that door. To come here, you had to know someone, for there were no signs, and no locals living nearby to drop in unexpectedly. The bar was, in and of itself, all

the art any pub needed. Long and curved, gilded foot rail glinting softly to itself, myriad elbows polishing the bartop to an almost living shine, the overhead lights casting their glow with generosity. Against the wall were the bottles, dozens and dozens of them, every kind of spirit and liqueur and whisky glittering away merrily amidst the curling carvings and liquid lines, art from a bygone era when MacIntosh was king. Even the pump handles were the originals, shaped first by master craftsmen and then by the hands of those who pulled an ocean of pints. And the publican was standing before him, eyeing him up, folding back his sleeves to display his tattoos, a double check that this bloke knew just exactly what kind of pub he'd got himself into.

A tiny crinkle laughed at the corner of Bodie's eyes, for it wasn't often you saw a burly 6'4" hard man with a loveheart tattooed on his arm—and a man's name reclining on blue ribbon encircling it. "I'll have a pint of heavy, please," he said, making certain to emphasise his old Liverpoolian accent. Sassenachs were never particularly welcome in this city, but Liverpool was considered to be a sister-city, almost Scots, and therefore tolerable. If Doyle had come in here...

"One pint coming up," and with that, so simply, he was forgiven the accident of his birth that had made him English.

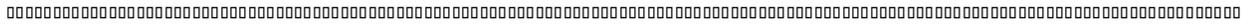
A miraculous conception, a man appeared at his elbow, eyes bright with interest. "No' seen you around here afore. You jist get here?"

"Yeh. Used to live here, though."

The man sipped his own drink, never letting his eyes stray from tonight's prey. "Oh aye? An' where was it you were living?"

"Up Maryhill Road," he answered, careful to use the proper language, careful not to risk his entrée into this milieu. He needed to forget Ray for a while, needed to purge a little of the dangerous longings from his system. "Just off the Garscube Road."

"Oh, aye," came the reply, same words, completely different intonation. "Aye, I know



ward declarations, just a simple offer, couched in terms that could be misunderstood with deliberate ease. But both men wanted the same thing, so Bodie simply nodded and followed through the throng, under the whimsically red light and through the heavy swing door.

It was dimmer in here, the intricate patterning of tile all-but lost in the twilight anonymity of the back corridor. A different smell here: not the aroma of generations of beer and tobacco and back-slapping good humour, nor any hint of the constant, underlying tension that riddled this city. Here, there was the faint lingering scent of Domestos and Dettol, carbolic soap and cigarettes, and under it all, Bodie could smell sex. So subliminal a scent, but so instantly potent. He could feel himself swell to press against his underwear, could sense his own scent cloud around him, could feel his self-imposed restraints loosen and the beast within begin its snarl. There were the familiar scents of danger and violence here too, to add spice and piquancy, to lure and seduce, and for men like him to succumb under. He smiled again, aware of how he would look in this stuttering light, an almost vampiric cast to his features, catching on his arched brow, making him the spitting image of his father. The man he had refused to become—the man that part of him still ached to become.

As he walked along the long corridor, past the cellar door and the boxes of smoky bacon crisps and Irn-Bru, he spared a thought for his sisters, whom he had loved, despite it all. He hadn't yet dared check the system for them, to find out what had become of them. Hadn't dared check to see if his father were even still alive. Too much, too close, all that. Too easy for it all to come and sour this life he had carved for himself, and he wasn't about to let that happen. Allow the past purchase on his present—he might find himself sinking back into the mire, and he had fought too hard and far too long for that. And fought even harder to close off the darkness his father had fostered in him.

So. Tonight. He'd have the arse that was walking ahead of him, bury himself in that flesh

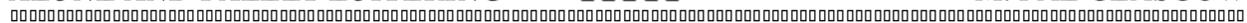
and forget his past, forget his present, buy his future. Bury his father and mortgage himself to Doyle, doling small bits of his heart out on a monthly basis, until Ray got used to it. Step by step, just like Jim strolling jauntily in front of him. Two lights, white 'gents' sign on his right for those who wanted nothing more than a quick pee to get rid of the beer, but there, what had once been the 'Ladies', in those long-gone days when ladies still came here, there, high on his left, there was an echo of the door that had led him in here: again the red light, again that display of wry humour, and then all thoughts of humour left him as he stepped through that door.

So nondescript a room, just your basic pub toilet, cleaner than most. Old fashioned table piled with towels. Urinal along one wall, the water whooshing quietly through the trough. Sinks, a line of them, original porcelain, fancy handles blooming, petal-shaped, in the bright light. Stalls, old mahogany warm and rich, space enough below to see if the cubicle were occupied. One door, open, propped that way, to display the neatly incised hole inside where a man could stick his cock through to be sucked or fucked.

And then the lights were fading, switching out, one by one, until only three remained lit, reflected in the wall length mirror that ran above the sinks. Jim stepped away from the light-switch, no smile on his face now, only the heavy-lidded stare of a man wanting sex. He walked past Bodie, going to stand before the urinal. Bodie stared at him in the mirror, stared at the broad back, stared at the wide-legged stance, listened to the splashing. Waited, with mounting impatience, until the sound stopped and Jim stood there, silent, and then turned to face Bodie in the mirror, his cock still out, still cradled in his left hand.

"Did you come in here for some prick, or jst to turn your back on me?"

Bodie was about to speak, but the silence was filled with the sound of the door opening. Another man came in, young, Asian-dark, slim and tall, making a pretence of using the toilet.



Bodie didn't mind, not one bit. If he'd wanted private sex, he'd have waited for Doyle. He wanted this to be meaningless, nothing more than a good screw, and if you came to a place like this, you accepted whatever came your way. He spoke to Jim, hanging his own jacket up on the curled, brass wall hook, beginning the slow unbuttoning of his shirt. "Came in here so you could turn your back to me."

"Not a snowball's, pal. Not something I do."

"No? I could always try to change your mind about that."

"Try it, pal, just you try it..." Invitation, deliberately clothed as threat, and Bodie was upon him, mouth open, forcing the other man to surrender to the invasion, filling Jim's mouth with his tongue, thrusting in deep, claiming him. Bodie's hands strove to contain the other man, to subdue him with the strength and force of his lust. And as he felt the other yield to him, as he felt the other's muscles turn liquid with arousal, as he felt his power over the other man, confession dawned in him: he wanted to do this to Ray. He wanted to force him, wanted to make him to submit. Wanted to hurt him, a little, for the all the small hurts of the day when he wanted so little from Ray, for all the days when a smile or a touch would suffice, when the giving would be emotional, not sexual.

And so, infused with this, he bent the other man, arching him back over his forearm, knees between the other's legs, his free hand pulling and tugging at fabric until it parted—unzipped or ripped, he didn't give a damn—and he held his own hard prick in his hand and his hard hand was on Jim's rich buttock. It no longer mattered at all that the man he had was called Jim, nor that he was an individual. All that mattered was that he could do, here, that which he could not do with Ray.

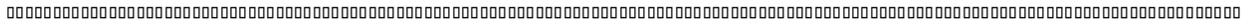
He kissed the other man again, but tenderly this time, even as the touch of his hands was rough, mouth giving his love, hands giving him strength enough to cow another man. He moulded the man, shaping him, forming him

into what he wanted him to be: a willing victim for his harshness, a willing recipient of all the possessive, acquisitive love that lurked in Bodie. And to see another man bent beneath him, submitting and submissive, oh, what an aphrodisiac that image was, spurring him, inflaming him. The body in his arms began its struggle, but he ignored it, wrenching at the clothes that hampered him, recognising the struggle for what it was: token protest to sweeten the conquering. Token, the action added to the words, an old game played to the measured moves of sex, the excuse for one victim of machismo to surrender to another. And Bodie felt the power of it surge through him, the heat of it centring in his cock, settling in his balls, making him full and fecund and ready.

There were hands writhing with his own clothes, and as he pulled away long enough to breathe, he saw that the hands were brown and slender, those that tugged his trousers lower to bare the down of his thighs, but the hands that hauled his shirt open were white and spatulate, trembling in their eagerness. He didn't trouble himself with the clothes of his sexmates—Bodie wasn't the slightest bit interested in such minor details, for they did nothing but distract from the visceral feeling of having a man under him. He bit his way down a white chest, tugging sharply at nipples and red hair, marking the skin with the crescent brand of teeth. A breathless gasp of pleasure at that, from himself, from the other, from the mouth that was leeching the life from his cock, it didn't make any difference: he gave pleasure, pleasure was given him, he *was* pleasure, and it was all flowing together in an endless circle.

He thrust his hips forward, burying himself in wet mouth; he thrust his tongue forward, burying himself in a different, equally wet mouth, their heat becoming his, his fire inflaming them. The third man knelt between his feet, sucking so deep, with such intensity, Bodie heard himself groan in his other man's mouth. A hand was pressing against his arse, a finger probing, and then the man on the floor was

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stretching up, his brown hand splayed and hot as it slid the length of Bodie’s spine, coming in to a fist to rub, hard, against Bodie’s arse, the exquisite delight of it shivering through all three of them.

They were hard, all of them, and Bodie felt himself the centre of the Universe, omnipotent, omnipresent. He lifted his hand, and felt jolt run through three bodies as he slapped one man, felt the skin under his hand warm as it reddened, felt the tremble when pain turned to pleasure. He thrust again, but this time, the wetness of mouth wasn’t even close to enough. With an anorexic moan, he wrapped his arms around the man whose mouth he plundered, lifting him up, towels scattering hither and yon, turning him, settling him on the table so that he could plunder his body as well. His cock was so hard, so hot, it craved the cooling fire of another body. A hand came up to guide his prick, a tongue came up to lick at his arse, and he pulled down, pushed up and abruptly, with a thrill of strength, he was home, sheathed, pillaging, cock up an arse, tongue up his own, filled and filling.

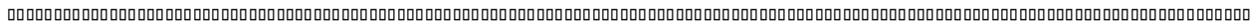
He looked down, and saw what he loved: a man under him, bending to his will, submitting, white back sweat-pearled, all the muscles quivering. Bodie shouted out loud for the joy of it, Ray coming into his mind as he rejoiced in the simple complexity of sex.

The wetness sucking on him left, and he felt a void, an ache where the circle had been complete, but then it was there again, a hardness promising him all he wanted. Hard slickness pressed against him, and he tensed, deliberately, wanting it to hurt, wanting it rough and hard and callous, all the things—like love—he never had with Ray. All the things he missed from his ill-spent youth and dissolute adulthood, all the things frittered away on dinner and dancing with the birds, and the ‘all good fun’ romps that seemed to be all Ray would allow. For now. And for now, when he needed something more, or perhaps—if you looked at it askance—something less, well, he could come to places like this, and men like this, where it was all bone and

muscle and hot skin, sliding into him, as he poured himself into another man. He thrust, and his cock surged, and the cock inside him surged. His back arched, and his belly pressed against the muscular knob of spine, his own spine curving against the hairless smoothness of belly. As he looked down, he could see where his red cock was engulfed by white skin, and where long brown fingers pressed into the black hair that arched on the whiteness of his own belly. With every gasp of air he dragged in, he dragged in the old, familiar scent: males in rut, he most of all, his own odour intoxicating, mingling with the other two men, a symphony of sex.

The hands on his belly had pressed lower, one hand stopping, splayed fingers framing Bodie’s cock, feeling it as it plunged in and out of the white arse. The cock up his own arse was insistent, pounding at him, slick and heavy, driving him on, whipping him up, taking his mind away and leaving him only the voluptuousness of three men entwined together in lust. A mouth nipped his earlobe, a tongue snaked into him, fucking his ear as a cock fucked his arse as he himself fucked arse. It was wonderful, this completion, and he thrust harder, the pleasure building, compounding the insatiable need that was devouring him from the inside out, hurtling him on, ever faster in the race to orgasm. Teeth dug into his ear as wetness splashed inside him, and he groaned in echo, feeling his own seed rise, pushed out by the semen filling him. He came, hands clutching desperately at the man under him, pulling him up as he plunged in deeper, back clenching as he came, great pulses of pleasure streaming from him.

Weakened, he collapsed to the side, sinking to the floor, propping himself against a tableleg to watch as the man who had fucked him sucked the man he had fucked. He watched, entranced, too sated to rouse, as the pale cock was swallowed; watched, entranced, as the faces contorted once more with pleasure. To them, he was now superfluous, nothing more than the added fillip of a voyeur. The dark man was kneeling now, pressed into Jim’s white arse, his



pulsed by matters relating to the nightworld, and began to regard me with a thinly disguised attitude of dread. I realized I would have to convert him soon, before his fear caused him to flee.

Matters came to an unexpected turn almost immediately, however. I had just returned from an early evening foray outside, bringing back a child for my female acolytes to feast upon. Jonathan, despite warnings from me, had chosen to explore the castle after dark. He had found his way into my acolytes' parlor, where the protective barrier I'd placed over it caused him to faint and slumber there into the night. My ladies Madeleine, Natasha, and Helene discovered him there, insensate upon a lounge, and thought him a present from me.

I arrived barely in time to grasp Helene's neck and pull her away from Jonathan's recumbent form. Though I could see her teeth had not yet penetrated, I flung her back and angrily scolded all three women. "He is *mine*," I reminded them. "How dare you kiss him before I have finished with him?" They argued with me, restless with their own desires, but I held firm and directed them to the child I'd chosen for them earlier.

I turned my attention back to Jonathan as they left, and saw he was gazing dreamily upon the scene through half-closed lids. Leaning over him, I exerted the full force of my will to make him sleep and forget. A small moan escaped his lips, as if he fought for consciousness, then his lashes fell closed, light brown smudges against his flushed cheeks. He lay there motionless, lips parted slightly, arms and legs in lax repose, chest swelling and falling gently with each breath, head tipped back to expose his exquisite inviting throat. He was irresistible.

I knew I had to remove him from the parlor for his own safety, but rather than guide him entranced from the room, I passed my arms carefully under his back and thighs, lifting him gently to carry him to his bed.

Even at that late stage, my immediate intentions were honorable. I meant only to se-

cure him in his room for the duration of the night, and discipline my ladies for their improper attentions. It was a long walk back to the wing his room was in, and though I never tired, I grew steadily more aware of the weighty burden I bore along, the scent and feel and look of him. His blond head rested upon my shoulder; his lean body was cradled unresisting within my arms. Vices I had not indulged in for ages began to crowd my imagination.

I reached his room and placed him softly on the bed. Rummaging through the wardrobe I found his nightclothes and tossed them on the chair beside the bed. Then I bent over Jonathan and began unbuttoning his vest.

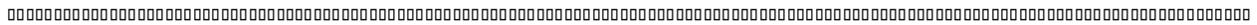
I think this was the point where my resolve failed, for I cannot honestly say whether I was truly interested in making Jonathan comfortable for the night, or only in the excuse to undress him and satisfy my curiosity about his body. I worked slowly, partially because I did not want to rouse him from the stupor I'd cast on him, but also because it was an enjoyable task to linger over. First off were his vest and shirt; then I drew his undershirt over his head, stopping to admire the lightly-haired chest before moving on to his shoes, stockings, and then the trousers. It was with less than steady fingers that I removed his last undergarment, revealing his dark gold curls and the perfectly formed organs nestled there.

I picked up his nightshirt from the chair, moved to pull it over him, and faltered. He was enchanting, so invitingly stretched out, compliant and helpless. I put the nightshirt back down and touched my finger to his forehead.

"Rouse," I whispered. "Rouse but do not wake."

He sighed and slowly twisted his head on the pillow. His limbs stretched then relaxed, and his blue eyes opened fractionally, clouded and unfocused. I trailed my hand down his stomach, watching his muscles ripple after, his torso squirm in reaction.

"No memory," I intoned. "You will feel what is done, but have no understanding, keep



“Jonathan, Jonathan my treasure, you will not feel pain. Raise your chin, so, and feel only the thrill, the pleasure.”

His head tipped back and a blissful expression stole over his features as I bent my mouth to his throat. “No pain,” I repeated, too giddy with sensation to proceed slowly. My thrusts were deep and brutal as I fastened my teeth on the soft skin of his throat and bit through to the life-carrying vein beneath. Jonathan whimpered only, a small wounded sound laced with such unbearable sweetness that my loins shuddered in reaction. Warm blood spilled into my mouth, triggering the lust frenzy I’d known of old.

I seized his hips, pulling him close as my penis stabbed repeatedly within him and my mouth sucked hard at his neck. For that moment he was everything I could ever desire, perfection in my grasp, and I devoured him.

Feeling the moment approach, I buried myself within him, one hand holding him still, the other clasped about his straining shaft. Jonathan gasped as I forced his orgasm upon him to coincide with mine. My phallus swelled and spasmed, pouring semen into him as I drained him in return, his seed with my hand and his blood with my mouth. On and on my unceasing pleasure pulsed; on and on I drove him through a prolonged unremitting climax for himself. He shuddered and cried out, overwhelmed by the physical assault on his body and senses, then wept silent tears of confusion when at last I permitted his orgasm to end.

Alarmed by his distressed reaction to the sensual extremes I’d put him through, I retracted my teeth from his flesh and pulled away, pressing one hand over his eyes and ordering him into a deep sleep. He passed into complete unconsciousness, his body going limp beneath me at the same time.

I lay upon him quietly for some time after, recovering physically as I struggled to regain my aloof disinterest. It was hopeless. Even stilled, his body called to me, filled my senses. I had not yet pulled out of him, loath to

part with such extraordinary pleasure as I had just known, and I felt my penis stir with renewed interest as I regarded the slumbering figure in my arms.

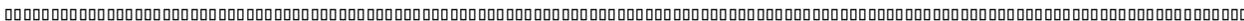
I moved tentatively within him, feeling his passage grow tighter as I hardened again. Still, I hesitated. Although I had the stamina to continue, the passion had been so great, the release so fulsome, that I feared further excitements might disappoint in comparison. But then, rocking gently on the passive figure of my victim, I decided it was enjoyable enough a sensation to continue. And not so all alone.

“Jonathan,” I whispered. “Jonathan, hear me. Rouse again, my treasure. No memories, my own, rouse fresh.” I caressed his face tenderly, still rocking against his cushioning form. Jonathan gave the faintest of sighs. “That’s right, my precious,” I encouraged. “Enjoy this sensation. No memory of before, let this be again the first time.” He was responding, slowly drifting up through layers of consciousness to squirm at my touch, without crossing the threshold of actual awareness.

I used him shamelessly that night, raping both his mouth and rectum, endless couplings which I made him comply with, made him respond to every penetration as if it were the first. Despite his increasing fatigue I raised him to repeated climaxes so as to share the pleasure, that pleasure which he was giving to me. The spasms wrenched at him, making him clench within as they tore through him. His soft whimpers and cries at each orgasm primed me for renewal, and I plundered his body over and over throughout the night.

I took pity on his exhaustion finally, sensing that although I could have continued indefinitely, his human body could not be driven to ecstasy so repeatedly without rest, else it might suffer collapse. Reluctantly I pulled free of him, stealing a kiss from his moist lips before instructing him to sleep deeply and peacefully. When I had sufficiently recovered myself, I went to fetch a bowl of warm water and a cloth to cleanse his skin of sweat and semen. Having

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bathed him and removed the evidence of our exertions, I tenderly dressed him in his night clothes and settled him under the blanket. He bore all this unresisting, wrapped now in a healing mantle of deep sleep.

It was nearly dawn by the time I closed his door behind me. I hurried to my resting place, thoughts and plans tumbling in my head as I tried to decide what course to follow now. It would take a while to convert the man; one bloodletting alone—no matter how ecstatic—was not enough. But the bond had been established. I could sense him already, felt how in his bed he curled one hand under his cheek and the other over his groin. I knew that if Jonathan escaped before the deed was complete, he would be easy to track.

That was what happened of course. Al-

though I clouded his memories of that night, he fled my castle in terror not long after. There were too many other discrepancies to hide from him and I suppose his own subconscious had cried out to him from the first, warning him of the danger to his mortal life.

I was not unduly concerned by his flight. It was not what I wished, but I had time on my side, all the time in the world. I have always been a selfish creature, and it seemed quite reasonable to me that I should eventually track him down, destroy his Mina and other loves, and so have him to myself. Forever.

And so it might have been too, had not a Dr. Van Helsing arisen to obstruct me. In another place, in another time, I like to think that I might have won Jonathan at last. In that never-never land we are together, immortal.

THE HARBOURMASTER'S TALE

M. FAE GLASGOW

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IT WAS IN THE WINTER OF 1895, I BELIEVE, THAT FIRST I BEGAN TO WORRY ABOUT HOLMES' NOCTURNAL WANDERINGS. I cannot be more accurate, for on this matter, I kept no notes. It is, after all, not the kind of thing one wishes to commit to paper, lest it fall into unscrupulous hands, such as the reprehensible Charles Augustus Milverton, that could wreak all kinds of appalling mischief. Not even the great Sherlock Holmes would be able to survive a scandal of such dread magnitude. However, as Holmes would say, my story would follow all the faster if I were to start at the beginning.

I must confess, that, having been in the Army for so many years, and in a good, if rather nondescript public school for a great many years before, I was not so *naïf* or even so righteously innocent that I could not recognise the signs of a man suffering from that terrible malady, the

desire for his own sex. Holmes, I am afraid, displayed every last one of the damnable characteristics, and, it grieves me to say, I believe he even indulged himself in this vice most frequently and most unwisely. He would disappear, departing as the lamps were lit outside, dressed as befits a proper gentleman, but when he returned in the first mists of morning as the lamps were being doused, his attire was that of the most common of working men, the kind of fellow one sees lounging around the dock areas, claiming to seek work. He would come in of a morning, bleary-eyed, pallid, almost staggering with weariness, and so terribly torn that it was an agony to see. He always seemed to be both tremendously eased and terribly tensed, all at the same time and in equal measure. Naturally, all of this made him the most unsociable of companions, and one never quite knew whether the



relaxed part of him would chat over the breakfast kippers or if the tense man would simply storm off at the least little word. It was all terribly upsetting, all the more so for the sure and certain knowledge I had that he would stop all this, give it all up, if I would only say the word. I could not. To say the word, I would needs must follow through with action in kind, and I simply could not allow myself to commit such a heinous sin, even for a friend I love more dearly than my own family and respect more than any other human being I have ever encountered.

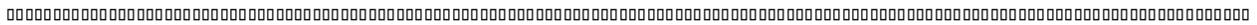
It is, I believe, impossible to know what it was that drove Holmes to this aberration, no more than I could positively avow what drove him to his dreadful bouts with cocaine, but I believe that in both cases, it was the genius of the man, the splendour of his mind that isolated him so from the gentler sex, that, I am quite, quite certain, had much to answer for. Perhaps, if he were less singular in both mind and habit, he would have been able to form some kind of fondness for the weaker sex, but I fear that he was as misogynist as his brother, the esteemed and reclusive Mycroft. For whatever reason, however, he suffered from this disability and it, as with his addiction to cocaine, was growing that winter, by leaps and bounds. By the time Yule had passed and the New Year had been ushered in with gaiety and brightness by all and sundry, Holmes excepted, of course, it seemed to me that it was then that Holmes never went a day without either his foul potion or his clandestine excursions. There was nothing I could do, for discussions on the one were met with acrimonious rejoinders and for the other, he would simply refuse to speak, beyond declaring that there was only one possible answer and that that was far beyond his reach and held by another. It was from the way he would look at me as he said this, rather than by his words, that I was able to discern, to deduce, if you will, that I was the one who held sway over him.

My first reaction was one of horror and outrage, naturally enough, as would be the reaction of any decent, God-fearing gentleman, but

as I stormed from our rooms, even as I descended the stairs two at a time with a fine disregard for Mrs. Hudson, I found my memory haunted by the expression that had darkened his already solemn eyes. It was not often that one saw emotion of any kind displayed by my friend, and never, in our long acquaintance, had I ever seen such misery in him. I was troubled, as I walked through that night, the lamps casting flickering haloes through the rain. Indeed, as I paused to catch my breath and gather my addled wits on the new bridge, a constable approached, to ascertain my state of mind. I believe that, upon seeing my grim visage, he feared that I might be contemplating some foolish notion of ending it all! I reassured him, of course, and in doing so, I found I had reassured myself. After all, it was not that Holmes had suddenly started harbouring these appalling emotions for me, merely that I had chosen this moment to open my eyes and see what had surely been staring me in the face these many months past.

As I walked back to our rooms, I looked up at our windows, barely in time to see him spring back from the glass. I am quite sure he had no intention of me seeing him; indeed, I am quite sure that he did not even know that his secret was revealed, for, if it had not been for the chance of a passing hackney, its lights briefly settling upon our bow window, I would never have caught so much as a glimpse of Holmes. Strangely, I was less disturbed by my realisation of his shameful feelings for me than I was by the thought that I had distressed him to the point where he, of all people, had to stand by his window to watch and wait, until he knew that I was returning that night and had not been horrified into an hotel. It was terrible, to think of Holmes suffering so that he would be driven to such a display of emotions, he, who reviled such weaknesses. For a considerable time after, the memories of that night would spring into my mind, most unexpectedly, and cut me to the quick. My dear Holmes, so terribly, frighteningly vulnerable, and he and I, both knowing all the while, that I could end his suffering with a mere word. Unfortunately, we

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both also knew that I could never utter such a thing, could never allow myself to wander so far from the paths a gentleman must tread.

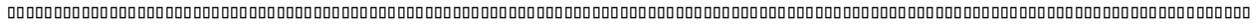
In the summer of '96, his strange wanderings had settled into a regular pattern, and I found myself to be consumed by curiosity. Where did he go? Whom did he see? What kind of place catered to men with such unacceptable tastes? Was this place of a piece with the brothels I had visited in the necessary practice of my medical arts? Or, perhaps, was it of the nature of the opium dens Holmes sometimes frequented for the information let slip by drug-loosened tongues? I applied Holmes' own techniques to the matter, learning through careful observation, that it was only when he affixed certain cuff-links to his linen that he would leave, not to return until the morning, a very different man. It was with a curious pang of mixed guilt, pride and repugnance that I noticed the cuff-links were the very gold ones which I had gifted to him on the occasion of the first publication of one of my accounts of his great talents, the tale I so fancifully termed 'A Study in Scarlet'. If he were to see me watching him dress, a flush would heighten his pale skin, as he affixed his cuff-links, which of course first led me to wonder at the nature of his secret.

It was the night I importunately managed to do this function for him that I decided I must follow him and decipher my answers. For, as I threaded the cuff-links through his linen, it was with utter amazement that I perceived that Holmes, the automaton, unfeeling Sherlock Holmes was all a-tremble at my closeness, and that my participating in this intimate ritual with him had set him as all a-flutter as a young girl with her first *beau*. It astonished me, shocking me into silence, and delayed me so long that I came perilously close to missing my chance to follow him. For shameful though it is for me to admit, I must confess that I did indeed follow my dear friend with the express intention of spying upon him. As my only excuse I hold up my deep and abiding affection for this great and lonely man.

As I have stated before in this narrative (which shall never see light of day until such times as both Holmes and I are long dead and the mores of society changed to such a degree that this revelation of Holmes' vice shall not cause people to revile his name and shudder with repugnance), I am not so *naïf* that I am unaware of the depths to which people are so tragically capable of sinking. As I am sure my reader is aware, there exist in this great metropolis of ours numerous dens of iniquity, where all sorts of unnatural vices may be purchased, without so much as a passing thought for either morals or the poor unfortunate miscreants upon whom these aberrant and abhorrent behaviours are exercised. It was a horror thrilling deep within me, that my dear friend's vice might be one even more terrible than the craving of one's own sex. I had heard of, and indeed, had even seen on one horrifying occasion, the hideously maltreated bodies of tiny victims from a vile house which catered to those who roused to the mistreatment of children.

My head was in such a spin, after years of suspecting Holmes and after long months of realising that Holmes suffered from viewing my person in a most inappropriate light, that I found myself tossing and turning many a night, fearing what despicable vices he might indulge. And so, the night when he trembled so at my touch, I resolved to follow him, to set my own mind at rest, and if my worst nightmares proved to be fact and not the product of fevered imaginings, to at least attempt to return Holmes to the paths that might lead him back to righteousness. I did not, even for a moment, hold on to the foolish notion that he might one day meet and marry a woman, for it was obvious that was simply not in his nature, any more than sweet-temper filled him. Indeed, it shows the slipshod state of my own morals that I was hoping to find that his vice was nothing more than the practices of Sodom.

Thus it was that I hastened into my greatcoat, pistol in pocket, I know not why, save only that it gave me some semblance of security. I hurried out into the night, turning to my left as



I left our rooms, for past observations had intimated that this was the path Holmes invariably took. Shortly, I saw his tall, lean figure striding on ahead of me, only his uncommon height serving to lift him above the crowds thronging the streets. I did not believe myself to be observed, for he seemed lost in thought and as downcast as ever I had seen him. This black depression was different from his usual bouts of being in low spirits, for then he would simply take to the couch and his needles, never venturing to move a muscle. This mood of his tonight seemed to be more one of deep sorrow, and a familiar, lingering one besides.

I confess that the guilt I harboured grew ever the more strong, as I followed him so slyly that night. We continued for many minutes, he in the lead, I coming along behind, until he at last ducked into a moderately respectable rooming house. I lingered outside, careful to remain on the same side of the street where I would be unobserved from any window. It was not long before his figure emerged, but dressed completely differently from before. Now he wore the unfashionable tweeds of a country gentleman who had neither the style nor the finances to wear Town evening clothes. By slouching, he had lopped some inches from his height; false moustachios and sideburns filled out his face and had I not known to expect just some such trick, I would surely have missed him.

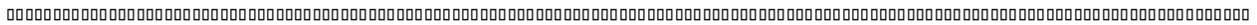
On we went, through streets that were still fortunately busy, until once more, he slipped into a building. By now, we were in a far less respectable part of town, although an area still by no means seedy. A tradesman eventually emerged, a man obviously well accustomed to earning his daily bread, with hair of carrot-hue, hunched shoulders and a bushy beard. Still, I recognised Holmes almost immediately, from some indefinable instinct for knowing him amidst even such a press of people. I continued on behind him, as the streets became more and more unfashionable, until we finally reached a depressing brick building, with a 'rooms for let' sign over the crumbling door-mantle.

There was some considerable delay upon this occasion, and indeed, I began to fear that he had slipped away from me. I was on the verge of leaving, my impatience almost getting the better of me, when a poor fellow emerged from the building. It was only a glance of sympathy from me, but it served to keep me on Holmes' trail. The man looked to have been born an urchin and never risen above his station, the grime of a lifetime discolouring the skin of his face and hands, lending him an almost skeletal appearance. It was with a thrill of pity that I realised that this was Holmes! Where was he going, that he had to stoop to such degradations? I was horrified even more as we continued upon our separate but linked journey, he still gloom-ridden and self-absorbed, I, filled with sympathy and horror.

The air was becoming thicker as night fell, a fog rolling in and deadening the faint glow from the newly-lit gas lamps. Still we walked on, until we crossed that invisible line that demarcates civilised London from the mazes that even our faithful bobbies hesitate to penetrate. Holmes hesitated not for an instant, and I followed on behind, spurning the fawning, foul-mouthed attention of our unfortunate sisters who have sunk to the dreadful levels of selling their bodies on the streets for the price of a four of gin hot. Holmes paid these harlots rather less attention than did I, hurrying on now like a bloodhound hot on the scent. By now, the heavy smell of the docklands was in the air, vying with the fog to see which could offend our senses more. Old fish, tar, the putrid rot of vegetables and the unmistakable stench of homes without drains to carry effluent away. It struck me that it was no wonder that typhoid fever is still so rife in our city and that so many children die before their fifth birthday, if these are the unsanitary and unsafe conditions in which they must live.

As we came close the docks themselves, Holmes paused at the street water pump, wise enough not to drink, but obviously heated enough to require some water to splash on the back of his neck. He looked around, very casu-

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ally, but sharp-eyed, and I thanked the instinct and the many years of sharing in his exploits that had guided me to hide myself in a doorway, regardless of the slime upon the ground. He did not see me, and indeed, I barely saw him, as he disappeared down an alley-way. It was obvious that the end of our journey was close at hand and I became more worried with every moment. Patently, our destination was not a reputable house of sin, and so the question once again arose as to what terrible vice Holmes was going to indulge in himself. I feared greatly for him. Why could he not go to one of the clean, discreet houses that catered to men of that sort? The answer came to me almost immediately. Were he to go there, he would run the very serious risk of being recognised, and thus compromised into assisting a man of influence in some case or other. Such a thing would be anathema to him, for he revered his profession as I believe he did not even revere God Himself. To be recognised, and thus have the subtle pressure to help, or perhaps cover some deed, or even to act in the way a certain Right Honourable gentleman had importuned him to do, not a month past—such a thing would strike terror into him, for his profession was the only thing, as he had told me upon one occasion, that he could hold high to the shining light of rectitude.

Due to the need for concealment, I had needs allowed Holmes to travel quite a distance before me, and now I discovered to my profound annoyance, that I could not discern into which establishment he had gone. Along the docks I walked, turning aside the offers of prostitutes, male and female alike, as I perused the bright-lit windows of public houses and hostelrys, all of them equally tawdry and roisterous. As I hesitated before one door amongst many, I was approached in a most sinister and determined manner by a creature the likes of which I had never seen before. This woman, although I hesitate to use the term, had a jaw broader than my own, and numerous seafarer's tattoos marring her flesh, upon which grew fully more hair than upon my own chest. Her dress was cut uncom-

monly high, with short sleeves revealing muscular arms, such as one would more usually expect upon a stevedore, and yet her voice was as light and as sweet as any lark I have ever heard. She seemed reluctant to accept my protestations of disinterest and so I found myself hurrying through the doorway in search of haven. It was thus that I was able to catch the barest glimpse of Holmes as he trod upstairs.

Thus, by purest chance, I had come across him again and in the kind of establishment that catered to men and men only. The entire room, being neither large nor small, was filled with men and those places usually occupied by prostitutes were taken by men of all shapes and appearances, dressed in a most ungentlemanly manner. Not one of these fellows wore shirt-cuffs or collar, and indeed, most did not even have their shirts fully buttoned. Two of them even wore nothing but trousers, exposing bulging muscles and great expanses of skin in the warmth of the room. There was a pianoplayer and men dancing, one with the other, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I was shocked to my core, however, when I realised that at one of the tables, two men were engaged in kissing and as I could see, their mouths were open and one had even dared to place his hand inside the other fellow's trousers. I could not believe my eyes, nor understand how Holmes, although notoriously untidy but yet a chap of tremendous decorum, could possibly bear to bring himself to such a place where men were engaging in carnal pursuits publicly. The operator of this establishment—I do not quite know how else to name him, for although he was rouged and powdered as any madam would be, he was still definitely a man—approached me with barely concealed hostility and two very large common chaps at his back.

“Han’ wot d’yer want, toff?” he cried, in a most lisping and unattractive voice.

I had heard and read quite some considerable amount about this kind of place, although none of it had prepared me for the physical truth. “I wish,” I said, then had to pause, for my voice

was dry and hoarse at the terrible injustice I was about to commit upon my friend, but in this place, I feared for my life, if they suspected that I was not as they. Indeed, the large fellow on the right was hefting his billy club most threateningly, with an expression of such evil upon his simious face, that I believed my safety was in imminent danger. "I wish to use one of your glory holes, if I may."

"Oooh, yer wants ter see han' not do, Mister 'Igh-han'-bloody-Mighty," the foul-mouthed creature squealed at me, revealing stained and crooked teeth. "'As a fancy fer the watchin', is that hit? Eh? Han' which ones o' me clients does yer want ter watch, or is yer not that fussy, eh?"

I controlled myself with difficulty, keeping a weather eye upon the two men, both of whom were lovingly caressing their cudgels. It was becoming terribly obvious that if I were unable to convince them that I was indeed one their kind, I would suffer something far worse than death before they disposed of me. "The man who just went upstairs. I'd like to watch him, for I have a taste for tall, thin men."

"Cost yer, fer 'e's one o' me regulars, like, han' I don' let people spy on them tha' come 'ere regular."

"To see him, I'm willing to pay. Especially if you tell me which nights he comes here, that I may come here myself to observe him."

"'Ow'd' yer know abaht 'im, eh?"

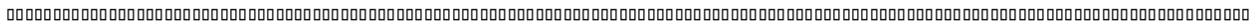
I felt the guilty flush rush up over my skin, and saw the creature before me misinterpret it. I was grateful, for I was quite uncertain what answer to give, while this man provided my response for me. "So's yer've been watchin' 'im, 'as yer? That 'ow yer gets yer jollies, watchin' some poor innocent feller? Pity yer only interested in watchin', hain't it, lads? Could gives yer a lovely surprise if yer wasn't. Watchin' 'im, eh? Must've given yer quite a thrill when yer seen 'im come down 'ere, eh? Get a rush in yer goolies, did yer?"

Such language! I hadn't heard the likes since my Army days, and I confess I had not

missed it. Unfortunately, it is the lot of men to be affected by such coarseness, and I was not immune to the effect. The operator of this place must have sensed some small reaction in me, for he cackled wildly, and then pulled a key out from inside his shirt, handing it to me whilst it was still quite warm. "A sovereign, sir, a nice gold sovereign, han' if yer likes wot yer sees up them stairs, fer another sovereign, I'll tells yer wot nights your feller comes in 'ere. Yer goes up the back stairs, han' takes the third door on yer right, han' then yer'll get a proper eyeful."

I handed over the coin and followed his instructions, suffering an agony of embarrassment as I was sure that every eye in the room was fixed upon me and knew precisely where I was going and precisely what I was intending to do. As I climbed those rickety, dark and dirty stairs, with their smell of the spent seed of countless men, my heart grew heavier. What *was* Holmes doing, coming to a place like this? Surely, there were more salubrious places, the kind of places perhaps that tradesmen would use, that would serve him just as well, with equal freedom from recognition, but with far less filth? Did they service some vice here that was too abominable to be even mentioned elsewhere? Is that why he frequented the dregs of society? I was filled with fear and shameful though it is to admit it, curiosity burned through me like a fever.

I came to the door, the handplate blackened with the many times it had been used to push this door open. I entered the cubicle and closing that door behind me, locked it firm, tugging on the handle several times to ensure my safety. I barely cast a glance around myself, for I was in little more than a coffin standing on end, with a small 'O' of light slivering through the coarse wooden wall. Below the 'O', there was a patch, visible even in the faint light of the dark-lantern, that I suspected was the mark of what I had smelled so clearly in the stairwell. I stepped forward to slide the latch of wood aside, revealing the room beyond, but taking a moment to position myself carefully, for in my fastidiousness, I had no desire to come in contact with that



besmeared wall.

Thus it was a moment after I opened the spy-hole before I placed my eye to it, and so my ears and brain had warning ere my eyes ever saw. The voice I heard was instantly recognisable as Holmes, but in tones to which I had never once before been privy. He sounded hoarse, as if he had been racing, and almost mewling, as if in a terrible state, but I knew it was not pain. To hear Holmes, in so private a moment, in such pleasure gave me pause, but I was too weak to turn aside without first looking. I had, after all, still to ensure that his vice was only that of the Greeks and nothing more infamous. With trepidation, I looked through the hole. The room I saw was lit flickeringly by fireplace, candles and the steady low glow of lamps gilding the place somewhat and taking the edge off the insalubrious, sorry state of the room. The walls were bare brick, yellowed plaster clinging tenaciously here and there, the floor bare wood, with suspicious staining in several spots. There was a wash-stand in one corner and upon it, a chipped and aged cheap enamelled water jug and bowl, a threadbare, greyed linen towel hanging over the bar. No window alleviated the gloom of the walls, nor any prints or brightness of any kind.

It was only after I had examined the room that I could bring myself to look upon my friend. My breath caught in my throat and tears sprang to my eyes. Holmes, my dear friend, was humiliated, on the floor upon bent knees, allowing another man's member entry to his mouth. But there was such an expression on his face! It was as if he did not perceive the shame of his actions, only the pleasure he was so obviously gleaning from this vile act. His mouth was wide-opened, and all around it gleamed wetly, even as he pressed it into the brown pubic hair of the man he had paid. It was then that I dared to observe Holmes' partner in this sinful act.

Thus was it, in that seedy, debased room that I found my answer of why Holmes came here, and nowhere else. It was here that I found out his darkest, most painful secret. The man was of average height, quite stocky, but not fat.

His skin was extremely fair, although his complexion was slightly ruddy, the mark of a man in excellent health. His hair was brown, with some waviness to it, moustaches well-trimmed and thick. His eyes, as I could see even in this light, were of a most unusual shade of blue. His hands were strong, used to work, but not of the manual kind. He was, then, in other words, a very reasonable facsimile for me.

So that was Holmes' secret, that was why he always began this adventure by donning the one gift I had ever given him, for he observed neither Christmas nor birthdays. He came here, amidst this filth and disease so that he could have from me that which I was unable to give. I felt the pain stab me deep in my heart, that I should be the cause of Holmes' slide to a place so repugnant as this, where he risked far worse than recognition. The disease that must abound here, fed by the incalculable numbers of men that must use that body as Holmes used it. Yet, as I watched, I began to perceive that he did not so much use that body as worship it. It was heart-breaking to watch him as he, with eyes closed, kissed so tenderly every inch of that man's chest. You can imagine what kind of shock it was to me when I found myself thinking of him not as 'that man', but rather as 'me', for it was dreadfully obvious that to Holmes, 'that man' was his 'dear Watson'. It was my repeated observation that he had always said that phrase with peculiar warmth, and although my intellect had known it for long, this was the moment my heart grasped it. Holmes loved me as truly as ever a man loved a woman, and with as much sincerity and depth of feeling as any of God's creatures has had the grace to know.

I could not tear my eyes away from the depraved scene in front of me, such debauchery quite beyond my ken, despite my well-travelled background. I considered myself a man of the world, and that part of me was not in the least surprised to see what before had been mere clinical descriptions of mentally deranged behaviour and off-coloured jokes in the Mess Hall, but the gentleman in me recoiled, my heart

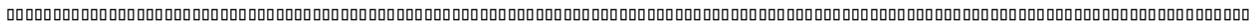
stunned and reeling, whilst my body remained transfixed. A peculiar change came over me, not all at once, as it does when one feels quite ill, but rather gradually, as one absorbs a new lesson in life. The more keenly I observed Holmes—observed, not merely saw—the more difficult it became to remember that this was a sin, and if one had, as I had, reason to be less than didactic in the following of fire-and-brimstone Scripture, then there was still the knowledge that my own profession would label Holmes unbalanced. The mere thought of it! It was so utterly preposterous to think of Mr. Sherlock Holmes as deranged, to consider that great brain to be diseased, he, who had the sharpest, keenest, most stupendous intellect in all of England! It was then, I believe, that the scales were ripped from my eyes and I saw as Holmes had so often tried to make me see, which is to say clearly, with logic and reason, not the preconceptions of habit. I fear he would have been sorely disappointed in me, however, for although it was intellect that allowed me to see him clearly, it soon was passed over in favour of feeling. How my heart was wrung for him! I would not have believed it possible that he could feel so, that all those years of cold disdain had hidden so very much passion and such sweet affection. There was in me no small vanity, and it distressed me to see that approbation and fondness which I had so long sought, squandered on nothing more than a prostitute rented for a few hours. To see all that love poured out onto the sere and dusty floor of that squalid apartment, all that bright and pure feeling sullied and dirtied by the fetid atmosphere of this foul place, oh, how it infuriated me.

Through all this thought and stormy emotion, I kept my watch. In the other room, Holmes was now lying on the greyed linen of the bed, the rustling of the straw reaching my ears quite clearly. He was writhing now, in that manner so familiar to any man who has known the joys of carnal love, save that it was he, not a woman, who had legs wrapped around a body that was to cleave to him. He was moaning, those same noises I had heard before, but now there

were words intermingled, words I blush to even remember. They were the kinds of words a man likes to hear from his bedmate, unless of course it is his lady wife. If it is, however, his mistress, those are the very words to gladden his heart and quicken his body.

The other man, or as I have already said, I was thinking of him as ‘me’, was caressing Holmes, with very firm gesture and lingering tongue, suckling on his nipples as a babe would his wet-nurse. In my unsuspecting ignorance, it had never occurred to me that one man could take such time and consideration over another. This, for all its vile surroundings, was no six-penny fumble against the barracks wall. This was so painfully clearly Holmes’ little fantasy, his dream, what would be if I were only to say the word. His chest hair was so astonishingly dark against the milk of his skin, my eyes were drawn to it constantly, more especially so with ‘me’ using mouth and tongue to swathe a path through the straight, glossy hair to find twin pink nipples. Every time the other man would suck on Holmes’ pap, my friend would groan and reach his hands up to slide his fingers through thick brown hair. The other man pulled back, and it revealed both of them, as naked as the day they were each born. Both of them were in a state of extreme arousal, and Holmes’ member was standing up so straight that it quivered with his excitement, and with his every breath it would tap against his stomach, as if to remind him that it was ready. It was very flushed, a delightful rosy colour, and such a fine example of manhood that it was easy to understand why the Greeks had considered men the ones to be beautiful.

That part of me that is base was roiling, puerile curiosity raging as to what they were going to do next, whether or not I would see it all, or only what had already befallen. It was then that Holmes turned, kneeling like a dog on the bed, his weight taken on hands and knees, dark head bowed as he waited, gleaming in the flickering of candles. The other man—‘I’—moved in behind him and grasped ‘my’ member and—no, it is too shameful to admit. I cannot confess, and



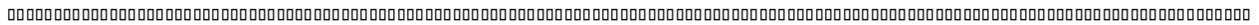
yet I must. To tell the truth all unvarnished is my only possible penance. As the other man grasped his member, I was overcome by the sounds and smells in the other room; I was overwhelmed by my own long abstinence after the death of my wife and quite without conscious thought, fumbled with my trouser buttons, breaking the thread of one in my haste, until I held my own member in my hand, as did my counterpart who even now knelt poised behind Holmes. As anyone who has seen the Greek collection in the magnificent Victoria and Albert Museum would agree, there was no possible doubt as to what would happen next. My breathing was hoarse and shallow, sounding like a locomotive, so loudly that I was sure Holmes must hear, but he was so completely enraptured by his own dreams that he was oblivious to anything but his love. My other self leaned forward, using his—my—hands to part the twin globes that gleamed so palely in the gentle light and then he used his right hand to hold his member and guide that fully erect flesh into my dear friend.

My heart was close to bursting as I saw this, all the old, sacred words tumbling through my head as my feelings tumbled through my heart. ‘And two shall cleave as one.’ ‘And ye two shall be as one, joined in the flesh and the spirit.’ All the while, my hand was moving rapidly, a piston of pleasure upon my manhood, keeping rhythm with the deep plunges of my other self. In fulfillment of my base curiosity, Holmes suddenly arched up, until he was kneeling tall, a Priapus statue, his back pressed against ‘my’ chest, my other hands wrapped around him, stroking through that hair that looked softer even than an infant’s silken locks, and Holmes was once more exposed to my eyes. The visible proof of his love was standing straight before him and as I watched, as my hand moved upon myself, as my other self moved within Holmes, he tightened his fist around himself and joined with us in this atavistic, primal rhythm, forging us all together, until I felt myself to be more surely the master of his pleasure than the man he had paid to impersonate me. My phallus was anxious in

my hand, and I could see the intensity of the moment carved upon Holmes’ face, imbued with all the warmth and deep affection that I had long despaired of seeing upon his face for any human being. But it was there, indeed, to a magnitude I had not conceived possible in anyone, and I was thrilled to the depths of my selfish soul to know that it was for me and me alone.

I was sorely stimulated by the cries coming from that other room, by the smells and sights of them—of us—so heavily engaged in the pleasures of the flesh. It was so astoundingly beautiful! The scabrous room faded in shame from impinging upon such glory, paling from my vision, from my mind, until it was only Holmes, and I, and the love he bore me which I could finally believe equalled the fondest feelings I harboured for him. It was wondrous warm, to feel my hand upon my phallus and believe it to be the chintz-smooth heat of his inner being hastening me home. My shoulders remembered the weight and solidity of his arm around them, my hands remembered the times when he had slipped his own long-fingered elegance in to join with my more prosaic limbs, but all of me remembered with a shudder of affection, the way he would look at me in our rooms on Baker Street, which we had shared for so many years. Nights stole over me again, of Holmes lying languid upon the sofa, scraping his bow ‘cross his violin, the sweetest strains of romance singing forth, to be met, and matched, by the warm brown of his eyes as his gaze alit upon me in my chair by the fire. He always preferred that I sit there, ‘where I can see you, my dear fellow’, and now I understood so well that desire of his. In the room beyond, in the glow and the orange softness of light, if one slitted one’s eyes, one could be back in Baker Street, were it not for the scrofulous furnishings here.

In that light, it was I who was with Holmes, it was I who gave him his heart’s ease, yet it was also I who stooped before a peep-hole, massaging my member, bringing myself to the pinnacle of pleasure with Holmes, carried along beyond thought, beyond morals, beyond ethical



considerations, washed away by the intensity of emotion flooding through me like the worst storms of January. Holmes was an image of perfection before my eyes, a long, clean line the Masters would have hastened to paint. He was arched, taut and lean as a longbow, and as trembling with contained power. His body was milk white, fairer than any beauteous lady ever seen by man, his hair blacker than the ebony from the Dark Continent, and by far the more mysterious. My fingers so longed to touch that soft dark-hued silk, but I could not. It was with a groan from both our mouths that my 'other' spread his fingers 'cross Holmes' chest, tangling blunt, practical fingers through hair. Holmes echoed us, the merest instant behind, and then his head dropped back, to lean on the clavicle of the man who was giving him love for me. The line of his neck, the strength of his jaw, art to be displayed in a gallery, gilt with the glow of fire and light, but it was his expression of purest ecstasy which superseded it all.

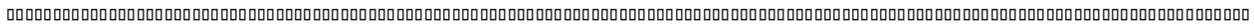
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I—the other—was still moving deep within Holmes, sliding in and out with small, tender movements, occasionally slowing his pace until all I—he—did was make tiny, circular caresses inside, caresses which drove Holmes to distraction. I could feel my body ready itself for climax, the heaviness below my phallus rising up to cradle my member, the pleasure shooting all through me, setting my every nerve to tingle and my very soul to singing. Holmes felt it too, keening his pleasure, his hand blurring in his desperation to attain that most exquisite of peaks, and I pushed him forward, bending over him, thrusting into him now as one never must with the gentler sex for fear of bringing hurt or fear or revulsion, but oh, how Holmes loved it, the more a man I was for him. Hard, I pushed, with all my strength, trying to fill him, to take away all the lonely isolation that cursed him so. I succeeded, his face contorting with delight, my body pounding into his, both our voices joining together to cry a litany of praise all the way to Heaven's Gates. He was calling my name, over and over, fervently, passionately, begging me to

love him. With one last great, heaving thrust, our bodies yielded to my will, and our seed pulsed from us, to be spent, wisely spent, in the expression of love.

I came to myself with my trousers and drawers around my knees and my hand wet and sticky with unmentionable passion, my seed mingling on the wall with the sins of the many. Shame washed over me, my skin turned ashen, my legs weak from both the carnal excess and the horror filling me. I reeled, stumbling, to collapse against the wall and thence the floor. To have committed so despicable an act! And upon—with—my dearest friend! How could I do such a thing, how could I sully the name of friendship so? A soft sound from the other room brought me to my feet once more, and I compounded my sin by returning to peer through the peep-hole at my friend in this most private of vices. Holmes, stoic, cold, unfeeling Holmes, was lying on his back, cradling the man he pretended to be me to his chest, stroking his hair, whispering words of love to him, all those words barricaded inside from the first days of his cruel and unloved childhood, all the way until the days of cruel and unloved majority. To see so much love, and to infer, therefore, the agony that must reside alongside it in the dark secrets of his mind, it was no wonder, then, that he was so moody and so fraught. Some of the guilt of his reprehensible drug practices fell upon my shoulder to weigh upon me. As I had known before I began this night's misadventures, I had it within my power to change it all, were I only to say the word.

I left him then, ensnared in the lying embrace of a man who would forget him as soon as the money was spent, to return home to the rooms I had for so long shared. In the hansom and in the comfortable old chair, with the smell of Holmes' tobacco still lingering in the air, with his violin propped carelessly upon the mantle, his smoking jacket draped untidily across the back of the sofa, I sat and thought of my friend, and of my duties to him. I thought of what he wanted and of what I needed from him. I thought of the carnality of his love, as compared to what



I had always believed was the purity of my own. I thought also of my reaction to what I had seen and was sorely troubled, for how could I tell what had spurred such a reaction? Was this some secret part of myself I had never known, or merely the over-reaction of an unwillingly celibate man? Even if it were some dark secret of my own, the seeing was all very well, but could I actually do the physical? I had proved that I could watch such debauchery, but would I be able to perpetrate it? If I were to do so, would my conscience let me be, or would it hound me, poisoning all and destroying Holmes in the process? And what of Holmes, harbouring such deep and abiding passions for me in such lonely crenellations? What of him, with all his years of love unrequited? What to do for a man who needed so that he was willing to commit crime—for let us not forget that what he and I had done this night was indeed criminal and carries a terrible sentence, prison being the least of it—to have a mere facsimile of me? Holmes, sinking to the putrid depths of the docklands to grasp a will-o'-the-wisp of pleasure as the nearest he could come to my hands. What to do for him? Was I willing to give up all my beliefs in what makes an Englishman a gentleman, for Holmes? Were I to prove willing, would I be able to do so, or would I cave in to the wrongness of it all and hurt him ever more by cutting him off after it started?

And then I thought of him again, as I had seen him from that coffin of a glory hole, arched and erect, a living pæan to Priapus, all aglow from without from the lamps, all aglow from within from the love. So beautiful, so strong, so needful. So very much mine, were I only to ask. I thought of the feeling of my flesh grasped firm in my own hand, and contemplated the image of my flesh gripped by Holmes' flesh. I thought of his loneliness, and of his pain, and of what a

dreary little lot life promised him, without me. Love is a safe harbour, and I was its master.

I sat up until the light of day began to gild our windows, bringing beauty and promise with it, the cleansing light of God. And still I thought of Holmes, and of the wages of sin. As I heard his weary tread upon the stair, I rose to face that window, and the light of God as it rose over the tattered and inconsequential rooftops of man, so that I would not need to gaze upon Holmes as I told him what I must. His hand was upon the handle, as God's was upon the world, his step spilling into the room, as God's light spilled into the room. I heard his sudden intaking of breath, sensed his horror, sensed his pain, crucified upon my morality. I turned then, for I could not be such a cad as to turn my back to him as I turned him out of my life. For a moment, I caught him unawares and I saw all the agonies of Hell writhing in his eyes; then his chin came up and he steadied himself, girding his loins for the sentence he knew I was going to carry out, the Black Cap upon my head. There were, just faintly, the smallest glimmerings of tears in his eyes, and I hesitated before such pain. The light filled the room, and I felt God's warmth upon me and heard the warmth of Holmes' voice as he had cried my name in love and passion, as my body had filled his and taken away all the coldness within him. The light, the dawning of God's sacred day, was warm upon me and in that instant of life, I changed the course of ours forever. I put one hand out towards him, reaching for his strength to guide us both through this, as I sought His Love and Forgiveness at the same instant.

“My dearest Holmes,” I said, and then his hand was in mine and His Hand rested warmly upon us both.

beer and wincing at the pop, Doyle seemed normal; or as normal as he ever was. Right from the start Bodie had suspected Doyle had depths of strangeness untapped by most: a changeling, a dæmon whose choice, for reasons all his own, was to fight for the angels, not the dark.

Straight as a die: honest to a fault: put with this a morality so extreme it was in itself almost a parody of corruption, and it all added up to the paradox of character which Cowley needed from his hand-picked army, hired to fight the worst things in the world.

Doyle had a rare temper, not the noisy vociferous tantrum which might explode over a lost sock or a missed parking space; those even Doyle did not expect to be taken too seriously, but occasionally something else showed itself. A cold and vengeful fury for those who had annoyed him, or made him look small: times when Doyle, under cover, had been forced to take humiliation from some carefree soul who thought he was an easy target, exactly what he seemed: but Doyle brooded and did not forget. Certain telling little events made Bodie uncomfortable to remember them: the former colleague, for instance, Doyle had never forgiven for making him look foolish in some prank years ago, languishing now in some forgotten hell-hole, never knowing whose word in whose ear had had his minor drugs charge made an example of. Nothing illegal, not even unfair: it was simply that extenuating circumstances did not enter into Ray Doyle's scale of justice, and mercy was not his style.

And Bodie. A mercenary with a twisted elegance of outlook, as casual about life as death, Bodie was a suave psychopath to Doyle's green-eyed paganism, fighting for the angels at his side, though god knew why.

They had been good as partners, one of Cowley's inspired teamings; fiercely loyal to one another even if they were not exactly friends; but now they were off-course and drifting. There was one way to go, or there was another: but to undo the dark, unmentionable sin of the past, to unclench its twisted fingers from

everything they said and did and felt now, was impossible: somehow, they had to live with it.

And so here Bodie was, lounging on Doyle's bed and drinking from a can of beer while Doyle put together a sandwich in the kitchen. One bored blue eye on the screen, Bodie flicked channels relentlessly: soap opera, sport, cartoons, black and white film—

Doyle appeared in the doorway wearing a white chef's apron and kissing his fingertips. "Le dîner, mon copain." He twirled the plate on his hand. "Ç'est magnifique. Though I do say so myself."

Bodie's stomach was tortuously tied. "I'm not that hungry."

"*Croque monsieur*," Doyle continued, advancing undeterred, confiding: "That's a cheese sandwich to you, mate."

"You have it," Bodie said, uninterested.

The sandwich landed on his chest.

"Christ, Ray!" Bodie sat up in a hurry, knocking over his beer; the toasted sandwich, hot and greasy, fell onto the bed. He ate it, to get rid of it. Doyle threw himself down beside his partner and lounged against the pillows. With one hand he stuffed the sandwich into his mouth, with the other he reached for the TV flipper and went through the channels: black and white film, snooker, cartoons...

"Pass me a hanky," he said, through a mouthful of sandwich, indicating: "wardrobe."

The handkerchiefs were in a drawer within. Bodie extracted one and noticed, as he turned to pass it to Doyle, something imperfectly hidden behind rows and rows of jeans and shirts. His heart jolted and his stomach turned, as a vista of memories he had buried fluttered darkly in his mind like moths, and from nowhere he heard the faint, eerie sound of bells.

The devil stepped into the room and stood looking, interested.

Anger Bodie had suppressed rose to torment him; the past surrounded him like incense, richly scented with emotions best left unstirred. To keep silence would be the best thing he could do; being Bodie, he defied dam-



nation and chose, instead, the worst.

“That little job well and truly over, isn’t that right, Ray?”

Doyle followed his gaze to the edge of fur along brown cloth. With one finger, he stirred a circle in the condensation on the top of his beer can, round and round; his gaze on Bodie was quite steady.

“You know how it is.”

“But I see you’ve still got the gear,” Bodie said, bending an amiable glance towards his partner. “Just in case, I suppose.”

Doyle’s grey-green eyes blazed sudden ice. “And what’s that supposed to mean?” Very carefully, very gently, he set his empty plate on the bedside unit, dusted his hands and the crumbs from his shirt, watching Bodie with a cat’s slanted concentration.

“Well, I’d have thought you’d want to rid yourself of all that filth as soon as possible. You know what they say: live in dirt long enough and it sticks.”

Doyle laughed coldly. “Oh, come off it, Bodie. Don’t be such a bloody hypocrite.”

“And what, my Raymond, is *that* supposed to mean?” Bodie smiled, a clever and terrifying smile. The flames rose around them; fire and brimstone faintly scented the air. Doyle chose to be perverse.

“Oho, a slight case of diplomatic amnesia. All right, mate, I understand.” He winked outrageously.

Bodie wanted to choke him. He grasped the bedclothes in tense fingers and stared from the foot of the bed at his curlyheaded partner, half his size but a dirty fighter. He had his back now to the offending robe, which roused in him the most disturbing and violent feelings, bonded as it was to the past, to the wicked thing they had done: bent on expiation he turned round, yanked the wardrobe door fully open, ready to tear the garment up with his bare hands.

A worse horror met his disbelieving eyes.

He stared, utterly silent, and heard the obscenity of Doyle’s laughter behind him.

It stopped when Bodie turned, six feet and 170 pounds of heavy muscle, his eyes sardonic and murderous.

“Don’t tell me. You got attached to them.”

Doyle didn’t say anything. He stayed where he was, prone, shockingly vulnerable, refusing the option of defence. Indeed, his eyes stared up in mocking provocation, defiant and bold.

Bodie kicked aside a tangle of fetishes, the sad trappings of sadism. He continued, with grim and sinister geniality, “Or, I know. Secretly you hoped for a Master?” From the hoard of peculiar toys, Bodie selected the whip, the very whip which in Doyle’s hands had lashed with a furious beauty, flying to draw blood from tender skin: he weighed it in his hands and considered Doyle with measuring eyes. “Sweetheart, you never know: I may oblige you.”

The endearment venomous, the offer dripped black poison. Doyle laughed up at him and kicked his foot against the duvet, casual and leisurely. “No chance, mate: I know you. You couldn’t do it.”

As an invitation, a provocation, it was hardly subtle. Doyle tossed his head with roguish coquetry: but something more flickered beneath, a terrible desperation, a mad dervish dancing wildly in his eyes.

Bodie hated him for that.

It was the sweetest, dirtiest temptation he had ever had, to lay into Ray Doyle with slashing strokes, punish him for lascivious acts with half the world, the whip singing in his hand: he felt the thing vibrant, eager to snap through the air and take the blood it hungered for.

Bodie threw the whip down, hard, so that Doyle caught it instinctively and winced.

“You sick bastard,” Bodie said, breathing hard. “You poor, sick bastard. Grew on you, did it? Now you can’t do without it?” His mouth twisted, savagely. “I know the story, Ray. It starts as a game, and then you find you can’t stop playing.”

“It isn’t like that,” Doyle said.

“*Then why hang on to it?*” Bodie hurled at him, all of his anger and his shame blazing like a torch, burning the last hope of salvation away. Abruptly, Doyle’s attitude changed, melting him into a pliant sprawl. His sudden smile was sweet, deepening the crease in his cheek so that it flashed like a dimple. “You said it yourself. To—play with.” And he drew the whip between his legs obscenely, like a lover, a deviant caress rich with subtle eroticism. Bodie was disgusted, and fiercely excited, and could not take his eyes from his wanton partner. It was already too late: already they were doomed.

“That’s a dirty game, Doyle,” he said from a tight, tight throat, astonished and ashamed by his intense and urgent responses to something his intellect was sickened by, even as his body yearned.

Doyle kissed the tip of the whip and threw it away. He held out his arms. “But you want to join in.” His eyes, insolent, travelled the length of Bodie to linger, appropriately.

“I don’t think you mean this, Doyle,” Bodie said through gritted teeth, undoing his belt buckle. “But you’ve done it anyway; and now you’ll have to take the consequences.” With a shocking thrill he saw the first apprehensive flicker from Doyle, the nervous sideways glance. Bodie advanced on him with deliberation. “You’re asking for this, aren’t you? Well, you can have it.”

Very carefully, with a lover’s tendresse, he unclasped Doyle’s belt, pulled down the jeans and the scrap of warm cotton he wore beneath, pushed up his T-shirt to his armpits. He opened his own trousers just as far as was necessary and no more.

Half naked, an appealing sprawl with his clothing disarranged, Doyle looked sweetly ripe for rape. His hard organ curved up erect; it looked huge over his narrow hips, straining halfway up to his heart, a vivid colour against the pale skin of his belly. A teardrop glistened at the slit. Bodie smiled tenderly, brutally. “I think you’re enjoying this even more than I am. Which—” he knelt over Doyle’s face— “only

goes to show—” he paused, with the tip of his cock an inch from Doyle’s perfect, quivering mouth— “just how beyond help you are. And sweetheart—” his hand closed, suddenly, on the fragile windpipe of the man beneath him— “if you bite me, you won’t find breathing very comfortable: just a friendly warning.”

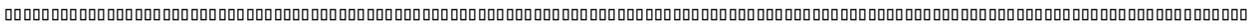
Doyle’s eyes looked up at him, shining, somehow sad. Bodie shut his mind to them. Madness, this was insanity; but he fucked the warm wet hole of Doyle’s tender mouth in a white-hot blaze of lust, giving vent to all the anger and the fear and the sheer sexual glory of passion unleashed and power gained. A gasp left him as orgasm surged; he grabbed at curls and ground Doyle’s face hard into the musk of his loins as his cock extended itself and spat sweet fire down Doyle’s throat, a wonderful physical joy spreading warmly through him, convulsing him with shudders of glorious sensation.

Looking at Doyle afterward, with his heart still pounding fiercely, Bodie didn’t regret a second of it, not one second; it had been far too marvellous for that. Doyle’s eyes, closed, were wet with tears; Bodie brushed them away with his thumb and tasted sweet salt. “Was that what you wanted?” he whispered to him tenderly. “Right up your street, eh mate?”

Unable to speak, Doyle turned his head away from him. Bodie caressed his chest gently and saw Doyle’s cock, a pale, sad little curl on his belly. “Too rough for you, sweetheart? Or— not rough enough?” He leaned over and picked up the whip from the floor. “There.” He brushed Doyle’s genitals with the leather thongs, trailing them over him kindly. “Is this what you like?” Slowly, Doyle’s body responded to this inhuman lover, the cool corrupt touch of an artefact. His eyes, wide open, watched Bodie all the time; even in the sharp-edged ecstasy of orgasm: the last and best bravado of all.

And now there was no hope.

Pride and perversity, the weird ritual dances of pleasure sharpened by pain; they had let these things out of the box and the conse-



quence was damnation. Perhaps, once, they had dreamed of something different, and never spoken: but it was out of reach forever now.

Perhaps it had been theirs for the taking, once.

Once upon a time.
Before...

Tired, Bodie lay down beside his partner; his hand groped for and found Ray's. They lay there hand in hand. Doyle was sleeping sweetly, his breathing a noisy rasp, his cheeks streaked with the silvery salt of tears; his fingers entwined tightly with Bodie's. Bodie shivered, and burned, as if with a fever: he could not sleep.

The present was no comfort at all: but when he shut his eyes it was to find the horror of the past waiting, unpurged, to unfold its little drama again before his cringing mind.

They were in hell, no doubt at all of that: the wheels were set in motion; all they could do was suffer to be swept along, and pay the price for eternity.

And so he had come, anonymous, into the stormsweet world of depravity where the Master now ruled; opened for a while the chink of dark fire that ran beneath the real world where people worked and laughed and played, the currents that ran deep beneath the rational mind, and he discovered forbidden enchantment; it engulfed him.

Briefly masked, two harlequin diamonds shielding his eyes, the man who was and yet was not known to him led him into velvet passages of desire, spiked with thorns that only sweetened the pleasure, the rough voice harshened now with command.

And he listened to it, shivering, and obeyed because damnably he wanted that, and only that; and the sound of weird bells celebrated his subjugation. The whip whispered silk, and struck home on bared skin, drawing nerve-shrieking pain, exotic pleasure equal in strength: he knelt for it without meekness, seduced into wanting by that voice of subtle magic, beg for me, kneel for me—

He tasted leather, and felt only rushed, dark excitement frightening in its intensity, a tidal wave, too fast, too much for him. The whip, enchanting, stung along skin and teased him. The Master spoke to him, harsh, imperious, and his own voice answered only in gasps, whispery. The high sexual tension gathered, and peaked—

A moment of stillness lasted too long. He waited, in an agony of wanting.

"BLEED FOR ME," said his master, and he laughed, a soft, chilling sound just as the whip struck home.

Kneeling bared on fur, he cried out, the warm sweet pleasure at his centre ripening, overflowing: and he was coming with unbearable glory even as the silver-tongued whip, expert, drew blood.

Awakening from the maelstrom to silence, tasting the warm mouth of the man who now knelt beside him, holding him, something he had not expected and yet it came to him as naturally as breathing; for an infinity they stayed that way, equals once more, very close.

Then the crack opened, and closed behind him with finality, and he was out in the world again, with the knowledge of a thousand years on his shoulders.

And that was the end of innocence.

For H.G., though she is too nice for it: but she knows why. 5/90



crotch.

A quick slash of his hand, and the behemoth was stopped, just in time. "I'm man enough. I'm man enough to choose who, and when."

A rumble went through the bar, a verbal closing in of ranks, and then the chairs began to grate across the floor as Warrior after Warrior rose to the challenge of the soft-bellied Human. This, some of the faces said, was going to be fun. This, some of the faces said, was going to be dinner.

Riker propped himself up against the bar with his habitual easeful slouch, sipping with manufactured unconcern at a drink that was burning a hole in his stomach, right beside the one that fear was gnawing in him. Now he knew why Starfleet so strongly refused Humans permission to wander amidst the nether regions of the Klingon city. Here, they were barely tolerated, and then only for amusement value. And so ignorant, they were nothing more than fresh meat for a culture that demanded rituals of pain to aver manhood. A culture, where the marriage bed meant public consummation, another in their many rituals of blood. Tonight, Riker thought, he just might be another...

"He is ugly, that is certain, but he is softer than a woman, soft as a bedroom pet. He is not a real man, for he has no beard, but it would be..." air hissed through spear-head teeth, "interesting to see if he could hold a man."

A tremble through the room, a ripple, twenty Klingon warriors rousing to attention, and Riker felt as if every cock in the room was aimed at him.

"It would be more interesting still to see *how many* men he could hold."

A wave of anticipation undulated through the crowd and they drew closer, entombing Riker in a semi-circle of wall-to-wall Klingons. Surreptitiously, he tried to see out of the corner of his eye if he could escape over the table. The old woman, eyes afire, had a double-bladed knife poised at the exposed nape of his neck. He turned back to face the crowd. This

really was not quite what he'd had in mind for this particular adventure...

"I am senior here. He is mine first. He is small to my largeness and I want to feel his soft human flesh split for me."

"His blood will ease your pleasure." Riker could have killed whoever came up with *that* bright idea. When Security found his body, Picard was going to kill him.

"And then I shall have him."

"And I shall taste hiss fleshh."

"NO! Desist."

"Human lover!"

"Suckled by humans—is that why you protect their weaknesses? Are you weakened by them too?"

"Have they demanned you, Worf, that you come to the aid of a beardless 'cho`më?"

Riker stared with unfeigned relief as his shipmate strode forward, shoving warriors out of his way. Toe to toe with the leader of this little *salon*, Worf stopped, snarling his words up into the face glowering at him. "You may not do this to him for..."

"For what reason? Are *you* going to stop us? Are you going to stop *all* of us? All by yourself? Or will your..." he reached out to scrape one horned glove down Riker's face, a welt of blood beading behind, "'cho`më come storming to your assistance?"

Riker might have been stupidly naïve to come here, but he was not a fool. He took one long, sobering look around the group of warriors, at the blades glinting so prettily and deadly in the lights, and knew that it would be death for both of them. And there was no way out. The Klingons would not let them go, not now, not since challenge had been taken, and even if they were willing to do so, Worf could not back down, not and still be able to think of himself as a Klingon. Riker cursed himself to hell and back. This was not what he had planned on, not at all... He opened his mouth to speak, but Worf forestalled him.

"You cannot, for I have claimed him as kah'zhai."



And then it was there and thought was gone, driven from his head by the big cock plunging into him, hot steel tempered in the coolness of his body. A scream of unadulterated joy burst from him, and he arched up, reaching with his hands to grip Worf, curling himself up until Worf held him close, cock buried deep in Riker's body, Riker's cock nudging at rippled belly. Riker was close enough to kiss, but dared not, settling instead for open-mouth licking of the sculpted face, rubbing against the bristle of beard, sucking in the tip of a mustache, letting it go, instinctively avoiding the ear and stretching up to reach the forehead ridges. A collective moan issued from the crowd, Worf's own reaction voiced for him. And then Riker's tongue was skiing over the ridges, hands ruffling hair, freeing it from the confines of neatness to wave and curl around his fingers. All the while, Worf plunged in and out of him, plundering him for their pleasure, all of it cycling through them and through them. Riker felt his own arousal threaten annihilation, collapsing back onto the table, lifting his head only far enough to see Worf's black hardness disappear into his own flesh, the whiteness pinked under the unrestrained thrusting of Worf's body. He was so huge, now, holding Worf within, and Worf was huge and the pleasure kept building, building, and the sweat was dripping off him to pool on the table and Worf's sweat was dripping onto him, to pool in the middle of his chest. Riker dabbled a finger in the wetness, sucking on it, the sugar-sweet taste delighting him. He wondered how Worf's cum would taste... Another buck up his

ass, massaging him and Worf was coming, filling Riker to overflowing, the quiver of cock triggering him and sending him over the edge, his white cum leaping from him to linger, shockingly pale, on Worf's chest.

And then it was over, and he was lying there sated, the afterglow fading before it had begun, melancholy harrying it from him, a bucket of cold water thrown over a rutting animal.

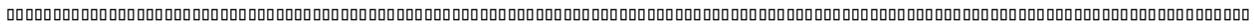
He pushed Worf aside and rose to his feet, his eyes growing haunted. "Holodeck off. Erase program. Repeat, *erase* program. Command override—no record of this program is to be kept."

Worf disintegrated before his eyes, bleeding into the bar, the entirety of his fantasy dissolving into black and yellow.

"Program erased. No record retained."

Riker picked his clothes up from their heap on the floor, beside where his version of Worf had dropped his own uniform and redressed, very slowly, very methodically. A shower first, then to the gym, for his daily session of torture: wrestling with Worf without once betraying the least bit of desire. No fraternizing with those crew directly in an officer's command. And no fraternizing with a Klingon who would see it as being made nothing more than kah'zhai—pleasure purchase.

Riker paused, tugged his tunic down firmly, straightened his spine and walked forth into the utopian brightness of the *Enterprise*, his dark secrets once more behind closed doors.



thigh would press his cock hard against the stretched leather, the tensile skin pulling on him, drawing his foreskin back with every breath, until, at the door of The Pit, he was fully hard, and pulsing, and exuding raw sex. He slipped his credit keycard into the slot, a momentary image of what tonight would bring sliding through his mind, and as the maw opened in front of him, even the music skipped a beat, a moment of absolute silence marking his entrance. Magnificent, he stood, at the top of the stairs for all eyes to be raised to him, for all to look up to, bound, in tacit promise and sweet allure, in leather, black from head to toe, the light glinting and sheening on him like sweat, kissing his hair, adding mystery to his dark eyes and voluptuousness to his sculpted lips, catching, breathtakingly, upon his cock where it lay along his thigh, barely acquiescent to its leather constraint.

And then someone breathed, someone whispered in awe, and the spell shattered, piercing every man there with a sharp pang of lust. The singer resumed his song, the dancer his re-enactment of last night's sex, the patrons their hunt. And not one of them could take their eyes from Avon, drawn to him by his hunger, their hunger feeding his until there was a tangible aura of sex in the club, a starvation caused and, his body preened, satisfied by only Avon. He had them, or would, those that he wanted anyway. As many as he chose. In whatever manner he chose. Willing victims, every one, to the arrogance of the quintessential topman.

As he descended lower, he searched out the specialities offered by the club and the men, like him, who came here for the satiation of needs deemed too *outré* by even the *demi-monde* of gay life. Even men from the Federation Space Academy came here for those things unavailable to them from their victims—or trainees, as the Government so fondly termed them. It was here, and at clubs like this in festering pits the Galaxy over, that certain...unusual tastes were satisfied. Wildness and danger and risk and fear: these were all things explored with rabid enthusiasm here. Power. Pleasure. Submission. Pain. Spe-

cial predilections: those that not even every man here would endure. But there was nothing they would not tolerate. Each man here had his own fetish, his own desire, and he would brook no disapproval. Not here, in this small, debased haven, for if there were no acceptance here, then there was no acceptance anywhere that Men had populated.

Too many needs catered to here, too many for Avon to take in immediately. He looked around, slowly, noticing small fragments. So there he saw, over there, by the far wall, a tilted table, water hoses and nozzles draped and ready, and there, one of several leather slings, a man hooked into it, swaying gently as a hooded man slowly eased his fist deep inside him. And there, a man pilloried and chained, cock hard as he bore his punishment from a snaking line of leather-clad men. And Avon was honed sharper even than those hatchet-faced battle-axes, those men here who had killed and raped and pillaged, for his need was deeper even than theirs, and darker, and fuelled by a fear far more voracious than any that they knew:

Love.

That was Avon's one great terror: that he would love again, as he had Anna. And that he would love even more unwisely. Such as an idealist. A *suicidal* idealist. One who could kill Avon with Avon's own weakness: the cursed ability to love. Something he did, unfortunately, rather well, hence the cynicism, his last bastion against his better nature. *Well*, he thought to himself as he came down the stairs to so graciously join his audience of admirers, his half-smile addicting them, *my brother always was so very fond of our 'better natures' as he called it, but look where it got him. I think I'd rather be a cynic than dead. Even if he were happy before the...* His brother being a topic only for the still calmness of night, he turned his mind away from the sunlit memories. He closed all that part of his past out, opening himself instead to the lascivious stares caressing him, feeling every hungry lick of an eye against his groin, feeling his own

heat, and theirs, as they stared at him, needing him, needing, needing...

He crossed the floor, the crowd automatically parting before his aristocratic autocracy. Or simply to see him all the better, to see the undular movement of his backside as he passed the watchers by. To see the muscles clench and unclench, to round and hollow with every step, as his cock had risen and ebbed. Many a hand groped in his wake although no-one dared to touch him, not him, oh, no, not him. There was too much danger there, too much arrogance in his every move, too many signs declaring that the mere plebian masses dared not touch until he had given permission. And as yet, he had done nothing more than give them a sight for sore eyes and hard cocks. As Avon walked past them all, hands reached down to slip inside trousers, or reached out to cup a curved cheek, or pinch a peaked nipple, anonymous hands moving on anonymous bodies, a sighing symphony of flesh on flesh, sex flowing free and electric as the very air they breathed. As he stared in the bar mirror and watched the wake of touching rippling behind him, Avon smiled. Ah, yes, this was going to be quite a night...

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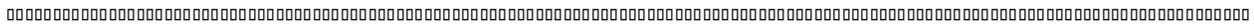
Elbows comfortably propped, he kept his attention on the mirror, paying scant attention to the man leaning next to him, not looking at the barman from whom he ordered a drink, not even letting on that he had noticed that the man on his right was wearing nothing more than leather leggings that left white flesh and brown pubic hair uncovered, all his vulnerabilities on public offer. Avon was far more interested in what he could see in the mirror. There was a man in a sling near the back of the room, a single spotlight shining down on his tanned skin, his only adornment the leather straps and glinting clasps that held his body suspended, as men clustered around him, using him, being used by him, a confluence of passion. And there, a flicker of motion drew Avon's attention: a man, manacled to the wall by his own custom-built handcuffs, another man suckling on him, face pressed against the rippled ridge of stomach muscle, the

rigid cock swallowed deep inside his throat. And there, a man, flat on his back on the inclining table, one man filling his mouth, another filling his rear, another thrusting into his clenched fist, another using the hair on the man's chest to feather sensation along his cock.

The smell of sex was far more intoxicating than the drink in Avon's hand. Finally, he abandoned the third-hand excitement of the mirror to watch the dancer on the bar as he gyrated, knees bent, back arched, a paying customer's finger twisting inside him to the syncopated rhythm of the singer. And all the while, Avon could feel his heartbeat echo in his own cock, could feel the pulse of his blood sighing against his leathers, could feel his own excitement mount. He faced his back to the bar, looking around the large room with ever-increasing satisfaction. There wasn't a single face there that was even vaguely familiar, no-one who even peripherally reminded him of a single person he knew now or had known. Or, hopefully, whom he would ever know.

Anonymity. Undiluted, unpolluted, unequivocal anonymity—the perfect antidote to Roj Bloody Blake, Saviour of the Galaxy and Nemesis of cynicism the Universe over. Roj Blake. The thought soured his face as his interest in the unrestrained sex around him paled. Roj Blake, far more life-threatening than a whole flotilla of Federation battle cruisers. Those, he could fight, and easily, and were he to lose...well, death always had been a part of life. But Avon had a feeling that the price of losing to Blake would be far higher than dying. He had a horrible feeling that the price might be *living*, with his soul as dowry.

The drink in his glass shimmered, refracting light, eddying with Avon's emotion, even as his whole demeanour remained impassively sensual. Anna haunted him yet, even here, with men surrounding him, with male scents inundating him, male voices, male bodies, male sex. And she still lingered in the back of his mind like tears, tempting him, taunting him with something he could never quite grasp, some-



thing that was never quite right, dimming the rose-coloured glow, but never enough for him to be free of her. Perhaps, had she not died for him, he would be able to shake the love off. Perhaps, had she lived, disillusionment would have saved him, but she *had* died, and for him at that, which left him...easy meat. Ripe, ready to fall, hungry, hungry, hungry for someone to fill the hollow aching guilt and loneliness she had left behind.

Which, of course, brought him back to Blake, and this room of wall-to-wall raw sex and a safely anonymous need that Blake would never be able to fill. And that, *that* would be his lifesaver. He could hold that shield up high in front of himself every time Blake came too close, every time he caught himself watching the way the man's muscles rippled. Instead of his fingers itching to feel that strength for himself, he could remember the feeling of a stranger filling him, giving him the ultimate sexual satisfaction. And, having allowed a stranger to fuck him, he would never be tempted to surrender that one last inviolate area to Blake. Would never, *never* be tempted to give him that symbol of trust. Tonight he would yield, he would let a faceless cock fuck him into next week and rend him, ripping him away from this debilitating attraction that grew inside him every time he saw Blake.

Like the moment the knowledge had hit him, in the teleport room, over Centero, Vila standing at his side, nudging him...

"We're glad you're safe," Vila had said, looking happily at Blake and the newly-rescued Cally. "Aren't we?" he had prompted Avon. "Aren't we?" he reminded him, none too gently.

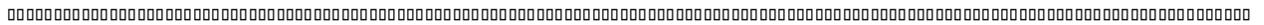
And unfortunately, perhaps tragically, Avon *was* glad, fiercely so, staring at Blake, seeing him whole and hearty and seductively strong. The moment had slipped through his fingers, but the knowledge it had brought did not and that night, alone and solitary and untouched in the sanctity of his own bed, he had found himself—cock in his hand and Blake in his mind—fantasising, dangerously, fatally, about being buggered for the first time in his life,

giving his tightly guarded trust to a man he was not sure was even entirely sane after the Federation had ravaged his mind. But Avon had lain there, fist clenched in taut pleasure, blurring in motion as he thought of Blake, in him, as no-one had ever been, a part of him as no-one had ever been, as Anna had been unable to be... His back arched up off the bed, muscles quivering as the pictures raced through his mind, inflaming him. Blake's body, big hands, soft and smooth, broad chest, even smoother, the firm plane of muscle tantalising, a glimpse of heavy genitals swinging free, just for a moment, in loose, dark trousers, making Avon's mouth water in anticipation. And Blake's voice, from the day they had found out about Travis.

"I was sure I had killed him."

Masterful, rich, deadly. Enticing in its strength, as all the mealy-mouthed philanthropy never ever could be. And that almost sexual anticipation on Blake's face at the thought of meeting Travis again, of, perhaps, besting him this time. And when the news had come of Cally's capture and Travis' approach, there had been that distillation of masculinity, as Blake had displayed it, making Avon breathless, thankful for the excuse of having just run on to the flight deck, for that explained his panting, and the gleam in his eyes had gone unnoticed, mis-filed as anger against Blake's high-handedness, not as arousal at his heavy-handed charisma which demanded—*demand*ed—that Avon desire him. And he had listened to the wordless seductions, just as he had listened to Blake's plan to rescue Cally, even as he had warned against the obviously fatal risks, whilst his mind had screamed its own warning of Blake's personal danger to Avon himself. To that, however, he had proved deaf, as many nights of solo satisfaction testified, every solitary climax accompanied by the oft-imagined sound of Blake's voice hoarse in orgasm, and the feel of him, exploding, splashing inside Avon, filling him, claiming him...

And all this was doing was stealing his protective anonymity away from him. Best to



forget the *Liberator* circling above his head like a metal carrion crow. Best to forget Blake. Best of all to forget the knowing nudge-nudge wicked glimmer of amusement in Blake’s eyes as Avon had opted for a spot of free time down here, in the best known flesh-pot in the quadrant. Here, amongst men who craved other men. Here, the Nirvana of the Galaxy where anything went. All one had to do was to brave the Pit, to descend level by level, until one had reached one’s own limit, until one dared not take another step. It was—or so the rumours had it—named ‘The Pit’ because no-one had ever reached the lowest level of all the layers of singular sexuality.

Looking around himself in this, the public room, Avon could well believe it. There were men here doing things that he would not even consider, no matter how twisted his life might be. He could not even conceive of allowing what the man in the porcelain tub was begging for. To each, as they say, their own... But over there, beside the stairs, now, that was precisely the kind of thing Avon was interested in, his antidote to his too, too personal interest in Blake. A man, braced against the wall, facing blank plastic, cock buried in a face he couldn’t see, being buggered by a stranger. *Yes*, his mind exulted, cock surging up at once, hard, against his trouserleg, *YES!* He took his first step forward, then stopped once more, leaning back against the bar. The appeal, as he considered the display, was partly in its very publicness. And witnesses, then, he would have witnesses that he had no need for Blake, just for the power of malesex. And the more public, the more men, and the more men, the less his need for Blake and the stronger his shield for the moment he had to face the mesmerising bastard again. Public.

“Yes,” he whispered and at the sibilant sound, the nearly naked man beside him whipped around, understanding the message imperfectly, dropping to his knees before this masterful man, pulling the fly open, grabbing Avon, bringing him forth and sucking him greedily, getting the first taste of this gorgeous topman. Avon groaned, gripping the kneeling

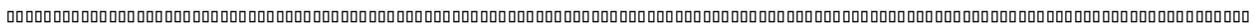
man’s hair, urging him in closer, thrusting hard into his mouth, grinning with feral delight as other hands plucked at his clothing, opening it up, pulling trousers down to tangle tightly around his knees, revealing his skin, his hair, his nipples. Shoving the man sucking him with such avid skill, Avon stepped forward from the bar, allowing someone he had no desire to know to come in behind him, leaving his back unprotected and revealed, until it was covered by the hardness of a man pressing up against him, a turgid cock snaking between his cheeks, tormenting him with a taste of what was to come. The snub head nudged at puckered muscle and pleasure shivered through him. As did a name...

Blake...

Had he said it aloud? The fear made his belly cold, but the heat of the mouth on him soon warmed him, the hot body pressed against his back dispelling the chill. Nipples scraped against his shoulderblades, and hands came up from behind to rub, flat-palmed and hard, over and over his own nipples, raising them into mountainous pleasure. The cock was nudging again, questioning, as its owner did, if this blatant topman wanted to ‘trade off’ as a bottom, or if one so impertinent would find his balls shoved down his own throat. A second, a pause, and Avon arched forward, away, saying no, then pressing back, amending it to ‘later’.

He thought of Blake, imagining himself, as he had so many times before, impaled by Blake, body and heart and soul, fucked both in body and mind, and suddenly, ‘later’ became ‘now’, for he dared not leave a part of himself inviolate, dared not leave an atom of his being untouched, unsullied. For were he to do so, there would be a fragment of purity in him that Blake would be able to reach in and claim, and so claiming, would own all of him. To surrender now, to give up this last bastion of masculinity, was to defeat the siren song of all the belonging Blake offered him, and to turn aside the price unpaid. And so, here and now, he would live not the fantasy of Blake making Avon his, but of a host of nameless men fucking him, one after the

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other after the other. Yes, that was a fantasy he could survive.

And if there was one thing every man in this room understood, it was the enactment of fantasy, of dreams coming true and for most, it was fantasy indeed to have a topman submit. They all knew how to spin dreams into reality; the slightest nuance would be picked up, and returned, satisfied. So, when Avon slipped his wrists behind himself, shackling himself with his own desire, wedging his hands between himself and the man fucking the cleft of his backside, the message raced around the bar like wildfire: the topman wanted to be bottom for a night, and was willing to let everyone see it. And he wanted to be bound...

They gathered in a circle then, to watch, and Avon grinned to see them, all of them, a crowd of faces he had never seen before and they would have him, would take what was Blake's and doing so, free him from the yoke of emotionalism. If he could only sate his lust, then, surely, he could defeat the need to be loved.

From the periphery, a tall man stepped forward, drawing Avon's attention, but then there was a mouth kissing his, a tongue in him, hands all over him, rubbing and squeezing and stroking, cocks pressing into his skin, each one different, and Avon aware of every single one of them. The mouth that had been sucking his cock left, and another, bigger, took its place, a cock stroking up and down his shin as the man stroked up and down Avon's cock. Then he, too, was gone, and hands took his clothes from him, and there were open mouths kissing him wetly, all over, sometimes joining each other on Avon's skin, using him as a meeting place. The man who had been behind him was gone, wrenched away by someone bigger, smooth-chested, his cock bigger and thicker. Someone's hand—the man himself?—slicked unguent onto Avon's backside, wetting the cleft, wetting the cock as it slid between his cheeks, moving so smooth and big and masculine there. Denying Blake. Forcing Blake away, where he belonged, as nothing more than a fellow renegade. Not—not—some-

one he could love. Not that, please, not that...

Before he could think about it, all else fled to the four corners of the world, driven by the hands as he himself was driven forward by the firm press of masculinity, bending him so that his cock lay flat and trapped between his quivering belly and the supple leather of the barstool cushion. Then the hands were on him, what felt like thousands of them, wonderfully anonymous, impersonal hands touching him so terribly intimately, and, touching him most intimately of all, the stranger who had been behind him, hands that matched the cock, all big and smooth and hot, spreading his buttocks, opening him up to view and to comment.

"Fuck, look at that!"

"Pretty bastard, isn't he?"

"Tight little hole, that."

"Come on, come on, get a move on."

"Yeh, we all want a turn at this one."

"Spread 'im."

"Tie him."

"Bind him. Open him up, so that we can all see..."

And Avon loved it, for Blake would never, could never, indulge in a scene such as this, no matter how voluntary the debasement, no matter how enthusiastic the so-called 'victim'. He heard a husky groan, and realised that it was himself reacting to the seduction of thongs securing him to the barstool, keeping him facedown, wrists and ankles bound, body held rigid and ready. Just like his cock, weeping from the pleasure of it all.

"More..." he said. "Give me more..."

The hands that had been kneading him into readiness lifted briefly to return with a resounding *smack*, flat, wet palms slapping onto the raised cheeks of his backside. As the sting surged sweetly through him with the pain, his mouth gaped for breath and suddenly, there was a cock thrust in, filling him with its taste and hardness and redolent bulk, sliding in and out as he sucked it instinctively, old memories from before Anna coming back to him, rekindling his skill. And it was all the juicier for the knowing

that Blake would never be able to do this: to fuck the face of a man bound in a public house, hands and cocks rubbing all over him as someone spanked him again and again into the rosy glow of lust.

The cock in his mouth was being thrust in so wildly, and the voices around him were rising into a crescendo and then it was there, cum spurting hot and delicious down the back of his throat. He sucked desperately, wanting it all, but he hadn't had enough, not quite, before he was robbed. He lifted his head as high as he could, but all he could see were legs and abdomens and upthrust cocks, a kaleidoscope of colour, black, brown, auburn, blond, and all with the red or rose or purple of cock, and he wanted them. All of them. For then there would be no room for Blake...

Someone stepped forward, whipping off a flimsy of silk—the dancer from the bartop. Avon turned his head aside: he wanted no-one he recognised, not even so minimally as a man he had noticed not half an hour ago. The blond was shoved aside and a black man took his place. Avon opened his mouth for him, drinking him down, pressing his face into the tight-curved knot of pubic hair, feeling the hands on the back of his head holding him there, demanding pleasure.

And the man was still working on his backside, the same man, Avon knew, for the touch was the same, the feel of the skin the same, the strength the same. He resisted the temptation to pretend it was Blake, losing himself, instead, in the fantasy that it was actually a never-ending stream of faceless men making him their willing catamite. His spine shivered with the intensity of his pleasure, and a hand—not his topman—traced his length, a wet mouth reiterated it, then kisses, nibbles and at last, his man was spreading his cheeks again, this time a finger going inside to spread slick welcome for the cock tapping with such negligent dominance against Avon's left flank. The man in his mouth was thrusting hard now, gagging Avon, until he gave up all control of the situation and relaxed completely, groaning deep in his throat. The finger was gone

from inside him, replaced by what felt like the tip of the world pressing into him. Pain exploded in him and he pulled away from the black man, trying to arch his body away from the insistent cock, but he had nowhere to go. The cock withdrew from him, as silence descended.

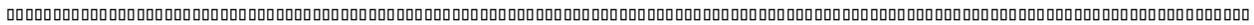
"A virgin..." someone whispered.

"First-timer," Avon heard said, and felt the knowledge deep inside. First time. And not Blake. He would be safe from Blake, for he would have no symbol of trust left to give. Not after tonight... There was a finger in him again, a pleasant feeling, added to when another finger eased in, stretching him. And a third, taking its time, slowly circling, no sound now except the muted cries of pain and pleasure from the back rooms and the softness of breath from the circle of hard men watching as Avon was readied for fucking. A pause, even of the breathing, so the only sound now was the faint moistness from the fingers rimming Avon and the creak as Avon squirmed against the leather stool. Gradually, even that sound stopped as the fingers withdrew, leaving Avon visibly opened.

He waited, eyes closed, for the kindness of strangers. And then, it was there: the black man's cock, pushing into his mouth, his topman's cock easing in, until Avon was penetrated front and rear, filled by the embodiment of manliness, surrounded by men, inundated by men, and none of them Blake. He was free. He was safe...

The purple-black cock thrust into his mouth as the stranger's cock thrust up into his arse, both withdrawing in unison, both pounding into Avon as one, until it was all he knew, this absolute surrender to his own pleasure and to the pleasure of these men. His own arousal burned through him and he sucked harder with his mouth, clenched tighter with his arse, wanting to bring them both with him. Hands were all over him; he could tell which hands went with the cock he was sucking and which went with the cock that was fucking him, and all the other ones he did not know—but *they* knew his body, here, for these moments. The cock up his arse slowed,

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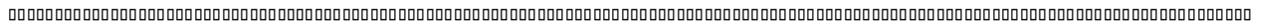
rotating slightly, and he changed his mind. Not for mere moments would he lavish the richness of this sex upon himself, but for this entire night until his body collapsed under them all. He felt weight descend upon his back, displacing all the hands, until it was just himself, his topman and the black man filling his mouth and throat. A mouth was nuzzling up his neck, getting dangerously close to his field of vision, so he closed his eyes, whilst his ears listened to the wet sucking his own mouth made and the wet sucking the topman made as he marked Avon's skin. Branded, fucked and sucking, Avon was trembling all over with the sheer ecstasy of it all, and then he shuddered as his topman leaned up beside him, cheek to cheek, as they were arse to belly, and flicked his tongue at Avon's lips, licking at the cock in Avon's mouth. Hands came up then, to touch where Avon's body joined the man he was sucking, then one hand slid wetly down to rim where Avon's arse took in a stranger. So much, so much, and he wanted them all to go over the edge together, a symphony of maleness, losing himself in the anonymity of it all, away from Blake. Suddenly, without warning, the cock in his mouth bucked and liquid heat slid down Avon's throat, as he sucked harder and harder, clenching his arse so tightly around his man. And then his mouth was empty, until fingers filled him, barring entry to any of the men encircling him.

And now, Avon thought, dizzy with pleasure and his position, it's just he and I, all locked together, and he so wonderfully big in me, god, god, this is what I want. And every time I find myself wanting to kiss Blake, all I need do is think of this, and nothing that suicidal maniacal messiah would ever be willing to do could compare to this. My candle of hope. My messiah...

He was enveloped by the body of the man over him and in him, and now that the erotic mania had slowed, Avon became aware of details, of the man's scent, of his sweat-slick chest pressing Avon into the seat, of his leather jerkin or jacket or whatever it was veiling them, of

leather trousers opened only far enough to allow the topman to shove his prick up Avon's arse, the scrape of zip and kiss of leather pressing into him as hard as the cock buried deep in him did. And the movements, so slow now, such miniscule circles to give such pleasure. Avon felt a scream rise in his throat, as desperation rose in him. He wanted to be fucked, hard, not made love to, not even when it was only a charade performed by a stranger. It reminded him too much, tempted him too much, and he had to keep Blake out of this experience completely, had to hold it inviolate to keep it as his shield. He arched up, fucking the topman, making his own demands, and he was rewarded. A smack, and another, every blow ramming the deeply buried cock against his prostate, bringing him closer and closer to the edge. Teeth fastened thrillingly on the side of his neck, feasting, taking yet another symbol of trust away where Blake could never reach it. And the cock in him... Thrusting hard now, leather slapping against Avon's reddened skin, the coarse spring of pubic hair pressing into the crack of Avon's arse with every forceful surge. Harder and faster, the man's mouth all over him, his hands touching him everywhere as the stool and his bonds held Avon in place. There was nothing else in the world for Avon, just this circle of masculinity, and the man filling him and surrounding him and taking him farther than he had ever gone before. The pleasure built, an agony of delight, and then his man was there, a jerk forward, a hot splash deep inside as life was spilled into Avon, as Avon was fucked forward into the stool and the ecstasy burst from him, making his belly slicker than ever, every pulse echoing a millisecond behind the man in him, coming together, beat for beat.

And then it was over, and Avon hung there limp and satiated, unable to move, unable to endure any more pleasure. His man withdrew slowly, lifting his heavy body off Avon's, but never letting go completely. Avon could feel him trail the length of his back as the man walked around to Avon's head. Other hands were releasing him; the experience was over and so he



opened his eyes, to see heavy boots and crumpled leather trousers, the tails of a waistcoat, the glint of a belt buckle. And the cock, still big, shining wetly with its own cum and the lubricant that had slid it home. Dark hair, curling thickly, at its base, then a hairless belly, so very, very pale.

Avon lowered his head again, choosing to look no farther. He wanted to keep his stranger faceless, to leave this open to endless variations for his imagination to people with any one who took his fancy, as this man had taken the one thing he could have given Blake that Blake would have wanted: trust.

A hand cupped his chin, tipping his face upwards towards knowledge, and he kept his eyes firmly closed even as his topman began urging him to his feet. Avon was smiling now, so beautiful in the afterglow of sex, hair awry and curling faintly with sweat, white skin flushed so perfectly. He resisted the invitation to stand, preferring to rest where he was until his man had left. Then a finger slid between his teeth, and he was willing, perhaps, to allow the pleasure to begin again already. And after all, this man *had* helped to save him from his own absurd infatuation with Blake. Still smiling, he opened his

eyes to see his leather messiah. The smile disappeared as if it had never been born. Avon stared, appalled.

Blake.

Blake.

It had been Blake all along. And it was Blake smiling down sweetly at him, one hand rubbing his belt in absent-minded promise for all Avon’s dreams.

“I thought this was what you had in mind when you mentioned where you were coming tonight, Avon. I should have known I could trust you to pick somewhere perfect, absolutely perfect for you to give in to me. But,” he traced the very tip of the belt across Avon’s face and Avon, helpless, sucked it in, knowing even then that he was lost, forever, “I promise you it’ll be even better the next time. When I’ve had time enough to get everything ready for you...”

And Avon stared up at him, lust uncoiling greedily in his gut and love devouring his heart and knew that he was, without doubt, dead.

For if the love didn't do it, then Blake's damned cause would.

Either that, or Avon's own jealousy would be the death of Blake...

just to look at him, engrossed in the daily grind of writing up a report. *God. Me and Bodie. Not just a quick leg over with him. Not just another fella to screw for a night and then never see again. He'd never let me get away with that. An' I'm not sure that I'd want to give him up once I'd had him. Which is one of the reasons why I've been avoiding this in the first place.*

Feeling eyes upon him, Bodie looked up, giving Doyle a smile wicked in its knowledge. That was all, just a glance before he bent his head back to his work. *Christ! Look at me! Gettin' hard just from him looking at me like that. Want him. Wanted him for years, but never could pay the price. Commitment. To Bodie. Shit, I'll be lucky if he sticks with me for a year. Be luckier still if I don't get scared and run out on him beforehand.* Then he thought about the scene on the boat, with Marty the gunrunner, acting as if Bodie was his, acting as if they were already lovers. *And that's quite a turn up for the books, isn't it? Ready to fight dirty for him, to keep Marty's filthy paws off him. Jealous as hell, just 'cos I knew he'd had Bodie when I hadn't.*

He went back to his report, dry language and even drier figures assessing the 1-80 rifle. A movement to his left, then a hand, soft-skinned, a faint hint of after-shave clinging to it, brushing the hair at his nape, shivering sensation down his spine. Then gone, Bodie with it, coming back with a mug of tar-like tea. He found himself staring at the hand, not the man, for he knew Bodie's face in all its expressiveness. That hand. Would touch him, tonight, bare skin on bare skin. That hand would pump his dick for him, cradle his balls, finger him. Tonight. Later. With Bodie. He raised his eyes, and Bodie was there waiting for him, eyes the colour of summer sky, so dark and intense a blue that it made you hot even before you left the shade. And he was about to leave the shade and plunge headlong into a fully-fledged relationship with his partner. *Mad dogs and Englishmen*, he thought ruefully, thinking about the enormous changes he was about to make in his life. *Mad dogs and bloody Englishmen...*

Reading over the sheaf of papers, another thought popped into his mind. "You'll save me," he'd said to Bodie. "You'll save me." *Never trusted anyone like this before, Bodie, not ever. Not enough to trust them with not just me life, but living as well. Everyday, you and me, and you'll get to know me better than you probably want to. Better than I want anyone to know me. Scares me, that does. And you knew that, didn't you? Waited for me, keeping on at me, all the touches and the friendship and the affection. Knew you'd reel me in eventually, didn't you, you suave bugger.* Face flushing, he thought about that. Buggery. He loved fucking, loved feeling himself swallowed by satin flesh, loved the feeling of having a man up him. *Thank God Bodie's been around a bit, don't need to worry about taking it slow and easy. Nice and hard, that's how it'll be between us, no worries about having to lie about what we want, just in case it'll scare off a promising fella. This is for keeps, isn't it, mate? And it some ways, it doesn't even seem like a beginning, we've already been together so long as it is. Just a an extension. Just the next logical step...* 'Logical' didn't even begin to describe how he was feeling, an odd combination of the security of long-term lovers with the breathless nervousness of fumbling teenagers on their first holiday away from Mum and Dad, with all the girls in the world laid out in front of them. His jeans were getting tighter, pressing on him, adding to what thinking about Bodie had started. Kathy Mason and her deceptions were long forgotten; Cowley's temper and disapproval assigned to the scrap heap, along with all the arguments against getting so closely involved with your partner. Too late to rationalise that now—they'd been and gone and done it, and all that remained now was to dot the i's and cross the t's. Tonight. Him and Bodie. In bed. Him, in Bodie.

Report finished, he stuffed it into a manila folder, dumping it into the 'out' tray, ready for one of the office staffers to hand over to Cowley in the morning. And for him, all he had to do now was sit and stare at Bodie to his



heart’s content, giving in to the newly permissible luxury of staring at a man with whom he had quietly, surreptitiously fallen in love. Bodie was leaning his head on his right hand, the left resting on the blotter, curved and relaxed, fingers bent.

“No one likes a bent copper,” he’d said.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Bodie had answered him. And that, that was the precise moment it had changed, when Bodie had taken it from flirtation to outright emotion. Wouldn’t have seemed like much coming from anyone else to anyone else, but between the two of them, with all the water that had flowed under their particular bridge, it spoke volumes. Not ‘fancies’, but ‘liked’. Always known, but it made it different somehow, made it real, to actually hear it said. Bodie, liking a bent copper. Bodie, liking him. Safe words, to go with the enticingly dangerous emotion that shone from his eyes sometimes. And Doyle wanted it, wanted all of it, and had done so for so long. But it had taken those flip words to gel it in him enough for him not to refuse, had taken the combination of jealousy on both their parts—”Tea? Fine with me,” and then Bodie coming along to play gooseberry—had taken their usual daily grist of danger and dissatisfaction, had taken screwing a bird for the slaking of sex and nothing more. And perhaps, it had simply taken time, to get him ready for the commitment of it all. Bodie was mouthing the words as he read them, obviously mindful of the rollicking he’d got from Cowley over the slapdash state of his last report, and the sight was one Doyle found endearing. There was enough of unfettered, unpolished youth in Bodie still to make life endlessly interesting, enough to bring out the wildness in himself. That would work well for them together, especially in bed. He’d heard enough complaints from Bodie about women who wanted everything slow and tender, whilst all the time a man’s balls were tying themselves in knots. So they’d not do that, not until the mood seized them, not until they had banked down some of the embers of rutting sexuality that had been smouldering between

them since the day Cowley had made them partners. Last words now, then the pen picked up, name scrawled with a flourish, all three initials employed to their fullest, and then it was done. They could go home now. Together. For the night. And for however long it lasted.

“Ready, mate?”

He grinned back, leaning back in his chair, stretching luxuriously, knowing that the movement made his pale lemon shirt gape to show chest hair, hair that every man—and most of the women—he’d ‘known’ had loved to touch. “Been ready for ages, you.”

A question in the eyes, seriousness under the banter. “Have you been?”

“Yeh. Been ready since at least this afternoon, you know.”

Sweet, predatory smile then, a hint of hunger licking at his lips. “Been ready a sight longer than you then, sunshine.”

“Well, we shall just have to let you go first then, shan’t we?” A promise.

“Sounds fair enough to me.” Acceptance.

It took his breath away, that willingness, that image of himself plunging into Bodie’s body.

“Well don’t just sit there gawping like a gutted fish, get a move on. C’mon, Ray, I’m *starving*. We’ll pick up chips on the way home, all right?”

“Yeh, but there’s a question I’ve been dying to ask.”

“Oh yeh?”

“Yeh.” He couldn’t help it, he knew he was grinning like a loon. “Your place or mine?”

A quick swipe at curls and then Bodie was racing past him to the stairs. “Yours, of course. Got a bigger bed, haven’t you, you randy old toad.”

In the car, sitting so closely together, throbbingly aware of his hand on the head of the distressingly phallic gear stick, cold-sweat aware that Bodie was keeping his hands firmly to himself, the smell of cod and chips and vinegar keeping the dank smell of the unexpected



eyes. *Will you chain me?*

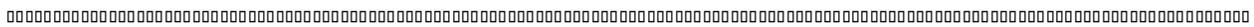
“Never want to tie you down, you know that, mate, don’t you? Free to come and go as you please, free as a bird. Never going to hurt you neither, that’s why I waited until you were ready to come to me. Wanted this for a long time, but I’m patient and you were worth the wait. At least,” and Doyle felt Bodie’s smile fill his hands to overflowing, “that arse of yours is.”

Doyle breathed out, letting his body propel him forward until Bodie’s eyes closed, blue-marbled alabaster eyelids wrapping the wonderful warmth within. Lips brushed, a fraction shy, little enough that they could put a stop to it now, just enough to hint at what they would be giving up. There was no hesitation, both mouths opening, maws to devour the other, to bring him inside, to join them. Bodie’s hands were suddenly, shockingly, delightfully, under his shirt, fabric shoved and pulled until bare skin tingled in the air and hair was ruffled back and forth, back and forth across tiny bumps of nipples, sensation gliding through him as Bodie’s tongue slid into his mouth. He heard himself groan and mocked his own adolescent enthusiasm, but didn’t even attempt to restrain himself, striving, instead, to let all his self-imposed strappings go, to allow himself to be washed away by this loving, to give himself over to another person in a way he had never dared to before. He didn’t need to think, didn’t want to think, wanted only to know what Bodie’s body felt like under his, to discover if that milk skin was truly as soft as it looked. To discover what it was like to make love, not merely have sex, with no holds barred, with nothing of any consequence save how it all felt. He wriggled, all the better to touch Bodie, all the better for Bodie to be able to reach him, fondle him, touch him deep inside where he kept his most precious of secrets: himself. Bodie’s hands were in his trousers now, and a small part of his brain suggested going to bed, but that would mean trying to get up that bloody staircase and that would mean letting go of Bodie. And he couldn’t. If his life depended on it, he couldn’t stop now, lest his

fear stop him next time, lest the next time they were both able to think enough to put passion aside. He pulled his mouth free, using it to taste the sweat-moist satin of Bodie’s chest, lips pulling at nipples, teeth nipping at skin. For every caress of his tongue, there was a reflexive shiver along Bodie’s muscles; for every nibble of his white teeth, there was a gasp of pleasure to echo his own. Lower, he went, sucking and biting, leaving redness blossoming on the white, leaving pleasure rippling through ribbed muscles. The zip rasped open under Bodie’s anxious hands and Doyle’s wet mouth was there, waiting, for turgid flesh to be revealed, food for his hunger. Before the fabric was even fully out of his way, he had descended, plunging his tongue hotly into the dark shadow that graced Bodie’s groin, limber tongue finding pulsing hardness, sharp teeth grazing with delectable lightness.

“No...” Bodie gasped, every single atom of his body denying his word. It was written all over him that he was not protesting the pleasure, but rather the losing of control, of allowing himself to be washed away by the intensity this was bringing to him. Doyle smiled, the stretch of his lips taut around the crown of Bodie’s penis, his tongue pressing hard, insistent, demanding on the domed pleasure.

“No...no...no more, oh, please, don’t stop, oh no...” And with every rebuttal, Bodie’s hips surged upward, muscles straining, veins tracing a delicate Danube amidst his white skin. With practised ease, Doyle swallowed him, devouring him, bringing him within, deep, deeper, until his face was teased by the springy cushion of jet black hair. Bodie’s hands were rubbing over every inch of Doyle that he could reach, hands both frantic and hard, generous and demanding, and all of it built on a solid foundation of need. They were driven, the pair of them, whipped on by all those months of anticipation, all those months of denial. Doyle’s hands were clutching at Bodie’s buttocks, Bodie’s hands were pulling clothing out of the way, setting them free so that he could lose himself in a sea of warm skin, soft hair dancing under his finger-



broad back, careless of the fact that he was pressing just at the sensitive points over the kidneys, he groaned as he leant forward, biting his lower lip as the pleasure hit him, Bodie clenching his arse muscles for him, making it so wonderfully, incredibly tight, Bodie matching him groan for groan, hips bucking wildly every time Doyle thrust into him, making it hotter, better, deeper.

Perfect. Absolutely perfect, this being part of Bodie, this having of the larger body with its marble-statue musculature, with those endearing murmurings whispering, broken with passion from Bodie, muffled by his face being buried in the cushions. Doyle braced himself, hands on the small of Bodie’s back, still not caring where his hands were, knowing only that his hands were on warm skin and his cock was inside supple flesh. He moved, felt Bodie jerk under him, moved again, felt Bodie recoil only to snap backwards again, impaling himself with a cry, writhing under Doyle as Doyle’s hardness filled and stretched him. And all the while, the clenching muscles of Bodie’s arse pumped him, keeping tight as a virgin, adding to the pleasure, making them both cry out with the overload of sensation. Doyle couldn’t wait any more, couldn’t make the pleasure last any longer, no matter how much his body strived for it. He rammed home, once, again, and then again and again until he dissolved in the liquid ecstasy of orgasm. Sated, limp, he took a second to rest on the breadth of Bodie’s back, blinking in shock as he was thrust off, tossed backwards to land naked, on the plush of the carpet, limp cock flopping against his upper thigh.

“You bastard!” came at him, a bolt from the blue, fury pouring down on him, bitter vitriol burning into him. “You absolute bloody bastard! You didn’t have to do that, you know. You didn’t have to fuckin’ do that to me!”

And he lay there, stunned, staring up at Bodie, the tall man as white as a sheet, muscles trembling, fists clenched. *My Christ, he wants to hurt me!*

“What’d you go an’ do that for, eh, Ray?”

What’d you go and spoil it all for? Didn’t have to be like that. I’d’ve let you, later, when I was ready. Didn’t have to hurt me, Ray.”

“What kind of sick joke is this? What the hell are you going on about?”

“What’d you mean, what the hell am I going on about? You didn’t have to hurt me, Doyle, that’s all there is to it.”

“How could I’ve hurt you, eh? You tell me that. You’ve been round the merry-go-round more times than I’ve had hot dinners, so I don’t see what all the fuss is about. I wasn’t that rough, no rougher than other blokes’ve been with me, so what’s all the fuss about?”

“I didn’t want you to fuck me, that’s what.”

“Then why didn’t you say so? You’ve got a tongue in your head, haven’t you? If you didn’t want us to fuck, then why didn’t you say so?”

“I bloodywell did say so, you little prick. You just wouldn’t listen.”

Doyle got to his feet, wiping a speck of blood from where he had bit his lip when he landed on the floor. “Oh, yeh? Well look at you, Goliath. You honestly trying to tell me I forced you into something you didn’t want to do? Me an’ who’s army, eh?”

“Couldn’t stop you without doing you serious damage, could I? You were past all reason, you couldn’t even hear me, I don’t think. Couldn’t have stopped you without using lethal force, Doyle, not with those bloody hands of yours on my kidneys, I couldn’t.”

“Are you seriously trying to tell me that I raped you? Oh, get off it, Bodie. You were screaming ‘no’ at me all the while you were shoving your cock down my throat, weren’t you? How was I supposed to know when you meant ‘no/no’ and not ‘yes/no’, you tell me that.”

“Oh, did it look like I was enjoying myself, trying to heave you off like that?”

“Heave me off? I’ve seen more enthusiasm from a bird. Don’t come the outraged virgin with me, mate. I’m not the first that’s had you.”

He was stunned by the bitterness that came over Bodie's face, horrified by it, terrified by it. He ran away inside himself, using anger as a shield to protect himself from the ugliness of truth.

"No, you're not, are you? Just never expected it from you, that's all. Never had you pegged as the type of bloke who gets his jollies from hurting other fellas, Doyle. Never would've thought it of you."

"Hurt you? How the hell could a shrimp like me hurt you, eh? Come on, Bodie, don't just stand there, answer me. How could I hurt someone the size of you?"

Gathering his scattered clothes together, Bodie turned his back then, too engrossed in his own pain to notice the fractured intake of Doyle's pain. There was blood, there, on Bodie's thighs, mingling with the cum, and bruises, where sharp hipbones had thudded into tender buttock. A cacophony of colour, and all of it his fault. His fault. Or so Bodie would have it, anyway. "So how come you didn't stop me, then, if you didn't want it as much as you say you didn't want it?"

"Oh, you want your pound of flesh, do you, on top of everything else? Want to know all the sordid little details, is that it? Get off on that as well, just like you do on hurting people, is that your sick idea of fun, Doyle?"

Doyle got to his feet, watching with a worried glint in his green eyes as Bodie got dressed, a frown furrowing his brow as he saw how his partner's hands were trembling. Hurt? Fury? Stifling the urge to rip Doyle limb from limb? "Look," he said, trying to be conciliatory, genuinely uncomprehending of what was eating Bodie, "I fucked you when you say you didn't want me to, but I don't see how I could have forced you. It wouldn't have taken much for you to get me off you, so what's..."

"Wouldn't take much, eh?" Bodie's eyes were blazing at him, fury and pain churning together into a whirlpool of agony. "Wouldn't take much? Tell me, Ray, *sunshine*, have you ever been raped? No? Didn't think so. Know

what it feels like? Feels like you've sat on a hot poker, and one wrong move an' it's going to rip you open, split you like a marrow. The way you were ramming it into me, d'you think I *could* move much? And have you rip me inside? No thanks, *mate*. I'll pass on that, if you don't mind. And oh, yeh," he said, bitterness sheeting brittle layer upon brittle layer, "why didn't I throw you off straight away. How about I didn't think you could be about to do what it looked like you were about to do? How about I didn't think that you, my *mate*, my pal, could ever be as low as those bastards in Angola. Or on the merchant ship I jumped when I was 14. Shakin' you up, am I? An' as for the first few seconds after that, before you shoved your cock up me, well, this'll give you your jollies, Doyle. I froze. Yeh, big tough man Bodie froze because I felt like I was a kid again and back on that bloody ship with that fuckin' first mate. Is that what you wanted to hear? Is it, Doyle?"

"Christ, Bodie, I didn't know. I thought you wanted it. Come on, you can't blame me for not getting what you were after. First you said no but you meant yes, and then I'm supposed to know when no means no and all your rolling and moaning means the opposite of what it meant five minutes before. Look, if it'll make you feel better, I'm sorry I went too far for you."

"That's it? You fuckin' well hurt me, and all you can do is offer me a pathetic little 'sorry' as if you stood on my toe? That's all you have to say for yourself. God, but you're a selfish bastard, Doyle. Don't know what I ever saw in you. Must've been feeling masochistic, cos that's all I've ever got from you, grief and more bloody grief."

"Look, mate, I've already apologised, what else am I supposed to say?"

"You're not supposed to *say* anything. I want you to *feel* something for someone other than the great god Raymond bloody Doyle."

"Well, if that's how you feel about it, if my apology's not good enough, I'll take it back then."

"Good. And I hope you bloody choke on

it.” He turned away from Doyle then, literally as well as figuratively, ignoring the other man, dressing in silence, bitterly hoping the stiffness of his body was making Doyle feel like the heel he was.

It wasn’t until Bodie was tying the laces of his shoes that the repercussions of this began to dawn on Doyle. This wasn’t just another one of their arguments, this could be the end of it all. He reined in both his temper and his fear, and his tongue stumbled around his mouth, searching for the right words.

“Look, Bodie, okay, so I did something you didn’t want, an’ I’ve said I’m sorry. Honest, I am. Never want to hurt you, mate. Not you. Best mate I’ve got, best mate I’ve ever had.” Skittish, eyes very wary, Bodie nonetheless sat still all the while Doyle was speaking, all the while as Doyle crept closer to him, all the while until the back of Doyle’s hand was lying on his cheek and he could feel the faint, delicate bristle of hair there. He stared, silent, demanding that Doyle pay his reparations, insisting that Doyle see, that Doyle understand. That Doyle love him, and not just use him.

“I mean it,” Doyle said into that unwelcoming silence, “I’d never do a thing like that again, not now that I know that all that squirming and moaning was supposed to stop me. Never want to hurt you, Bodie,” he whispered, drawing closer, using his best weapon—his sinuous sensuality with its promises of love. The right words to soften the callousness, the right expressions to give them a new beginning. And then, with one thoughtless phrase, with one ill-considered choice of words, his tongue stumbled and fell, bringing everything crashing down with it. “But you know what it’s like, Bodie, sometimes when you’re with a bird, an’ she’s got you so hard you don’t know if you’re on your head or your heels, an’ then she starts moaning and wriggling, and you just keep on going. You know how...”

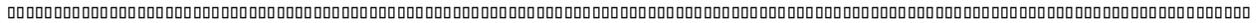
He reeled back under the blow, jawline white from the impact of Bodie’s fist, blood flooding back to turn white to red to blue.

Tempestuous fury burned in Bodie’s eyes, love mixed with hatred, bitter agony as all the hopes he had nurtured so tenderly for four long years lay tattered at his feet, in the form of a man who could rape without even having the balls to give it name. Shredded, by a man who could never love him, who could only ever love him to the best of his ability, as Bodie had always known. It was cruel indeed to learn just how paltry that ability was.

“Hopeless, that’s what you are. You’re pathetic, Doyle, if you screw people like that, and then say you just got all caught up in it. ‘She’s got you so hard’, you said. Good excuse that, then you can make it all her fault, just like I bet it’s all everyone else’s fault that you can’t keep a relationship going more than a fortnight. An’ was tonight all my fault, too? Well, was it? Did I make you do what you did? Oh, but of course, how could I forget?” His voice lashed out, drawing blood, words rubbing salt in the welling wounds they both bore, “I could’ve stopped you, couldn’t I, any time I wanted to, right? Oh, yeh, dead bloody right. With a cock up me arse, after what I learned on board ship and in the bloody Congo, you expect me to try to fight someone off like that? It’s ugly, and it’s disgusting, and it’s got nothing to do with pleasure, what you did to me, but it’s not a fate worse than death. You’re not worth it, *mate*, saving a relationship with you isn’t worth risking peritonitis, *sunshine*. Bastard you definitely are, but not even *you* matter enough to be a fate worse than death.”

Stricken, stunned, Doyle lay sprawled on the floor, mouth open, mind empty, as all the barbed-wire words ricocheted around his mind, the sharp edges cutting him, flailing him as they ripped through him. Bodie was almost at the door before he regathered his breath and himself and chased after his—*ex?*—partner. “Bodie!”

The banked-down hatred that hissed from Bodie was chilling to see, more freezing still to be its target. “Don’t say a word, Doyle, don’t you dare say another fucking word to me. I don’t want to hear anything you have to say.



Bar one. Bar what Doyle himself had done in his selfishness and fear. Trembling, barely daring to touch, one hand reached out to brush the unlined brow, to feel, for himself, that the flesh was still warm, that the machines didn't lie. A breath of relief flooded him, and he collapsed to sit on the edge of the bed, perched beside Bodie, careful not to disarray the tubes and IV's, careful not to add any more pain to the long list of sins he had blackening his name. He stroked the hair away from Bodie's forehead, then smoothed it back, fingertips butterflying over arched brows, gossamer touch on long lashes.

"Very touching," Cowley said, accent evidence to his anger. "Pity you didn't treat him so well before."

Doyle whirled round, almost losing his precarious perch, gathering himself and his wits with shaking hands. "Sir?" he said, not really saying anything at all.

"You mean, how do I know? Who else, Doyle, would he let hurt him like this? There's not another soul in his life he cares enough about to let himself be raped," the word was twisted with disgust, all of it aimed contemptuously at Doyle's head, "without at least trying to kill the bastard first. And there's no sign of a struggle on him, no blows from defending himself in a fight, no broken knuckles. And the bruises on his knees are too high up to be caused by getting someone in the goolies. All the marks on him, Doyle, every single one of them, were caused by being restrained. By you, unless I'm very much mistaken. And I doubt that."

Bluster, taking the place of honesty, hiding him away from confessing to this most brimstone of judges. "All right, so he was raped, and someone held him down, but what makes you say it was me? You can't just say it's because I'm the only one he'd let do it. What if he was jumped by a few blokes, eh? You're not going to try and tell me you don't know the kind of pubs he used to hang around, are you? Sir?"

"Oh, I'm perfectly aware of Master Bodie's...predilections. Just as I'm aware of yours, Doyle. But you've got a point, all the

same. I can't claim instinct as proof. But look at it this way. You come in here, riddled with guilt, so wrapped up in it that you didn't even see me here, with a dirty great bruise on your jaw. And Bodie went home from HQ in *your* car, to have supper at *your* flat. A relationship that's been simmering away for years, comes to the boil and you want something he can't give yet, so you do it anyway. The way you always do, eh, Doyle? And then 72 hours later, give or take, and Bodie pulls his 'phone off the hook so that someone comes to investigate and what do I find, but a man burning up with fever, belly distended, going out of his mind, saying over and over and over again that 'you didn't have to hurt me, Ray'. Tell me, laddie, what else could it be, but you raping your partner as if he were nothing more than a bit of skirt picked up at the dancing? You tell me. Go on. Give me another reason for why one of my best agents is lying in a hospital bed, being pumped full of antibiotics and God knows what else, if it wasn't that you raped him?"

Silence. There was nothing Doyle could say to that, nothing that wouldn't condemn him even more.

"Well? Nothing to say for yourself? What kind of man are you, Doyle, that you could do a repulsive thing like this?"

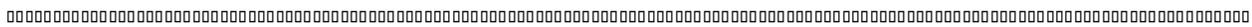
That stung, hearing his own question bedecked in contempt and loathing, coming at him from Cowley. "The kind of man you made me. Sir."

"Oh, no, you don't, laddie. You'll not be papping the responsibility for this on *my* shoulders, nor on anyone else's. You've made your bed, and God help me, I'm going to see that you lie in it! Now get out of here. You've seen all I want you to see and done more than any man has the right to do."

"You can't make me leave him, Cowley."

"That'll be *Mister* Cowley to you, Doyle. And not only *can* I make you leave, but I bloodywell *will*. This is a CI5 hospital room, with access restricted to CI5 personnel. I suggest you leave it immediately, Mr. Doyle, before I

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have you arrested for trespass in a restricted area.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, *Mister Cowley sir?*”

“Oh, how thoughtless of me to forget. Of course, anyone brainless enough to rape a fellow agent—and his best friend—would be too thick to understand plain English. You are dismissed, Doyle. Fired. Sacked. Out. And you can hand in your gun and your identification to McCabe as you leave. That’s all I have to say to you, so you’d best get out before I start in on a lot of things I shouldn’t say to you. Home truths are never welcome, Mr. Doyle, especially not when they’re as ugly as yours.”

“Wait a minute, you can’t fire me just like that. Bodie hasn’t pressed charges, hasn’t even told you I did anything at all. You can’t give me the sack just on your own suspicions.”

“Is that so? I can’t fire, can I not? You should know better by now, Doyle. Read the small print. I can fire you for no reason other than I’ve taken a notion to do so. Now get out, or so help me, I’ll have McCabe come in here and you’ll be taken back to HQ under guard.”

“You’re serious, you’re bloody serious. You’re going to throw me out because of something in my personal life.” Cornered, he sneered, his war already lost, determined to win this battle to ease his tattered pride. “All right, all right, you win. I’ll hand everything over to McCabe. But tell me one thing, *Mister Cowley*. What’s Bodie to you that you’re reacting like this? Eh? Fancy him yourself, do you? Is that what this is all about, the old man’s jealous cos someone younger got what he wanted all for himself?”

“Get your foul mouth out of here, Doyle and don’t ever let me see your face again! As far as I’m concerned and as far as CI5 is concerned, you are terminated. And that means, in case you’ve forgotten, that your car goes back to CI5, your flat goes back to CI5, your furniture goes back to CI5. And because you were fired, you’ll be getting nothing more than a week’s severance pay in lieu of notice. And you can make sure to pick that up when I’ll not be at the office. Now

get out, before I teach you a lesson or two. Go on. *OUT!* Away with you, and don’t ever let me see you again. You’re finished, Doyle, d’ye hear me? Finished.”

Finished. Finit. Caput. Dead.

At the doorway, holstered gun in hand, ID wallet ready, he stopped, all the anger pushed aside for the moment. “One thing, sir,” he said, without so much as a jot of sarcastic emphasis. “He will be all right, won’t he?”

“No thanks to you. And don’t you think it’s a wee bit late for all this tender concern? Friday night is when he could have done with *that.*”

Then Cowley turned away from him, exactly as Bodie had. Exactly as he had himself, when holding his inner truths up to the glare of light. He watched for a moment, watched the aging man staring down at the younger man, wanted to apologise for words said in haste. But that was the price of such words, that they be said in haste and repented at leisure. There was no lust in Cowley for Bodie, none that Doyle had ever seen anyway. And if there were? *Well, Bodie would be a damn sight better off with Cowley than he would with me, wouldn’t he? Not that it would be hard...*

He took a breath, meaning to say something, something to ameliorate the hurt, something to lance out some of the poison boiling up between them all, but even the sound of him still drawing breath was enough to make Cowley stiffen. The rejection stung like a salt-lashed whip and anger rose, as it always did, to hold the pain at bay. The child in him wanted to scream and yell and stamp his feet, to shout “See if I care!”, but the man in him stifled that oft-cried shield of childhood, for he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to carry it off without his voice breaking, as it had that day he’d had to choose between doing his job and protecting Bodie. *Funny, innit?* he thought to himself with an edge of bitter irony to cut all the deeper, burying himself in his guilt and rage so that he could hide away from truths too painful to change. *Never been any choice before, always just been ‘do whatever you need*

to do and hang the consequences'. Looks like this time, the consequences are going to hang me. He couldn't resist it, simply had to turn around and look once more on what was now his past. The thought lodged in his throat, burning like bile—not tears, no, not tears. He'd not cry for himself, that would run too much risk of revelation. All his tears would be for Bodie, and this was not a time when they were needed. After Friday night, the world should be jumping for joy and clicking its heels that he was leaving Bodie's life. Leaving. Cast out, more like, with Cowley as the hand of bloody God. Get thee hence, vile creature. Can just hear the old bastard saying it as well.

At the bedside, Cowley was growing visibly tenser, knuckles whitening, red flags of anger burnishing his cheeks. A movement, just a hint of motion, but enough to give fair notice. *Get out, or I'll have you arrested.* Doyle lingered for another second, just for the blink of an eye, harvesting his last glimpse of Bodie. As ye sow, so shall ye reap. And all he had was bitter emptiness and a horror of looking himself in the eye.

McCabe stoically didn't see him, as he just as obviously hadn't heard a word of the shouting match that had spewed from the room to echo down the corridor. His silence was condemnation enough for Doyle; that same silence was protection enough for Bodie. Bodie would have Cowley and CI5 and home, leaving Doyle with nothing but himself. There was a certain cruel justice in the world after all.

Bright sunlight, glinting off a young nurse's blonde hair, dazzling on the snow of her starched white apron dizzied him as he left the hospital. It seemed so bizarre a contrast to his own, portentous Gothic mood. For a few minutes, he stood on the broad, shallow-stepped sweep of Victorian stairs, obliviously hindering both nurse and patient alike, his mind curiously calm, the eye of a storm. *S'pose I'd best get back to the flat then, get packed up and moved. Need to find a place. Means I'll have to get to the bank, soon's they open. Then move all*

me stuff before I turn the car back in. God, it's been years since I last had to look for a flat, christ knows what they're going for these days. Shouldn't've gone to France last Bank Holiday, need the money now. Mind you, I could always stay with Mum or our Syl if it comes down to it. Oh, yeh, c'n just see it now. Big tough CI5 agent running home to his mummy. Give them all a laugh, that would...

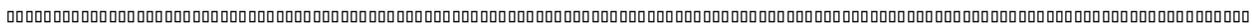
An ambulanceman, old dear on his arm, climbing the stairs inch by inch as if Everest had moved to London for the summer, glowered at Doyle, muttering under his breath about what the world was coming to these days. Almost abreast of Doyle, the old woman faltered, clutching at the St. John's man, pulling him off balance, knocking his cap askew. Doyle didn't even notice, too much concerned with his own needs to pay attention to the minor difficulties of others. The pair finally passed on to the swinging doors, low-voiced, ill-tempered mutterings still trailing along behind them. It took a student nurse barrelling into him from behind to wake him from his reverie to face the daylight nightmare.

There are surprisingly few jobs available to an ex-Met, ex-CI5 man, Doyle discovered. But then, on reflection, it was hardly surprising at all, really. Who in their right mind would employ a man that the great George Cowley had labelled as 'Unstable personality. Prejudicial discharge.'

"Ray! Ray, haven't you done with those weeds yet? God, I ask you, what did I ever do to deserve an idle git like you, eh? Where's our Dave when I need him, eh? I bet he'd have this little lot up and out by now, have that grass green as envy, he would."

"Get off it, Mum, I've only been out here a half-hour."

"Don't you speak to me like that, young man! While you're under my roof, you'll keep a civil tongue in your head, d'you hear me? Coming back to me, cap in hand, at your age. Where did I go wrong with you? How come you turned into such a lump, when..."



Doyle tuned her out completely, just as he had when younger. It was the only way he was able to keep his hands to himself. *Her and her bloody darling Dave. Anyone'd think he was the golden boy, when all he did was bugger off to the Army as soon as they'd take him. Never phones her, never writes, 'cept for some soppo card every Mothering Sunday. Comes home for Christmas with that big-titted wife of his and his squad of brats, wrecks the house, eats Mum out of house and home, but does he ever land it? Course not. He had the right father. He was clever enough to wait until after Mum got married before he was born, didn't he? And then he goes and follows in his Daddy's footsteps, another bloody bit of cannon fodder for the fucking Army. While dear, sweet old Mum gets to play the Widow Doyle for all it's worth, until her 'mistake' comes round to visit.*

"Are you listening to me? Well? Are you? I swear you were sent by God and all His Saints to try me. Purgatory, that's what you are. Payment for me sins, that's you. Oh, I'm coming over all faint, I need a lie down. See what you do to me? I'll have to take to my bed again, all because of you. If only my lovely Alex hadn't passed on so young, he'd be here to comfort me. Don't just stand there being useless, go and make me a cup of tea. I'll be in my bed, so you can fetch it upstairs for me. And don't forget the biscuits this time, my lad."

He stayed where he was, kneeling heavily into the spring of the grass, listening to her weary steps tread dramatically along the path back to the front door. A satirically amused smile greeted the old, familiar pattern: his mother seemed to think that the minute she was in the house, she was out of earshot. There, the groan of the old hinges, and then the sprightly step of a lively 48 year old woman, well pleased with her morning's work.

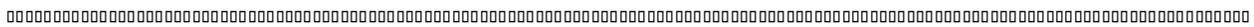
Widow bloody Doyle my arse, the uncharitable thought crossed his mind the second she crossed the threshold. *Not that I had ever better call her that to her face though. "Doyle?" she'd say, puttin' on that horrible fake-posh*

accent, "Doyle? How can I be the widow Doyle when Doyle's my maiden name? It's Mrs. McAllister to the likes of you..."

McAllister. Now there was a name he had come to hate. There was a name that he was fiercely glad not to carry. He'd rather have everyone know he was illegitimate, or come up with the old lies about his mother's 'tragic first marriage to her Irish sweetheart' than carry that old bastard's name. That was a man he never even wanted to think about again. He sat back on his haunches, trowel resting idly on his denim-clad thigh, watching a sparrow flittering along the top of the terrace. The long row of houses marched on, unyielding, eyes shuttered and blind.

And this was where he was living?

So what if he'd long since run out of money? He could have fought them down at the DHSS, argued with them about his stamps, made them contact the appropriate Government offices. Not even Cowley was a mean enough bastard to lie about that. That's all it would have taken: get the idiots down at the dole office to verify that he *had* held an 'employment stamp exempt' job, or whatever the hell the civil servants called it. He could have used the dole money, people managed to live on it for years. But he'd not been able to face the reams of paperwork, of having to go in to CI5 himself, not even now, not even with all these months between him and Bodie. Or perhaps that was the problem. He'd always been one for dramatic depressions, long hours spent in analysing and examining and going around in gloomy circles. And there had been no Bodie there to jolly him out of it this time, had there? He picked at a weed, finding a worm, watching intently as the worm crawled over him in search of some nice cool dirt. He'd got too used to that, to having Bodie get him out of his moods, that maybe he'd almost forgotten how to shake them off himself. Perhaps that explained these past few months of just lying down and dying. Or maybe he just didn't like himself enough to do anything for himself.



treated, bouncing from his anger to his depression, unable to face himself, thus his id was quietly trying to destroy that man he despised.

He wasn't sure whether or not he was glad that it hadn't yet succeeded.

The coast of France was looming up ahead, home of wine, pâté and bread superb enough to spread even his narrow hips. Home of snooty Frogs and garlic-drenched frogs legs, sexy women and demonstrative men. A crowd in which to become a hermit. A place, perhaps, of forgiveness, even if he could never forget.

Unlike England. There would be no blessings for him there, neither forgiving nor forgetting, not from Bodie, not from Cowley and most certainly not for himself. So to France then, she of such wary alliance, she of such hostile friendship. To paint, perhaps, or to work doing whatever he could turn his hand to. To live, *en ville* or *au compagne*, time would answer that. It wasn't that Cowley didn't have the reach, rather that he wouldn't consider destroying Doyle's nascent chances worth so much of a stretch.

The air began to clear as he neared land, the lash of sound and the prick of light returning, forcing him out of his sweet melancholy. The smell of the shore defeated the smell of the sea, the draw of the land slowly eviscerating the pull of the water, until he was aching for the soil again, with its blank face of earth to wipe out the memories he had buried in the sea. A fresh start. A clean slate. Nothing and no one but himself and what he carried on his back: a few clothes and enough guilt and anger for a shroud.

But it was with head held high, sinuous grace turning heads, eyes clear that he set foot on foreign soil. *Christ, bloody Napoleon on Elba, that's who I am. Be showing me arm in the old jacket next. Now, let's see. Just gone 6 o'clock, grab a coffee somewhere, dust off my old French and get on the bike, down to St. Germain and let's see if Willie the Wanker can find an old mate a job.*

It was with strange voices ringing in his ears, unfamiliar aromas assaulting his nose and the different brightness of French sun dazzling

his eyes that he rode into the village on the outskirts of Paris. St. Germain-en-Laye, gothic church and massive city hall, open air flower market and a cemetery filled with souls. An odd peace began its slow seeping in through his pores, as steadily and serenely as the dust danced in the golden air. He could breathe here. He could forgive himself, here. He could find the answers to questions that he had never dared even ask, back home, in the grimness of daily survival.

Bike chrome reflecting the whitewash wall, he knocked on William Ferguson's door, ready to bury his demons and start all over again. The fear of it thrilled him...

EVEN ENGLAND CAN CHANGE, GIVEN ENOUGH TIME. And even a man can change, given enough time. Some men, anyway...

"You've not given me a single good reason why I should tell you where Bodie is these days."

Doyle stared at the man who had once been king of this particular castle and was shocked by the changes time had wrought. Oh, the fire was still there, but it was strained now, as if it were will and not heart that kept it fuelled and burning bright. Tiger hair was steel grey now, a colour as cold as the eyes that glared back at Doyle. "Look, I've told you, I'm not going to turn up on his doorstep like a bad penny, just want to drop him a line, let him know I'm back in England. What's the harm in that, sir?" He clamped his mouth shut, too late to dam the word he had had not the slightest idea was going to come out. Sir. It was so easy to call him that, so easy to slip back into the old posture, sitting on one of the chairs in front of the Old man's desk, arguing for a rise or a weekend off or to have his expense chits reinstated. *Don't be such a wally, he snapped at himself, that's long gone. Forget all that.* But it was painfully obvious that neither of them had forgotten 'all that' and that Cowley, at least, wanted none of it. To think that one night had soured over four years... Doyle was no fool: he had expected no forgiveness, but he *had*

forgotten just how hard Cowley could be. *Cut Bodie and the Cow bleeds*, he thought again, as he had so many times since ‘that night’, *and then the old bastard’ll come after you with his claymore.*

“So all you want to do is write to him, is that it? Then why can’t you address the letter to him here? It’s worked fine these past three years, I don’t see why you have this sudden need to change the system.”

There was no diplomatic way of phrasing what he had to say. “Because I don’t think you’ve given him a single one of those letters, that’s why.”

Cowley leaned back in his burnished chair, the burgundy leather creaking faintly. “All my fault, is that what you’re trying to tell me, that it’s because of me that Bodie never once wrote back to you? Well, you just listen to me, laddie,” he snapped, lunging forward, sharp as nails and twice as cutting, “I’ve made sure—personally made sure, mind—that Bodie’s had every one of your letters, every one of your postcards, your Christmas cards and your birthday cards and what have you. Every single damned one of them, Doyle, I’ve given him. With my own two hands, I’ve given him your reminders of what you did to him. And every time, I’ve had to watch what happened to him afterwards. Keep them from him? I’m not you, Doyle, I’d never stoop so low.”

The fury made him reel, as shocking as the truth that was lodging in his throat. He’d been so sure that it was Cowley stopping Bodie from getting his letters. So sure it had been Cowley stopping Bodie from hearing how much he had changed, the differences he’d made in himself. But it wasn’t. It was Bodie himself. Bodie who hadn’t wanted to forgive.

“Ach, laddie, don’t take on so. You can’t have expected anything else, after all.” He looked at Doyle again, the whiteness leeching the life from his face, the pupils dilated and wild. “You did, didn’t you? Never took you for a dreamer, Doyle. Here,” he said, fetching his bottle and a pair of glasses, the old limp return-

ing as arthritis came to roost, “get this down you.”

Face now carefully blank, Doyle took the proffered glass, cradling it for a moment, watching the light glint off the multifaceted crystal that held the warm brown of the whisky. He sipped it and couldn’t help but smile, despite it all. Still Glenfiddich, and with the heat of it slipping down his throat, the smell of it filling his nostrils, it was almost as if he had never left. Almost as if it would be Bodie breezing in through the office door behind him.

It was Bodie. He knew it, instantly and to the marrow; knew, too, the moment Bodie laid eyes on him. Turning to face him was one of the hardest things he’d ever done. So was speaking to him. But it was the seeing chill indifference where he had once seen love: that, oh, that was by far the hardest.

“Bodie,” he said, with a nod of greeting, holding himself firmly in check, restraining himself from jumping to his feet and grabbing the man he used to know. “How are you, mate?”

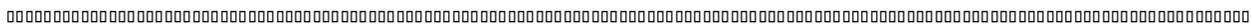
“Fine.” And that was it. One word, and then Doyle was dismissed, turned aside from, discounted. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Aye, about the Duncan situation, but it’ll keep.” A slight nod at Doyle, a silent reminder that they had a civilian in their midst.

“Then I’ll get back to work, then, sir.”

The cold in the room began to numb Doyle and his old anger began to warm him. “Oh, don’t let me keep you,” he said, in the old voice, resuscitating memories of many an old battle. “Wouldn’t want to stand in the way of Her Majesty’s loyal servants, would I? After all, I only came all the way from fucking France to see you, Bodie. The least you could do is speak to me.”

“Oh, that’s rich, coming from you. That’s really rich. After what you did, you think you can just waltz back in here and good old Bodie’ll lie down at your feet and lick your boots, is that it?” In the aftermath of his outburst, even Bodie looked surprised that there was so much anger still in him.



Doyle wasn't surprised at all. Underneath all his hopes, he had feared that this would happen, that his price would not yet have been paid. Three years, obviously, weren't enough. He smiled, slipping back into the ways they had once used to defuse arguments. "Not wearing any boots, am I?"

"Think it's funny, do you? Think it's good for a few jokes and then let's all forget about it and be good chums together? Lissen, mate, if you think I'm going to forget what you did to me, you need your head bloody examined. With a sledgehammer."

The whisky in the glass trembled with the slamming of the door, amber lights rippling and twisting. The reverberations of the finality of that slamming door eddied through Doyle, setting his teeth on edge, filling him with agony. He hadn't expected hearts and flowers, not really. But a part of him had hoped, a small, foolish kernel had sat there, a spot of gold amidst the dross, promising him that once Bodie saw him, once they were actually in the same room together again, once the first awkward moments had passed... They'd been closer than anyone else he had ever known, had loved each other, had needed each other. He couldn't quite believe that it was all gone, sunk without a trace in a vat of vitriol.

"Here."

His refilled glass was thrust back into his hands and he looked at it, wondering when Cowley had taken it from him and topped it up. He hadn't noticed, hadn't noticed anything, apart from how it felt to have Bodie physically walk out on him. He thought he had already been through all that, but being excluded, ignored, was nothing on having to sit there while Bodie actually walked out. Gone. Over before it had started, just like the last time. Before he could prove that he had changed. Before he could even get Bodie to look at him...

"Doyle! Look at me, man. That's better. Never thought I'd see this, Doyle, you lost to the world because you were regretting what you did to Bodie. Oh, I've seen you riddled with guilt

afore, seen you sick with it, but you've never regretted something. And there's a difference with you. Guilt is something you feel whether it's because you've raped your best friend or because some fellow you've never met blew up a bus in India. You enjoy guilt, it makes you feel alive and part of the human race. See, ma, I'm human, I feel for my fellow man. That was always your style, Doyle. But regret? No, you never regretted doing something enough to make it so that you could never do it again, did you? But you're truly sorry about that night, aren't you?"

"Sorry? You'll never know how bloody sorry I am."

"Sorry enough to just sit there like a great lump of lard, or sorry enough to go after him and make him listen to you? He'll still turn you down, mind, but you could at least make him hear what you have to say."

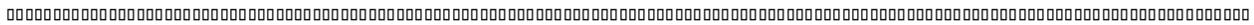
"No."

"What d'you mean, 'no'? Do you want him or not? For goodness sake, make up your mind!"

The glass sparkled as it splintered, cascading whisky down the chipped filing cabinet. "Of course I bloody want him! D'you think I'd come this far, sell everything up in France and face you, if I didn't want him? But I promised myself something, Cowley, and that was to let him make his own decisions. That's what went wrong that Friday night. Wasn't standard rape, I never forced him at the beginning. It's just that I decided for both of us what would be good. Never gave him a choice, never let him pick what he wanted, just knew what I wanted and went after it, without paying any attention to him, bar seeing what I wanted to see and not another thing more."

"So you'll let him walk out now, because it's what he wants?"

"Yeh." Disconsolate, fighting the urge to go out there and wrestle Bodie to the ground, force the stubborn bugger to listen to reason, he subsided into the chair, sprawling back, lacing his fingers through his hair. "Yeh, that's exactly



“And that’s where Bodie comes in, right.”

“Aye. He was all set to go back to Africa, to a place just outside of Johannesburg. Training white supremists how to ‘defend’ themselves. Offered him a very good price too, I might add. But I’d given my word and I’d never run away from that promise. The first time I ever did that was 3 years ago. Shut your mouth, Doyle, or you’ll be setting up home for flies. Oh, aye, I saw it coming between you and Bodie. Not the details, mind, just the problems. And I never lifted a hand to help. I let my own anger get in the way. Let you run away.”

“Let me run away? You just about kicked me out of the country!”

“And what if I hadn’t? What if I’d let you stay, with Bodie torn apart and me angry enough to do murder? What then? Ach, well, the past is the past and I can’t undo it. But I *can* make amends. I can try to help you now the way I should have years ago.”

“So now you’re going to help me, eh? That’s rich,” he sneered, not noticing he was using the same words that had been levelled at him. “You threw me out, fired me, kept me from Bodie... Wouldn’t even tell me where he’d been moved to once he got out of hospital. Had to suck up the backside of one of the secretaries to get his bloody address! But it took me two months to get to him and you know our Bodie, don’t you? Two months without a word from me, and he’d have the biggest bloody vendetta since the Godfather, wouldn’t he? So you got to keep him and got rid of me. Put me through hell and now you expect me to put myself in your hands again? Pardon me if I don’t leap at the chance, but I’m not as flaming stupid as you want to think I am.”

“Sit down, Doyle! And stop making this harder than it already is. D’you think it’s easy for me to forgive you for what you did to Bodie? D’you think it’s easy for me to do what my conscience tells me instead of what I actually feel like doing? No, you listen to me, laddie. I’ll help you with Bodie, but only because I owed you help and never gave it and because you’ve

convinced me that you have changed your attitudes. But I’m warning you, I’ll not put up with any of your stuff and nonsense, d’ye hear me? One false step, and you’ll think what happened last time was Eden.”

“Who says I want your bloody help?”

“Me. And whether you want it or not, you’ll take it. Bodie needs you and that’s half of his trouble. He needs you and more fool him, he loves you. And he thought he’d found the right person for him. So what did you go and do? Take it all and shove it down his throat till he choked on it. He’s been the walking wounded these three years past and I’m tired of watching him suffer. I’m tired of giving him your letters and having to hold my tongue while he either goes off and mopes for a month or screws his way round half of London. It’s gone on long enough.” A moment’s breath, a second’s pause, then some of the ire left him, some of the past subsiding into the grave where it belonged. Here was one healing that had finally begun. “Aye. Too much suffering already, Doyle. For all of us.”

Doyle sat back down, head aswirl. *Three years and the old bastard can still make me dizzy. What the hell comes next?*

“Now,” Cowley went on, donning his glasses, picking up his appointments book, “I’ll be seeing a Mr. John Stirling on Wednesday. He’s got his finger in every pie there is. D’you need a job?”

“You really take the biscuit, don’t you? When I got here, you nearly ripped my head off. And now you’re offering to find me a job. Well, no thanks. I can manage by myself, thanks very much.” There was a flicker across Cowley’s face, a brief expression that Doyle recognised. If they were going to be able to finally lay that night to rest... “I mean it, sir,” he said, rewarded by the slightest of softenings of that craggy face. “And if I can’t find what I’m looking for, I’ll come back and ask you, if that’d be okay.”

“Aye, that’ll be fine. Leave a ’phone number with Ms. Armstrong. I’ll be in touch with you after I’ve spoken to Bodie.”

And it was just like old times, the same



couldn't drag his eyes away from Bodie, the corridor and the gloss of the doors and the glassy shine from the pictures not registering on any part of him save the last remnant of his CI5 training. He could hear every breath Bodie took, heard him swallow before he spoke again. "I'd've thought living in France would've taught you *something* about clothes."

"Wasn't clothes I learned about over there."

Silence greeted that, a vintage didn't-hear-a-word-of-that Bodie silence. It should have unnerved him, but he felt like grinning. Not only a homecoming of sorts, but so much better than what he had expected of today. After the massacre in Cowley's office, he had wrestled his foolish hopes back into their dungeon. He let the silence carry them into the living room and through the ritual of offering and accepting a drink. Then he sat down upon the pale cream couch he'd never seen before, looked around at the art he had never seen before, looked at the man opposite him, a man changed, perhaps, almost as much as Doyle himself. Perhaps.

"Cowley told me you'd be willing to hear me out. Was he right then?"

"When's Cowley ever wrong?"

"Any time he believed your bloody expenses, mate!" And that went down like the proverbial lead balloon. Okay, so Bodie wasn't about to allow levity to smooth this for them. "Some things I wanted to say to you, Bodie. Some of it's stuff I should've said that night, some of it's stuff I said in my letters. Some of it's stuff I never even knew."

The silence was deafening.

Doyle girded his loins and went on, implacable, needing to say this probably more than Bodie needed to hear it. "What I did to you...it was—and it wasn't—rape. Yeh, I forced you, but I didn't realise I was forcing you and it wasn't about power or violence and that's what rape's really all about. What I did to you, was all about me. All about how selfish a bastard I was. Still am, truth to tell. Probably always will be. But never the way I was then, Bodie. That

night, all I could think about was how I felt to finally get into bed with you. The only thing going through my mind was how my body felt. Never meant to hurt you, Bodie."

The silence *hurt*.

"Look, I can't undo what I did, but I do want to make it up to you. Want another chance, Bodie. Want to try again, see if I can get it right this time."

The silence was beginning to get right up his nose. It was an intrinsic part of his nature, this greeting hurt with anger, an aspect of himself grown out of childhood and never to be excised, no more than he could change his bones.

"Listen, Bodie, I never meant to fucking rape you, I just didn't realise that you'd stopped wanting what I wanted."

"And that's supposed to make it better? I'm supposed to be *glad* that my best mate couldn't give a shit about me, to the point where it didn't matter that it was me he was shoving his prick up? It's supposed to make it better that you couldn't have cared less who it was under you, as long as the body was still warm? Oh, yeh, Doyle, that *really* makes me want to fall to my knees and forgive you."

Doyle was beginning to miss that silence. "Bodie," he said, then stopped, hearing the snap in his own voice. "Bodie," he began again, curbing his temper as he had learned to, using his will as a rein and not a lash to hurt others, "I don't blame you for being livid, I'd be the same way. I'm just trying to explain how it was for me that night and..."

"Oh, how it was for you that night? Tell me, ducky, was it as good for you as it was for me? Is that what you're building up to you, you bastard?"

He was actively missing that stoney silence by now.

"Bodie..."

"Don't you fucking Bodie me. But it's a bit too late for that, isn't it, Doyle? You've already fucked me, haven't you? Already had your taste. Is that it? Fancy another spot of forced sodomy, do you? Is that why you've



bloody pair we are an' all, aren't we mate?"

"Don't care what you say, you're not giving me any of the blame for that night."

"But what about for keeping it going, for hurting us both this time round, what about that, Bodie? Now that's something you can't blame me for."

"Maybe not."

"Definitely not."

Silence again, both of them busy with the words that battered at the core of the gordian knot.

"Give me another chance, will you, sunshine?"

Bodie climbed to his feet, for all the world older than Cowley. "Dunno."

Doyle took his ace out from his sleeve, fingering it, wondering if this were the right moment to play it, or if this gamble would lose him the only trump card he had. Bodie's back was to him, his head bowed, fingers tangled tightly in the heavy curtain. Doyle saw that back stiffen, saw the neck muscles cord, saw the head begin to slowly rise. He felt the bile rise along with the knowledge that he'd lost. Time to play his last card.

"One other thing I'd wanted to tell you, something I told you in my letters. I love you, Bodie, love you enough to come crawling back to you like this. Even love you enough to make some changes in myself." He wanted to joke, wanted to make some facetious, sarky remark, to fall back on the good old British way of dealing with scenes: make them funny and then perhaps the bombs won't hurt. Or at least you won't be prat enough to cry.

"Join the real world, Doyle. You can't just kiss it better."

"D'you think I don't know that? Look, Bodie, I'm sorry, I wish I'd never done it, if I could go back and do it all again, I'd put by balls in a bloody vice before I'd hurt you like that again. Bodie, when all's said and done, what it comes down to is me wanting to prove to you that I really could be good with you. Show you that I love you."

"And do you? Do you honestly love me?"

Such a small voice, to come from Bodie.

"Yeh. Just that I used to have a helluva funny way of showing it. Like I've been saying, I'm really sorry, mate."

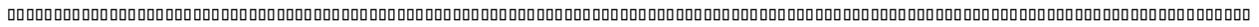
"Not half as sorry as me."

One large, pale hand came up to rub at Bodie's nape and Doyle watched it, feeling the old hunger hollow out the pit of his stomach. God, how he wanted to reach out and touch that soft skin himself or trace the curls as they slept against the smooth neck. But he dared not, knowing full well that it would destroy whatever vestigial chances that still clung stubbornly on.

"Give me another go?" he heard himself say, voice harsh with his desperate attempt not to sink into wallowing in his own misery. "Please?" and his voice finally cracked, breaking mid-word, the pain biting into Bodie.

"Oh, Christ, Ray, I don't know. Go away, will you and let me think. Can't think with you here. Go away, Ray. Just go away."

For a second, he couldn't actually move, but then the sight of that rigid back penetrated him, cold and chill and killing. His hand came up, but then returned to his side, skulking in the shadow cast by his jacket as if ashamed that it had even thought of touching Bodie now. He didn't want to speak, didn't want to hear how his voice would sound. So he nodded, unseen, to Bodie's back and then began to leave, the movements forcibly bringing back the memories of one particular morning a lifetime ago. His body knew the motion, every move burned into his synapses to entwine with his DNA. No choice, but to go. No choice, or he'd be no better than he had been that night. *Don't even think it*, he told himself. But of course, tell yourself that, and the thoughts spew into your mind faster than you can murder them. *Don't!* he screamed at his temptation, walking faster and faster until he was almost running. As his hand reached out for the snib, the picture came to his mind full-fledged, the picture of how much Bodie still loved him and how terribly, frighteningly easy it



would be to seduce him. The hunger was a cataract of need from Bodie, a hunger that was temptingly easy to exploit. But sex now would be worse than useless, would serve not to forge them together but to force them apart, bringing up 'that night' like Sunday vomit after Saturday's party. His hand closed upon the latch, twisted the brassy metal and pulled the door open. He took his first step away, his entire, obstinately optimistic body listening for Bodie, listening to hear Bodie say 'wait'. The word didn't come, nothing came to reel him in. He stepped through the gaping door, onto a landing pristine and scoured, devoid of all signs of life, the epitome of the polite English city dwelling. He started down the stairs, still listening, still hoping, but it was all dying, step by step, the fearfilled pain racing in on its heels. By the time he reached the outer door, he was running as if all the bats of hell were chasing him.

And he didn't even know that Bodie was still standing at that window, watching him.

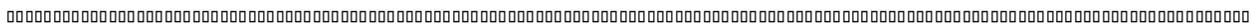
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The flat he had rented on his return to England was the sort usually described as 'modest'—that estate agents' euphemism for microscopic. But it was perfect for him, a man on his own who had sloughed off most of his material possessions. There was room enough here for him to fill some empty spaces with new books and old treasures as he bought them, but not so many spaces that he rattled hollowly around the place as his hopes shivered through his brain. No matter how he tried, he still felt the faint swellings of hope every time the 'phone rang; his belly still churned every time the door went, he still couldn't help but start at the sight of a tall, dark and handsome man in the street. Apart from the recalcitrance of his heart, he was resettling in England quite well, even if he were given to a distressing propensity for yelling in French if he were in a hurry and idiots were in his way. But all that was passing, as the old air and the old attitudes seeped back into his bones. He had even gone to his mother's house, to sit politely for an hour over tea while she com-

plained about him as if he weren't there and at the end of it, he had stood and departed, feeling as if he had never been there at all, as if the woman with whom he'd had tea was a wisp from a book by Genet. Walking home from his mother's home had been wonderful, his mind full of his city, his London, all the places he'd known first as a lad, then as a copper, and then with Bodie. Bittersweet, absolutely, but ripe and rich and heady, even if it was only the slithering lick of pain that told him he was alive and kicking.

And at the oddest moments, memories would come back to him, diamond bright and ruby warm: Bodie's skin, the big hands holding him, the brilliance of the smile glittering in blue eyes. There was a song on the radio, played everywhere, in the shops, on the radio of some yobbo walking past, blasting from a car screeching around a corner. "Lips like sugar, sugar kisses," the singer sang, pouring salt into his wounds or heat to his groin, the reaction as rational as the flip of a coin, emotion ruling this one aspect of his life. Sugar kisses. It took so little to feel Bodie's mouth open against his, the sweetness of it devastating this other side of the disaster. And then the guilt would rise up again, for no matter how often he thought he had forgiven himself, no matter how often he had expiated that particular sin, no matter how many times he had examined it rationally and worked himself through his self-revulsion, it would catch in the back of his throat, choking him. It was going to take Bodie for him to be able to finally bury it in himself where only the health of the regret would remain, changing him from that night. And in the meantime, there was a living to be made, choices to be made. The Beethoven record was still there, but he never listened to it, not now. Even much of Mozart had been lost to him, for the past it evoked, so it was just as Tchaikovsky began to fill his small flat that the doorbell rang, interrupting music that was of an age far less discordant.

By the time he'd got as far as the living room door, the bell had gone twice more. "All



right, all right, keep your shirt on, I'm coming, I'm coming." His door was a solid piece of wood, his peep-hole not yet installed, a blank face to present to the world. He hauled it open. "Bodie." That was all that would come from him, all the other words held inside. Let Bodie be the one to speak, give Bodie the chance to say whatever it was he had come here to say. *Keep your mouth shut, Doyle, don't cock it up now. Just keep your big trap shut...*

In benedictine silence, they went into the sitting room, Bodie not attempting to keep his curiosity to himself. His eyes examined everything, filing it all away, assessing, identifying, noticing every subtle nuance of taste that had altered with the passing of years and noticing too those things which were conspicuous by their absence. Knick-knacks, pictures on the walls, the clutter of books and papers. So little had imprinted itself upon this flat, even considering the short time Doyle had lived here. Looking at it through Bodie's eyes, following the line of thought with the same old ease, Doyle saw this house for what it shouted: temporary. Nothing here was fixed, nothing here was settled, nothing here yet belonged. Not even Doyle. Perhaps, *especially* not Doyle.

Doyle sat down, as he had at Bodie's, on the couch, waiting for Bodie to reiterate that last meeting they had suffered. Instead, Bodie lowered himself on the sofa beside Doyle, close enough for the musky draw of his after-shave to curl over to Doyle, just as Bodie's hair curled a fraction over his collar, barely touching, but addictive to those who desired him.

"Been thinking about what you had to say when you came over to the flat last week, Ray."

Ray? Doyle thought, a hope going through him that, for the first time, he didn't immediately suppress. *If he's calling me 'Ray' right off the bat and he's been thinking about what I said... Down, boy,* he thought to his cock that was rising in direct proportion to his hope, *pack it in until you're invited...* "Oh yeh?" he managed, laudably calm.

"Yeh. Must be getting senile in my old age, but some of what you said actually made a bit of sense. You were a lousy bastard to do that to me, but if I look at it from your point of view, it's not quite as bad. And," he paused, dragging in a deep breath, "even though I still think I should've beaten you to a pulp for it, even though there's no bloody excuse for it, it still leaves me with two choices, doesn't it? Either I never see you again, or I give you another chance. Which is what brings me here."

There was a tremble in Doyle's hand as it rested on his thigh. He was waiting, consumed, for Bodie's touch, for Bodie's forgiveness, for Bodie's answer.

Bodie wasn't looking at him, was staring at the carpet between his feet and the way it reflected in the polished black of his shoes. "I'll only warn you once, Doyle. You do anything like that to me again, if you so much as think about it, I'll fucking kill you. Quite, quite." he suddenly stared straight at Doyle, impaling him, butterfly on display, his words so terribly, terribly quiet, "slowly."

"Seems fair enough to me, Bodie. D'you want it in writing?"

A wry smile greeted that. "Yeh, actually, I would, but I'll never get it from you, will I, Ray? Not your style, that. No, the warning's enough, I think. Well, that's all I had to say." He got to his feet, Doyle eyeing him with complete shock.

"Where're you going, then?" he asked, going back to the way they always used to talk to each other, wiping the slate clean, even if there would always be a backup stored in each of their memories. "Got some food in, if you're hungry." He laughed, albeit it a little strained, a little cracked, mirror to his feelings. *Nice and slow, nice and slow, don't rush him, don't rush...* a small voice was repeating frantically in his mind, saying the words over and over, reining him in, stopping him from grabbing Bodie and hanging on for dear life. *Can't have it all at once. Can't just really wipe it all clean, it all takes time...* He laughed again, even less than before,



reweaving the old friendship. "How's the Cow these days, eh? Still the same old bastard to work for? Still catching you fiddling your expenses is he, then?"

And the conversation stuttered up between them, and then it began to flow, the friendship parachuting open as if nothing had changed, as if Doyle had done nothing more untoward than move to France for 3 years. But it was so awkward, the parting at the end of the day, what they had come so close to becoming hovering over them like a pall. There were good-byes, with that peculiar moment the British have of 'to hug or not to hug', the feelings there, but the tradition of closeness not. And then there was what hugging meant to them, what it brought up again... So there were long looks and aborted movements of restless hands, shufflings of feet and finally, a shrug, a good-bye and then the door was shut and Bodie was gone, leaving Doyle alone to wait until he was forgiven. Alone, save for that last minute invitation to keep him warm.

"Come for a proper English pint with me tomorrow night, then?"

And god, yes, he'd come with him, any time Bodie asked. He was still hugging the possibilities to him as he went to bed, pyjamas tossed carelessly over the chair as he slipped between the chill sheets, hand immediately, starvingly, centring in on his cock, pumping, hard and sudden and implacable, the smell of Bodie, the sight of Bodie, the feel of Bodie bringing him to an abrupt, lonely orgasm, Bodie's name groaned into a deaf pillow. And then there was the rest of the night to get through. Alone. And for however long it took Bodie.

HE KNEW IT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TONIGHT, HAD KNOWN IT FROM THE MOMENT BODIE HAD MET HIM TO GO TO THE GAME. They'd been building up to this for only a week, but it was definitely going to happen. In fact, considering how they both felt, he was surprised they'd managed to wait this long. The fact that they had was tribute only to Bodie's need for proof, Bodie's endless need

for reassurance. *Not that I can blame him, much. Probably done the same in his shoes, considering what happened the last time. Be different this time, though, he'll see.* He smiled at Bodie, a smile warm enough to elicit loud whispers of 'look at that poofter!'. That only made his smile all the warmer, priorities being one of the things he'd learned as a result of that night. There were times when you had to let the world go to hell in its own hand-basket while you took care of your own little world and its special denizens. Or in Doyle's case, denizen, singular. There wasn't room yet for anyone else, not even room enough for Cowley or Murph or anyone else. All that could come later, when he and Bodie were settled, when he knew for definite that they were together and no-one—least of all himself—could put them asunder. He'd always liked that phrase, liked the archaic, pompous music of it, if not the being chained to someone forever. Vows were not something he would ever take lightly, not when the world and his own nature held so many variables and quirks. Not until he could be sure it *would* be for the rest of his natural—or unnatural, as the Mary Whitehouses of the world would have it—life. He was still smiling that same smile and Bodie was beginning to look at him a bit funny.

"You all right, mate?"

"Yeh, 'm fine. You all right?"

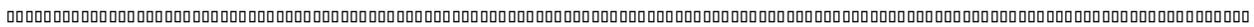
"All right? All right? Listen, Doyle, no one's ever called me just 'all right'. Usually got bloody fantastic, actually."

"I didn't know all your girlfriends were virgins."

Bodie licked one finger, drew a score in the air, conceding that he had walked right into that one. "D'you want another?" he said, in lieu of a come-back.

"Nah. Rather go home."

It was the way it was said rather than the words that made clear what he was asking. And he was asking, not demanding, nor subverting nor seducing. Just asking. Putting himself up on offer, giving Bodie the control, the power, the right to make the decision. There was a long



skylight overhead, stars dreaming, beckoning, and Bodie came up beside him, looking at him levelly, all attempts to keep this on the same even keel abandoned, for this was so much more than what had gone before. His key then, the door open, a deep breath and they were both through it, in the living room, facing each other, as jackets and coat were dropped on chairs and then they were simply staring at each other. A fulcrum, that instant when the moment could have become fraught with tension, but Doyle smiled, deprecating, laughing at them both standing here like awkward, knobby-kneed teenagers. Bodie came forward to him then, reaching out, taking the hand that reached out to his, then Bodie was leading them both into the bedroom.

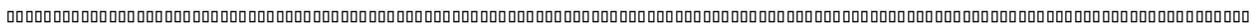
Small looks, small kisses, a hand brushing the sensitive small of Doyle's back in the almost-dark of the bedroom. Light spilled in from the hall, not quite meeting up with the streetlight that eased in from the window, the dark blue curtains hanging forgotten and undrawn. Bodie's eyes were closed, Doyle's wide open as he watched that much-loved face so concentrated with the pleasure and the unease of intimacy. This time, Doyle had promised himself, this time, he would listen properly to Bodie, would actually see him, would not become lost in the largeness of his own pleasure. He stroked the crisp starch of Bodie's shirt, pulling it free of trousers, needing to touch the softness of skin, needing to feel the ciliated spine quiver under his touch. He found the arch of Bodie's spine, felt those miniscule hairs erect at his caress. Bodie pushed him away, just a bit, far enough for them to each to unbutton the other's shirt, their lips meeting and parting in promissory kisses. His shirt was smoothed from off his shoulders, dropping unheeded to the floor as Bodie's fell, hands free to roam, his across the smoothness of skin, Bodie's to striate through swirling hair. Lower then, back to being a team in perfect harmony, one with the other, belts disposed of, buttons undone and then...a pause, a hesitation in the way Bodie was kissing him and fear took up

residence in Doyle's belly. He could feel words gather in Bodie's chest where it was pressed to his own and he waited.

"You know something, Ray? We're going to feel a right pair of prats. Here we are being all romantic the way we're getting our clothes off, and we've gone and forgotten our shoes and socks. Going to spoil the mood something rotten, that it."

He couldn't help but laugh then. "You great wally," he said, punching Bodie—but lightly—in the chest, moving back to sit on the edge of the bed, unlacing his trainers and pulling everything off, still laughing as Bodie hopped around getting rid of his own shoes. "Trust you to think about that in the middle of the great seduction scene. Sure you don't want to check that the oven's off and the telly's unplugged and the cat's..."

His mouth was stopped with a kiss, Bodie's tongue entering him, filling him with moisture and heat, love coming through as clear as the chiming of the church bell. Only nine o'clock, but he didn't think this was even slightly too early for bed, in more ways than one. They were ready, oh, they were both more than ready, Bodie's erection digging into Doyle as he was brought to his feet. Bodie's hands were at his waistband then, Bodie's mouth feathering over his face, tongue darting, setting little bonfires of delight burning. "Now where were we then?" Bodie's voice was in his ear, all warm and lascivious, the humour so benign and a blessing to Doyle. "Right about here was it?" and there was a hand pressing on him through his jeans, pressing hard, just right, rubbing him against the top of his own thigh, caught between denim and hair-soft skin. He pushed Bodie away, needing to get his hands between them so that he could get at Bodie, get at the clothes that were in his way, frustrating him, making him desperate. In amongst all the large regrets of 'that night' was the small one that he had been in such a hurry that he couldn't remember how Bodie felt filling his hand or tasted under his tongue. He wanted that, wanted to get on his knees before Bodie in



loving, but the finger had been joined by another, dry, hard, beginning the hurting. *This wasn't how it was supposed to be...* Doyle thought, agony spearing him within and without. *Oh, Bodiemate, don't...*

“And what would that prove, eh? Prove that you'd let me hurt you like you hurt me, prove that you'll do anything to make me forgive you, won't it? But Ray, it's not what I want. Don't want you here like a fucking sacrifice. Want to fuck you when you're so hot for it you're screaming, want to fuck you when I come home one night and you jump me at the door, don't even let me get you into a bed you're so frantic for it. Fuck you up against the wall, or on the sofa, or on the floor or in the honeymoon suite, don't care, but it's got to be cos you're desperate to feel me up you, not to say 'sorry' for something three years ago. So, my lovely, get your backside—and your other little bits—back over here. Come on, wipe your eyes, love, come here, come to me, let me hold you...”

And he was in Bodie's arms, Bodie's forgiveness wrapped warm and large around him, Bodie's tongue lapping up his tears, taking all his sorrow and regret and self-hate into Bodie himself. The healing was almost complete...

More kisses, passion rising again now that the storm of emotion had passed, better emotion, lustier emotion taking its place. Bodie's hands were on Doyle's bum again, a finger in him, but only for the pleasure that brought. Bodie's voice was in his ear, his breath lost in Doyle's curls, tickling his nape. “In the drawer, Ray. Tube of stuff. You forgot it the last time, so I thought I'd better buy some meself, you old skinflint. Well, go on, get it. *I can't reach from here, can I?*”

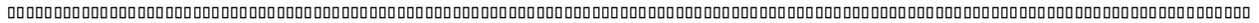
Doyle stretched, refusing to let go of Bodie, scrabbling in the drawer amidst the clutter of books and pens and rubber bands and chewing gum packets; then his questing fingers found it: smooth tube, no mistaking it. Bodie took it from him, unsteady hands anointing Doyle's erection.

“All that for me, eh, love? God, you're

beautiful. Love your prick, never got a real chance to see it before. Want to suck you, Ray, want to have you all the way inside me. All ready now, so slick. Gonna slide in there smooth as silk you are. Here, put a bit in me, make it nice and easy.”

Doyle took the tube, heaving in great gulps of breath to steady himself, overflowing with arousal and need and love. Very gently, he soothed some of the gel into Bodie, taking his time, enjoying the way Bodie's body opened up under his finger, the muscle quivering before his eyes, swallowing him up, Bodie's voice subsiding into silence as the pleasure grew. He'd remember that, that Bodie went quiet when it started getting too good to take. Then he had to kiss Bodie, had to reaffirm that this was between the two of them, not just a faceless fuck. He hooked Bodie's legs over his shoulders, staring down into the face of the man he loved above even his own self-deceptions, then slowly, with exquisite care, staring into those blue, blue eyes, staring, staring, barely blinking, holding them together with love, he began to join them in body. He could feel the head of his cock pressing against the small tightness that was Bodie, felt the muscle yield, felt himself press home into the inner heat that was his mate. Then they were together, hard cock buried in tender flesh, the jut of hip pressing into the soft swell of arse, chest to chest, mouths almost touching, breath mingling as their sweat blended with their pleasure. He had to move, had to, and Bodie was moving with him, grunting with the ecstasy, writhing, eyes finally closing. Doyle did not close his eyes. The need to watch, to guard Bodie from Doyle himself, was far too immutable. So he watched, and grinned, elated and filled with the joy of it all, his body buried in Bodie, Bodie lost in pleasure, dark head tossing side to side on the white pillow, neck cording, arm muscles bunching from holding Doyle so close and tight.

Abruptly, Bodie pushed at him and Doyle jumped back as if burned, almost withdrawing from Bodie, but hard hands were pulling him back in, Bodie's legs wrapping around



his hips, drawing him closer than he had been before and then Bodie was shoving upwards, moaning, fucking them both. Doyle pumped up and down, hard, fierce, unequivocally masculine, but never once, not for a second, more than Bodie wanted, not a fraction more than Bodie could take. The small of his back was aching, from the fucking and from Bodie's heels digging in to him, but that only made the pleasure all the more intense. At this moment, it was all pleasure, it was all delight, it was all perfection. He thrust hard again and Bodie pushed up to meet him, fierce as Doyle, as frantic, as desperate, as close to coming. Doyle sank down a little more, until Bodie's cock was pressing into both their bellies, precum making it all slick and wonderful. Now, with every deep thrust, he rubbed against Bodie, felt Bodie's unyielding masculinity even as Bodie's flesh yielded to him. More, and harder, and all the while, Doyle was watching. They were so close now, both on the verge of orgasm. Bodie opened his eyes, locking their gazes together, cocooning them completely in each other. Another buck of Doyle's lean hips, another arch of Bodie's back and then they were both there, heaven, with Bodie's cum streaming between them, wetting their bellies and Doyle's seed anointing Bodie inside, filling him with heat and wetness.

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Doyle collapsed then, exhausted, sated. Forgiven. It was palpable, the forgiveness. He could reach out and touch it, if he wanted to. And he did. So he reached out, touching Bodie's chest, feeling the heartbeat under his fingertips.

There were no words, for there was no need for words, not now, not with the love still tingling through them, not with the sense of completion making heavy their limbs and eyes. Only small touches, small caresses, the soft kiss of lips on nipple, the slow, languorous embrace of tongue on skin. Sleep was there, waiting in the wings, hovering over them, misty comfort to hold them. Still entwined, their seed upon and in each other, they slept.

In the morning, with newly risen sun stretching fingers of sunlight towards their bed,

they began it all again, with kisses and loving and words, until they slept again. And so life finally began, the healing complete.

Almost.

THE YEAR WAS DIFFERENT, THE DECADE DIFFERENT, THE BED THE SAME, THE MEN THE SAME. In the stillness of the morning, indulging in the luxury of breakfast and morning paper in bed, Doyle lay and watched as Bodie's chest rose and fell with every breath. He lay there, thinking about what the doctors had said, thinking about how Bodie paid only lip service, then went right on eating even more high cholesterol food than ever before. And Doyle knew why. Knew all about this man's bone-deep need for commitment, the inbred need to belong, to know that everything was settled. To know that Raymond Doyle was never going to leave William Andrew Philip Bodie. To know that he was never going to waken up alone. No matter how happy they were, that was always there, nagging silently, never mentioned, Bodie acting as if it didn't exist. But it showed, more in its absence than in anything Bodie ever did. No, there were no demands, never had been, but it was there in the way Bodie lit up like Trafalgar Square at Christmas, all because Doyle had remembered the anniversary of the time when it had all *really* started between them. He'd made a point after that, to remember every date of significance in their shared lives, but still, it was always lingering around them like a pauper, hungry, big-eyed, miserably waiting. Bodie's need for something, anything, that he could hold in his hands and say, 'see? Ray *does* love me and he *is* going to stay with me.' In these days of AIDS and couples splitting up under the pressure or never getting together because of the fear, Doyle could almost feel it himself. Except he had no doubts at all about Bodie, was as sure of him as a child is of the family dog. Always there, he knew that. And that was a luxury Bodie didn't have, the lack of it slowly eating him alive. Almost literally. Doyle thought again about his private conversation with Bodie's doctor, thinking about what Bodie had given up



and what he had continued with. Being an agent on the streets had passed without a parting glance; moving into the lucrative private sector bodyguard business with Ray had been done with nary a murmur, but the food... Oh, Bodie was careful to exercise properly, had given up all the things that could cause the fatal surge of adrenalin, but he still ate all the wrong stuff, ostensibly behind Doyle's back, but Ray was no fool. He'd been watching, had friends keeping an eye on Bodie, saw all the test results, the numbers slowly climbing higher. And the medicine that had been prescribed, the medicine that would stop this genetic predisposition that had caused so much trouble so young—that lay in Bodie's underwear drawer, unopened. It was, Doyle had decided, almost as if Bodie was subconsciously making sure he went before Doyle left him.

There were long groans to match long stretches and then Bodie was quickly out of bed and away to the bathroom, returning minutes later, diving under the covers even as his hands reached out to the breakfast tray. Doyle slurped his tea and glanced over the top of his newspaper with ostentatious casualness at his bedmate. "Been thinking about something, Bodie," he said, again with that falsely casual air, as if discussing the football scores.

"Hang on a minute and I'll 'phone the Sun," Bodie muttered at him, paying not the least little attention. He was used to his Ray in the morning.

"Nah, I'm serious."

"At this time in the morning? Ray my love, you're unnatural, that's what you are."

Doyle didn't have his usual ready retort for that, thereby sending out warning signals by the score. "No, seriously, I mean it. There's something I've been thinking about suggesting."

He got a look for that. "I am *not* into gerbils and you had better bloodywell not be either."

"Don't be any more disgusting than usual, Bodie. Listen, I was reading here in the

paper about a court case that just got settled in the High Court." He paused for dramatic effect. "Upholding the validity of other EC country licences, even if both parties involved are British."

Bodie paused with blank incomprehension, EC licences already well-established in their firm and not in question at all. "That's lovely, and I'm very pleased for you but look Ray, will you just get on with it? I'm trying to have me breakfast here."

Again carefully perusing the paper, again watching Bodie with surreptitious fervour, he asked: "Fancy going to Denmark?"

Bodie's face lit up, a lovely leer brightening his eyes, a marmalade-tipped hand reaching out to Ray, wagging his eyebrows like a dirty old man. "A dirty weekend? Are you suggesting a weekend of illicit and illegal pleasures—none of them involving gerbils of course—housed in the sinful shores of Denmark?"

"Well, I *was* thinking of a bit more than just a weekend and I was going to suggest tons of pleasures... But I wasn't thinking about any illegal ones. Actually," he said, eyes lowered, long pink tongue licking Bodie-flavoured silver shred marmalade, savouring the taste, drawing his moment out, suddenly flashing his eyes open to stare wide and green into Bodie, needing to see the moment when the commitment was offered, "I was actually thinking of making it a bit more legal than it already is."

Bodie just looked at him, words on the tip of his tongue as it wet his lips, but caution, and common sense holding them in. Doyle smiled wryly at that, knowing he had only himself to blame for Bodie not grabbing him. Oh yeh, Bodie had been watching the original news about Denmark's new laws as avidly as any other man in a gay relationship, but Doyle's steadfast lack of interest had killed that particular hope long before the Danish law was established EC wide. Even now, the end of 1992, with all the boundaries down, Bodie hadn't followed up on it, for why should he? Doyle knew per-

“I’m glad you and Bodie are doing this. It’ll be good for you. Both of you.”

“Yeh, I know. Wasn’t till we started making all the arrangements that it really dawned on me how much I wanted that bit of paper as well.”

“By the way, I’ve spoken to an old friend of mine, an excellent solicitor. If you go in to him at the beginning of the year, he’ll help the pair of you to draw up new wills. Ach, don’t look at me like that, laddie. You have to take care of these things, and a wedding’s the perfect place to remind you. This is for life, Raymond, *life*. There’ll be no changing your mind after this, not for either one of you. Look at it as another commitment.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll do just that, sir,” Doyle answered in the old, long-suffering tone.

Cowley laughed again. “You see that you do, 4.7.”

“Were good years, those, weren’t they?”

“Very good years. But all that’s over now, no place for an insular group like CI5 in the new Europe.”

“Sorry to see it go, George.”

“Aye, well, so was I, in a way. But better it go than I have to hand it over to some bureaucratic, red-tape mad idiot to fritter away what I built. Or to turn it into some kind of secret police.”

They were silent for a moment, each looking elsewhere, one remembering the past and the threats of the future, one thinking only of the good things this room would bring the future. “Oh, we’ll send you a proper card, of course, but thanks for the present, George. I like a nice piece of silver.”

“Not half as much as the case of malt I sent to go with the decanter set, I’ll warrant.”

“You should’ve seen Bodie’s face when he opened that up, god, I thought he was going to fall over. He...”

“Go and get him, lad, you can talk to me any time. Well, go on, don’t just stand there catching flies.”

Doyle walked over to where Bodie was

standing in the doorway, in all his glory. Doyle had put the time and effort into a perfect dinner suit with all the trimmings, including a crisp white Swiss lawn shirt, but Bodie! Bodie had pulled out all the stops, including some Doyle hadn’t even known existed. Then he stopped and looked again and realised it had more to do with the way they were both were feeling than the mere cut of cloth and drape of fabric.

“H’lo, mate,” he said, stopping inches away, his own face as aglow as Bodie’s.

“H’lo yourself, Ray. You all set?”

“Oh, yeh, been ready for ages. You ready?”

Bodie leaned forward and kissed him, lightly, on the lips. “Been ready for years, love. Shall we get on, then?”

“Yeh. I’ll get them to start the music.”

The music had been Doyle’s choice, as the hotel had been Bodie’s, so it was to the soaring strains of Mozart—who else?—that the small group of guests took their places, the twins firmly restrained by maternal or paternal arms, securely bribed by hard sweeties and promises of presents after.

The official stepped forward, a plain man, pleasant of face and appealing of accent. “Tonight, we come here to see the marriage of two men who love each other and who have decided to live together in married union. I will officiate, they will speak their own words and then I shall declare them married. So. Who presents them to be joined?”

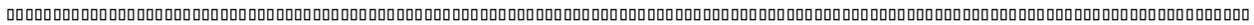
“I do,” said the Scots voice, gruffly, but his eyes were bright as he came to stand behind them. “I present William Andrew Philip Bodie and Raymond Stephen Doyle to be joined in matrimony.”

“Are there any to state a legal cause why this cannot be done?”

The only answer was little Sarah sucking loudly on her sweetie.

“Then let them speak their vows to each other. You may proceed.”

A second’s breath, and then Bodie spoke.



“I, William Andrew Philip Bodie, do take thee as my lawfully wedded spouse, to have and to hold, to love, honour and cherish, not to be parted even by death.” He took Ray’s left hand in his own, waiting for Ray to speak.

“I, Raymond Stephen Doyle, take you, William Andrew Philip Bodie, to be my lawfully wedded husband. I promise to be worthy of your trust, and to stand beside you, through thick and thin. And I’ll love you forever, Bodie.” He turned to Cowley, took the ring offered to him and slipped it onto Bodie’s finger. “With this ring, I thee wed. Love you, Bodie.”

Bodie stared at the ring glinting so brightly on his hand, a simple, plain band, all rounded and satin smooth, as if it were old. He raised an eyebrow, and Cowley broke from the planned words. “It was my mother’s, Bodie. I’ve no one of my own flesh and blood to give it to. The pair of you were the only ones I wanted it to go to. Now here, before we all embarrass ourself’s bursting into tears like a bunch of silly fools, take this and give it to Raymond.”

Doyle’s old gold ring winking on his hand as he took the circlet offered him, Bodie held Doyle’s hand in his own, slowly placing the final link in place. The platinum band, a thin circle of fine strands of platinum woven into a pattern so complex it appeared simple, nestled comfortably around Doyle’s slim finger. “With this ring,” Bodie repeated, the generations of

tradition redolent in the words, filling both of them with the sense of time everlasting and bonds made never to be broken, “I thee wed.” His voice trembled a little, fading with emotion. “With my body,” his voice was almost a whisper and Doyle’s clear tones joined his, saying the words with him, making the vows together. They looked directly at each other, no one else in the world beside them.

“With this ring, I thee wed. With my body, I thee worship. With my heart, I thee adore.”

“By the authority of the state of Denmark, recognised by the European Community of States, I now pronounce you legally and bindingly married.”

They were still holding hands, still rubbing their rings as they rested on each other’s fingers as the strains of ‘Ode to Joy’ welled up around them, turning the secular room into a cathedral. It was Bodie who was the one to speak first. “Married, eh? Does this mean I get to kiss the bride?”

“As long as I don’t have to,” Cowley said, “that’ll be fine.”

It felt strange, to both of them, to kiss in front of others, but it was right, the final seal on their bonding. A cheer went up as their lips met, and what had been a chaste peck turned into a proper, loving kiss.

The healing was complete.

From Red Dwarf to Snow White as per her detailed instructions.

see her mouth. Her lipstick was orange, it made the scarf look like flame. Then the dwarf stopped dancing and sat down on the chair opposite me.”

“And what did the dwarf tell you this time?”

“He told me—are you quite comfortable? I can send down for room service if you’re hungry. Damn fine hotel this, especially when you consider how reasonably priced it is. Room service 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.” He smile and sighed with evident pride and satisfaction. “America at her hard-working finest.”

“The dream, sir?” Truman prompted, anxious to find out—finally—who had killed Laura Palmer.

“The dwarf said the answer was still locked inside me, still a secret that I hadn’t seen yet. And he said—and this is the really interesting part, Harry—he said that I couldn’t find the answer because I was too frustrated, sexually speaking. He said that I was putting much more energy into suppressing my manly desires than it would take to *express* those desires. And of course, I said to him that as I wasn’t married, how was I supposed to take care of these desires without using up all this energy. I told him, clear and straight as I’m telling you now, that I couldn’t be with a woman. I couldn’t sully American womanhood like that. Nor even Icelandic womanhood, either. A man just *can’t* have sex with a woman who is not his wife, not if he wants to remain pure and decent. Then the dwarf said that you had the answer to my dilemma. He said I should call you straight away, the second I woke up and have you come over here to tell me how to express my manhood without behaving in a way that’s immoral against the fine women of this fine nation. Isn’t that the most amazing thing, you having the key that will let me find the key to who killed Laura Palmer? Absolutely amazing. Then the dwarf told me to wake up, which I did and then I called you.”

Harry Truman just stared at him, unable to believe his luck. He was a farm boy; he knew all kinds of ways a man could do what a man’s

gotta do. He just hoped that the way *he* wanted to do it was the way the dwarf had intended would free Special Agent Cooper’s mind. Agent Cooper was staring at him intently, intense innocence mixed with intense interest on his face.

“Well, Harry? Can you show me how to unlock the key to the key? Tell me what I have to do.”

“Em...” Truman temporized, gathering his thoughts, trying to figure out just what the dwarf had in mind, trying not to let his own desires cloud the issue. Then Cooper stood and began to pace, back and forth, back and forth, never taking more than three steps in either direction.

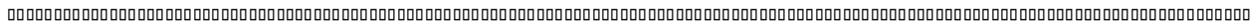
“I have to know, Harry. Perhaps,” he said, stopping unexpectedly directly in front of Truman, crotch at eye level, a very interesting vista indeed, “if you’re uncomfortable showing me—and many men would be, it’s not the kind of thing fine upstanding citizens discuss—then perhaps you could write it down for me. Then I could just follow your instructions and you wouldn’t have to witness anything at all.”

“No, no, it’s okay,” Truman blurted, seeing Cooper slip through his fingers, although not yet literally. And he wanted it to be literally. He was going to *make* it literally. “With these things, sir, it really is best to have a hands-on demonstration.”

“Okay, you’re the expert in this, I’ll take your word for it. If you don’t want to do it, perhaps one of the others would. Hawk. Yes, Hawk looks like the kind of man who would know how to keep a man’s nature in harmony with the driving needs of his body.”

“Yes, but the dwarf *did* say that I was the one to show you how to...to channel all your energy better.”

“True, true. Well, Sheriff Truman, I’m afraid it looks like we don’t have a choice about this. We’ll get started straight away.” He came to a halt directly in front of Truman, weight resting on the balls of his feet, hands resting on his hips, his groin thrust a little forward, boxer shorts partially agape. Definitely a room with a view.



over on to his side, his erection scraping across the counterpane, “a pæan to Priapus, that’s you, Harry.” His voice was soft, awed, almost breathless.

“What the hell’s that?”

“No need to swear. Pæan to Priapus,” he whispered, gazing at Truman’s unfettered glory. “Hymn of praise to the god of the erect phallus. I’ve seen drawings, photographs of ancient Greek vases and plates, when I sneaked into the archaeology department of my home town library. And you are perfect for that. A work of art. Just like in the books.”

“I’m glad you think I’m good to look at. I’m good to touch, too.”

Cooper was learning his lessons well. He reached out and grasped Truman by the cock, leading him onto the bed, drawing him down until they were in a tangle of Cooper’s hand and Truman’s cock and Cooper’s own cock. And then Truman was on top of Cooper, his weight heavy and oddly reassuring to the other man, the jut of his hips pressing down on him with immutable strength. And then those hips were moving, rhythmically, pressing down and then releasing him, until he thought he would scream with frustration if they lifted up away from him just once more. He grabbed Truman by the swell of his ass and pushed him down, hard, as he himself shoved upwards. His mouth was open in aching hunger, trusting that the emptiness would be filled, as it was. There were lips upon his, breath not his own was sighing into his mouth. Then, thrillingly, for the first time in his life, his body was not inviolate, for the first time in his life he had someone else in him. For the first time in his life, he was not alone.

It was only as he was assuaged, only as he was touched, that he realized how painfully lonely he was. How lonely he had always been. But even as he thought it, the hands that brought the loneliness took it away, replacing it with the tingling shiver of pleasure. And the hollow, hurting void of his mouth was filled by the limber strength of another man’s tongue, the taste strange and wondrously good to him. He

sucked on it, needing more, more, trying to pull more of Truman inside him, make them closer. Small noises of pleasure were coming from him, to be absorbed into Harry’s body along with his very lifebreath. And it was all too, too wonderful. He couldn’t keep his hands still, couldn’t control their frantic quest to explore, map, claim every inch of Truman. Couldn’t stop their desire to knead muscle, tangle in hair, dabble in sweat. The more he touched, the more he wanted to touch. And the more that sweet, consuming fire in his belly burned along his cock. He was sure he would set them on fire, he was so aflame with what Harry was doing to him. With the way Harry felt and tasted and smelled. But slowly, cruelly, through the pleasure, crawled a wailing hollow. He was so empty, he needed—he didn’t know. He pulled away, turning his face to the side, Harry’s kisses a meteor shower on his cheek.

“Harry,” he mumbled, biting a shoulder that looked just too good to resist, “what’s wrong with me? I feel so strange. There should be more. I’m so empty inside...”

“Shh, it’s all right. Lots of gay guys get that feeling when they’ve got a man on top of them. I’ll fix it for you, I’ll make sure you’re not empty any more.”

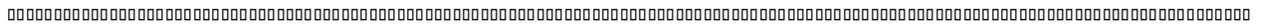
And then there was that oddly delicious sensation of being stretched down there, Harry’s fingers stroking at him...there. He couldn’t quite bring himself to give ‘there’ a name, for all the words he used were too much the product of the morgue to use here, or too much the product of the school yard—and this was his rite of passage into manhood. After this, he would put aside the childish words and use manly words like...

“Fuckhole.”

“What!?” Harry squeaked, shocked. There were only two people in this room and *he* hadn’t said it so that meant... “Cooper, babe, did you say what I think you just said?”

“Cunt.”

“Yeah, you just said what I thought you just said. Like my fingers on your...cunt, do



inside him and then he felt liquid heat suffuse him, fill him, to replenish the store of what he had just lost.

Hands were stroking him as gently as if he were a child, small kisses were being danced upon his face, Harry's hips were undulating tenderly upon him. There was still a presence inside him, but it was small now, and even as he became aware of it again, it slipped from him, his body making a little *moue* at the loss.

The hands caressing him stilled, the kisses stopped, the weight grew heavy. Truman, he realized, had fallen asleep, face innocent as a newborn babe's. Eventually, Cooper eased him off, reaching into the bedside drawer for his memotape. What was that word Truman had used for him? Oh, yes. Gay.

"Diane," he said, very quietly lest he wake Harry, "I've just had the most life-altering experience of my life. As you can hear from the almost complete silence around me, it is near dawn. Soon, the birds will begin singing the praises of life once more and I shall rise to begin

a new day's investigation. Before I do that, though, listen to this." He held the tape to Truman's lips. "Did you hear that? It's the sound of a man sleeping peacefully, having done his duty. We didn't find the answer the dwarf promised me, but that, I believe, is because we haven't tried the right method yet. It would probably be very helpful if you could locate a book for me, one that would give us more clues on how to solve the dwarf's message to me. One of those books you see everywhere. "The Joy of Gay Sex" is one I saw once, in an airport. Little did I know that one day I would need it to crack a case. Well, that's all, Diane. Good night."

He replaced his tape in the drawer, pulled some covers up to keep them warm, then snuggled down in beside the sleeping Harry. Almost of its own volition, his hand found Harry's penis—*cock*, he reminded himself, *cock*—and cradled it fondly. As he slipped in to some quality sacktime, his last thought was that he could get to like being a real man.