



And they were stuck in a stifling office, awaiting his lordship's pleasure. There wasn't the usual frustrated anger in them at this being left sitting like schoolboys outside the headmaster's office: it was too simple a pleasure to be skiving off after the helter-skelter of this month past. Doyle settled his bones a little more deeply into relaxation, allowing himself the luxury of letting life pass by unhurriedly and unchecked.

Listening to the occasional ripple of laughter that rose above the flow of the crowd, Doyle ran the files through his mind again, finding them even more boring this nth time through. Just a list of the many civil servants whom MI6 believed subverted over to the other side, whichever side it was in whichever case. Just a list of names, with photographs to go with some of the names, jobs done, positions held, sundry things in common... And not a single common thread to tie them all together into uniform rope, as far as he could tell, nor any hint either of what kind of investigation was going on into which kind of skulduggery. Which is why they were sitting there waiting for Cowley to come in and tell them what the connection was and where they fitted in.

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A truncated snore drew his attention over to his partner, his pupils widening and eyes narrowing as he feasted on the sight of Bodie sprawled half off the chair, bone cords stretched tight, shirt pulling out of the waistband, a fraction of white skin exposed to the pretence of coolness that nakedness offered. Doyle stared at him, following the lines of muscle, the curve of flesh, the beauty of the sleeping face.

He was going to have Bodie, one day.

One day, when things were right between them, when they could fuck without fucking up the relationship. There was a tantalising hint of more than just sex coiling sweetly between them, glittering like agate in the sand when the tide goes out, only to be covered again when the sea washes in again. He couldn't quite grasp it, not yet, the promise amorphous and intangible, but always, always, almost close enough to touch, but slipping away when he reached for it. Perhaps it was a matter of nothing more than timing, or of trying too hard. It *would* happen, eventually, when it was ripe and ready and they were able to make it work. But for now, it was enough for them to look, and then go off with their 'birds',

keeping it light and easy and free, letting the bond beneath the friendship slowly weave itself into reality.

He was enjoying this time between them, this anticipation kindling heat in the deeper caverns of his soul, bringing fire to places in himself that he'd never dared touch before. He was enjoying the flirtations too, savouring the brief touches they allowed themselves: a caress of fingertip down a shivering spine, a brush of hand on a stubbled cheek, the quick press of hip on quickening groin, gone before the arousal could rise too far. Oh, yes, it was a rare thing they were building between them, nurturing this amœba that was slowly evolving and unfurling its offers of a future that would survive. Doyle stretched out a little more himself, unconsciously echoing Bodie's pose, matching him with what had grown to an almost—so just-on-the-tip-of-the-tongue *almost*—complete empathy between them. His breathing slowed its cadence, lowering him into demi-dream, where it was all right to fantasize and hope: all right in dream, for he knew that if Bodie were to wake, there would be a moment of lingering tenderness in his eyes that would match the sweetness of Doyle's own dreaming.

He toyed, for a moment, with the idea of reaching out, spanning the couple of feet that separated them, and joining them at the hand, but the reality of being in Cowley's office stopped him, his hand falling to hang limply at the side of his chair, fingertips brushing the coarse pile of carpet instead of the plush of skin. Perhaps tonight, if they got off early enough, Bodie would invite himself over to be fed and between them, they could conspire to casually drop in one of their myriad excuses and give him a reason to spend the night. And then, he could reach out, to link his fingers with Bodie, an invitation to stay, to let it begin between them... He smiled at that, the warm sun bringing highlights of copper to his hair and a blush of colour to his cheeks. No, not tonight, Josephine, he thought to himself in Bodie's dreadful French accent, not tonight. Too soon, far too soon. Needed more time.

Needed, for that matter, to get a grip on himself and stop wallowing in fantasy. If Bodie caught him at this... He straightened in his chair, looking anywhere but at Bodie. It was too



managed to end up with so many informants owing him so many favours. It wasn't even that he had been corrupt—not in his own eyes, anyway. He'd never accepted money, nor gifts. Never turned aside when real crime was going on. But if a bloke had a few funny ciggies in his pocket and wanted to keep his record clean by opening his mouth or bum, well, that was different. And it had given him access to some truly useful insider information: he'd caught many a big fish from letting the little fishies go. He heard Bodie move, heard the creak of stiffened bones as Bodie stretched, heard the groan of leather as a gun was settled less uncomfortably on heat-prickled body. Yeh, he'd had men, more than Bodie'd had hot dinners.

And that worried Doyle. It was written all over him—or at least it was, to men who liked men—that he was available. And that meant he encountered more than his share of gay or bi men, and that, in its turn, meant that it brought him back round in a full circle: did Bodie fancy him, or was it just his own 'bent', so to speak, that was making him parlay innocent camping into an offer he had no intention of refusing? He glanced over again, to see Bodie staring at him with intense, uneasy scrutiny, so he looked away, unwilling to face him. He wasn't quite ready to answer questions that Bodie wasn't quite ready to ask. Time enough later, always supposing Bodie shared this attraction...

Giving himself something to do, he picked up a tattered copy of the *News of the World*, raising his eyebrows that Cowley of all people would have a slag rag like this in his office, but that thought soon went out the window. Another headline in a very long list of headlines, all the news that was fit to print, read all about it and thus make him more skittish than any grown man had the right to be: another civil servant caught in a love-nest with his boyfriend, shocking pictures on p.3. He wasn't about to look at Bodie, not when he was sure that the guilt was written all over him. The sweat broke out under his skin, where it made his flesh creep with the memory of the old, old fear. He'd come to manhood before '67, with all the anguish and fear-filled discretion of those days. He read the lurid prose of the so-called newspaper, with its condemnatory and inflammatory choice of words, with its po-faced self-righteousness that allowed

itself to use queers the way other idiots used blacks or Jews, and felt his stomach clench with the dismaying knowledge that the Law had changed, but nothing else in this scepter'd isle had. Christ, if Bodie found out about him! He scanned the rest of the story quickly, reading details that perfectly echoed the details he'd been reading for months now, in story after story after story. It could be him, plastered all over the papers, if he weren't careful. Or more than likely, it'd be him plastered all over the pavement if Cowley caught him breaking his word and fucking around with men. In this day and age, in this climate, he'd be hung by his balls and left out to dry—if he were found out. That was the golden rule, of course. Do whatever the hell you wanted, especially if you wore the right old school tie, but don't ever, under any circumstances, get caught. For then the very people who most closely shared your...predilections would be the first in line to rip you to shreds, lest the mud slung at you should stick to them.

Looking at the story, something clicked in the back of his mind, and he picked up the folder again, riffling through the pictures and names of all the subverted. And found himself wondering if they were in this file only because they had agreed to sell their souls so that they wouldn't end up in that newspaper.

The door clicking open sounded a fraction of a second before the faint *plop!* of the manila folder dropping into the drawer, and the first of Cowley's footsteps merged flawlessly with the sigh of fabric as Doyle sprang back into his seat, abruptly nonchalant, an expression of angelic innocence suspiciously covering his face.

"Jeremy Thorpe," Cowley said, without preamble, setting off a sudden rumble of prescient fear in Doyle's belly. "Elton John. The Right Honourable Sir Robert Forsyth. Mr. Duncan MacPherson. Sir Geoffrey Percival. Mr. Michael Symington, defence contractor. The Right Reverend Hugh Pym. All men who have been victimised by allegations of homosexuality by those after money or power or secret information." He sat at his desk, sloughing jacket and loosening tie, slapping a new file on the desk top in front of himself, his voice never once pausing, but becoming sonorous, a minister delivering Sunday sermon, his tone as smooth and



doleful as the funeral bell. Bodie was sitting up now, taking notice, the fragile stillness of the man at bay, one quick glance telling Doyle that whatever the reason, Bodie shared his sense of impending disaster.

The new folder was opened, motes of dust dancing in the sunlight, the two men watching Cowley utterly still. The top sheet of paper was pristine white, save for the two dark black columns marching off down towards the bottom, the blue tip of Cowley's pen marking off every randomly picked name as he said it with perfect, precise diction, as if it were a poem of sorts. "Peter Beale. Sandy MacIlvain. Dudley Smith. Jim Starkey." One brief, cutting stare at Bodie, then the pen went smartly back up to the top of the page, to the other column, a bloodied Bodie sagging in its wake. "Jim Archer."

With the first name, Doyle's stomach knotted in sickening knowledge. He couldn't spare a look for Bodie, too concerned with staring in wide-eyed horror at Cowley's implacable face as each condemning name was enunciated.

"Ewan Evans. Derek Jackson. Michael Potter."

A pause, although neither list was close to being completely disclosed, and by the time Cowley had his glasses off and his eyes, wearily, wiped, the only thing for him to see were two agents facing him, defiance and aggression marking them. "I think that'll be enough for us to be getting on with for the now, don't you? The first list, well, you'll have recognised those from the papers. The second and third...if either of you remember past last week, then you'll remember those names, won't you?"

Silence. Profound and defensive silence. Neither one of them willing to speak, neither one willing to be the first to make the exposé real. Doyle crossed his legs, one ankle going over the other knee, a pose aggressive in its masculinity, silently shouting out his refusal to be cowed.

Cowley rose to his feet, hand going to the small of his back and then to the thigh that ached so badly, despite the heat and the relief that should have brought him. Other men suffered headaches and backaches brought on by their stresses and tensions: for him, it was the resurgent reminder of the sufferings of war. And this was, he argued with himself once more, a war, and in war there were always casualties. Even if the wounds weren't always physical, or honourable.

"I knew," he began, an autumn leaf of a voice, "when I signed you on, and I knew it fine well when I partnered you that something like this would eventually come up. I even half expected," he gathered up whisky and glasses, coming back to his desk, putting something between himself and them, bomb-shelter from the upcoming storm, "the problem to come from you two. But it hasn't, and for that I'm grateful. But the fact œ%ains," he shoved two generous drams over towards them, and they took them, warily, while he went on speaking, "and it can't be denied. The pair of you," he hesitated, took a drink, continued, not looking at them, "are queers."

The room fell frigid. The much-vaunted communication between Bodie and Doyle came crashing down, all lines severed, all the links lying cut and bleeding on the carpet between them. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, or so it is said, and there was an over-abundance of danger in that room, the silence threatening. Threatening what, none of them could say, for time was suspended, breathless, while the world continued its merry way outside, the office girls still laughing, the workmen still whistling their rude appreciation, the pigeons still cooing in broody contentment. But in that office, there was nothing, just waiting. Bodie moved, restless, his mouth tight, his skin whitening. Doyle wanted to look at him, but didn't dare: he had too many demons riding on his own shoulders to confront any of Bodie's. And beneath it all, unacknowledged, unheard in the clamour of rising uncertainty, was the stiletto-smooth question slicing into him: and why hadn't Bodie told him the truth?

Nestled in with the reason why he hadn't told Bodie his own little truth, that insidious nagging buried itself under the sound of Cowley's voice.

"The Minister," he was saying, "has laid down his own brand of the law. He wants all security risks removed."

Fired. He—they—were going to be fired. The anger began, the old St. George against the Dragon, his own crusading zeal instigated not for some abstract nor for some underdog, but for himself. "You can't fire us! You know as well as I do, we're less of a security risk than the Minister, with his bit on the side in the City while the little wife keeps the home fires burning. I've

been queer from the start, you know that. And if you think that just because the Minister knows that I'm going to turn into some limp-wristed poof who'll hand over every secret he can get his hands on, then you're a fucking idiot."

Cowley stared at him, gimlet blue cooling him down.

"Sir," he added, belatedly, sparing a glare at Bodie, cursing him for keeping his mouth shut. "Cat got your tongue?" he asked, with all the softness of hacksaw on steel. "Or is it just that someone stole your fairy dust, tinkerbelle?"

He saw Bodie swallow that, throat muscles contracting, fists clenching, eyes going very, very hard. "Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black, Doyle?" The gaze was very insulting, defensiveness turned to hostility, fight, not flight. "And if anyone round here's a fairy, wouldn't that be you, petal?"

Doyle opened his mouth, but Cowley spoke first. "Shut up, Doyle. And you, Bodie. Come on, the pair of you. Here you are, threatened with losing your careers, of being blacklisted as undesirables by the security review board, and all you can do is shoot each other in the back? I thought I had trained you better."

They matched each other for ill-grace as they subsided under Cowley's command, the habit not yet broken.

"As I said, before you two went into your comedy routine, the Minister wants all security risks eliminated. So does MI6, but that's because they can afford to pay lip-service to the Minister on this. I don't have that luxury. We're still fairly new, this department of mine, and I don't have the manpower to just throw out some of my best operatives." He fiddled with his spectacles, absently, while he looked at the two men sitting opposite him, the sun sharply bright on the whisky glasses. "It took some rather...creative conversation, but I persuaded the Minister to try something other than wholesale firing. I told him that getting rid of people now wouldn't solve any problems, but just delay them. And that the only way to actually solve the situation was to cut the corruption out at the root. Which is where you two come in."

The old patterns snapped back into place from where they had been reeling in shock. A quick glance of communication, that bespoke understanding, the recognition of an operation

to be undertaken, a job to be done—themselves to be let off the hook.

"And where's that, sir?" Bodie asked for them both.

Cowley hesitated for a moment, visibly choosing his words. "You two are going to—I believe the expression is 'come out?'"

There was no confirmation from either one of them, just shocked hostility.

"You'll come out, as a couple, but discreetly, very slightly, as if you were just getting complacent, careless. That should flush out the ring of blackmailers. When they approach you, you come to me, and we go in there and get them."

"And then we go back to having birds and all is forgiven?" Suspicious, knowing Cowley and the mores of Whitehall too well to believe that it could ever be so simple, Doyle asked more to have his reservations confirmed than his hopes satisfied.

"No." Bald, unadorned, the word lay on the desk like a gutted fish, until Cowley spoke again. "Getting this bunch won't solve the problem any more than firing all the homosexuals would. No, we have to go to the root of the whole thing." Another pause, another drink, then more words, these ones delivered only after Cowley had risen to his feet and turned towards the window and away from them. "You two will have to stay public, and prove that even homosexuals can be good agents. You'll have to be above all the usual criticisms that are levelled at...your sort, of course, but that's certainly not a problem for you. After some time of this, I shall be able to go to the Minister with proof that it would be unwise to weed people out for one flaw in their character. Which means you two will keep your jobs instead of being turned out with 'unstable' stamped all over you. And I won't have to watch a considerable amount of money being thrown down the drain. Not to mention a considerable amount of effort on my part."

"D'you honestly expect us to believe that—sir?" Bodie's voice rang with the echoes of the parade ground, and with that, the chill rain of Services disapproval of 'that sort of thing'. "Come off it. We're being set up. We get to catch the blackmailers and as soon as we've bagged them, then we'll be for the chop, won't we?"

"I've already told you how it will be, so stop causing difficulties. You two are going to be the

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test cases, and if you do the job you've been trained to do, then you'll be able to keep it."

"Oh, yeh, right," Bodie sneered, voice and expression ugly, his words careening on before even Doyle could get his tuppenceworth in, catapulting them all forward. "And where have I heard that one before? It might fool Doyle here, but you and me are both old army men, sir, and even if you keep your word to us, the other bastards involved in this won't. We'll get to do their dirty work for them and then we'll be for the chop. Same old story it's always been, innit? It's all right to have queers if there's a war on, but the minute the trouble's past, it's shoot the nancies and if you think—"

"Aye, I do think, and that's the difference between us, Bodie. Now sit down and shut up. Use your head, man. They already know about you now, whether you like it or not—"

"Know what? That I'm queer? Then they're wrong if that's what they think, sir. I'm no fairy."

"Then what was that list of names all about?" Doyle snapped at him, his body still with tension. "Bridge partners, were they?"

"Look, Doyle, I've buggered a few blokes in my time, but only when there was nothing else available. It's not the same as being a pansy."

"Not the same? Like the 'virgin' who was only a bit pregnant—it didn't count because she didn't enjoy it? Or doesn't it count if you just shove it up some poor bastard's arse—mean to say, it's not as if you kissed him or any of that queer stuff, is it?"

"That's enough, Doyle. Bodie, I've already told you to sit down once. I'll thank you to remember you've not been fired yet, so on your backside and listen to sense."

With exceeding ill grace, Bodie buttoned his lip, subsiding enough to obey the letter of Cowley's command, if not the spirit of it. His blue eyes were bitterly cold as he glowered at Doyle, heaping guilt upon his shoulders, for the real culprits were faceless and nameless and far beyond his reach. Far easier then, to blame Doyle for his apparently easy slide into leaving the safety of the closet, than to face up to his own little skeletons.

"Now," Cowley was saying, watching them both very closely, "I don't want any sudden changes in you. This has to be done slowly and carefully—are you paying attention, Bodie?—for

we don't want to scare this bunch off. No real changes at first, apart from cutting down on the number of girls you go out with. Get a little bit careless, you know the kind of thing, the things that get you pair ribbed unmercifully round here. Oh, aye, no need to be so surprised. I know all about the rumours and the joking that goes on about you two."

"That's part of why we were picked for this, wasn't it?" Doyle, pensive.

"What rumours?" Bodie, barricaded.

"Get off it, Bodie. You can't have missed them, they've been all over the place! Every time we go on holiday together, every time one of us mentions spending the weekend camping together, the stories fly. And you're the worst offender!"

"I've never heard any off-colour comments. Apart from Lucas' bloody stupid jokes."

"The root of those 'jokes', as you call them, Bodie, have had more than one of your colleagues in here making sure that the pair of you aren't a security risk."

Bodie whipped round to stare at Cowley, refusing to believe what he had spent so much time and effort refusing to see or hear. "Who? Who the fuck's been coming to you with lies like that? Me and Doyle haven't done a thing, not a single sodding thing and not one of them can say any different. Never laid so much as a finger on him, not for sex, anyway."

Tacit it may have been, but 'methinks the lady doth protest too much' reverberated through the room, silence broken only when Cowley spoke. "Be that as it may," he said, with unwarranted mildness, "the...involvement you two have is common knowledge—or rather, gossip, I suppose you'd prefer, Bodie. But all it will take is to have you two seen to have access to even higher information than you actually have and at the same time, have you—become careless with your relationship. Let yourselves be seen, be less discreet than you have been up to now."

"I've already told you, Cowley, I'm not having it off with Doyle!"

"Och, what d'you think I am, Bodie? All the nights when you've slept at Doyle's flat and vice versa, all the times you've gone 'to the country' with one another, when neither one of the pair of you ever showed the blindest bit of interest in the countryside before I paired you off. Aye, I































