

A Balcony and a View of the Sea

By Helen Raven

How does this novel relate to “The Cook and the Warehouseman”?

“A Balcony and a View of the Sea” is set in the same universe as “The Cook and the Warehouseman” and has the same starting point, but it’s a completely separate novel, not a reworking. It branches off from the first novel after the opening four paragraphs, which are as follows:

The first ships of the alien fleet came into orbit around Earth on Wednesday, September the 7th, 1983, just after 6pm, GMT. The aliens looked so much like humans, and their English was so good (along with their French and German and Arabic), that many people assumed at first that it was a hoax. Some portion of Bodie’s brain continued to think that, even after he had been up to the flagship as part of the UK security presence. They were all so matter-of-fact, so practical. If they really were professional traders, you’d think they’d know from experience what their arrival would do to a... Well, “home-system” culture seemed to be their term. You’d think they’d make some allowance, show some sense of occasion. Their only concession was to bring their royal family along, and that screamed hoax more than anything else, since all six wore masks. At what point were they going to snatch them off, yelling, “Surprise!”? Was it even the same people behind the masks each time? If this was all the work of some millionaires’ Amateur Dramatic Society, surely they’d all want a chance at the best parts.

When the main negotiations started—the negotiations to choose the country that would host their trading base—Bodie was included in the UK security team again, with instructions to watch the royals and assess whether or not they were switching negotiators. By the end of the Saturday, Bodie reported that he was 90% certain that the two who were doing all of the talking were not being switched. The king, behind the battered gold disc of Inoni Sarai (to all intents and purposes, their sun god), had small, tanned hands, and a habit of pressing them flat on the table and then circling or tapping with his thumb. The princess heir, behind the blue-speckled china of Atenassi (something to do with unwelcome truths), had a slow, deep voice that contrasted with her brisk, decisive movements.

For the other four, he would only put it at 75%, though it probably didn’t matter. Of course, the UK team could have it all wrong, and maybe the show was actually being run by the quietest one, Udom Kol (no translation had been given), with the mask that looked dripping wet. Maybe those rare notes that he passed along the line were deciding Bodie’s standard of living for the next fifty years.


Nah. And again, did it really matter, and what could the team do about it if it did? Be polite and attentive to all of them. Assume they’re all important, even if it looks as if they’re nothing but surplus royals.

“A Balcony and a View of the Sea” starts below, with Chapter 1.

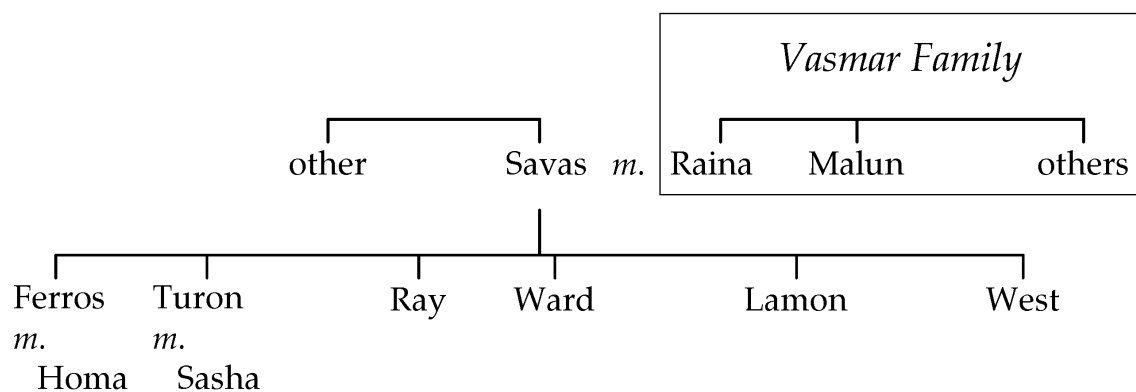
Glossary

Days of the Week

The Working Week						The Weekend		
At Mordez	At Rahden	At Laura Var	At Pontal	At Kamaran	At Oba Nyon	An Embrun	An Udom Kol	An Uraba



The Bakkel Family Tree



The Main Members of the Mabein

Inoni Sarai

battered gold disc, worn by Malun

Attenasi

blue-speckled china, worn by a senior officer

Udom Kol

wet appearance, worn by Ray

Embrun

partner to Udom Kol

Hutton Iba

black with fissures, worn by Turon

Kamaran

represents flood, worn by Ferros

Laura Var

represents harvest, worn by West

Oba Nyon

wooden, carved with foliage

Halabron

rock, worn by Sasha

Gagras

worn by Lamon

Chapter 1

The first afternoon break came almost exactly halfway through the work day, and the three members of the UK security team would get together at the start of it to discuss the coverage for the second half of the day. A couple of minutes into the discussion on Monday the 12th, Bodie saw during a routine scan of the room that his new friend from the Foreign Office was back. Had just arrived, Bodie reckoned, and he was looking across at Bodie, too, like finding Bodie had been the first thing on his mind. Bodie lifted an eyebrow in acknowledgement, got a fractional nod in response, and returned to the conversation as casually as after any other scan. All the while the shock from the sharp clenching of his heart was still radiating out through his chest, and his cock was throbbing.

He was managing to give just enough attention to the conversation, he thought, though he didn't really know how, when his mind was racing with all the things he'd been thinking he might say to the man. Some things he could say here, on the ship. He'd start with the obvious news. "Hey, d'you hear about Udom Kol? How he came and talked to me last night? About twenty minutes after you had to go to that meeting. We've been trying to figure out who he had me confused with. I did what I could to hint to him that I was just the muscle, but if he got it, he still stuck around." And he'd give his muscles a flex, which he was sure would get him one of those wicked grins. Then he could probably get down to the real business: "You weren't at the briefing last night. I'd been thinking we'd go for a drink afterwards." Back to his place to fuck, really. Or to Ice-Cold's place, if that was closer. Though no doubt they would also have a drink or two in the stretches where they needed to catch their breath.

Almost everything else would have to wait until they were alone. There were a few things he was sure he'd be saying at some point tonight. Like how he'd jerked off thinking about him, and heard that dirty chuckle in his dreams. And how their conversation had left him buzzing, so keyed up that someone in the delegation would have been bound to notice before the end of the evening. But he got lucky, with Udom Kol coming over, and after that any sign of distraction, any gleam in his eye could be put down to having somehow bluffed his way through ten minutes of more-or-less ordinary conversation with an alien royal in a bloody-great mask.

As for the timing for coming out with the other things jostling for space in his mind... Well, it would have to depend on how long it took him to be sure enough of that feeling from the night before: that they could say anything to each other. That they'd pick up on any joke, or any outrageous hint. Three nights, four nights maybe? Before he'd admit that he'd come up with a nickname for him, and it was "Ice-Cold Cupid". "Cupid" because of his mouth, of course, because Bodie had found that something happened to the flow of time whenever he let himself think about the invitation of those subtly full lips. And "Ice-Cold" because of how remote and pitiless the man had suddenly looked when they were both surveying the room to decide if any other delegation selected their security detail for a particular type of look quite as obviously as the Russians. Like that, you could see how strange the man's own looks were. No chance of fitting him into a matched team. His face was so broad, and his eyes oddly round, and almost too far apart. Their grey-green was a winter sea about to turn treacherous. The mouth would lure you close, and then you'd be sucked under and dashed against the rocks. But in the next

second the survey was over and he was smirking at Bodie, and that was like stepping through the front-door and feeling the warmth of home on your face.

It could have been “Filthy Cupid”, from those chuckles. Or “Kung Fu Cupid”, from how many of his questions about Bodie’s plans for defending the delegation suggested that he knew something himself about hand-to-hand combat. That was after Bodie had started clowning around and the questions had become mock-innocent, teasing, and when Bodie had stopped clowning for long enough to ask him directly about knowing martial arts, he’d pulled such a perfect, rueful face when he’d said it was something he’d learned a very long way away, and he was sworn to secrecy.

So “Ice-Cold Cupid” wasn’t fair, it didn’t do him justice, but the image of the still, aloof face excited Bodie more simply than all the rest. It was what he’d been thinking of when he’d started coming. And he wanted to tell him. Not that he’d be saying anything to him about time slowing or about winter seas and rocks. Nothing like that. He’d keep it light. But the guy acted like he was used to all kinds of over-the-top compliments. Regarded them as his due. Bodie was sure that no matter what he decided to say, it would be taken in the right way.

Being ready to admit to the nickname would probably go along with admitting that he didn’t usually go for wiry men. Not that it turned him off, but his best times with men had all been with men at least as sturdily built as himself. When he was in the mood to go looking for a man, or to jerk off thinking of a man, it was always that type of man. But after just half an hour next to Mister Ice-Cold, it was suddenly the wiry men he noticed first in any crowd. The sense of coiled energy in the sharper line of the shoulders, of purpose in the cabling of the sinews down through the wrists. Hell, he’d been thinking that even Udom Kol had something of this new, electric magic; that was how quickly it had grabbed him, and how hard. Tonight, when he got Ice-Cold Cupid in his arms, he knew he’d feel the shape of each bone like it was thrumming.

Everyone should be wanting to hold him like that. Because what he had wasn’t something that could be turned off. Not just want to hold him, but to make him laugh, see him interested and impressed. But the French bloke and bird that he’d got talking to by the time of Bodie’s next scan were still treating him like he was any other diplomat. And, OK, none of the smiles that Bodie had glimpsed during that scan had been wicked, or any in the scans after, but those lips looked even fuller and more inviting when they were speaking French. Fluent French, as far as Bodie could tell. So that was one place he’d been stationed, but right now he could be based anywhere. He’d have an embassy he needed to get back to once the negotiations were over. Maybe he was already in the middle of learning his next secret martial art.

On the sixth scan Bodie saw that a fourth person had joined the French group, and it felt like his heart lurched before he’d even consciously recognised the new bloke as the best-looking member of the French security detail. Capitaine Chiselled-Jaw. Who Bodie had been joking with the previous evening about the buffet’s potential for really strange food-combinations – all in mime, after they’d quickly found that was easier. Not flirting, definitely not, just a few moments of goodwill between men in the same line of work. But there must have been something in it, enough to catch Ice-Cold’s attention, because less than a minute later, there he’d come sauntering over to ask what the joke had been, confident that he was going to be amused too, almost like he and Bodie were already friends. And then after a couple of jokes of his own about the food, he’d taken a quick

glance along the length of the table to the French bloke, then gone just short of deadpan when he said, "His nose is so straight, I imagine he gets a special bonus for letting his team use it as a ruler." Not flirting either, not necessarily. A man might say that in all innocence to a member of his own team's security. Expecting them to laugh and move on. But instead Bodie had said that the bonus for using his chin to plane wood must be even larger, and within a minute it felt like no man in the room was safe from them.

It was jealousy. The lurch in his heart over Chiselled-Jaw had been some kind of jealousy. Even though there was no need, he could see perfectly well that there wasn't any need. Ice-Cold's smiles hadn't changed, weren't suddenly hiding some secret. But the next scans were going to have to skim right over the group, because Bodie no longer trusted himself to control his expression.

That stab of reaction shouldn't have been a surprise, though. It went along with all the other things bubbling up in his mind, that he knew he wouldn't ever be saying. The sex was going to be unforgettable, nothing would make him pass that up. Or the jokes, either. But it was just as well they'd be on opposite sides of the world once the negotiations were over.

Men were for good, exciting, uncomplicated sex, and military men were the best for that. You didn't have to be a genius to figure that out. They knew the score. Weren't ever going to take pointless risks with their careers. Sure as hell didn't want to get mushy, whisper sweet nothings, not even the ones who liked a hungry kiss or two as part of their straightforward, convenient sex.

The starry-eyed stuff was for birds, and Bodie did enjoy making a fuss over birds. It went with all their other exotic charms. That was normal, and all of Bodie's men knew it was normal. He'd never had sex with a man without either him or the man saying something that got them comparing the time to go till their next meeting with some pretty girl. Well, except for the type of sex where they didn't talk at all, would never know each other's names. And that was normal too, he thought, especially for a man who was used to a certain level of action.

So he didn't think about men, really, except to remember the techniques and reactions that made sex with this one or that one particularly good. With a few choice images from most of them. But now here he was having a stupid number of thoughts, about this man who had nothing solidly, reassuringly military about him at all. And so many images already, when they hadn't even had sex. Getting the chills from remembering the colour of his eyes? Exciting, part of the buzz, but a million miles from normal. And wanting to tell him about the chills? Make that five million miles. A light-year.

Maybe that was it. The light-year. Almost nothing to do with Ice-Cold himself. The arrival of the Hailin had turned everything upside down. Some part of him was giddy with excitement about being on a spaceship, and this was how it was coming out. Yeah, maybe.

And still he didn't want to stop it. When it looked like being the best kind of wild ride, with neither of them sure from moment to moment which one was in control. If it was just for a few weeks, he thought he could almost enjoy being jealous. Up here, for now, it was normal to care about being the only man in the room that Ice-Cold truly wanted to talk to, because he knew from the previous evening that believing it made him feel a foot taller. God, that note of reluctance in the man's voice after the glance at his watch, when

he'd winced and said he had to go, he had a meeting. Then the sigh, and the serious scrutiny of Bodie's face that had lasted at least a second too long. And then he was heading for the door without another word, and the corner of Bodie's mouth was tingling, like that's where the kiss would have landed if Ice-Cold had let himself stay a second longer.

It was tingling again now, and Bodie looked over, suddenly urgent to see him. But he wasn't there, the whole group had gone. Had he drifted off to a quiet corner with Chiselled-Jaw? Or worse still left the room, maybe even to go back to London? No, he was in the middle of the line for tea, and he was staring at Bodie. His expression was carefully absent, like he was lost in weighty diplomatic thoughts. There was no acknowledgement this time when their eyes met, either, but to Bodie it was obvious that he'd been impatient all day for the chance to stare just like this. They were both in the grip of space-fever. God, they were.

By the time Bodie had got Watkins and Meades through the last of the details, Ice-Cold was waiting for him at one of the small tables at the back of the room with two cups and saucers.

"Thanks." There was no sugar in the tea or on the table, but Bodie sure as hell wasn't going to waste time on that now. "Look, are you gonna be at the briefing tonight? You wanna head off for a drink afterwards?"

But he was shaking his head, very definite, and Bodie's heart had turned to a lump of rock. Wrong. He'd read that so wrong. Space-fever? More like typhoid. Christ. Oh, Christ. No, don't gulp back the tea and run away. Tell him about Udom Kol, anyway. Crack a few jokes. Be a man and get through this. Get back to earth.

He opened his mouth to start the story about the prince, but the other man got in first, looking almost as tense and controlled as Bodie felt. "Not the briefing, but – I've found an empty cabin on the deck below. Can you get away? How soon can you get away?"

It took Bodie a moment to be sure of what he'd heard, and then a flood of heat seemed to run all the way around his body, just under his skin, before surging into his cock. "Right now? You're found us a cabin right now? Course I can get away." The other members of the British delegation were all busy with conversations of their own. He'd checked for that before he'd come over.

A flash of relief and delight, and then he was all business. "I'll go down first. You wait at least a minute. Out of here, turn left, then third right, and after about ten yards you'll see the stairwell on your right. Down one level, then left. It's a long corridor full of cabins. Ours is on the right. It's got this symbol on the door." He'd lifted his cup and saucer, revealing a folded piece of paper, and now he was sliding the paper towards Bodie. The symbols were two curly squiggles that looked a bit like Arabic writing. "I've put the full directions on the other side. There's a keypad by the door. Just press the large button along the bottom. That'll open the door."

Bodie nodded, and used his card-sharping skills to make the note disappear up his sleeve. "I've got it. You should go."

"I should go." He drained his tea in one abrupt movement, and this time his farewell took the form of a casual tap of the back of his hand against the side of Bodie's arm as he

headed past. Comradely thanks for an efficient meeting. Bodie didn't turn to watch him go, just took another mouthful of his own tea.

OK. So they were hurtling off on the wild ride, and there wasn't any doubt after all about who was in control. The man was Secret Service, wasn't he? Someone deadly important, from this level of skill. They'd never ask him to waste his time with any meetings down at Bodie's level. He probably knew more about the conversation with Udom Kol than Bodie did, had been briefed and seen through it within minutes. He was ice-cold for a reason. For a living. Of course that made him even more exciting, more intriguing, but Bodie was suddenly much less sure about what he could or should say.

Bodie retrieved the note once he was down in the long corridor. None of the delegates or crewmembers he'd passed on the way had paid him any attention, and by the time he'd reached the stairwell there had been no one at all in sight.

The door slid open with a sigh. Ice-Cold was waiting just inside. There was another keypad by the door, and he pressed a button and the door closed, and when he pressed another button a light on the keypad changed colour. Locked, presumably. Do not disturb.

For a few seconds they stood looking at one another, and then it was Bodie who reached out, and there was nothing aloof or secretive about the mouth that opened to him. It still held a taste of tea, but tea touched with liquorice, and behind that some kind of herb that was just the right side of bitterness. And the bones were thrumming, the lean muscles, too. Every fine shift in shape and texture was engraving itself on Bodie's nerves, even through the layers of cotton and expensive wool. Bodie didn't see how he himself could feel or taste a tenth as good, but how could he argue with all those gasps, or with the strong, fierce grip?

"God, you're a genius finding this place. Crazy with it, but a genius." They'd both pulled back at the same time, equally breathless.

A small shake of the head. "Motivated. Just properly motivated. Like that, I can make anything work. Except getting us more than twenty minutes to play with, so can I see you get out of those clothes?"

Bodie grinned, and hurried to unbutton his jacket. "Never been asked so nicely. But where can we..." With the jacket off and held out by his side, he took his first look around the small, high-ceilinged room in search of somewhere safe to put it. Because they couldn't go back with even one crease in their clothes. "You already found the wardrobe. Course you did." It was built into the wall near the foot of the bed, empty, with about ten hangers.

"I think of everything." Reaching out to take the jacket, with a faint, lopsided smile that was his first since they'd got here. They dealt with the tie within seconds, and then he turned intent again as he watched Bodie unbutton his shirt. "You're even paler than I thought you would be. But where you've got hair it's so black. How that looks..." He sighed. "I can't get enough of that." Another, deeper sigh. "And you've got beautiful arms."

With anyone else Bodie would immediately have joked and preened, but instead he found himself wanting to mutter some kind of quiet thanks. But he had no idea how,

with a man, he was sure it would come out wrong, and in the end he said, “Liverpool Black Irish. Nothing makes me tan.” He shrugged as he said it, and handed over the shirt.

He sat down on the foot of the narrow bed to take off his shoes and socks, then carried them over himself and put them in the bottom of the wardrobe, to be out of the way. The two of them were standing very close when he handed over his belt and then stepped carefully out of his trousers.

His cock was already jutting out of his Y-fronts so it wasn't going to be a big surprise, but he still waited until the other man had turned back from hanging up the trousers before he peeled them off and then dropped them on top of his shoes.

Low and intense: “And blood-red where you're not marble or black.” Fingertips grazed across his left nipple, then slowly followed the line of hair down from his navel to his groin to push into his pubic hair, tugging lightly. Not, just not, touching his cock. “And the most perfectly framed cock anyone has ever seen.” Bodie panted and looked, and thought he saw himself turn an even deeper red. He should forget what he was used to with men and just enjoy this, shouldn't he? The fact that this man did know what to say. Maybe always knew what to say. And didn't seem to expect the same back. As long as he was so obviously getting the right reaction.

“You. Now you.” He pulled at the lapel of the dark-grey jacket.

No, “Ice-Cold” didn't do him justice at all. His skin was like stored sunshine: honey and smoke, an even tan with a light dusting of hair that seemed to run through every colour from a chestnut brown to an old gold. Nothing pinched or mean in his type of wiriness, only strength. Readiness. Balance. He could be a gymnast. Or a cat burglar. Bodie said nothing, just stared, and breathed hard, and was serious.

His legs had the same tan, all over. So his embassy was somewhere hot. Where someone at his level would get a house with a pool, and walls high enough for perfect privacy. He wore dark-green boxers, and he let them fall to the floor then flicked them into the wardrobe with his foot.

When Bodie got his first full view he gaped, and then dropped to his knees, hands on the lean hips. “God. Oh, Christ.” He swallowed hard, his mouth flooding with sweet saliva. “How does any man who's seen this ever let you out of his sight?” It was essence of cock, every feature somehow brought to the fullest possible definition. Distinctly thick but not huge, not huge, Bodie knew his own must be longer, but God, so obviously important. The next stage in the evolution of sex. He looked up, saw an expression nearly as surprised and absorbed as his own. “I'm serious. You must not be able to go anywhere with a communal shower. One look and you'd turn any man queer.”

“I – I –” Shaking his head over and over. “I don't...” One last abrupt shake, then a ragged breath, and he put his hand on Bodie's head and was pushing, urging him to look down. Maybe just wanting to see him looking again, maybe asking for more.

Bodie looked, and then leaned forward, mouth opening, imagining how those curves and ridges and the pulse were going to feel inside his mouth. And then his imagination flipped on him, and he stopped. The other man made a sharp, high sound, and the hand tightened in Bodie's hair. Not pushing. Just reacting.

Bodie's turn to shake his head. "I want you to fuck me. If we've only got twenty minutes, I'm gonna get that before we leave here." On "that" he wrapped his hand around the cock, just below the head, and got a deep groan, and an urgent thrust forward, and a hot throbbing in the cock that called an echo in his own cock and arse and mouth. "Yeah?"

Obviously yes, without words or even a nod. Bodie got to his feet and took the few steps back to the foot of the bed, and then lay on his back with his knees raised and parted. Normally he far preferred being fucked from behind, but he wanted to see as much as possible of that cock.

Ice-Cold was still over by the wardrobe, breathing heavily, looking like he was trying to calm himself. Their eyes met, and held. After about five seconds he smiled, looking amused, content. Bodie smiled back, then: "Any time..."

"I'm ready?" Without looking, he reached behind himself, found the pocket of his jacket, brought out something that made a crinkling sound, and then finally approached the bed.

A sachet. Of lubricant, must be. Brought from that place he was stationed. Bodie raised his head to watch as Ice-Cold tore it open and spread the gel on himself, and he felt another surge of heat all over his body at the sight of all those blatant, obscene, delicious details glistening in the light of the cabin. Then two gel-covered fingers were pushing into Bodie, while the other hand clutched at Bodie's raised thigh. Bodie let his head fall back and sighed, then closed his eyes as the fingers turned and tested.

"You're tight." Sounded more a question than a compliment.

"It's been a while. Especially for this position. But don't worry. I know what I'm getting into."

"I think you do."

Slowly the fingers withdrew. Bodie raised his head again to see the other man take hold of himself, and then that perfect cock was pushing at him, and then it was in him, and pressing deeper, and Bodie forgot all about watching anything. He could hear his own moans, unmistakably the sounds of an amazed man stuffed to his limits with cock, and when the moans would let him he clawed at the bedding, and rolled his head against the mattress, hard to the left.

All the way in. He could feel the prickle of pubic hair against his hole. Quickly he moved his legs, pulled with his calves to lock the other man in place.

"Don't move yet? I need - My nerves there... They can't really believe they've got so much to deal with. It's like - I dunno -" He pulled an apologetic face, knowing he was going to sound so stupid, but needing to say it, if only to try to explain it to himself. "If someone showed you colour. When you'd only ever thought there was black and white. Oh, God, no, don't laugh, don't make me laugh. That turns it into fireworks. I need a few minutes of just staring at the test card."

Ice-Cold had closed his eyes for a moment and bitten his lip, but he'd managed to settle himself to just an amused smile. "Take as long as you want. My nerves are very, very happy like this."

Bodie smiled back and raised an eyebrow. "Twenty minutes?"

The smile faded, and he frowned like he was taking the question seriously. But then he shrugged and gave a sharp sigh of disbelief. “I don’t know now why that ever seemed important.”

Disbelief at himself, that had been. For having had such skewed priorities. They looked at one another for what felt like a long time. Bodie reached up and cupped his palm around the broad cheek. “Right now they’re telling me that you’re nudging my heart. My nerves are. Though I know for a fact you’re not quite that big.”

He turned his head and kissed Bodie’s palm. Then a grunt and a pause, and he opened his mouth and slowly dragged his tongue all the way to Bodie’s fingertips. “Mine are telling me that I’m right up in your throat. When you were moaning... You have no idea how much I felt that.” Another kiss to Bodie’s fingertips. “You are salty.” Not a complaint.

Bodie ran his fingertips along the line of his Cupid’s lips and then let his hand drop to the bed. “What’s your name?”

A very slight pause. “Ray.”

“Ray.” Bodie nodded, several times. “Ray.”

“And you’re William.”

Bodie shook his head, saw a frown and confusion. “Bodie. I go by Bodie. No one calls me William.”

“Bodie. OK. Yes.” He reached down and pressed on Bodie’s stomach, just above the base of Bodie’s cock. “How much more time do you need, Bodie? When can I get to make you moan some more?”

Bodie put his hand over Ray’s hand, closed his eyes, and took a good ten seconds to check the state of his nerve-endings. “I think they’re as used to you as they’ll ever be. How good d’you reckon the soundproofing is here?”

A wince. “Maybe not great. Just tell me when you need me to do anything. Not do anything.”

Bodie nodded, and shifted his legs again, moving his calves off Ray’s back. “Maybe... don’t try to make me come. I’ll take care of that. I just want to have you fucking me.”

“OK,” and he started to pull out, and Bodie began moaning immediately.

Afterwards, Bodie reckoned they lasted for at least eight minutes, maybe as long as ten. If he kept his eyes open, focussed on Ray’s face or on whatever Ray was looking at, then he could control his reaction, limit himself to grunts and curses and groans. But if he closed his eyes – and sometimes he couldn’t help himself – then his body took over and he’d be writhing and clutching and making noises that were close to desperate, close to pleading. Ray soon found the rhythms that did this to him, which were mostly slow, and he’d work Bodie until the noises reached what he said was the safe limit, and then he’d go still and stroke Bodie’s thighs or Bodie’s stomach until Bodie opened his eyes again.

After one of these pauses – maybe the third – he leaned forward, pressed his fingers briefly over Bodie’s lips, and whispered, “Shh. Listen. Look at me. Listen,” and he moved back with the same long, slow movements. “No! Bodie. Look at me. Listen. There.” The

slippery sound of him pushing in, then again as he pulled out. In more forcefully, then out very slowly. Bodie nodded, and kept silent, and they carried on looking at one another and listening. Then again in a whisper: "That's the sound of you getting the best fuck of your life."

Bodie waited through two more thrusts that were slow again, then said, "The best fuck a CI5 man's ever got on an alien flagship, I'll give you that." After a couple of heartbeats they suddenly grinned at each other, and then the forcefulness was back and more, and Bodie was grunting and cursing.

Ray's next words, quite soon after, were quick and tense. "Bodie, I'm close. I'm so close." Bodie took hold of his own cock, and bucked in reaction, and at that, the cock inside him seemed to double in size, and a bolt of scalding heat pierced Bodie, drove up through his heart, yes, into his throat, and Bodie was crying out and coming. Screaming, practically, and then whimpering as the cock kept on punching at him, for a time he couldn't measure, even after the blazing heat had started to fade.

There was a long sucking sound as Ray pulled out. He stood staring down at Bodie, hands light on Bodie's thighs. Looked like he might never see the need to move or speak again. That was how Bodie himself was feeling, at any rate, until his arse contracted involuntarily, and he was brought back a few levels by the cooling trickling as some of Ray's come was pushed out of him. He hauled himself onto his elbows, shifted up to the head of the bed, held out his arms, and then Ray's hot, damp weight was pressing him down, and they were kissing and kissing.

Some time after they had rolled onto their sides, Ray drew back, ran his hand slowly from Bodie's shoulder-blade down to his hip, then said just as slowly, very serious, "I've learned a new word for 'hungry'. It's 'Bodie'." He swallowed, and gripped hard on Bodie's hip. "You're... You're..." He blinked several times and swallowed again. "You are the most rewarding fuck."

Bodie's turn to blink. But then he found his most smug smirk. "I get that a lot."

Fierce: "You do not." A sigh. "Otherwise... No one who had you like that would ever let you out of his sight." And he jerked Bodie close and they were kissing again.

"Speaking of which..." Bodie had pulled back just a fraction of an inch. His lips brushed Ray's as he spoke. "I've gotta know when we'll be doing this again. The next break? The reception?" But Ray was shaking his head, and Bodie pulled further back. "You've got more of those meetings?"

Ray nodded slowly, looking thoroughly miserable. "Lunchtime tomorrow? I'll get down here as soon as I possibly can."

"Me too. Should be easy enough. Or what about tonight? Any chance you could come to my place once I'm done with the briefing? Stay the night? Try out for the best fuck not on a spaceship?" Though he was guessing the chance was slim.

"I – I –" Ray closed his mouth for a few seconds, then: "Yes!" Bodie felt the force of the words against his lips. "I'll get there. I'll be there."

“Oh, thank God.” Bodie closed his eyes, tightened his arms around Ray’s waist, then rolled heavily onto his back and looked up at the ceiling. “Then I suppose...” A sharp sigh. “We should think about freshening up and getting back to work.”

There was a bottle of shower gel in the bathroom. Marks and Spencer’s Sea Minerals. And a couple of sponges and large towels. Bodie happily agreed that Ray did think of everything. They washed themselves, dried themselves, and dressed themselves quickly, without talking, and then Bodie took his pen from the inside pocket of his jacket, tore a blank corner off the note, and rested the paper on the small ledge by the head of the bed to write down his address and phone number. “I should be back home by midnight. At the latest.”

Ray nodded, studied the address, then folded the paper and put it in his own inside pocket. “I’ll go first.” He pressed the button that made the light change. “Give it a few minutes again, OK?” And then the door was closing behind him. Bodie waited out the time turning his remaining portion of the note over and over in his hands. He could probably have given the whole thing to Ray with the address. He’d remember the position of the cabin, didn’t really need the squiggles for reference. But the note was his, Ray had given it to him, it held the writing that had invited him to the best half hour of his life. Rounded writing, that was making him think of Ray’s curls. And plenty of dramatic touches, like the oversized capitals and the deep loop on the ‘g’. Hints at what Bodie did think was some kind of genius. There’d be so many surprises with Ray, every day, even on the days when he was so busy being deadly important they’d only have time for a kiss.

Again the corridor and stairwell were deserted. It was the middle of a busy working day. On this ship, it wasn’t a time when you needed to worry about soundproofing.

A couple of the British delegation saw him coming back, but they assumed he’d just gone to the loo, that he already knew that the Hailin were running late. No reason that had reached the delegation, but should be a maximum of ten more minutes.

It turned out to be five minutes. They could have afforded the time to soap each other in the shower, or to kiss goodbye at the door. Bodie winced as he sat down, then smirked, and then shook his head hard and did his utmost to concentrate properly on his task of observing the royals.

He didn’t see Ray again on the ship during the rest of the day. Hadn’t expected to, and hardly spent any time looking. Didn’t find himself talking to Udom Kol during the evening’s reception either. He did check a few times to see how the royals were circulating, but this time none of them was bothering with the muscle, and Udom Kol didn’t even seem to be there.

The reception finished promptly at eight o’clock ship’s time, the briefing in Whitehall was short, and Bodie was home before half past eleven. He took his suit off, had a shower, and then dithered about whether to get dressed again in something casual, stay in his bathrobe, or just open the door naked.

He kept the robe on while he moved around the flat: opening windows for some air, doing the washing-up, making sure the ice-tray was filled, shoving the worst of the

living-room clutter into the drawers of the desk, and straightening up the bed. Not hurrying, all calm and efficient, but his heart was hammering in his chest, and with each minute it felt like the robe was making his erection even more obvious than if he'd been naked.

The entry-phone sounded on the dot of midnight. "I'll buzz you in, Ray. I'm on the top floor." When he hadn't heard the click of the street door opening after five seconds, he pressed the button again. "Try again. It needs a sharp shove sometimes."

And now he was in, and Bodie opened the door to wait for him. Ray was running up the stairs, and he kept running all the way up the three floors. Bodie held his arms out when he heard Ray reach the last flight, imagining how he'd catch him, but Ray slowed on the last few steps, maybe from his first sight of Bodie. He'd changed out of his suit, was wearing a brown leather jacket over a cream T-shirt and jeans. The jeans were tight, or maybe that was just how they looked now, after that run up the stairs with a well-advanced erection.

He raised his arms too as he crossed the landing, and then they were pressed together and Bodie was heeling the door shut. They were both breathing hard, and Bodie could feel the pounding of Ray's heart, even more insistent than his own. But the kiss was almost lazy. Gentle, Bodie would have said if he was with a bird, but slow and deliberate from Ray seemed more like a reminder that Ray knew the secret of bringing him to the verge of howling. Ray was good at lazy. They were both good at lazy. Their breathing calmed to just a shared roughness in their sighs, and their pulses settled to an idling thrum. Their erections got harder, though.

There was the sound of the street door opening then banged shut, muffled voices for the space of maybe three sentences, and Ray suddenly switched gear. He moved his right hand down to tug at the tie of Bodie's robe, and when it was undone he pulled at the robe from behind with his other hand until it was hanging wide open. By then his right hand was already busy unbuckling his belt, and then working at the zip of his jeans.

Fully caught up, Bodie was the one to break the kiss. "Bed?"

A slight shake of the head. "No. Here. Please. I promised myself that I'd have you fuck me right here. Before I'd taken two steps inside. Up against the door. Hard. It's all I've been thinking about since you asked if I could come here."

Bodie shrugged out of his robe, threw it toward the sitting-room. "You bring any more of that gel?" He reached to check in the pockets of the leather jacket, but Ray took his hand and pushed it down inside the back of the jeans under the boxers, bringing Bodie's fingers right into the cleft.

"I got ready before I set off."

Bodie could already feel the slickness, but he pushed his middle finger in, and Ray groaned and pushed back and parted his legs.

"Never met anyone like you, Ray, for thinking ahead."

"Motivation. Remember? The more I see of you, the stronger it gets."

Bodie pressed his index finger in too, and Ray groaned again and then was dragging roughly at the jeans until they were down to mid-thigh. Bodie pulled at the neck of the

jacket with his free hand. “Take this off, too. It’s in the way. You’ve got the sexiest back. I want a chance to feel it.”

The jacket landed on top of the bathrobe. Deliberate? Bodie thought it might have been. “What about the T-shirt?”

“That’s OK. Now, weren’t you going to be up against the door?”

Ray turned and braced himself, and moments later Bodie had pulled out his fingers and was shoving in his cock. Not rough-hard. Not yet. Less careful than he’d normally be for his first time in a man, but he trusted Ray to know what he wanted, to say what he wanted. What else could you do, when he came so prepared?

Ray was breathing his name, over and over. Not helpless and disbelieving like Bodie had been in the cabin – and Bodie hadn’t let himself hope for that – but still sounding very well pleased. Bodie edged closer to rough-hard, and his name disintegrated into a rasp between a growl and a snarl. Low, though. No need to worry about the neighbours.

“What did you promise yourself? About how long we’d make it last?” Bodie said it into his ear, while their hips were struggling together, fighting to get Bodie even deeper.

A quick, negative grunt. “Never thought about it. Doesn’t matter. Just wanted. This. I couldn’t sleep last night for thinking how strong you must be, how that would feel. Never guessed the half of it. So just do. This.”

“Then I’m gonna...” He took his right hand off Ray’s hip, reached around to take hold of his cock. A definite snarl, and Ray juddered.

“Yeah, that’ll make it...” Gasping, while the shudders became less frequent. “Hard, Bodie. Don’t forget... Hard.”

Bodie slid his left hand under the T-shirt, clamped his arm around Ray’s chest, and gave up all idea of holding back.

Ray came first, and Bodie hadn’t imagined it before: that cock really did swell dramatically when it was coming. Four near-violent punches he felt this time, and he swore that with the first he could hear the come spatter against the door, even over Ray’s tearing groan. He felt each kick inside Ray’s body too, and was coming himself almost on the last one.

Bodie brought his right hand to rest on Ray’s stomach. A few seconds pause then Ray pulled away from the door and laid his arms over Bodie’s, intertwining their fingers. They sighed. Bodie closed his eyes, thought Ray did too.

“Any way around, still the most rewarding fuck.” Bodie’s cock had slipped out of him a few seconds before.

Bodie laughed. “And I’m going to register your cock as one of the wonders of the world.” And the cool, soft brush of his curls, too. The smell of... was it moss? Moss and warm pine bark. Sharp but soothing. Unique.

Bodie didn’t think he could blame space fever any more. It wasn’t just about the thrill. They hadn’t lost their senses, not for a moment. No, they were finding them. And he’d

never felt more normal, he'd never liked himself so fully. All from how much he liked this man. His Ray. Whose fit in his arms was another of those wonders, but now he was feeling a draft under the door. He slid his arms away and stepped back. "Well, sir. You've given the door a thorough inspection. Would you like to see the rest of the flat now?" His best posh estate agent voice. Not that he had any direct experience of the breed.

A chuckle. "Sure. Why not?" Ray pulled up his boxers and jeans, while Bodie picked up the jacket and robe. Ray turned around and moved away from the door as he was fastening his belt, and then reached out for the jacket.

Bodie vaguely saw the gesture, felt the jacket being taken, but his attention was elsewhere because he finally now had a sight of the door. A small choked sound and he sank to his knees, pressed the side of his face to the cold surface, closed his eyes and opened his mouth wide, and then was single-mindedly searching for Ray's come with his tongue. Pure instinct, his reflex at the idea of neglecting or abandoning any part of Ray.

Ray gasped with surprise and then he was on his knees too, his face next to Bodie's, his tongue following Bodie's tongue, grazing along its edge.

Bodie had meant to get every drop, it had seemed so important, but Ray was turning each movement into almost a kiss, and it was impossible, impossible, not to tilt his head that fractional amount and search for Ray's lips instead.

Bodie felt Ray suddenly smile, and wasn't surprised when in the next moment he pulled away with an amused snort. "I've been thinking... 'Bodie' means 'thirsty' as well as 'hungry' – but that's far too cheap a line."

A quirk of the eyebrows. "Yeah, that's naff. I am ready for a drink, though. What about you?"

"What're you gonna have?"

"Mm. Gin and tonic."

"That'd be great," and they got to their feet, picked up their dropped clothes, and headed into the sitting-room.

Bodie put his robe back on, but Ray left his jacket on the back of one of the armchairs. He came to the kitchen to watch Bodie making the drinks.

"It's quite a small kitchen. Isn't it? You'd have to be a more organised cook than I am."

"Or not cook at all." Bodie handed over the cut-glass tumblers, then raised his own. "Cheers."

Bodie sat down on the couch, thought Ray would join him, but instead Ray set to exploring the room. He started by working around clockwise out of the kitchen, but then suddenly spotted the black-and-white picture of 1920s dancing girls over the mantelpiece and crossed over for a closer look.

"You're attracted to women too?" Genuinely surprised.

Bodie nodded. "It's mostly been birds for me, to be honest. Sounds like you're not."

A shake of the head. “Never been interested.”

Never tried even pretending to be interested, from that tone. Thoroughly queer, which must mean that he'd had boyfriends like Bodie'd had girlfriends. Bodie had never gone anywhere near that world. He'd always been clear it had nothing to do with him, with what he liked from men. But he thought he was already getting over the jolt of Ray being so different. This was Ray. Of course he was different. Or he was standard British Secret Service, if you wanted to look at it that way. Bodie wondered who'd be the first of them to joke about that, and how many nights it would take for them to get to that point.

Ray studied the picture some more, then turned around to Bodie like he had another question. But after a couple of seconds he shrugged instead, then turned back to the wall and moved on to the right. Bodie leaned back, nursing his drink and enjoying the view.

“You read a lot. Looks like...” A long pause with his head tilted sideways, then he straightened and turned to look at Bodie again. “Mostly military history?” Frowning. Uncertainty that he'd got that right, Bodie thought. Not because he had a problem with the subject.

“Yeah. I was in the Army before I joined CI5. SAS. Then Paras before that.” No reaction to “SAS”. It was weirdly refreshing. Impressive, really. Ray could play things ice-cold without it even showing in eyes. “Never got above Sergeant but...” He shrugged. “I like getting the big picture.” Another shrug. “Trying to figure out how much is bullshit. See how much the guy really knows about what the life is like.”

“You've killed people.” Even, but assessing.

“Well, yeah.”

“A lot?”

After a pause, with only a slight tightening of the lips: “I'm good at my job.”

“What was the last time? When?”

A sharp sigh. “Couple of months ago. Hostage situation after a fucking stupid bank raid.” Ray was nodding, looking thoughtful. “It bother you?”

“No.” Immediate and definite. “Just interested. I've got caught up in my fair share of action, but it's never gone that far. Sounds like you miss the Army.”

Bodie exhaled noisily, meaning “mostly no”. “I miss being part of something really big. And, yeah, the history. The tradition. All the stuff that comes along with your regiment. And I look damn good in a uniform.” Ray's eyes widened, like he had no doubt of that. “But the money's a hell of a lot better in CI5. And I've got a proper base here now. Not being shunted around from one posting to another, and more often than not it was the arse-end of nowhere. And the action is the best you're gonna find these days. So yeah...” An extravagant shrug. “What I do miss it for, I can mostly get from reading that stuff.”

Ray nodded. “You've hardly got any fiction at all. These are novels here, aren't they?” The four paperbacks on the top shelf.

“I read more than it looks there. Couple of thrillers a month, I guess. I just don't keep them. Pass them straight on to the rest of the squad.” He gestured to the bookcase with

his chin. “Those are the ones I’ve got lined up for the next baby-sitting job. Next stake-out. What about you? Reading?”

“Mostly for work. Especially recently. Not much on my own time.”

“What sort of thing for work?” No chance that he’d be able to tell Bodie the truth, but Bodie was interested to see what he said.

“Material in different languages. A mixture of newspapers and novels, mainly. I’m very quick at picking up languages. That’s the reason I’m here, really.” He lifted his head, flicked eyes and eyebrows upwards. The night sky. The Hailin fleet.

“Yeah?” This really was interesting. And probably all true. “How many languages can you speak? I saw you’ve got French.”

“Right now, along with the French I’ve got Arabic, Russian, Japanese and Spanish. Some German. And English, obviously.”

“Huh. Well, I can order a beer in about ten. You gonna learn the Hailin’s language?”

“Hass Embrun. That’s the idea.”

“How’s that going? Can you say something?”

A brief, thoughtful frown, then Ray spoke in a thoroughly foreign language for about ten seconds. Sounded like Afrikaans to Bodie for a moment, then Portuguese for another moment, and apart from that he had no idea.

“OK? So what was that?”

Slowly: “Well... roughly translated... ‘I’m telling you, I’ve met the sexiest man. I mean, so sexy, he should come with a dehydration warning.’ “

Bodie laughed so hard he slopped gin and tonic over his arm. Ray just stood sipping his own drink, looking quietly pleased with himself.

“You made that sound like it could be real. God, those would be some language lessons. But really, how is it going? You got a feel yet for how tough it’s going to be?”

Ray shrugged. “The Hailin keep saying it’s a very difficult language. But I haven’t met anything that makes me think I should panic.”

“Would be a big deal for the Foreign Office if we were the first to have someone who could speak it. Too late for the negotiations, obviously, but still gotta be really useful.”

“Yeah, it would.”

Bodie nodded, impressed, then drained his glass and stood up. “I’m gonna have a second round of rehydration. Can I top you up?” Ray had only drunk about half. Too busy exploring.

“Please. It’s just right. Really refreshing.”

Bodie held out his hand for the glass but Ray brought it over to the kitchen instead, and this time he did join Bodie on the couch afterwards. They sat with their thighs touching.

“Nice flat. Looks like a nice neighbourhood, too.”

“Very nice. I stick out round here like a sore thumb.”

“It’s expensive?”

“Way more than I could afford. The flat comes with the job. Always on call, but central location. If I had to pay my own rent, I’d be out in... I dunno... East Acton. You’re not based in London, are you?”

A brief shake of the head.

“Don’t suppose you can tell me where you are stationed?”

Another shake. Ray seemed subdued.

“How’s your place there compare with this? D’you have a big garden with a pool?”

A smile. “Nah. Nice balcony, though. View of the sea.”

“Sounds good. Better weather than here?”

“A bit better.”

“How long you due to be in town? Just till the end of the negotiations?”

Slowly: “I’m not sure. That is the plan, but...” A sigh. “Now I’m not sure.”

Really subdued. Missing his sun and sea view? Whatever it was, he wasn’t comfortable with these questions, so instead Bodie placed his hand on Ray’s thigh and was immediately rewarded with an uncomplicated smile. And then with Ray’s hand on top of his, Ray’s fingers pushing between his and gripping, and Bodie was so hard, so fast that he grunted in reaction and his head jerked back.

“You OK?”

A deep, loud breath. “Just... you doing that with your hand. Sent me up so fast.” He swallowed. “Thinking about how you did that earlier. By the door.” And now it looked like it hit Ray, too, but with him it was tight-shut eyes, and a rasping breath through clenched teeth.

They looked at one another seriously for a long moment, then Ray said, “Let’s take a couple of minutes. Finish our drinks. I mean, we’ve got all night.” Bodie nodded, and they both raised their glasses.

They didn’t hurry, didn’t drink in unison after that start, but did keep fairly close pace. At about the halfway mark, Ray said, “Do you still have your uniform? From the Army?”

“Uh...” Thinking. “Not the whole kit. Not any more. But enough to give you the effect. If that’s why you’re asking?” Of course it was. “OK. Tomorrow night. I’ll get into it as soon as I get home. Be ready for you.” Sudden worry, almost fear. “You’re gonna be OK for tomorrow night?”

Unsmiling: “I will be here.”

Bodie finished his drink first, slid his hand away from Ray’s, leaned forward and put his glass on the coffee table, and seconds later Ray had done the same. Bodie started to push the table back, and Ray joined him.

“Yeah, that’ll do.” Nearly at the fireplace. Bodie straightened up, then unfastened and shrugged off his robe. Ray’s hands were working at his belt-buckle.

Bodie stepped forward, put one hand on Ray’s chest, the other on his hip. Low, in Ray’s ear: “The thing I promised myself, was that I’d get to suck you off.”

Ray’s hands went still. “Here.” Didn’t sound like a question. More like he was congratulating himself.

“Well... at the time I was assuming in bed. But now...” He gestured with his hand towards the couch. “Over there. I wanna get between your thighs. Have them pressed against me.”

An uneven sigh. “Oh, yes. You think so well, Bodie.”

Not a widely held opinion. But gotta mean something coming from one of the F.O.’s elite. Bodie pulled him close, took a brief, close-mouthed kiss, and then was urging him towards the couch.

It was everything he’d been imagining and more. The nerves of his mouth and throat would be processing that for days. Christ, when Ray came it really was volcanic. Not for the novice. Or for anyone who didn’t know what to expect.

He hadn’t touched himself, for once hadn’t come along with Ray. He sat back on his heels, one hand resting on Ray’s thigh, the other on his calf, and drank in the sight of the flushed, boneless sprawl. His doing. And if he’d still had room for doubt before, the blaze of pride at that thought was unignorable proof: he’d fallen in love with Ray. It shouldn’t be possible, not with a man, but he found he didn’t want to be saved from himself. Not anymore. He was going to follow Ray. Find a way to be with him. Because this felt like the best thing that had ever happened to him, and he wasn’t going to let it end when the negotiations were over.

Yes, he knew it was probably 99% sex; his body had gone half-crazy over Ray’s. But so what? He trusted his body. He’d asked a lot of it and it had never really let him down. It deserved this. The really crazy thing would be turning away from the chance to find out everything they could do together. If Ray felt the same way, and Bodie had to believe that Ray did. He was thinking he’d wait a few days, see if Ray said anything first. It’d be easier for Ray, wouldn’t it? He’d probably said it before to at least one of his boyfriends.

Whatever happened, it wouldn’t come close to being the worst decision of his life. And with Ray involved, he was sure they’d be smart about how they’d handle everything. They’d be as safe as they could be.

Finally Ray’s eyelids were fluttering open. A slow smile, “Ah, Bodie.” But then a small frown. “But you? I don’t think you...” He sat up, to where he could look down at Bodie’s crotch. Then reaching out: “Show me. Let me... Come here.”

Bodie got to his feet and stepped forward till his shins met the couch, and then Ray’s hand was on his hip, with the other closing around his cock. Bodie groaned and thrust forward, and shut his eyes. But then the grip eased, left him, even, and the hand on his hip too.

Ray was leaning back, both hands gripping the hem of his T-shirt. “Would you... Can I ask...” He swallowed. “I want you to come over me.”

“Ray.” Bodie took a step back. “Who’s gonna say no to that?” He took a grip on himself, reached down with his other hand to cup his balls. Ray had pulled the T-shirt right up to above his nipples, was holding it there.

“And watch yourself. Look at yourself while you’re doing it. Not me.”

Well, until the end, obviously, when he’d need to aim. But Bodie obeyed without comment, and didn’t look up even when Ray started murmuring about how he was so beautiful, he was so strong, there was not one line of him that could be better placed.

From near the nipples, more or less evenly, to down low on his stomach. Ray studied the drops, shifting his head from side to side several times to get the full view. He looked almost smug. No, he looked radiantly smug, but in a quiet way. He moved his hand down to his belly, touched his fingertips to the drops just below his navel, rubbed back and forth a fraction of an inch, then sighed and looked up at Bodie.

“Thank you.” Hushed.

“Ray. My pleasure.” He held out his hand. “Now... Can I take you to bed?”

They lay on their sides and alternated long kisses with just letting their hands drift idly, their hips and thighs flex. The sound of a car would sometimes reach them from the street, maybe one every five minutes.

Bodie had seen now that he had a man who all-but worshipped his come, and that had decided him that he didn’t want to wait after all. He couldn’t start out mushy, he didn’t know how; he’d have to make it about the practicalities. But if it turned out that Ray needed convincing, hadn’t realised yet... Well, he’d just have to muddle through. With some things, you couldn’t tell if you were really ready. Being out in the action was the only proof.

“Ray, I don’t know how you’ve got things set up with your job, but – I’ll move wherever I have to. Do what I have to so we don’t have to stop this. Of course you were right. That was the best fuck of my life.”

The twitch of a stifled grin, it looked like, then Ray reached out and laid his hand lightly on Bodie’s cheek. “Mine too. And we won’t stop this. We couldn’t. But as for what that’s going to involve...” A long, uneven sigh, and he moved his hand back to Bodie’s waist.

“So much will depend on where – On where the Hailin base gets put. That’s where I’ll be stationed next. I’d been thinking already about how I might be able to arrange things for you. I’m sure it won’t be difficult. You’ll have your choice of work. But it’ll be a while before there’s any point in worrying about the details.”

“You’d already been thinking about it?” He felt like he’d never want to stop smiling.

Ray could get mystery, challenge and affection into one fractionally raised eyebrow. “Idly. I had those hours of boring meetings. So there was that and making up word games around your name.”

Sitting there doodling his name. Yeah, it was official: William Bodie had a boyfriend. The thought made his scalp prickle from ear to ear, but after all, this was the week when the world turned upside down. “Good games, were they?”

With a relaxed shrug: “They still need work. I’ve got most hopes of the one in Hass Embrun.”

Felt like Ray wanted to do his Hass Embrun routine again. And Bodie would take the bait, but not quite yet. He’d see if he could choose a time that would make it even funnier. For now, he just gave a brisk nod. “Well, that’s you and motivation. I should get my share of the credit for shooting you to the top of the Hass Embrun class.”

“You’re from Liverpool?” Bodie grunted an affirmative. Ray must have been thinking about him and work. About people reviewing his file. “Is your family still there?”

A brief shrug. “Probably. Wouldn’t know. Haven’t seen them in nearly twenty years.”

Surprise. “How come?” Said with a mixture of interest and concern.

“I left home when I was fourteen. Got a place on a ship heading... anywhere.”

“Fourteen? That’s young.”

“Couldn’t have told me that back then, but yeah.”

“Your family was that bad?” Apprehensive.

A sigh. “Well, it wasn’t good. Nothing that’d make the newspapers, just miserable. Last year or so before I ran, I’d go hungry rather than spend time in that house.”

“How did it go? The running away?”

“I made a few bad mistakes. Gave me some rough moments. Rough months. When I’d be counting the days till I’d be somewhere else. But I always knew there would be somewhere else. I’d get through it. Nothing ever made me wanna go back. Getting out of there was never a mistake.”

Ray was nodding. “D’you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Brother. A year older. We never got on.”

A grunt, and a grimace. “My twin brother: biggest asshole you’ll ever meet.” Bodie laughed, and Ray shrugged and then grinned.

“He look like you? That’d be...” Could be very kinky. Even knowing the guy was an asshole.

“Nothing like. I take after our father. He’s more to our mother’s side. So you’re... Thirty-three? Thirty-four?”

“Thirty-three last month.”

“Huh. I’ve got a few months to go to twenty-nine. Bodie, I am so impressed with you for doing it. Getting away. Making it work. I was thinking about it a fuck of a lot by the

time I was fourteen. Never did anything. But I wouldn't have got far, anyway. Not like you. All I did in the end was choose a college as far away as I could get."

Maybe that was why he'd joined the Foreign Office, too? Even more than the languages thing. "So was it miserable? Or... another kind of bad?"

Frowning, and a long, slow breath. "Well... not any kind, really. My other four brothers and sisters were just fine with everything. I don't count the arsehole's opinion on anything. But I hated the idea of our family. I wanted out."

Bodie's eyebrows shot up. Sounded like the Mafia or something. But couldn't be that, or the F.O. would never have taken him. "What – What idea?"

A twist of the mouth, then: "Obscenely rich. Obscenely powerful. For longer than anyone can comfortably imagine. When you're part of it, the expectations are..." A ragged sigh. "I had to get out."

"Jesus!" A pause. "So what's your full name?"

Ray shook his head, looking grim. "It wouldn't mean anything to you."

Or maybe it would mean too much? Bodie bet that Ray's being so totally queer wouldn't have helped matters, either. That must be part of what he'd meant by "expectations". "How far out did you get? D'you still see them?"

On a resigned sigh: "Yeah." A pause and another sigh. "Especially lately. It's been..." A much longer pause, with Ray looking thoughtful. "Though it has its compensations. Sometimes. Opportunities. Options I know other people would –" A shrug. "On balance, I shouldn't be complaining right now." His deadly important job? No, Bodie had the feeling he'd really earned that. But maybe the family was the reason he was so confident that it would be easy for Bodie to join him; the compensation was that sometimes he could get away with things. "God. I wasn't planning on telling you any of this. Or – Not until I couldn't avoid it, until you had to meet them. Does it bother you? Make you see me differently?"

The question Bodie had asked earlier, about the fact that he'd killed people. "Ray. I could tell right from the start that you came from class. Doesn't matter that you don't have the public school accent. It's in the way you walk."

Ray blinked several times. "I did not know that." Suddenly he grinned, and relaxed considerably. "And I won't wonder for a second if I ought to do something about the walk. Because I think you like it."

"You're right, there." And Ray raised himself up on an elbow, and the kiss was the most intense in some time. No, they were not done for tonight. They'd be hard again soon. Bodie was kind of curious, though, about the family money, but from Ray saying "obscenely rich", then if there was any he was supposed to be getting, he'd make a big deal of sending it straight back. He might ask, sometime. Or just wait till he saw for himself how Ray lived.

Foreplay. This was the first time they'd been in the mood for it. Hands to start with, then they threw back the covers and roamed downwards, too, licking and nipping. Ray was particularly drawn to Bodie's nipples, not used at all to such a smooth chest. Bodie thoroughly enjoyed the reaction, but wondered where Ray had been, how he'd been

choosing his men, if he was really as unused as he seemed. Ray loved Bodie's stubble against his belly, too, the contrast with Bodie's mouth. And the inside of his arms were spectacularly sensitive, but it had to be the right kind of slow, light, threatening touch, like one that brought in the calluses on Bodie's gun-hand.

Rubbing their cocks together as they kissed, sometimes lying on each other, enjoying the weight, sometimes on their sides, with enough room left between them that they could slide their hands in and wrap their fingers around the two cocks together. Until Bodie grunted that he was getting too close and they instantly pulled apart.

For some time they lay with only the backs of their hands touching. Ray was the first to move, shifting partly onto his side with one knee raised, and a few inches further up the pillow, so his head was tilted down.

"You got something specific in mind? That you're saving us for? Or just not ready yet?"

Bodie turned his head to look up at him. "Been too long since you fucked me. Don't you reckon? Nine hours now by my watch."

Slowly, quietly: "Yeah. That's too long." They both looked down. Bodie's cock twitched, its tip glistening. No such obvious movement from Ray's but Bodie would swear it was thrumming. His hips bucked several times, involuntarily, as he carried on watching Ray's cock.

Ray pushed himself up on one arm, to shift easily over to kneeling. "Bodie. Bodie." Almost a whisper. "I can hear you salivating." He put his hand on Bodie's thigh, a few inches above the knee. "And watching you... I'm thinking you wouldn't believe me. If I told you I think what I've got is ugly."

Bodie glanced up at his face, and he did look completely serious. But then down again at that cock, and the evidence of his eyes, and the memories in his nerves... No, he couldn't guess what Ray meant, what he could possibly be seeing so differently.

"Ugly? No. I don't – How? Why? I mean, it's what every other cock is trying to be."

"You don't see that it's trying too hard? It's lost sight of where it is. It just doesn't fit with the rest of me. Not like you, you're elegant."

Bodie looked down at himself, at his cock that felt like a scalded fist. "Ray. Ray. God, I dunno what you're seeing but... Good. That you like what you see." A pause. "And –" He shook his head. "For the rest, I'm gonna believe that you figure you have to say that to us. Or we worry too much that we can't measure up." He thought Ray would laugh, but he didn't, and Bodie took another careful look at his expression. "You seriously think it's ugly? It bothers you? I can't be the only man you've had begging for it as soon as see it."

Now Ray was laughing. "It doesn't bother me. You set a few records but you're right, most men like it a lot. That's the one thing I don't understand about other men but..." A shrug. "I get lots of benefits so I generally keep my opinion to myself. But you... I suddenly wanted to know if you would believe me. I was fairly sure it wouldn't stop you salivating, either way. Was I right?" Bodie grinned and nodded. "Then where d'you keep your lubricant?"

In the drawer of the bedside table, nearest to Ray. Bodie pointed, and by the time Ray turned back to the bed, Bodie had got up onto his hands and knees.

“You’re swollen from before.” One hand holding his cheeks apart, the fingers of the other just barely touching, circling. “Redder. Looks tender.” Now rubbing, still too lightly. “Can you feel it?”

A brief grunt, neither yes or no. “Hotter?” Bodie was about to say “More impatient?” but then the fingers were in him.

“We’re going to get you more swollen. Keep you like that,” and short seconds later Ray was filling him. Maybe he was tender. Ray felt even bigger than before. Harder.

“Oh, Bodie.” Hushed, breathless. Not all the way in yet. The grip on his buttocks changed, fingers at his hole again, stroking. Following the line of where they were joined. “I wish you could see this.” A brief chuckle. “It’s what every other fuck is trying to be. Your arse... It’s as beautifully framed as your cock. And the way it looks when it’s stretched around me. When you’re taking me in. Like this, my cock suddenly doesn’t look out of place. It’s part of you. It’s just another of your beautiful points of contrast.”

“Ray. Ray.” Gasping. “God, yes. I wish I could see it.” It would be the sight of their bodies fallen helplessly in love with each other. Bodie could feel that, too, in every place where they touched and their pounding heartbeats shook each other.

The sounds that Bodie made were different in this position, and the things that shifted him between loud and less loud. Again, Ray enjoyed playing with the sounds, testing how surely he could bring Bodie back to loud. They had been there and back twice, and Bodie was really barely groaning (or maybe snarling) when the banging came on the wall behind the bed, about two feet to the right of Bodie’s head. Five thuds, and a man’s voice, sharp with anger but indistinct.

They froze, for about fifteen seconds, and then were sniggering and shushing each other and sniggering some more. And then silent again for twenty seconds or so, to see if the banging was going to come again. It didn’t.

Ray whispered, “Could you make out what he was actually saying?”

“Not a word. From the shape of it, though, I’d put money on: ‘Jesus Christ! It’s two in the fucking morning. Will you please keep it down?’ ”

They sniggered again, then Ray said, “Will you, though? Can you?”

“Hmm.” Bodie took a few moments to think about it. “Maybe if I’m lying flatter. So I’ve got the pillow to hold onto. Bite it, if it comes to that.”

They eased down carefully, staying joined all the while, and were careful too as they started to make love again. Bodie did clamp his teeth in the pillow, and clutch it, and moan into it. Bodie’s neighbour must still be able to hear... well, that a man next door was being very well fucked, but they must have done enough that they weren’t keeping too violently awake, and he didn’t complain again.

“I think...” Bodie gave a long sigh. “It’s time we got some sleep now. Save anything we’ve got left for tomorrow. In the shower.” A smile and a very brief nod from Ray. “The alarm’s set for seven o’clock. That OK for you?”

“Um. Better make it six for me. I ought to get back early enough that I’m there for anyone who expects to see me at breakfast.”

“Oh, yeah. How many of the team have they got staying at your hotel?”

“Nine. Enough that I always see at least one of them at breakfast.”

Nine of them from outside London? The team was larger than Bodie had realised. Must have whole sections that he’d never met. “Yeah, let’s get you up at six.” Bodie reprogrammed the alarm, turned off the light, and they curled against each other and were soon asleep.

The sex they had in the shower was low-key and unhurried. Lots of kissing, and soaping each other, and they brought each other off with their hands.

The front of Ray’s T-shirt was stiff with patches of Bodie’s come. He’d pulled it back down after Bodie had come over him the night before, run his hands hard from top to bottom and back again, and then dropped it in a heap shortly after, when they got into bed.

“You can’t step out the door in that, Ray. Even just to walk around the corner to your car.”

“It’s not that bad. I’ll put it on back-to-front. Do the jacket up, no one’ll see, anyway.”

“Or borrow one of mine.”

Ray was clearly tempted, but then shook his head. “Nah, it’s OK,” and he pulled the T-shirt on back-to-front. It wasn’t blatant like that, but still very rumpled.

Ray stayed for a quick coffee after he was dressed, and they made their plans for the rest of the day. Meet in the cabin at lunchtime, and again Bodie was confident that he would be home by midnight.

A long kiss by the door, and then Ray was heading down the stairs nearly as quickly as he’d come up them. The slam of the street door. Bodie went to the living-room window hoping for a sight of him on the way to his car, but the corner was just a couple of doors away and he must already have turned it. Bodie sighed, and went to get dressed.

Chapter 2

Bodie spent the morning trying to do his job. Trying not to think about Ray despite the deep throbbing in his arse. Trying not to be counting down the seconds until lunchtime.

His task was made slightly easier by the fact that something was clearly going on among the Hailin. About an hour into the morning's session, Udom Kol, who had been especially quiet for the last couple of days, suddenly placed his hands on the edge of the table with an audible thud, then a few seconds later forcefully pushed his chair back, and then practically ran out of the room. The other royals all turned to look, but not so quickly that they were clearly surprised. Could just possibly be that this had been discussed before, a while ago, and they were only now remembering. They turned back almost immediately, and Atenassi leaned over to say something to Inoni Sarai, and he nodded, and they carried on as before.

Udom Kol didn't come back. About twenty minutes after they'd resumed from the morning's break, a crewmember came in, went straight over to Inoni Sarai, gave him something, and then left. A sealed note, apparently. He broke the seal, read the note, showed it to Atenassi, and then got to his feet. "I hope you will all excuse me, please." And he was gone, too.

Atenassi gave the room about fifteen seconds to murmur and speculate, then she raised her hands, palms outwards. Part shrug, part command for silence. "We are having a family matter." Crisp, with maybe a touch of resignation. "I trust you understand that such things have no great respect for time or place. But for business we can continue perfectly well as we are." And she picked up smoothly from before the arrival of the note.

Interesting. Fewer clues there than even a seasoned Kremlin-watcher could construct a theory with but... Interesting. To see the Hailin involved in something truly unexpected. Or was it all an act? Maybe the point was to shake the delegations up. See how they reacted. Either way, no chance of that evening's de-briefing being short. Damn. He should have given Ray a set of keys, so it didn't matter if he got home late.

He didn't head down immediately after the start of the lunch break, but waited until the initial surge out of the room was finished, and for the rest of the British delegation to have their attention elsewhere. He was partially erect, but he was confident in the colour and cut of his suit; no one had noticed, or was going to.

When he stepped out of the stairwell and into the long corridor, he found a crewman standing just to the right, looking directly at the doorway. Bodie managed not to show any reaction in his face. Well, he couldn't go to the cabin now. So act like he'd made a wrong turning, go straight back. No big pantomime of "Goodness, how did I end up here?" Just a look each way along the corridor, and then back up the stairs. Try again in five minutes. Ray would wait.

"Mister Bodie." Bodie's head snapped around. "My name is Malun. I'm an officer on this ship. Would you mind coming with me? I need to talk to you about the man you've been having sex with. About Ray." The most even tone.

Bodie gaped, blushed, swallowed, and finally nodded. "I – OK. Yes."

“Thank you. This way, please,” and he led Bodie in the direction away from the cabin. On full alert, Bodie was taking in every detail he could. This Malun looked to be in his mid-50s, judging by human terms. Compact build, about 5’7”. Tanned complexion, in the European Mediterranean range. Short hair mostly steel-grey, with flecks of pure black and pure white. Bodie could only study the back of his head for now, because he had not once yet looked back to check on Bodie.

Far fewer doors in this corridor. Not cabins, then. About a third of the way along they passed a door that was open, and what Bodie saw looked like a warehouse. And the same with the next open door, on the other side of the corridor.

They went all the way down to the end of the corridor. Malun pressed the button to open a door on the right, and did look around to nod at Bodie before he stepped through. A small storage room and maybe also an office, with deep shelves on both sides and a desk at the far end. There was a gap about three feet wide between the shelves on the left, and Malun turned into the gap and did something that Bodie didn’t see, and a panel swung silently open to reveal a narrow stairwell leading up. Malun closed the panel after them.

At the top of the stairwell was another, shorter corridor. A sequence on the keypad of the first door on the right, and Malun turned to Bodie again. “These are my quarters. We’ll talk here.”

For an officer, Bodie was expecting a cabin maybe ten times the size of theirs, but Malun’s quarters beat any of the luxury London hotel suites that Bodie had seen in his years of bodyguard duties. They had entered near the corner of an L-shaped living-area. The arm off to the left contained a table that could comfortably seat twelve, while the other arm, that Malun was now leading them into, had couches and armchairs and tables arranged into three main areas, each for different numbers of people. The furnishings were plain – not so much like the hotel suites – and there were few ornaments, but there were several very large pictures, all of which Bodie had to assume were abstract.

At the far side of the lounge area was a small kitchen, set off the left end of the L. Malun nodded towards it and then said, “I’m going to make us some tea first. This could be a long talk. Would you like to sit over there?” Another nod, towards a pair of armchairs near the kitchen with a small table between them. Bodie sat in the one with the most direct view of the kitchen, and carried on scanning the room.

There were two other doors that he could see: one with a full keypad in the wall to the right of the kitchen, presumably leading to another corridor; and one with just a single button in the wall between the kitchen and the dining area. Must be to the bedroom.

“How do you take your tea?”

“Milk and one sugar. Please.”

As Malun was bringing the mugs over, Bodie said, “I’m guessing you’re a very senior officer.”

“I am.” A slight pause. “I’m the Chief Executive of the *Morven* trading enterprise. This is my fleet.” The admiral. A whole new level to how much trouble he and Ray must be in. Bodie forced himself not to swallow.

Malun put one mug on the table, near Bodie, but kept hold of the other as he sat down. He took his tea black. His eyes were steel-grey, maybe a shade darker than his hair.

“Now...” A light sigh. “Ray tells me that he led you to believe that he’s with your Foreign Office. When in fact –”

“He’s a member of your crew.” Bodie shook his head once, hard, in exasperation with himself. “Of course he is.” That cock. It really was another direction in the evolution of sex.

Malun was nodding. “He’s also my nephew. I would be having this conversation with you no matter who he was, but you should know that he is also my nephew.”

The admiral’s nephew. With the Hailin suddenly taken by surprise, having to deal with a family issue. Bodie dropped his gaze from Malun’s face to the small tanned hands wrapped around the light-blue mug.

“You’re Inoni Sarai. And Ray must be Udom Kol.”

The slightest frown and twist of the mouth. “I am Malun Vasmar. Ray is Ray Bakkel.” A pause. “We wear... the two that you mentioned.”

So a king as well as an admiral. And the man he’d been planning to leave his job for was space-going royalty. When Ray said that they’d be together, that they’d work something out, well, he couldn’t have meant it. Bodie closed his eyes briefly, thinking of the first time Ray had gone into him, the overload of sensation. An alien prince, it was, who had done that to him.

“Is that his job? Bedding the local men?”

A bark of unamused laughter. This king Malun was so controlled, even in the way he lost control. “It is not.” Angry with Ray, not with Bodie for making the suggestion. Probably. A sigh and then most of the edge of anger was gone from his face and voice. “I did suggest that he go out and mingle incognito. He’s not accustomed to wearing the mask and he’s been finding it oppressive. Everything else was entirely his own idea.”

Down to stocking the cabin with M&S shower gel. Bodie raised his eyebrows, gave a half-smile of grudging admiration, and was surprised when Malun returned a similar smile and nod.

“So this morning, when he ran out of the meeting. That was to do with me? He suddenly added up just how many thousands of taboos we’d broken?”

A deep breath. “It was to do with you. He was sitting there looking at you. And having some particular thoughts about you that had very rapidly given him an erection when he’d had them in that same situation yesterday afternoon.” Bodie knew that he had to be blushing, picked up the mug to be doing something and at least hide some of his face. “When he realised that he was experiencing no arousal at all, he – Well, of course he knew why, but he immediately went to get confirmation.”

So it had burned out that quickly for him? Just become a huge mistake? So huge he’d had to ask his uncle to do the breaking up for him. Bodie’s face and chest went tight, painful. “What sort of confirmation, then?” Might as well hear it, the worst.

“Well, first he went to the cabin you’d used. He thought your pheromones – your *mana*, to us – He thought he’d find them fresh enough to work for him. And he did. So after he’d dealt with his erection he presented himself at the medical centre as a betrothed man and asked for the tests for a fully fixed biochemical dependency. For what we call the state of *esmana*. And when he got that definitive confirmation he immediately sent for me.” A shrug and a smile. “So... Mister Bodie. I brought you here to tell you that you now have an... admittedly startled but very excited and happy Hailin husband. Welcome to our family.”

So it wasn’t the worst, it wasn’t that Ray was finished with him. But he couldn’t figure out at all what it was instead. What could Malun mean by “husband”? Not a real marriage, obviously. Not with two men, and one a prince and the other a bodyguard, and they’re different species half a universe apart, and they’ve known each other for barely a day. Must be something to save face for Ray with his family, make it like Malun had always known, like it was some diplomatic thing just for here on Earth, just for the negotiations, or for however long Malun thought they should have. Amazing, when you thought about it, that Malun hadn’t simply had him thrown straight off the ship. But so strange.

He was just staring at Malun. He had to say something. Though Malun was waiting without any sign of impatience.

“That’s... That’s amazing. Not sure I really understand, but...” A shake of the head trying to look relieved, and definitely appreciative of this great favour from the king. “I wasn’t – It’s happened so quickly.”

Malun looked relieved too. He hadn’t been noticeably tense before but now he seemed to relax a few degrees. He’d said the thing he particularly needed to say, and now he could drink his tea, and take his time over the rest. “No, I don’t understand, either. Even with our two species looking so very similar, the odds of us being bio-chemically compatible should be... Well, we’ve travelled a lot, met other intelligent species, some of whom have also travelled a lot, and it simply does not happen. The mechanisms for pair-bonding are always so specific. So even though Ray was qualified, which is the term we use to say that he’d entered the stage of sexual maturity where he was ready to pair-bond, he didn’t hesitate for a second about having as much sex with you as he could arrange. He wanted to enter into a *tolmin* marriage with you.” A quick smile. “That’s another of our terms. For an infertile marriage without pair-bonding, I don’t know if you have them. He’d been planning to tell me about that this afternoon, to ask what position I could find him in the team that’s staying to put up the base. But instead...” A shrug and a broad smile. “Do you have *tolmin* marriages? Where there’s no possibility of pair-bonding?”

Ray had meant it, that they’d be together. He’d lied to Bodie about some things – well, worked fairly hard to mislead him, anyway – but Bodie thought he could believe in everything else that had happened between them.

Bodie really wasn’t sure what Malun meant by “pair-bonding”, why it was such a big deal with him. Where Bodie came from there was only one type of marriage, though, so he thought he was probably answering properly when he said no.

A brisk nod. “That usually means quite different arrangements for qualification. But let’s leave it to our anthropologists to compare notes.” He finished his tea, put the mug down and pushed it away. “So what about you, Bodie? I can see it was a surprise but can

you tell how close you are to being fixed? Ray said he thought it might have happened with you even more quickly than with him. Because your responses to him were extreme.” And Bodie thought of some of his responses, and closed his eyes for a second and went hot all over.

A grunt from Malun, sounding disappointed but not very surprised. Bodie opened his eyes and found the other man looking at his crotch. Frowning. “But you are clearly sexually excited now.” Bodie immediately crossed his legs, forced himself not to shield his crotch with his hands because that always looked pathetic. “And it’s three days since Ray was last in here so you are doing that yourself. Look, I want to take you down now to see your doctor. Get your test results. So when we go to Ray’s quarters we can tell him it’s going to be a maximum of... eight hours? Two days?” A sigh. “Not that long I hope but...” Suddenly he stood up. “OK. Let’s go. It’ll be a relief to you too, won’t it, to know exactly when Ray will be able to say to people that he has a human husband?”

Bodie put his mug down but stayed seated. Slowly: “Malun. I’ll do anything you want me to for Ray. I’m – I’m – I’m in love with him, I’d go anywhere with him. But – I don’t know what tests you have in mind. There aren’t any tests that doctors do that say anything about when you’ll get married. Well –” A pause then a shrug. “Apart from a pregnancy test. And you can’t have meant that?”

Malun stared at him hard for about ten seconds, and then slowly sat down again. He was clearly in the middle of some serious thinking.

After maybe a minute, suddenly: “But you are a pair-bonding species? You get married. To have children.”

“We get married. Yeah.”

“And children can only be conceived in a fully-dependent pair-bonded relationship. That neither can break without –” A wince that was almost a flinch. “Without experiencing great suffering. Incapacitating loss.”

Sounded like Malun had been through a brutal divorce. It could happen, right, even with a king? And you couldn’t get much more brutal than a royal divorce. Maybe she’d got sole custody of the kids. Or all except the heir, surely, and he did seem to have a good relationship with Atenassi. Whatever had happened it must have been a long time ago, but he was still really raw.

Bodie didn’t know what to say. That amicable divorces must exist, because there was a term for them, but no one he knew of had managed to have one. That he knew from his own family that staying together could make for a lousy experience too. Not helpful. Probably not relevant.

“Bodie? Is that right? About the conditions with you for a fertile relationship?”

“Well... Yes, it’s what everyone’s looking for. It’s the ideal.” After all, no one went in planning to drive each other up the wall, to make it impossible for their kids to trust them.

“But ‘ideal’ implies...” A long, frowning pause. “What you said about a pregnancy test. Unless I misunderstood very badly, you were saying that it could occur before the couple was married. Is it the woman getting pregnant for the first time that triggers the bio-

chemical changes? That makes the bond permanent?" A shake of the head. "But then how would that work with two men? Or two women?"

Bodie didn't know what Malun was asking about two men or two women, but he did know something about pregnancy and the threat of marriage. "Yeah, when I was growing up, you always did get married if the girl got pregnant. But that was in a strongly Catholic area in the '50s. By the time I got a girl pregnant it was the '70s and in Colchester." Malun had gasped and was leaning forward like a sprinter on the starting blocks, tense, arms slightly raised. "She never thought for a second that she wanted to marry me, didn't even tell me before she got rid of it. Never meant to tell me any time, but a friend let it slip."

Malun jerked to his feet as if pulled, jolting the chair back several inches. "But if she was fertile with you then, what about – Could she be with someone else later?"

"Yeah, she found someone better than me. Had three kids last I heard."

A strangled sound and Malun hurled himself towards the kitchen, and seemed to just barely make it to the sink before he was violently throwing up. Bodie leapt to his feet and took two steps towards the door with the full keypad – but that would take him past the kitchen and might be locked – so instead he backed away towards the door at the other end of the room, moving over to the wall first to have the cover of the furniture.

The bout of vomiting was brief, had stopped before Bodie reached the wall. Then there was a long pause, with laboured breathing, and then the sound of water running, a glass being filled, and drinking and spitting. Another long pause, then the water running again, and sounds that were probably Malun splashing water on his face and then drying off.

When Malun emerged from the kitchen and back into Bodie's line of sight he looked fish-grey with shock, but was back to his usual calm and control. He didn't seem surprised to find that Bodie had retreated halfway across the room. He didn't come after Bodie either, but went back into the kitchen, opened and shut some cupboards, and came back with a bottle and two small tumblers. He put them on the table, carried the mugs to the kitchen, moved his armchair to face Bodie, then poured two generous glasses and sat down.

A long swallow, the click of the glass on the table, then: "Bodie. If you're asked in the future if humans are a pair-bonding species, the correct answer is no. You might say, 'At a casual glance it might look as if we are. But that's cultural. It's voluntary. There's nothing in our biology that stops us from being fertile with anyone at any time. From walking away from any relationship without fear of either suffering or inflicting... formidable physical consequences. Such as to make a normal life impossible.' That's true, isn't it? Your marriages are entirely voluntary. They're not based on any kind of mutual bio-chemical dependence."

Bodie moved closer, but still keeping a couple of couches and some tables between them. "Um... I think there's some parts of the world where the girls don't get much choice. But – Yeah. I – I know you've been saying that a lot. About... bio-chemistry and pheromones and... medical stuff. I just thought – I dunno. You were saying I'd get to be with Ray. Even with who he is and where he's from, and we'd still get to be together. So I thought... I'd keep my mouth shut and do whatever you needed. Whatever Ray needed.

And it would all make sense to me later. But – I have to know now, don't I? What is happening with Ray?"

"He has become permanently addicted to your bio-chemistry. From now on he will only be able to experience sexual arousal if you are with him. You or your fresh pheromones. Which we call your *mana*. And if he's separated from you for more than four or five days he'll go into a withdrawal state called *gimana* that is –" A long, unsteady breath. "Very unpleasant indeed. So. Really. You're the last person on this planet who has any reason to be wary of me, Bodie. I need to keep you safe so you can be with Ray. To make sure he never goes into *gimana*."

Bodie hesitated for a few seconds, then nodded. He shifted the armchair to face Malun's, took the second glass, and sat down. He sniffed at the drink, found it was scotch, and took a mouthful. It was smoky and salty and burned, and that was very welcome.

"And that's pair-bonding? That's how it works? You're right, we don't have that."

"That's how it works for us. Almost all intelligent species we've encountered have some equivalent. We've always thought it was essential for a species with a long childhood. To ensure that the parents stay together throughout that time."

A small grunt from Bodie. "We mostly have religion for that." And habit. And a mortgage. And worrying about what the neighbours would say. And love too, of course, and respect, though he hadn't seen much of that at close quarters.

"That's interesting." Malun took a drink then winced. "There's no polite way to say this but your biology is something that we associate entirely with animals. It will be fascinating to find out exactly how you manage things in your society to give sufficient support for the children's welfare." A snort. "That is, after I've fired every last member of our current Anthropology Department. And speaking of that, would you excuse me for a few minutes? My people need to be warned."

He got up and went over to a desk, pressed something and a screen and keyboard slid out, and then he typed for several minutes. With that done and the screen and keyboard put away, he went over to the keypad by the door, pressed a button and spoke briefly into the keypad in their language, and then returned to the armchair.

"I've asked Iran – who wears Atenassi – to take charge of making sure that our qualified personnel are immediately withdrawn for all contact with humans. She'll say that your biology is potentially very dangerous to us. No more details than that."

"Qualified? I know you said something about that before, but it was when I wasn't listening properly. You don't mean people who are qualified as anthropologists, do you? It's not that they're the only ones who are talking to us right now."

"No. When I say 'qualified' it's a translation for another term in our reproductive biology: *jarunan*. It's someone who has entered the stage of sexual maturity in which they become able to form a pair-bond. Which will start to happen if they meet someone they're compatible with. Only about a third of us become qualified. I didn't. I've never been interested in sex."

So no brutal divorce, then. Well, of course no divorce, with this pair-bonding thing. But Bodie had painted himself such a clear picture of the divorce. And he liked Malun and

was glad that he hadn't gone through that after all. But it meant that none of them wearing the masks were his children after all. Not a proper royal family, as everyone in all of the delegations had understood it. The Hailin leading humans to believe something. There was a lot of that going around. Or maybe both sides far too quick to see only what they expected to see.

Bodie swallowed hard. "I'm dangerous to Ray, then. So dangerous the thought of it had you puking your guts up." Then on a tone of protest: "But you said he was happy about what had happened. Surprised, you said, but happy. Excited about being my husband."

A long, pained sigh. "Ah. Bodie. That was when he thought that you had become addicted to him as well. Or was certain that the process would be complete with you, too, in a matter of hours. That you had remade each other's body chemistry. That you couldn't think of leaving him any more than he can now leave you." Another sigh. "It's something we rely on completely. The pair-bond only forms if both people are feeling the same attraction. The changes in the bio-chemistry depend on both sides producing the sequence of hormones of being consistently delighted with one another. If one of them starts to become disillusioned then the changes shut down in both of them. So you see we know absolutely that we cannot find ourselves in a state of addiction on our own. That's the most devastating part of this coincidence: that your body convinced Ray's that it was matching him in every step of the process. Of the *russma*. When of course it wasn't."

"I – Well, no, it wasn't doing that. But – What you said about being delighted with each other. What he said about my responses. Jesus! His body convinced me... Spent the night proving... That he... was going to make me happier than I ever thought I could be. No one could make me leave him. I get why you need to warn your others but – I want the same thing that Ray wants. And I'm excited to be his husband, that he needs me like that. I can't think it's going to be any hardship to give him what he needs. So..." A shrug. "There's no need to make it into such a big deal. Not where the two of us are concerned." This time yesterday Bodie would have sworn that there was nothing on earth that could drag any words from him about how another man's body made him feel. Not to the man who had made him feel it, and a thousand times not to any other man. To a man in authority, who might even have moments of reminding him of Cowley. But that was yesterday. And today he wasn't just dealing with things on earth.

Malun looked at him for a long time, expression hard to read. Finally, still unsmiling: "I'm extremely glad to hear that. Certainly, listening to you talk about him, I would have no idea that you weren't... a properly married man. Bodie, you are very welcome to our family." A nod of acknowledgement and a small, brief smile. "However, I'm afraid you've got a lot of very hard work ahead of you. We all have. Because of..." A deep, uneven breath. "The things in our culture that gave me such a strong visceral reaction when you told me about the pregnancy. But I think you can wait for the details of that bad news. And there's also what I know about my nephew and his capacity to make things difficult. For himself and for everyone around him."

"Like how much he wanted to get away from his family? He told me a bit about that. Though I guess I shouldn't say that to you."

"Yes. Particularly like that." He tossed back the last of his whisky and put down the glass with a thud. "He has his good points, certainly. But I think my sister Raina has

infinitely more. And I have vivid memories of all too many phone calls from her. He did mellow a lot once he got away. And once he was safely out of adolescence. But he's not easy. Or never when he's with us."

So you let him roam around incognito and look what happened. Bodie quirked an eyebrow and decided not to say it. Because Malun's sister was sure as hell going to, when the news got home.

Instead Bodie nodded slowly. "OK. I get the idea. Lots of hard work. Never been afraid of that."

"I guessed as much. You strike me as a very practical man. So let's discuss some practicalities. I want you to move in here. To this ship. Starting today. I'll assign you quarters a few doors down. I need you close at hand in case something happens with Ray."

"OK."

"Good. So we'll go to your people and explain what's happened. That with you and Ray --"

"Christ, no! Don't do that!"

"What? Don't tell them? Why not?"

"No one knows I'm queer. Apart from the men I have sex with. No one's ever gonna know. I'd lose my job."

"But -- Why would it matter? What's wrong with what you do? I mean, apart from the fact that you were on duty yesterday when you went down to the cabin."

Bodie turned his head away, closed his eyes hard, clenched his fists. "It's considered shameful. Makes me less of a man." Then looking directly at Malun to see that he got it. "They can't find out. No one I knew from before."

"Ah." A sigh. "That's something else Anthropology didn't pick up on. We used to think like that. Or something like that. Not for four hundred years or more, though."

"So here -- On the ship. Ray and I would be just another couple? No one would care?"

"About two men?" A shrug. "No, it's normal. I guess a fifth of the crew is queer. Iran for example. If you use the same term for women. So what do we tell your people? About the fact that I've asked you to stay with us and join my crew."

Slowly: "I don't know. I'll have to think about it. I mean, I'm the last person on that team whose skills you'd have any use for."

"We'll think about it, then. But I do need to tell them something today. Now, the second matter, I thought I had nicely worked out, but now I'm much less sure. And that's what happens with you and Ray when the negotiations are over and the main fleet leaves. Ray thinks that you like being in London so I was going to put the base there. But if no one there is supposed to know about you two... Ray would not react well to those conditions. Is there anywhere else we could put the base? Where the two of you would just be a normal couple and where you'd be happy to live?" Bodie was shaking his head. "Then how do you feel about leaving with us?"

"I feel..." He closed his eyes and thought about it. "I feel OK about it. More than OK."

“You’d be leaving everything you know. There’ll be only a handful of people who speak your language. You might not come back for ten years or more.”

“Yeah, it’ll be an adventure. I was a paratrooper, Malun. I used to jump out of planes for a living. It takes a lot to frighten me.” Like people knowing you’re queer. From the angle of Malun’s raised eyebrow, maybe he was thinking that too, but in the end he just tilted his head and then nodded.

“In that case we’ve got thousands of options. We can find a place for you almost anywhere in the fleet, or on any base. For the bases on planets that would be suitable for you as a couple, some would be easier for you than others depending on the local language. Or you could live on our planet, Pen Embrun. That’s where I’m based when I’m not leading a contact mission, and there are any number of jobs you could do at our headquarters. Or Ray could go back to his old job. They’ve been holding it open while he’s been away on this mission.

“What is his job? He said it was languages.”

Malun shook his head. “That’s just what we had him doing on the way out. He’s a policeman. A specialist on a small team in a provincial city. He lives in a town on a small island across the water from the city.”

Not a diplomat. Not part of the space-going elite. A policeman. Ray really had got away from everything to do with his family. Everything to do with being a prince. “He’s got a sea view and a balcony.” Bodie smiled. “Yeah, he told me about his flat. I like the sound of that. I can imagine being married to a policeman.”

“Ray will be very happy with that. He’s proud of his work. And he loves his little flat and his town.”

“Yeah, I could tell he was missing it. Why’d he come along on this mission, then?”

A pained frown and a deep sigh. “His mother insisted. It was really important to her. To have him wear Udom Kol.” His face twisted suddenly, and then quietly, as if to himself: “Though after what’s happened we can’t possibly allow that again.” Well, that had to be easier. If Ray wasn’t going to get dragged off on another mission.

“Malun? Where is he? When can I get to see him?”

“He’s in his quarters. They’re close to here, too. ‘When’ will depend on... I’ll have to go and tell him what I’ve learned about human biology. He will be...” A very long pause. “Horrible. I think it may be hours or days before I can get him to listen to the other things I’ve learned. About you personally. Why I think he might actually have had very good luck. So it might be some time before he can bear to face you. Being him, he might even tough out *gimana* for a while. I don’t know. But don’t expect to see him today. We’ll have another talk this evening and I’ll tell you how he reacted.”

“OK. When are you planning on telling him?”

“Very soon. And then I will need to get back to work. You too. Unless you’ve already thought of something to tell your team.”

“Well... after we’d decided that I’m coming with you, I think I might’ve. I’ll just disappear. Make it look like I’ve stowed away. Maybe we say a crewmember saw me

sneaking down into the holds. You've done a search but there's no sign. Maybe I fell down a shaft, got trapped somewhere. I must be on board and if you find me you'll send me back. But for now you're done with looking."

Malun looked surprised. Kind of impressed. "And so the idea is that you've already done this? When you left the conference room at the start of this lunch break, that was you making your move?"

"Yeah. They'll never see me again."

"It's... beautifully simple. But reckless. You don't want any option of keeping the contacts you have here?"

"Can't think what I'd have to say to them. Look, it wouldn't be the first time I've jumped on a ship, got the hell away from home. If there's anyone on board who's likely to do it, it's me."

Now Malun was nodding, obviously decided. "Yes, now I remember Ray mentioned that. When I asked what he knew about your family. OK. We'll give them some time to notice that you're missing after lunch. And I'll tell them about the search at a suitable point this afternoon, probably after the second break. So if you won't be going back to the meeting, I think you should use the time to get yourself some more clothes. Toiletries. Books. Favourite food. Whatever you need. Of course we'll send you anything you want, as soon as you ask for it, but the journey from here to Pen Embrun takes two months, so I'd suggest packing for at least six months."

A frowning pause in which Malun was presumably weighing up some options. "I'm going to hand you over to Ray's older brother Turon. I think I should keep this strictly to the family for now. We'll have him take you down to your flat first of all, so you can collect the things you need before you're officially missing and there's a risk they'd send someone there to check. So I'll take you to your quarters now, and then I'll find Turon, brief him, and bring him to meet you. He's a kind man. And he's not qualified so he should surely be safe with you."

"And then you'll go to see Ray?"

"And then I'll go to see Ray."

Chapter 3

The quarters that Malun had assigned him to were three doors down from Malun's. The living area was a plain rectangle, with a couch, two armchairs, a low table, and nothing else. No shelves, or desk, or pictures. No dining table of any size. The kitchen was about half the size of Malun's, which made it twice the size of the one in Bodie's flat.

"I shouldn't be much more than fifteen minutes, assuming Turon is already on his way to my quarters." Malun had used the intercom on the keypad inside his quarters to put out a shipwide call for Turon.

There was a door a few feet to the left of the kitchen that had a single button next to it, the same as in Malun's quarters. The bedroom was large and bare, with a generous double bed, not made up. Another sight of the Hailin taken by surprise: Malun had been expecting him to move straight in with Ray. The bathroom was immediately to the right of the door. It was larger than the one in the other cabin, but the same design. No towels, though. No Marks and Spencer shower gel.

Bodie stood for a long time looking at himself in the mirror above the sink. Underneath his breath: "You're married now. You had one night with him. And you did something permanent to him. And now he can't leave you."

Not so different than if he'd somehow got Ray pregnant. Except that you could do something about a pregnancy, and there was clearly no way out of this for Ray.

Not for him, either. And that was good. It was an adventure. Even bigger than the one he'd been planning for himself and the Secret Service language expert. Because Ray had done something to him, too. And he wouldn't change anything about that. He took a piss, then went back to the living area to wait on the couch.

Malun took a shade more than fifteen minutes. Turon didn't look anything like Ray. He was as tall as Bodie but slender, and not in Ray's wiry, tense, energetic way, but somehow placid. Like a tree. Placid eyes, too, deep brown, in a long, thin arrow-shaped face. Jet-black hair with a shine to it, long enough that it would flop around if he shook his head. He looked like the teacher that half the younger girls had a crush on. Not because he was sexy, but because his style of handsome was so obviously safe. Nothing like Ray.

"Mister Bodie. Bodie." A genuinely friendly smile as he held out his hand. Bodie smiled back, and was surprised to feel calluses to match his own. Mostly on the fingertips. So what sort of manual labour did this alien prince do? "My name is Turon. It is good news that you will be joining us." He had a slow way of speaking, almost a drawl. "I hope we will all very soon make you feel at home."

"Thank you."

Then they were immediately out in the corridor again, heading further down, away from Malun's quarters. Malun stopped at the second door they passed.

"I'll catch up with you this evening, Bodie. I'll leave a message in your quarters when I have more idea what time it's likely to be."

"OK." Bodie wanted to wait long enough to see Malun open the door, catch just a glimpse of Ray's rooms. But Turon was already several yards away down the corridor,

clearly not even going to slow down. Bodie caught up, and didn't turn his head when he heard the sigh of the door opening.

The corridor soon came to a blind end. Turon raised his hand palm-out towards the wall to the left, then paused. "Do you have the keys to your house with you?"

"Yeah." Bodie patted the right pocket of his jacket.

"Good." Turon pressed his palm sharply against the wall around shoulder-height, and the whole section of the wall to the right swung silently inwards. Like the entrance to the stairwell, down in the storeroom. This secret door brought them out at the far corner of another storeroom, larger than the one below. Turon placed his right hand near the left edge of the door at shoulder height, tapped the fingertips of his left hand twice on a point about two feet lower, and the door swung shut and was a wall again.

Turon led them through several doors and corridors to the largest storeroom yet. The last third of the room was stacked with bundles of what looked like collapsed packing containers, in a range of sizes. Turon pulled out two bundles in a medium size and gave them to Bodie, then looked down at a shelf with some larger sizes and frowned slightly.

"Do you have many suits that you would like to bring with you?"

"Am I likely to need them? Do you have lots of ..." A shrug. "Formal dinners? Receptions? That kind of thing."

"No. Not amongst ourselves."

"I'll leave them, then. Just take this one." Glancing down at his right arm as he gave an elaborate shrug. Even if he'd never have another reason to wear the suit, it was still what he'd been wearing when he and Ray had first met.

"OK. What about books?"

Slowly: "Yeah. I've got quite a few I'd like to bring."

"Then I'll take some of the smaller size." He tucked one bundle under his right arm, took the other in his right hand, and then grabbed another medium bundle with his left hand.

The storeroom didn't have a door. Or it must do, because there was the keypad, but it was locked open. There were a fair number of crew in the corridor, and Bodie thought he recognised this part of the ship. They were near the shuttle bay. The machinery smell was a big clue.

But they didn't take the turn he expected and instead Turon led him into a room full of equipment and activity. Turon spoke to a man standing behind a counter, and there were a few exchanges of checking details on a screen. The man was busy for about half a minute behind the counter, then he came out with what looked like printed plastic cards slotted into holders. He pinned one holder onto the lapel of Bodie's jacket and the other onto the pocket of Turon's uniform. There was another brief exchange with Turon, and he handed Turon a handful of similar cards, not in holders.

"We're on Pad Number Two, Bodie. It's just over here." There was a raised platform on the far side of the room, with a line of four large metal circles on the floor, each about five feet apart. A transporter? They had a transporter? Like in *Star Trek*? They'd kept

very quiet about that. And who could blame them? “You’re on Circuit One. By the wall, there.”

He took his place on the circle, and Turon on the one next to him, and a few moments later they were in the ground floor hallway of Bodie’s building.

“I guess Ray used this last night. When he came here.”

“Yes. He returned from right here. That’s how we have the coordinates on file.”

And that’s why Bodie hadn’t seen him out on the street that morning. He must have slammed the street door for Bodie to hear, and then beamed straight up. Ray. Thinking things through.

They agreed that first Bodie would pack his clothes while Turon packed all the books. Bodie started by changing out of the suit, into a pair of cords and a shirt, and his cream jacket. He transferred everything from the pockets of the suit to the jacket, and then packed the suit.

So what did he really need? All of his underwear. Three jackets. Three turtlenecks. Three sweaters. Six pairs of trousers. Ten shirts. Six T-shirts. Four pairs of shoes, including his running shoes. His tracksuit. The shorts he wore for squash. His bathrobe. And his army fatigues and his beret, and his army boots. That should be plenty for the trip, and once he was on the planet he’d switch to their clothes.

It would be pretty obvious, with all his books gone and half his clothes, that wherever he was gone, he was planning to be gone for good. God, what was the Cow going to make of this? Would they reckon he’d had inside help, to get all those books up to the ship? Or that he’d worked out just enough about how the Hailin had set up their freight systems at Battersea heliport to fancy trusting his luck?

And there were the signs of a heavy night of sex. Between two men. Ray’s come on the door. And on yesterday’s Y-fronts in the laundry basket. And in his bed. Would they realise it wasn’t human? Why should they, when Bodie himself hadn’t suspected? He could try to clean up but... what did it matter now?

A few minutes to clear the bathroom, including a set of towels, and a few more for the army photo album and other mementos in the desk. His lead soldiers? Oh, why not? The bottles of spirits from the kitchen, and the tonic water, and the lemons from the fridge, and the glasses he’d used the night before. A jar of Nescafe. A box of tea bags. And his stock of Jaffa Cakes.

“I’m going to make myself a sandwich. D’you want one? I didn’t get lunch and I’ve just realised I’m starving.”

Turon was kneeling on the floor, dealing with the last shelf. He turned around with a broad smile. “No, thank you. I had just finished lunch when Malun called for me. He did say that my second task was to feed you.”

Bodie returned the smile, though not as broadly. “I’ll tell him we dealt with that in good time. How about a cup of tea, then?”

“Thank you, yes.”

Bodie put the kettle on and made a ham and cheese sandwich.

“How do you take your tea?”

“Just like that, thank you.”

Bodie was about to put the milk back in the fridge when he paused, shrugged, and then poured it all down the sink and rinsed out the container. He was causing enough problems for the squad; it seemed the least he could do, to make sure none of them would have to deal with his spoiled milk.

“Malun takes his tea black, too. From what I’ve seen.”

Turon nodded. “I think we like bitter tastes more than you do. We do use milk for some things, but not much. There is some of our food that you will probably not enjoy. I can teach you what to avoid. And I’ll get some changes made in the galley to give you a wider choice. Do you like to cook?”

Bodie raised his half-finished sandwich. “This is about my limit.”

“Then my wife Sasha and I will learn to cook your food. We will enjoy inviting you to dinner.”

A kind man. Malun was right. “Do you live far from Ray? Malun said he lived in a town on a small island.”

A lopsided smile. “We live very far from Parass. That is the name of his town. We are based with the fleet. At the end of this mission, when we’ve taken the masks we wear back to the palace on our planet, then we’ll go back to the fleet. We expect to be away for two or three years.”

He’d better enjoy the dinners while the mission lasted, in that case. “What masks do you wear? Am I allowed to ask that?”

“I wear Hutton Iba. You haven’t seen him. He’s not part of the contact team on this mission. Sasha wears Halabron. Who is on the team. He looks –”

“Like a rock-face.”

“That’s right.”

Sasha was easily the smallest member of the contact team. She was maybe 5’6” but she looked bird-fragile. She had a soft voice, but clear. And out of the six, she was the one who most enjoyed hand gestures: elaborate, varied, usually elegant.

“How long have you been married?”

“Five years. We first met through my twin sister Ferros about twelve years ago. And then when we were both stationed on Lunda Sul for a year, we found out how well we live together. And our jobs combine very well.”

“What do you do?”

“Um... I try to make people happier with their ship. Or their base. So they only ask for a transfer when we’re ready for them to ask for a transfer. Sasha deals with...” He frowned, and then raised his hand and drew a circle in the air with his index finger, over and over. “The systems that run in a loop and that we need for living. The air and the

water and the sewage.” He lowered his hand and shrugged. “What do you call that in English?”

“Ah.” Bodie’s turn to frown. He screwed up his face, then: “Utilities, I think.”

“Utilities. OK. Well, she looks for problems and for ways to improve them. We move around the fleet a lot. Investigating problems. Setting up projects.”

So the bird-fragile princess normally did trouble-shooting on sewage systems. This was a lot to take in.

Bodie nodded several times, then took a large bite of sandwich and a mouthful of tea. “Now I want to ask about your twin sister, but I know there’s six of you, and I’m getting to the point where I’m gonna have to write things down to keep everyone straight.” And his desk had some pads of paper and pens and pencils; he might as well take them with him.

Turon laughed. “Let’s get back to packing, then.” He finished his tea, held the mug out to Bodie, then turned back to the bookcase. Bodie washed the mugs and put them away.

“This is all for music, isn’t it? Shall we pack this next?”

Bodie shrugged and shook his head. “It’s electrical. Not gonna be able to plug it in, am I?”

“We have a team that deals with that. I think you should take it. Sasha and I like to make music. We’d be very interested to hear all of this.”

“Make music how?” Did he mean composing? Or what?

He raised his hands and made what looked like plucking movements. “I play the *orbarcho*. And Sasha plays the *cormoran*.” A brief pursing of the lips. “It’s one you blow into. Do you play anything?” Bodie shook his head. “But you’d like to have your music with you?”

“Yeah, that’d be good.”

Bodie packed the equipment while Turon packed the LPs and tapes, and when they were finished they still had more than one bundle of medium boxes left, and a couple of smaller boxes. Bodie looked around the room then shrugged. “I think that’s it. I guess I should go around and check all of the cupboards and drawers, but I think that’s it.” He worked around the flat clockwise from the desk.

There was still some ham and cheese in the fridge. And eggs and bacon. He stood looking at them for a few seconds, then turned around and said, “Malun said something about getting myself my favourite food. D’you know what he had in mind? I mean, should I be taking all of this?”

“He meant I should take you to your favourite shops. For food or books or music or anything you want. But it might be useful to have that in case you suddenly realise you’re hungry again.”

“Good point.” Turon got a small box ready, and Bodie cleared the fridge and the bread bin.

He found a pack of cards in the drawer of the dresser - always useful to have onboard ship. Nothing in the bedroom or the bathroom, but he had forgotten all about the hall

cupboard. Waterproofs. Winter coat. His bike leathers. No. He wasn't going to be needing any of that in space.

"That's everything now."

"What about the pictures?" Turon had been waiting patiently by the empty bookcase.

Bodie hadn't thought of that. His quarters were very bare.

"Could I put these up in the ship? How would that work?"

"We'd use different frames."

"Yeah, I'll take..." A slow look around. "These three, then." The photographs of mountains and moors and coast in Wales and Scotland. All nice enough to look at, but really there because they were all places where his units had done training. They were just small enough to fit in the medium boxes.

"You're not taking this one?" The dancing girls.

"Nah." No, he couldn't see Ray appreciating that.

"Then do you mind if I take it for Sasha? This woman here has exactly the looks that she finds attractive."

"Sorry. What did you say?" He could not have heard that right.

"This woman." The girl second from the right. Rosebud, to Bodie. Turon was studying her closely, and smiling. "She has very rounded lips, and a well-defined waist. And she looks as if she really enjoys the weight of her hair, and the way it moves. Sasha's always enjoyed holding and kissing women like that." He had turned to look back at Bodie, and his smile vanished immediately. "But I've shocked you. I'm sorry." A pause. "Could you tell me how I've shocked you, exactly? So I don't do it again."

Bodie opened his mouth, but did not know where to start, and after a few seconds closed it abruptly and shook his head. "Your marriages are nothing like our marriages."

"Ah. I suppose they're not. You don't want me to take the picture."

"I –" Bodie swallowed. "I'd probably be OK about that but Ray noticed it too. He made a comment about it. I just... don't know what he'd think if he saw it again."

Turon nodded. "We'll leave it, then." He closed up the container, then got the handful of printed cards out of his pocket and went around all of the containers sticking the cards to the sides.

"The freight system will pick them up. They should be brought to your quarters within an hour. I'll call to say we're ready to come back." The band on his right wrist wasn't a watch, it was some sort of intercom. Three brief exchanges, then: "They'll bring us up as soon as the circuits are free." The wait was less than a minute, and it was a woman behind the counter when they unpinning their badges, not a man. When they got out into the corridor, Bodie realised they'd arrived on a different pad.

They dropped off the unused boxes on the way back, and Turon showed Bodie the trick of opening the secret door. Apparently there were four secret entrances into "the family

quarters” and the same trick worked for all of them. There was a simpler route, too, with a public corridor, and he’d show that to Bodie the next time they went out.

There was no message from Malun that Bodie could see. “Do you think he’s finished telling Ray?” He’d hardly even been thinking about that. It had been a busy half hour.

“I don’t know. I’ll check my messages. Someone might have some news.” He pressed something on the wall to the right of the kitchen, and a small desk and a bench seat swung down out of the wall. The desk had a screen and keyboard built in, the same as Malun’s.

Turon had a message from Sasha, sent just a few minutes earlier. She was with Ray, because Malun had called her in to keep Ray company. He had to go back to the negotiations, but he thought Ray should not be alone. Sasha said Malun was right about that, but it was going to be difficult, seeing Ray and knowing there was really nothing she could do to help. Malun would catch up with Bodie that evening, as planned, and his instructions for Turon remained the same.

Bodie suspected that Sasha had gone into more detail than that about just how badly Ray was taking the news – you would, in a message to your kind husband – but he decided not to ask. He’d hear it all from Malun soon enough.

“Do we have to wait here for the stuff to be delivered? Or can we go back down and hit the shops? Most of them’ll be closing in a couple of hours.”

“We don’t have to wait. I’ll put a hold on the delivery right now.” Half a minute at the keyboard and it was done. “What do you want to get first?”

“Food.” Very definite. “Look, it’s not that you’ve put me off trying your food, sounds like it’ll be interesting. But when I think about breakfast tomorrow, I just...” He nodded towards the kitchen and sighed. “I just wanna know I’ve got something in there I understand.”

Turon smiled. “So what’s your favourite shop for food?”

Bodie took about ten seconds to think about it. “Let’s go to the Marks and Spencers on the King’s Road.” The food hall was a decent size, and it was nowhere near as busy as Oxford Street.

“I don’t think we’ve got any suitable coordinates set up for that. Which means we’ll have to go to Battersea and take one of the cars. Is it far from Battersea?”

“Not far. About a mile.”

“Good.” He stood up. “I have to change out of my uniform first. Because we’ll be out on the street. Please wait for five minutes.” He used the door to the right of the kitchen – the “public” door.

As soon as he’d gone, Bodie went over to look at the screen and the keyboard. A mass of kind-of-Arabic squiggles. Some must be numbers. If this was for the freight system, lots of them had to be numbers. But he couldn’t begin to guess. He needed to start learning their language. How much would they be able to teach him before they reached the planet?

Turon came back in jeans, a shirt, and a canvas jacket. He looked more than ever like a keen young teacher out of a film.

The public corridor took them directly to the transporter area. There were special insulated cartons for food, and they decided that one bundle each in the medium size should be enough. There was a third pad, it seemed, that was for trips that hadn't been pre-booked. But Battersea was a standard destination and easy to arrange, and the process only took a couple of minutes longer. And, of course, Turon was a prince. Not that they were falling over themselves to help him that Bodie could see, but it had to make a difference.

There was a Hailin-only area in the Battersea spaceport. Bodie hadn't even wondered about that before. It had a cashier's office, and Turon took out £1000, signing for it with his wristband. They had a fleet of black cabs on call, and within minutes they were across the river and then parked in the side-street nearest to the store.

Bodie dealt with breakfast first, getting plain croissants, almond croissants, butter, thick-cut marmalade, fresh orange juice, ground coffee, milk, and bread. No marmite in M&S, of course, but he could wait a day to get that. He checked with Turon that the kitchen could cope with all of the M&S ready-meals, and then picked out a week's worth of dinners. Biscuits. Swiss roll. Chocolate. Mints. Salt and vinegar crisps.

A thought: "You've got exercise facilities on board, right?" They did. Some more crisps. Gin. Tonic. A couple of bottles of wine. A pack of lager. Another of bitter. Oh, alright, maybe some salads. Some packs of pasta and bottles of pasta sauce. Cheese. Biscuits to go with the cheese. Grapes. Apples. Lemons for the gin and tonics. Nuts. Cheese straws. Sausage rolls. Teabags. More ground coffee.

Both of their trolleys were full. Bodie looked at them, looked back towards the entrance, wondering about getting a third one, and then shook his head. "This'll be fine. By the time I've cleared the fridge of this lot, I'll be ready for whatever you want me to try."

"We can freeze food. Some of the things here can be frozen, can't they? You could get more than this."

Bodie thought about it. "No, it's OK. If you meant it about learning to cook some things, I guess I could pick up some basics, too. And Ray cooks, doesn't he? D'you think he'd learn some?"

"He's a good cook. He likes to learn."

"Great. Then, yeah, we're done."

They put the bags in the boot of the taxi, but once they'd closed the boot, Bodie didn't go around to the passenger door like Turon, but stayed with his hand on the boot, just looking down the tree-lined street towards the river.

Turon noticed after just a few steps, and stopped and turned around. "What did you forget?"

"It's not that. I was just thinking... It's a nice day. I could really do with finding somewhere to sit outside and have a pint."

A brief glance up at the mostly-blue sky, and a nod. "But what's a pint?"

“It’s beer. It’s an amount of beer.” He quirked an eyebrow. “And we’ve got a type of beer that’s actually called ‘bitter’. You’ll love it.”

Almost a grin. “OK. That’s a good idea. We’ll ask the car to wait. Although we should pack the bags in the cartons to keep cool if we’re going to be a while.”

The cartons were on the back seat. Turon got them, they assembled and filled them on the pavement, and then put half on the back seat and half in the boot. This time when they closed the boot Bodie said, “Or we could just send him back to Battersea, ask him to offload them somewhere they’d be safe. We can walk back. Like you saw, it’s not far.”

Turon liked that idea, but he had an even better one. He used his intercom to get through to someone he knew at Battersea, and arranged for her to collect the cartons, put the homing-labels on them, and get them beamed back. He put the stack of labels on their own in a spare carton so they’d be easy to find, explained the new plan to the driver and told him the woman’s name, and a few seconds later the cab was out of sight and they had the street to themselves.

Bodie pointed in the direction of the river. “There’s a decent pub just down there.” It was across the road from the Army Museum. He’d been there a few times with mates when there’d been some event at the museum. “I’m pretty sure they’ve got seating outside. Or we can stand.”

There were two benches on the broad pavement in front of the pub. There were three Princess Di wannabes chattering away on the nearest bench but the other was free, and Bodie ordered Turon to secure it, while he went in and got the drinks.

“This here is a pint of ‘Directors Bitter’. Cheers.” Turon clearly hadn’t been briefed about the clinking of glasses thing but he seemed to like it. He also liked the beer.

They talked about plans for the next day. Bodie did want to get more books and wouldn’t say no to more music. There was a specialist Military History bookshop off Charing Cross Road, but they knew him there and he didn’t think he could take that risk. Foyles, with the Virgin Megastore around the corner, was the next obvious choice but he couldn’t face the crazy cashier system at Foyles, so the next-best looked like Piccadilly, with Hatchards for books and Tower Records just across the road. They’d aim for ten o’clock. Eleven at the latest.

Turon had an unusually large distance between the line of his eyes and his mouth, making his nose exceptionally long in that direction. Not so much to make you stare, but after a few minutes you might realise what it was about his face that gave an odd effect. “You don’t look anything like Ray.”

“No. I’m the one who looks most like our mother. And Ray’s the one who looks most like our father.”

“How many of you – of the six of you – how many are here? On the mission.”

“Four of us. The four brothers. My two sisters are at home. Ferros –”

“Your twin.”

A nod. “She’s pregnant now. Very big.” Then a pause and a smile. “Though probably she isn’t anymore and we’re uncles to twin girls.” More twins. Was it just this family, or was

every single Hailin a twin? “And my younger sister Lamon has just started her first job, so it wouldn’t be good for her to go away for half a year.”

“Half a year?” Bodie hadn’t realised it was that long.

A shrug. “Two months out. Two months back. However long the negotiations take here.”

“So who are the other two brothers?” Bodie held up his hand. “No, wait. I said I’d write all this down.” He put his pint down on the ground, got his pen and his wallet out of his jacket, and rifled through the wallet, sure he must have a receipt or some other useful-sized piece of paper. No. Just tenners. Three seconds’ pause and he took out one of those. What else was he likely to get to use it for now? “So you and Ferros are the oldest. Who comes next?”

“Ray and his twin Ward. They’re two years younger than us.”

“Yeah, Ray mentioned that he had a twin.” A brief pause. “He was quite rude about him.”

Raised eyebrows, and a dry tone. “Ray being rude about Ward. It must have been one of those days on which planets continue to orbit around their suns.”

Bodie laughed. “Is Ward really that bad?”

A shake of the head. “No, he isn’t.” Very definite. “Not at all. Or no worse than Ray, anyway. They’ve just... always fought. Always annoyed each other. And worked hard to be sure of always annoying each other. They still do, and we assume they always will. Life is easier for everyone if they’re kept apart. Personally, I think they’re far too similar in some ways and very different in others, but trying to point that out to them just makes it worse.”

“But they’re on this mission together.”

“Their masks had to come. But Malun could only put one of them on the contact team. Ward wears another mask you haven’t seen.”

“How close does Ward live to Ray?”

“The same as me. He’s based with the fleet.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a mathematician. He’s working on our communication systems at the moment. He’s definitely the cleverest out of the six of us.”

Interesting. He didn’t know what he’d say to a mathematician, but now he was curious to see this Ward for himself.

“And who’s next after him and Ray?”

“Lamon. She’s six years younger than them. It wasn’t until Ray and Ward were in school – in separate schools – that my parents could start to think that it would be good to have more children.”

“That must’ve been tough on you and Ferros. If you were only two years older than them.”

A small shrug and a shake of the head. “Ferros and I found ways to ignore it. Or calm them down. Sometimes. We were good twins.” A sigh. “They’re worth the effort. They’re interesting men. They make you see things differently. But neither can see much point in trying to make other people feel comfortable.”

“Not like you.”

Bodie was expecting him to smile but instead he looked at Bodie thoughtfully for maybe four seconds. Then, with the slightest tilt of the head: “It’s my job.”

That’s right, it was. So maybe he felt like he was never off-duty.

“What’s this new job of Lamon’s then?” He clipped the note to the pen, put them on the bench, and picked up his pint. This wasn’t too hard to keep track of so far.

“She’s a doctor for animals.”

“Oh, she’s a vet? And then there’s your youngest brother.”

“West. Yes. He’s a year younger than Lamon. He wears Laura Var.”

“Oh, OK. With all the fruit. He usually sits next to Ray.” West was short. About 5’6”, same as Sasha, but with a square, sturdy build. Again, not like Ray at all. “What sort of job does he do?”

Turon pulled a face. “Well, at the moment... Nothing very much. I’ve been worried about him.”

Bodie waited to see if he’d say anything more but he didn’t, and Bodie wasn’t sure if he should ask. Later. Maybe. “What about Iran and the woman who wears Oba Nyon, then? Where do they fit in?”

“They’re not related to us. Iran is a member of the Morven executive. Like Malun. And Sama has a senior position, too. They’re married. To each other.”

Bodie nodded. “Are there any other masks I haven’t seen?”

“Not on the ship. A few more back at the palace. Ferros and Lamon wear two of them. Other senior officers wear the rest.”

“What about your parents? I’m guessing they’re not on the ship or Malun would have called them as soon as –” Turon had flinched. Bodie paused, and saw the flinch turn into a wince. “I’ve said something wrong.”

“No. No. I was expecting we would talk about this some time today.” He swallowed. “Our father died a year and a half ago. There was an accident on one of the ships. Everyone onboard died. And without him our mother has – Malun said he explained to you about *gimana*? You know the term? What it involves?” Bodie nodded. “Our mother is in *gimana* now. She is so ill that she can’t leave her room. She’ll never see a ship again.”

“God. I’m sorry.” Turon nodded briefly then looked away, down at the pavement. Bodie thought about Ray, about what Malun had said about *gimana*. “So that’s why Malun sounded so... raw whenever he mentioned... When he was talking about what happens when a couple is separated.”

“Yes. It’s been hardest on him. If Ferros and I were good twins, they were the best. They influenced each other in everything. Taught each other everything. Together they were the most ambitious and effective young officers the business had ever seen. I saw him after he visited her just before we left on this mission.” A long, shuddering sigh. “It’s almost worse than seeing her. She manages to be brave. Sometimes. He – He can’t.”

“I am sorry. A year and a half. That’s... Might as well be yesterday.”

Turon nodded. “We’re all raw.”

They drank in silence for a while. Maybe not in comfortable silence, given the situation, but not awkward. Bodie thought of more questions he really wanted to ask, but it was past five o’clock now and the pub and pavement were starting to fill up, and the questions were going to need some proper privacy. He didn’t think he’d be making any more notes here, so he put the pen and tenner in his pocket.

After a while, though, he remembered something he’d been wondering about earlier that wouldn’t sound too odd in a Chelsea pub, and he asked Turon about learning their language. Turon said he’d be delighted to help. He was sure Sasha would, too, and West. But he did warn Bodie that it was likely to be difficult.

“We learn languages very quickly. It’s one of the things that makes the business work so well. For example, Ray and I learned English on the journey out.”

In two months? When he was maybe learning French and Japanese and Arabic and Spanish too? “That’s incredible.”

A slow nod. “It means that very few people we trade with have ever bothered to learn our language. They don’t need to. Not if they’re dealing with people who are in the business, and they always are. So there aren’t any materials available for learning our language. That would give a structure or let you do work on your own.”

“So one of you would have to be there teaching me? You’re gonna get really sick of me.” And the other way around, too. “How patient are you?”

“I think we’ll all need to be careful not to expect too much of ourselves. When we’re at the bookshop tomorrow I’ll buy some learning material on the other languages we know. To see how humans approach learning those languages, because we learn them very differently. And we’ll make materials for you based on that. West will do that, I think. He’ll be happy to have a project for the journey back.”

“Sounds good.”

“I’ll buy some books on cooking your food, too. You can show me what you like.”

Bodie grinned. “Sounds even better.”

Turon finished his pint first, while Bodie still had a couple of inches left. Bodie nodded at the empty glass. “D’you want another?”

An exaggerated frown. “I do but... I’ve been worrying about Sasha. If she needs my support with Ray. She probably doesn’t but...”

Bodie nodded. “It’s time to head back.” He drained his glass, put it down by the side of the bench and stood up, and Turon did the same.

They crossed the road, and took the street down the side of the Army Museum to the river.

“A park!” Turon was staring across the river at Battersea Park, his face lit up. “I’d heard there was one near the heliport but I didn’t know it was this big.”

The guy really liked parks. Well, you probably would, if you were out in space for two or three years at a time. “Yeah, it’s a decent size. Let’s take Chelsea Bridge, then. That way we can walk through it.” It would only add twenty minutes or so to the walk, and from the look on his face, Turon had forgotten all about his wife and how she was coping with Ray.

“Looks like you miss all this.” Maybe it would add more like forty minutes, Turon was walking so slowly, paying so much attention to everything. “I remember, from when I spent a long time at sea.”

Turon stopped, and turned his attention on Bodie for the first time in several minutes. “No, that’s not really why I’m so interested. We have a garden on the ship. On most new ships now. It’s a project of mine. Because of course I do like this.” He gestured at the trees and flowerbeds and lake with his hand. “But I also want to see how much we can make the gardens really useful to the ships. What food we can grow. Whether we can grow enough of anything to really add any... value to the ship’s meals. They probably give enough value just as a pretty space. But I want to see if they can be more. So I’m always interested in anything different. That might give me new ideas.”

A man who really liked his job. You didn’t see that too often. “You should go to Kew.”

“What’s that?”

“Kew Gardens. It’s another big park a few miles further down the river. But it’s for studying plants. They’ve got huge glasshouses full of... everything. Never been in, myself. But I’ve taken a few runs past there, along the river, and from the places where you can see in, it looks...” He shrugged. “Well, it looks like they know what they’re doing.” Mostly, it looked expensive, but that was the last thing Turon would care about.

“I’d love to see that.” Such a gleam in his eye. It took him a good way closer to looking actually sexy. “There has to be some way I can arrange the time.” They could tell Malun it was Bodie’s favourite place, he needed one last visit. But Bodie didn’t think he could cope with tagging along with Turon for hours of staring at plants. And it would be hours.

They started walking again. Still slowly, but with Turon now giving time to his other job: keeping Bodie company.

There were quite a few people around, but it was easy enough to find a route that kept anyone out of earshot. Bodie could ask some of those questions now.

“I’m probably not supposed to ask this but... Are you royalty? I mean, is Malun your king? Are you and Ray princes?”

Turon was surprised enough that he jerked his head back slightly. Not offended, though. After a few seconds, with a hint of a frown: “That’s a very good question. For Ray and me, I’d say yes, we are. We’re Bakkels. That is, we’re members of the Bakkel family. We’re the family that wears the masks. For thousands of years we were the only people who wore the masks. We were definitely royalty of the kind that you have here.”

“Then can I go one further and ask about the masks? About... who they are? Or what? Our experts were all agreed that Inoni Sarai must be your sun god. Some reckoned Laura Var might be your harvest god, but no one had a clue about any of the others. Did they have any of it right? Are some of them gods?”

Turon was nodding. “Your experts did have it right. Inoni Sarai and Laura Var are our gods of the sun and the harvest. The others are all gods too, but they have stories that are very specific to us as a people; no one ever gets close to guessing them. When we’re talking about the whole group of the masks, we call them the ‘Mabein’. They’re very important to us. Not just to the Bakkel family, to all of us. They make us feel safe when we’re...” He raised a hand towards the sky, fingers splayed. “Very far from home. Most people feel a connection to them. Like family. Good connections to some. Weak or bad to others.” A small shrug. “Like family.”

Bodie grunted in acknowledgement then raised an eyebrow. “But it sounds like Malun isn’t the king?”

“He’s not a Bakkel. It was our father who was the Bakkel. Malun and our mother are from the Vasmar family, and the Vasmars don’t have any history at all. Malun wears Inoni Sarai because he runs the business. Which does give him a level of power that I think would impress any king, but what’s most important is that it’s entirely convenient for him to spend his entire life in space. And it’s a very unusual and determined Bakkel who does not join the business.”

“Like Ray?” Turon nodded and smiled, and Bodie smiled back. “But – I don’t get the connection. The business and the masks and... you lot.”

“It started when we first began long-range space exploration about three hundred years ago. Many aspects of it were terrifying. We needed the Mabein with us, to keep us safe. It’s all a lot easier now but we still won’t do a first contact without them.”

And it means you get to freak the other side out with your masks. And with your royal family stuff, too. But Bodie had a feeling Turon wouldn’t be able to see it like that. “That’s asking a lot of your royal family. Makes a change from garden parties.”

“Yes. Even without the risks, it meant we were all away from home for years at a time. It was impossible to keep anything going back home. So we got more and more involved in the business. And if there aren’t enough of us to wear all of the masks – and we have not been breeding well recently – then we use suitable people in the business.”

Bodie could see why Ray had taken against the idea of his family. Against the expectations. Why he’d run away to become a policeman. He hoped for their sakes that the rest of the Bakkels loved their jobs in space as much as Turon loved his.

“What about having a private life? When you’re a prince. Are there gossip magazines all about you? Like about who’s wearing what mask? Where you’ve been on holiday?”

Finally, Turon did look offended. “No one would do that. The Mabein are gods. They talk to the universe. We are irrelevant. To assign any degree of importance to us would lessen them.”

“So no one knows you wear Hutton Iba?” He hoped to God he had the name right.

A head-tilt and shrug of concession, and Turon relaxed considerably. “I’m a Bakkel, everyone knows I wear someone. And sometimes a person will see or hear something that makes it obvious that it’s Hutton Iba. But they would never say anything about that to me. Or to anyone they know.”

“OK. Then what about attention just for being a Bakkel? I got the impression from Ray that you’re pretty damned rich. In your own right. And powerful.”

A slow nod. “We are. And at times in the past – long in the past – we did get a difficult amount of attention. We couldn’t have taken on normal work, even if we’d tried to. But now... I don’t think any of us really notice it.” A sudden smile. “Although I’m sure that after someone’s met one of us for the first time they will call around to tell all their friends. We do have a certain exotic value. But as far as I can tell, we get treated like everyone else. Ray wouldn’t say that, though. He calls himself Ray Vasmar. Vasmar’s a common enough name that no one would even bother to ask you if you’re related to the famous Malun.”

“And he didn’t wear a mask before this trip. Is that right?”

“That’s right. Before the accident our mother used to wear Udom Kol. And she insisted that it should go to him. And...” Shaking his head, over and over. “He didn’t try to argue. He couldn’t. No one could.”

So that was the full story behind Ray being on the mission, and Malun seeing that he needed time away from the mask. No wonder, really, that Malun had thrown up. They were silent for the rest of the walk through the park.

Once they were out of the park they headed towards the river. Turon was fascinated by the houseboats on the other side and had many questions, none of which Bodie could really answer.

The road they were on took a bend to the left and they finally had a direct view of the spaceport, although it was still a quarter of a mile away. Should give them time for his next big question.

“Turon. The thing you said about your family not breeding well recently... I’d been wondering... About the being qualified and the pair-bonding and whereabouts the six of you stand in all that. Malun said only about a third of you qualify. And he made it sound as if it’s to do with whether or not you’re interested in sex. And he never was. But I don’t... What’s it actually about?”

“It’s our second stage of sexual maturity. The first occurs when we’re about fourteen, when we become capable of having sex. And then if we have enough sex with enough different people in the next ten years, we go on to become qualified. Or a third of us do, as Malun said. We think of it as a test of genetic fitness. So that only those who have proved themselves consistently attractive can go on to breed. There are bio-chemical changes, and some external ones as well. If you haven’t qualified by the time you’re twenty-five then you’ve missed the deadline. You’ll never qualify, no matter what you do afterwards.”

“OK. I see what he was saying, now. And you’re not qualified?”

“No. I’m slightly more interested in sex than Malun, but only slightly.”

“So your marriage to Sasha is the second type of marriage? Not like the one I’ve got with Ray.”

A twitch and a few blinks, then: “Yes. A *tolmin* marriage, we call it.” He looked at Bodie with a slight frown for several seconds, then said, “I’m guessing you’re wondering if we have sex.” Yeah, good guess. “We do. Sasha’s always been more attracted to women. To Ferros, for example, when we were in college. But sometimes she’s in the mood for me, and I’m in the mood for her. Or sometimes she meets a woman who’s in the mood for both of us. That’s what’s been working best, recently.” A sudden grin. “You’re coping with this a lot better than you did a few hours ago.”

Bodie shrugged and raised an eyebrow. “Guess I’m adaptable. And I’ve had a beer with you. Makes a big difference.” A quick grin in return, then: “And Ferros is obviously pair-bonded because she’s got the baby girls. What about Ward?”

An emphatic shake of the head. “He’s even more baffled by sex than Malun. It’s the biggest difference between him and Ray. From how I remember that period of Ray’s life... he must have passed the test within the first few months. But we knew even before he started that he was never going to breed.”

“And Lamon?”

“She’s only twenty-two, she’s got a few years to go before she might qualify. But I think she won’t.”

“So that leaves West.”

A long sigh. “Yes. West. Two years ago we were confident about West. Many women find him very attractive. Qualified ones, in particular. And he was having sex with a very healthy variety of them. He told me once that he was having fantasies about the time when he’d be able to get that one qualified woman pregnant. West said he was hoping for at least four children. He’s always enjoyed spending time with Sasha’s nieces and nephews. And Homa’s too. I haven’t mentioned Homa, have I? He’s Ferros’s husband.”

“But now you’re worried about West.”

Several nods, and another sigh. “Yes. It was what happened with our father. It changed everything for West. He’d started the five years of training in the ship-building yards. Was in his second year and enjoying it. And the accident... I don’t think I explained before. The anti-gravity system failed. It’s a quick but horrible death. And after that West decided that he couldn’t bear to take responsibility for building any part of any ship. So he left the training. Malun found him something at the main base at home. It’s not work that anyone could find satisfying, but it keeps him busy enough that he doesn’t have too much time to think.

“And then seeing our mother in *gimana*... It’s left him terrified of pair-bonding. Of being left like that. Or leaving his wife like that. So no more sex. He’s decided that he mustn’t qualify.” A near-violent shake of the head. “He wouldn’t be the first to decide that. I’ve known at least ten people who were interested in sex but who did not want to risk ending up pair-bonded, and who took measures to make sure they didn’t qualify. But a boy who was fantasising at eighteen about the woman he was going to get pregnant is not one of those people!”

“Can see why you’re worried about him. Poor little sod.”

Turon stopped walking, groaned briefly, and then lifted his hands to his face and dragged them down it. “Yes. He needs a hug. But he needs it from our mother the way she used to be. So...” He started walking again. “I don’t know what to do.”

After about a minute Bodie said slowly, “From what you’ve been saying, it sounds like it’s quite unusual for someone to be left in *gimana*.”

“To be left permanently in *gimana* like our mother, yes, fortunately, it is. For most families, I suppose it happens maybe once in every three generations. Couples do sometimes separate and spend a few days in *gimana* in the course of a fight; I’ve never heard of a couple that needed more than a few days in *gimana* to rethink their priorities.”

“So if the permanent type’s unusual, does that mean that pair-bonded couples die of old age together? Is that something else the bio-chemistry does? Otherwise it would always happen when one dies first.”

“No, the bonding breaks up in old age. It starts to weaken from about sixty-five, and is gone completely within about five years. Our mother is sixty-two.”

“Oh. Malun told me the addiction was permanent. But I can see why he said that at the time. It’s still most of Ray’s life.”

Quietly: “Most of your life, too.”

Bodie shrugged. “But we both know that. So what’re we going to do except find a way to make it work?”

Turon stopped walking again, stared hard at Bodie, and then suddenly clamped his right hand tight on Bodie’s upper arm. “How are you so calm about this? You’ve known him for two days! There’s nothing in your biology or culture that would give you any terms to understand what’s happening. But you just shrug about giving up everything you know. How are you doing this? No sex has ever been that good!”

Bodie laughed hard, saw Turon frown then seem to relax, somehow reassured, though he kept his hold on Bodie’s arm. Bodie reached out his free arm to give Turon a couple of friendly pats on the shoulder, then said, “No offence to Sasha and her girlfriends, but with him, it was more than good enough. And also, like you said, he’s an interesting man. If this is what’s involved in carrying on what we started then... Well, I’m just gonna have to shrug again.” He did, and Turon laughed with him and let go of his arm. “Yeah, I can imagine today could have gone in a way that’d have me... I dunno... shaking with panic. But...” A sigh. “You are fucking good at your job, man. How you’ve handled this afternoon. And Malun, too. I know Ray’s gonna be hard work. I believe what Malun said about that. But I can see that the rest of you aren’t. I like what I’ve seen of you all so far. I’ve got everything I need to make it work.”

Turon was smiling broadly. “You’re right. You have.” He touched Bodie’s arm again, but briefly and lightly, to urge Bodie to resume the walk to the spaceport. “I have to admit I was expecting this afternoon to be very hard work indeed. But that was because of my experience of the type of man that Ray has generally liked to have sex with. Malun had

told me that you were not one of Ray's idiots, but I thought I knew Ray better and that Malun was seeing what he wanted to see." They were grinning at one another.

"I do have my moments of being an idiot. Especially according to my boss." Who would be deep by now in the diplomatic scandal of 3.7 turned stowaway.

"Ah, we all do. Even Malun. Even Inoni Sarai. Bodie, you're going to be very good for him."

Chapter 4

It was nearly six o'clock ship's time when they found themselves back on Pad Three. Turon headed for the public corridor but Bodie pointed towards the storeroom with the cartons and reminded him of the stowaway story. "I guess there's some chance a human could find his way to the public corridor and see me." Turon agreed he was right.

There was a note from Malun on the coffee table. His handwriting was very neat and regular, almost like a printed page. Bodie should come to his quarters at 8.30 ship's time. Bodie was now officially missing, and should indeed stay out of the public corridors.

Turon had gone straight to the desk and taken the hold off the deliveries. There was no new message from Sasha, but Malun wanted to catch up with him, any time before 8.15.

"He wants to know what we talked about. What he doesn't need to tell you."

According to the message, Malun should be in his quarters at that moment, in a meeting with Iran, but Turon was free to interrupt at any time before six. After seven he would be at the evening's reception, and Turon could also interrupt any conversation that he found him in there. Turon wanted to know if it was OK for him to go to Ray's quarters to help Sasha, and he went straight away to interrupt the meeting with Iran.

He was back in five minutes. Malun thought it was a good idea for him to see Ray, but he'd help Bodie set up his cabin first, so Bodie wouldn't be left staring at bare walls. There hadn't been time to give Malun a full report on the afternoon, so they'd meet again immediately after the reception.

It turned out there were things hidden behind the walls, starting with a large screen opposite the couch. There were controls for the screen built into the coffee table, and Turon quickly showed Bodie how to get UK TV. There was also American and Australian and French, but Bodie was happy to start with his usual four channels. There were shelves on either side of the screen, and a dining table with bench seating for four unfolded from the wall by the secret corridor.

In the bedroom, that wall held the wardrobe, and a space with several drawers and shelves. There were drawers under the bed, too. Turon thought the drawers might hold bedding but they didn't, so he made a call to ask someone to bring a set within the next half hour.

In the kitchen, he showed Bodie the cutlery, crockery and fridge, and how to get boiling-hot water. Bodie was fine with another sandwich and snacks for now; he could wait for a translation of the controls on the oven.

Turon said he'd wait until the first delivery arrived, to show Bodie how one could deal with them without speaking a word of the Hailin language. They sat on the couch and watched *Brookside* with the sound turned low.

Turon seemed distracted, and after a few minutes Bodie said, "You nervous about seeing what state Ray's in? I guess Malun told you something about how bad he was?"

"Nothing I hadn't guessed. He's in the state I would be in." A sigh. "Which is enough to make me nervous, but Malun asked me not to tell you anything about..."

"The cultural stuff. The stuff that means it'll be days before he can face seeing me."

Turon nodded, and they watched the rest of the program in silence. The first delivery arrived about five minutes into *Bergerac*. Turon pressed the button to open the public door, gestured at the two crewmen to unload the six cartons from their trolleys in the space behind the couch, and then smiled and nodded as they left.

“Yeah, I can handle that. So you’ll come and collect me at 7.30 tomorrow morning?” Yes, that was still the plan. Turon left by the door to the secret corridor.

The six cartons were all from M&S. Bodie stowed it all in the fridge and random cupboards, leaving tea and milk out as he found them. No sugar, but he could do without, once in a while. He took his tea to the couch but the next six cartons arrived almost immediately, and after that they arrived more quickly than he could unpack them.

It felt good to have his books on the shelves. And his lead soldiers lined up in front of the books on a middle shelf. He put the hi-fi and music on the bottom shelves on the other side of the TV, and adjusted the spacing between the higher shelves until it was tall enough to let him prop up the pictures and see them from the couch.

Hanging up his clothes made him think of their cabin. When would he get to see Ray again? Assume he’d thrown up, too, when Malun had told him. But Turon was there now, and he had to be saying things that would help. Bodie didn’t know enough. He should stop trying to guess.

He stacked the collapsed cartons in the corner of the room near the dining table, got a book, a sandwich, two Jaffa Cakes and a fresh mug of tea, turned off the TV, and stretched out of the couch to read until 8.30. Settling in to wait: maybe the most important military discipline a man could learn.

* * * * *

“Would you like a scotch or a beer? Or something else?”

Bodie opted for the beer, which turned out to be lager. Malun poured himself a small scotch, and then led Bodie to a group of couches and armchairs around a low table. There was an inch-thick file on the table, in a familiar style of cream-coloured folder. Bodie sat in the armchair nearest the file, and leaned forward until he could see for certain that it was his own CI5 file.

“Did my boss give you that? Major Cowley.”

“He did.” A pause. “I hadn’t realised, when we agreed on this stowaway plan, just how alarming an individual I was going to have hiding out among my cargo.” Bodie couldn’t tell at all how serious Malun was.

“Well... What in particular?”

“You’ve been trained to be dropped deep into enemy territory. To live off the land for weeks. You have an appetite for violence that is... of a level to which I am not at all accustomed.”

“Yeah. OK. But I’m not a nutter about it! And you’re not the enemy.”

Finally, a smile. “That’s more-or-less what your Major Cowley said about your appetite for violence. That you fully understood the need to channel it.”

“What else did he say?”

“That you could be impulsive. Usually in predictable circumstances and to a predictable extent, but of all his men you were the only one he could imagine doing this. He guessed you were bored. Or in some kind of trouble.”

Bodie nodded. “I like the Cow. I wish I could have done this without dumping him in the shit with the Ministry.”

“He was not having a good day. But he seemed more worried about you than anything else, especially when I met with him alone to ask what sort of man you were. He’d agreed with your Mrs. Thatcher when she authorised us to kill you on sight if you appeared to pose any kind of threat.” No surprise there. “But he did assure me privately that you would be dangerous only if threatened yourself. He said you were refreshingly straightforward. That you would not engage in any kind of sinister games against the ship or crew. I suspect he himself is not so straightforward, but the affection in his voice was striking given the circumstances.”

Bodie grinned briefly. “With him, ‘straightforward’ usually means ‘stupid.’”

“Yes, I use that code myself. So I asked him about that. He said that despite the documented evidence of your capacity...” A tilt of the head towards the file. “You could be highly selective about where and when you applied it.”

Bodie laughed. “I think plain ‘stupid’ sounds better than that. Which of my bad points didn’t you talk about?”

A slight smile and shake of the head. “I didn’t ask much else. Most of the questions I wanted to ask would have made it too obvious that I had in fact met you. They were not the questions one would ask about a potentially violent stowaway.”

“So how did... How did it all go? Like we’d planned?”

Slowly: “Not entirely. Your delegation came to us, and told us you were missing. They’d found out what they could first. That you hadn’t taken the shuttle down, that your car was still at Battersea. That your flat had been emptied. Major Cowley was already at Battersea with your file when they approached our liaison officer, and Mrs. Thatcher was being briefed. So I had to let them see us organising a search, and then wait a credible time before reporting that you’d been seen heading down to the holds, and before calling off the search. Your Prime Minister’s rage at you was so obvious and sincere, I could assure everyone that I did believe that you were acting entirely alone – without the knowledge of the delegation – and not look like a trusting fool.”

“She’d be first in line to kill me on sight.”

“She’d do it with her bare hands. Or a glance.” His tone shifted, became lighter. “I was impressed with the way they handled it. Taking the initiative over something so embarrassing.”

Bodie shrugged. “Better than being caught trying to cover it up.”

Malun didn’t look convinced. “There are bad risks, both ways. It made things easier for me, that they did handle it so well, because it will make it look less peculiar when I

make the announcement tomorrow evening that I've decided to put the base in Britain – despite what you've done.”

“You're gonna put it in London? I don't- Why? If Ray and I aren't staying. You could put it somewhere decent.”

Malun stared at him, then laughed. “You definitely joined the Army in order to get to fight. Patriotism was obviously not a factor. What's not decent, then, in your opinion?”

Bodie shrugged. “We're an embarrassment, we're finished. No one's got any real pride in anything. Any self-respect. I guess Thatcher might turn things around but... Jesus! It's a place where no one did a fucking day's work for the whole of the 1970s. Like I said, an embarrassment. You wanna be in Japan or Germany.”

“Ah. I can see that it would have been discouraging for you, the last few years. But from my point of view, the 1970s demonstrated the country's fundamental political stability. There were stresses, but nothing truly essential broke. No, you don't have your empire any more, but you're still large, and varied, and well-connected, and rich. Enough that you're going to continue to do interesting things.”

“Well, if you're looking for large and rich, what about the States? Everyone's been assuming that's where you'll go for.”

A definite shake of the head. “We don't like continents. Ideally, we want an island state that's large enough to support a truly diverse economy, and a temperate maritime climate. Britain was always very high on our list. It might not be perfect, but it will be quite good enough.”

“It sounds like most of the delegations here have been wasting their time.” As a fellow human, Bodie felt bad for them. Even for the Americans, who'd also been assuming the base was theirs. “If they're on a continent. Or've got the wrong climate.”

“Well... many are at a severe disadvantage, certainly. But sometimes the island states have even worse disadvantages. It's worth listening to everyone.”

Bodie frowned, and took a few slow mouthfuls of lager. “I'm wondering... How much of choosing Britain is about me?”

Another hard stare. “Almost everything. When I was assuming that you and Ray would be staying here I started doing proper planning for our move to your abandoned docklands area, and I realised how much I liked the idea. I had no regrets at all about the choice being narrowed to Britain. We're making the decision early, and that's also because of you. Because I want the other humans off this ship so you'll have more freedom of movement. And I need the negotiations over so we can all deal properly with Ray. With both Udom Kol and Halabron removed from the team today, I think it seems reasonable for me to make tomorrow the last day. I made the announcement at the start of the reception. Every delegation has an hour assigned to them tomorrow to make a final presentation of their proposal to me, Iran and the leaders of the team that will establish the base, and then I'll give my decision at 6.30. I've given Britain the first hour, while you and Turon will be down getting books, so your delegation will be off the ship when you get back, and for most of the rest of the day.”

“Why don’t you just tell them all now? If nothing anyone says tomorrow is going to make any difference?”

“Because there needs to be a sense of occasion. Whatever I decide, it’s going to disappoint and anger the other delegations. But giving them a day’s warning of the early decision, and having them all make their presentations on the same terms... It helps them save face in front of their own people. Which is frequently the most important thing.”

“Do Iran and the base people know it’s going to be London?”

“Yes. We had that meeting a couple of hours ago. They’re planning now for how they’re going to handle each delegation in a way that takes them seriously.”

Bodie nodded slowly. “What did you say? When you made the announcement at the reception. About why you were deciding early?”

“I said we had a family emergency. That we had to get home earlier than we’d planned. We’ll probably leave on Sunday.”

Four more full days on Earth. The Wednesday to the Saturday. So what did he want to do with his last four days on Earth? Apart from go to Piccadilly and buy a ton of books? Bodie swallowed. “And what about Iran and the base people? Do they know... what’s going on with this family emergency? That I’m the dangerous human you had Iran warn everyone about. That it’s Ray who’s... in trouble?”

A sigh. “Partly. I told them that humans are not a pair-bonding species but somehow have the capacity to put one of us into *russma*. And I told them that the person this had happened to was one of my nephews. Ray is the only one of the four it could be, but we respect one another’s privacy over... difficulties with pair-bonding. Edru Darat – who will be leading the base – asked me at the end of the meeting how far along my nephew was in the *russma*. And I said that he was very far along, and I didn’t know what was going to happen, and that the human concerned would be coming with us because that seemed best.”

No wonder Malun had recognised that Cowley was a devious bastard. He did the same thing himself. Maybe all the time. So what had he been lying to Bodie about?

“‘Very far along.’ I guess that’s one way to put it.”

Malun shrugged, looking serious but not repentant. “For now, it seems best.”

“Is Ray really gonna take up that much of your time? That you have to drop everything else?”

“Not of my time, no. Not continuously. But Turon and Sasha and West, yes.”

“What about Ward?”

A sigh. “That’s my next meeting for this evening: telling Ward. Seeing just how hard he laughs.” Bodie winced, and Malun nodded, in either agreement or confirmation or both. “How ruthlessly he plans to take advantage of the situation. I’ll be keeping him even further away from Ray than usual, obviously.”

“And from me?”

A slow shake of the head. "I don't know. Turon wants to introduce the two of you. In a few days' time. With Sasha and West over drinks. Without me. It's probably a good idea. As Turon told you, he is worth meeting."

Bodie looked away to take a long swallow of beer, then said, "Lot of meetings for you today." His whole life was meetings, of course. Just look at these quarters. From his resigned expression, Malun knew exactly where Bodie was going with such an obvious remark. But he didn't come back with any comment or even a nod. Seemed to be waiting for Bodie to say it. "You were gonna tell me about the one you had with Ray."

"Yes." He looked at his glass on the arm of the couch, and flexed his fingers back and forth around it. "His immediate reaction was... a sort of convulsion. As if he was trying to tear himself free of his own body. I got the quilt from his bed and managed to pin him down before he hurt himself badly. And after he was past that I spent a long time holding him and crying with him. I told him immediately that you were coming with us, that you had accepted the situation with no hesitation or reservations. He thanks you. He will do everything he can to make your life with us easy and... satisfying. But please be patient with him while he deals with..." A very long pause. "The shock."

Bodie waited for him to continue, but that seemed to be it. A policeman and an admiral. And the thought of him had them clinging to each other and weeping. And one of them liked him, and the other, just that morning, had been happily in love with him.

"Did he really say that? Thanking me. Or is that you being a diplomat?"

"He said it."

"But –" A shaking sigh. "Does he hate me now? If he's wishing that hard that he'd never touched me? That's what you're saying, isn't it? With the convulsions."

"No, he doesn't hate you. He feels very strongly about the pleasures of your company. His problems are with his view of himself. Because of some very deep-rooted ideas we have about our biology. And because of the place that these ideas have had in our history."

"Right. The things in your culture that you needed to explain to me."

"Yes." A sigh. "I've been wondering all day about the best way to explain this and I think there are three main things. First, and most difficult to say... I told you that we associate your biology entirely with animals. Well, he thinks you are an animal. Which means that everything that happened between you was bestiality."

"Holy shit! So the convulsions, that was – Holy shit!"

Malun swallowed hard and then nodded. "And the problem isn't so much that he wishes he hadn't done it, but that he's longing to do it again. With every cell of his body. Even though he now knows exactly what kind of sex it would be. And he's not ready to accept that about himself."

Bodie sucked his lips in between his teeth, tightened his jaw, dragged his lips back past the hard edges. And again. Needing the distraction. Trying not to imagine the details of Ray's thoughts. After about ten seconds, abruptly: "Do you think it's bestiality?"

A very slow breath in and out. “I can see his point. It’s nothing to do with your levels of intelligence. Your biology really is primitive. To us. Scarcely any different from mindless rutting. To experience deeply satisfying sex with such a biology would be disturbing. When part of you feels that you should be referring to your love as ‘it’.”

“It?” Through gritted teeth.

“I’m telling you what Ray said. And I told him that no one is going to let him use that term. Not me, not Turon. Nobody.”

So. No sex, then, until he’d somehow managed to convince Ray that he was... well, at least as good a husband as one of their own.

“Is this the first thing out of the three?” Malun nodded. “What’s the second?”

“The second thing relates to our ideas about religion. Our gods, and the masks. I know that Turon didn’t tell you that Udom Kol is one of our gods of marriage. More exactly, he’s one of the gods of a properly conducted, disciplined courtship that protects the couple and their families from the consequences of an unsuitable combination. In our mythology he was the last child in a family of gods. The other children had shown no restraint at all in their attractions and had ended up in disastrous pair-bondings. To rocks, snails, bolts of lightning. And he was the last chance or the family would die out. He’d started the process of *russma* several times, but he’d used techniques to slow it down. Such as spending time apart, and being chaperoned whenever they were together so that they wouldn’t give in to the attraction and have sex. The chaperones are probably the most important technique, because having sex during *russma* seals the pair-bonding almost immediately. Overnight, for example, with you and Ray. With Udom Kol, keeping the process slow, tensions did emerge each time and the *russma* went into reverse.

“Our other god of marriage is Embrun. Her mask is in the palace back home. Her story is that she was an immortal with no genitalia, no digestive system. Not engaged at all in the processes of life. And the two of them met, and the *russma* started, which for her also meant changing into a mortal woman. Udom Kol used all of his techniques of self-discipline and it made no difference because they were entirely suited to one another. They had six pairs of twins and died within hours of one another, and we Hailin are their descendants.”

“Embrun. That’s in the name of your language, isn’t it?”

“And our planet. His family made the planet and gave it to her out of gratitude. We know about evolution and solar-system formation. Obviously. But we also believe completely in the moment when Udom Kol fell out of the sky into the pool in which Embrun was bathing. His mask, with the drops of liquid, catches him in that moment. We feel we were there.”

“So... I’m guessing Udom Kol would not have got me down to that cabin and fucked my brains out. And found himself married to me less than a day later.”

Crisply: “We think he would not.” A brief sigh. “If Ward does laugh, it will be over this. In the scale of national embarrassments, I think this easily beats your stowing away.” But then Malun got that raw look again. “And there’s another factor, which might be enough to stop Ward laughing. You see, Ray’s mother used to wear Udom Kol. His

father wore Embrun. And when Raina insisted that Ray wear Udom Kol and come on this mission, it was because she was worried – we were all worried – that he wasn't taking the prospect of pair-bonding sufficiently seriously. That he'd end up with whichever of his idiots got qualified first. She wanted him to think properly about what he was doing."

"God, that's a mess. How the fuck are you gonna tell her what's happened with Ray?"

"I don't know. I'm going to need every minute of the journey home to work that out."

Bodie wanted to apologise. Offer some sort of sympathy, anyway. After a few minutes' hesitation, he leaned forward and rested his hand on Malun's forearm. "You look like you could do with another inch of scotch. Tell me where to find the bottle, and I'll bring it over."

Slight surprise, then a small smile, and Malun briefly laid his hand over Bodie's and shook his head. "Thank you. But I've still got too many meetings today."

"Is that the whole of the second thing?"

"It is. Now, the third thing involves some complications in our biology. And some hideous aspects of our history." Bodie's eyebrows twitched. What the hell was coming next? Another ten hoops the Hailin had to jump through before they could get one of their women pregnant? "I told you earlier that we rely completely on both parties in a pair-bonding being addicted to one another." Bodie nodded. "I might have given you the impression that you and Ray are the first ever case of a one-sided bond, but that's far from true. We have a long and grim history with people who initially appear to be bonded normally, but then after a time stop producing the *mana* and stop needing it. It's rare, but not so rare that we've ever been able to forget about it."

"Do they go into reverse, or something? If the marriage really isn't working out for them?"

Malun shook his head. "No, it's a genetic defect. Or rather it can be any one of a number of different defects. It's completely outside their control. But for most of our history we didn't know that, and we..." He averted his eyes, swallowed hard, and then ran his free hand slowly down his throat to past his collar-bone. And again. A strange gesture. Then a shaking sigh and he was forcing himself to meet Bodie's eyes. "We took terrible revenge on them. We stoned them to death."

Bodie nodded. "We've done our share of stonings. Or burnings. For things no one cares about now."

"Ah. Bodie. Unfortunately we do still care about this very deeply. A person with that type of defect is called a '*glarus*', and that's one of the most loaded terms in our language. It's far worse than 'rapist' or 'murderer'. Finding out that the person you are married to is a *glarus* is the worst thing we can imagine. If we hear of a case of murder and suicide involving a pair-bonded couple, we immediately wonder if the murdered one was *glarus*. Of course, there are a thousand other possible reasons, all much more common, but that is always the first reason that any of us will think of."

“Are you –” Bodie was blinking hard. “Are you – Are you trying to warn me that Ray might try to kill me? You say he doesn’t hate me, but... he might try to kill me?” Not just that, but kill himself, too. “Because I count as one of your poor sodding *glarus* people?”

Malun shook his head hard, so hard it was like he was trying to convince himself, and then he drained his glass with an abrupt tip backwards. “If you were a normal *glarus* I might be genuinely concerned. But you’re not. You’re not addicted to him, but you do – apparently spontaneously – produce the *mana* that he needs. He has the shame of being married to a *glarus*, the fear that you could leave him, but he is very thoroughly aware that he needs you alive.”

“But – What if I stop? Producing it. You’ve got no idea why I produce it, have you? For all we know, I could stop any day.”

“Then I’ll get you to safety. We’ll have something arranged before the first time I leave you alone with him. We can set up an emergency signal for the transporter. If it happens he will not be subtle. And you have the skills to hold him off for long enough to give the signal.”

Bodie closed his eyes, and let his head fall forward in something like despair. Certainly exhaustion. It was gone eleven in London now. He was supposed to be on his way home, if the day’s briefing hadn’t over-run. On his way home to get into his army fatigues. Because he’d promised Ray that he’d be wearing them when he opened the door.

A long, slow breath, and then he raised his head and looked at Malun. Something in Malun’s eyes, his mouth reminded Bodie of Turon. Turon not knowing what to do about West. Not the full raw look, but otherwise probably as helpless as anyone had ever seen him. “Y’know, I’m not seeing anything wrong right now with being an animal. Dunno what you lot think you’ve got to be so proud of. Simple and fucking primitive. You could do with some of that.”

“We probably could.” Slowly, as if he was really thinking about it. Of course he wasn’t, he couldn’t, but it was a good effort.

Bodie put his unfinished beer down on the table, then sat back heavily. “So that was the third thing. I’m a *glarus* and sometimes our husbands kill us.”

“No, I – I put that badly. That wasn’t meant to be the main point. You do need to understand the... the depths of our fear. The centuries of horror stories. That we all know. But for you and Ray now, the main point is... the shame. Because we all feel, also, that one of the terrible things about finding that you married a *glarus* is the shame. Knowing just how badly your body had been fooled. The idea of having to admit to people the reason you’re in *gimana*...” He shuddered. “I suppose it’s like the way you feel about your people knowing you’re queer.”

“And I fooled his body. My body did.”

“Yes. That’s the reason I did not tell Edru the whole truth. Why I’m letting people outside the family think that it is not yet fixed. It’s to save face. To make things easier for both of you. But when he gets home, with you, he will have to decide what to tell his colleagues, what to tell his friends. And that’s going to be a very difficult time. We will have to make public what we’ve learned about human biology. It will be there for any

friend or colleague who thinks to look. We'll arrange support for you for that period. Extra support."

"Fuck. This is a spectacular mess."

To his surprise, Malun laughed. "Yes, that's one way of putting it. Bodie, he does want you to be happy with us, and for your sake quite as much as his own. He wants to be every bit as practical and straightforward as you in finding a way to make this work. His thanks were very real. But you can see that he's going to have some bad days, when he can't cope with himself, let alone you."

"Yeah." Bodie gave a noisy sigh then made to stand up. "I'm gonna need a while to think this through. It's been a hell of a day."

Malun raised a hand to stop him. "Can I give you one last thing to think through? I can see you're very tired, but this won't take long and shouldn't wait." Bodie nodded. "I think it would be a good idea if I adopted you as my son." Bodie had no idea how to react, just frowned and tilted his head slightly. Malun didn't seem to have been expecting anything else; there was no sign he was disappointed or offended, anyway. "I want to give you a further claim on us, in addition to being married to Ray. Do you think you'd be interested in being Bodie Vasmar? Or William Bodie Vasmar. Or whatever you preferred. You don't have to answer now. At first, I was just thinking that the bureaucracy of registering you as a citizen would be simplified if you were already a full member of a Hailin family – if you were already Bodie Vasmar – but then I realised how much it would be the right thing to do."

Slowly, still frowning: "Bodie Vasmar. Yeah. Y'know..." A very long pause. "I would be interested. Thank you."

He didn't want to be thinking about the money, about how rich he might be. He'd turn all that down, like Ray. He was thinking of Malun and the Old Man talking about him a few hours ago (maybe in here?), and Malun hearing the affection in the other man's voice. Malun would be a good man to have as a father. Like Cowley had been a good man to have as a boss. Even if they were both devious bastards. Maybe partly because of that.

"Good." The warmest smile he'd seen yet from Malun. "I can arrange the adoption here on the ship. It doesn't have to wait until we get home. We'll do it in the next couple of days. Before you see Ray again." He put his glass on the table next to Bodie's and stood up. Bodie got to his feet, too. A few moments of looking at each other, too seriously, then Malun smiled and reached out to touch Bodie lightly and briefly on his arm. "Yes, it's too early for us to start working out what we're comfortable with as a way of saying goodbye. I'm going to be busy with the presentations all day tomorrow. We'll have one final reception, at the usual time. I'll see you some time after that."

"OK." Bodie turned towards the door, then remembered something and turned back. "If we're leaving on Sunday, that'll be enough time, won't it, for Turon to visit Kew Gardens? I told him it's the best place to go if he's interested in plants. And I guess you know he's really interested."

Malun was nodding. "He mentioned that to me. He'll have plenty of time. You and Turon got on well, didn't you?"

"Yeah, really well."

“Good. I am thankful that I have one nephew who is truly easy to deal with. Because now I have to go and try to make the best of one of the most difficult ones.” Bodie wasn’t sure if he should laugh, because it had sounded like the talk with Ward was going to be grim, but then Malun quirked an eyebrow and gave the smallest smile, and Bodie gave a larger smile, and that was goodbye.

Chapter 5

Bodie wished he'd made the bed up earlier, when the bedding had been delivered and he'd had energy. He dealt with the sheet and the pillowcases, but then couldn't face wrestling the cover onto the quilt. He didn't have an alarm clock but he thought he'd wake up in plenty of time.

His arse was still tender from the day before. The best fuck of his life. The most rewarding one of Ray's. Was Ray's arse still feeling it, the fuck against the door? It got Bodie hard, letting himself think about any moment when they'd been together the day before. Even knowing that if Ray was feeling a soreness like this, then it wouldn't be making him hard. It couldn't. Not with his animal husband several rooms away. More likely it'd make him cry. Was the convulsing over, like Malun had said? Had Turon had to sit on him, hold him down? Or maybe just listen to him scrubbing himself under one scalding-hot shower after another. Either scalding hot or freezing cold. Distract the nerves. Punish them. Stop them remembering. Try to wipe it out.

Bodie's erection died. He turned on his side and gave all his attention to the sounds of the ship. Mostly, there was just a steady drone. Sasha's utilities. The engines keeping them all in orbit. The muffled sound of footsteps in the secret corridor, some distance away, not passing his door. No voices. No sign there was anyone next door. Maybe no one was assigned to those quarters. Maybe they were out, still working. Or taking a walk through Turon's garden. Or already asleep. Bodie fell asleep still listening for voices.

He came suddenly awake several times during the night, knowing that he didn't know where he was. But the drone of the ship's systems and the faint but strange pepper-and-tar smell of the bedding immediately brought him back. And he turned onto his other side and was soon asleep again.

When he woke around six ship's time, it wasn't with a jolt of alarm, it was just knowing that it was time to get up. He figured out how to use the shower, got dressed in the same trousers as the day before but a fresh shirt, and made a large jug of coffee. One plain croissant with marmalade. One almond one to follow. Large glass of orange juice. Yeah, that would do as a way to start the day.

He wished he had a window. They must have portholes somewhere, mustn't they? He should ask Turon for a tour of the ship. As soon as they were back from Hatchards and the British delegation was gone. Maybe they wouldn't be portholes where you could laze around with your morning coffee, but at least he'd know where to go to see something other than ship.

He read while he was finishing his coffee, then washed up, read some more, and was rearranging his kitchen cupboards when Turon called at the door to the secret corridor on the dot of 7.30. They were punctual people, these Bakkels. They took three bundles each of the small cartons, Turon got another £1000 from the cashier at Battersea, and their black cab got them to a side-street north of Piccadilly shortly after ten.

Turon had asked him straight away how he'd slept, and he said it had been fine. "Is there a short answer to the question about what state you found Ray in?"

Turon had taken about five seconds to think about it. “No. And that’s not because it’s particularly bad news. It’s just not short.”

“OK. We’ll save it till we get back, then.” And after that their conversation had been as business-like as at the start of their first trip down the day before, apart from Bodie pointing out sights during the drive like Hyde Park, Green Park, and Harrods.

In Hatchards, Bodie asked Turon if he’d mind picking out some fiction while Bodie was looking at the History. “I’m generally looking for a straightforward story. With crime or action. Nothing that thinks it’s art. But if I choose it myself I’ll probably just clear five shelves from the same spot. And I’d rather have some surprises in there. Best if I look through them before we pay, get rid of anything that’s totally wrong. But don’t take any of that personally.”

Turon was happy to take care of the fiction. They agreed he’d choose at least a hundred books, and Bodie would spend around £500 on his History, and come to find Turon when he was done.

Bodie ended up with forty-six books, mostly hardbacks. The staff asked if he was working on a book of his own, and he shook his head and said he was stocking up for a long journey. Back on the ground floor he checked in with Turon, then went to put his books in the boot of their cab. Turon still needed time with the fiction, so he asked Bodie to choose four or five cookery books. Going mostly by the pictures, Bodie chose one of Italian, one of curries, and the three books of a basic cookery course that looked at about his level and had a decent range of recipes, including proper British food like shepherd’s pie and bubble-and-squeak and rhubarb crumble. He took those to the cab, too, without checking with Turon, and on the way there, since Fortnum’s was just next door, he went in to see if they had Marmite. They didn’t. He’d forgotten it was another own-brand store, just like M&S. He’d have to ask the cab to stop at a normal supermarket on the way back.

Turon was ready. He thought he had about 130 books. He looked amused, quietly pleased with himself, like Ray when he’d come out with that line in his own language about the dehydration. So Turon was playing with him. A bit. Had probably chosen some books he knew were wrong, just to see Bodie’s reaction.

But apart from the handful that Bodie vaguely recognised (via some girlfriends) as hippie and Women’s Lib bestsellers, Bodie really couldn’t see it. About half were thrillers and detective, a mixture of British and American. More women writers than he’d normally pick for himself, but maybe that’d helped keep the number he’d already read down to five. About twenty science fiction, which Bodie didn’t normally read – and maybe these were Turon’s joke – but they looked actually kind of an interesting mixture of space exploration, and weird future Earth, and just weird. Some horror. Some historical, mostly with a military focus. A couple of collections of short stories. And the rest were just general novels, some of which Bodie thought he recognised, so maybe Turon had just asked the staff about bestsellers. Again, a proportion of women writers that just seemed weird to Bodie, but maybe Turon didn’t know enough about human names to distinguish, and anyway, from what Bodie had seen of the Hailin, Turon would never imagine that Bodie would even notice. He might as well keep them. Give him more practice at making sense of people whose way of thinking was totally different from his.

No to the hippy and Women's Lib stuff, and to the ones he'd already read. He put those out of the way on the nearest shelf, then said, "Looks good. Should keep me going for a year or so."

Turon looked surprised, then a different kind of pleased with himself. "It's the right level of surprise?"

"As far as I can tell. I'll start with the weird stuff first, so you'll still be around for me to complain to."

Turon laughed, and they started carrying it over to the nearest till. Again, the staff were curious, and Bodie repeated his story about a long journey.

They took the books to the cab together, then back to the shop for the Languages section on the top floor. "West suggested I get two sets of material for a European language, and at least two sets for a language with a significantly different writing system."

"You've seen him? He's OK about making the stuff for me?"

"He joined us with Ray last night. Yes, he's interested in the project. He'll be the one teaching you at first. He wants to work out a system for some particular things, and then he'll share that with the rest of us."

They chose Spanish and Japanese, and after about twenty minutes of flicking through, had found sets of material that were noticeably different from each other, and that had put at least some imagination into the examples and conversations. All of the sets came with cassettes. Bodie would lend West his cassette deck and headphones. Back again to the cab, and during the short walk to Tower Records, they arranged that they'd take a similar approach for music: Bodie would stick to his regular sections (Classic Rock and the current charts), and Turon would take the rest of the store and aim to surprise him. Their limit was 25 LPs each. They'd spent a lot on books.

Turon's choices were sort of a surprise, in that they were things that Bodie wouldn't have picked for himself, but there was a definite stringed instrument theme. About half was classical, including some opera, along with some folk and what looked like a random mixture from different countries (Cajun, African, Middle-Eastern). Bodie might not listen to more than five minutes of any of them, but if they were something Turon wanted, that was fine with him.

After they'd put the LPs in the boot of the cab, Turon said, "We could go for a pint. Do you know anywhere around here?"

Bodie shook his head. "It's too early. They're not open yet. And too soon after breakfast, as far as I'm concerned."

Turon looked disappointed. "We should come down later in the day, then. At least once before we leave."

"Sure. I know a decent pub near Kew. Stopped in after some runs. We could meet there after you've had your day with the plants."

A smile. "That should be tomorrow. Malun said you'd mentioned it. Let's go back to the ship, then."

Bodie asked the driver to stop at any convenient shop that would have Marmite, and the driver chose the Sainsbury's on Cromwell Road because it was easiest for parking. Turon came in with him, curious to see a different style of store, but Bodie wasn't in the mood to browse and they were out within five minutes with the largest jar that Sainsbury's stocked.

Turon suggested that they keep the cookery and language books out to take up themselves, and they packed the rest for the freight system. Back on the ship, Bodie went to his quarters with the cookery books to make tea for both of them, while Turon went to find West and give him the language material. West was in his quarters, so that didn't take long.

They took their tea to the couch and Bodie immediately said, "What's the long version, then, of what state he's in?"

"When I left him this morning, he was much better than when I first saw him, and much better than I would ever have expected."

"You saw him this morning, too?"

"I stayed the night with him. He's still not ready to be left alone, but I think he will be soon."

"And what about seeing me?"

A deep breath in. "Well, he promised us that he's not going to let himself go into *gimana* so it'll be before Sunday. At the very latest. But —" A noisy sigh. "He's got no ideas at all yet for how he might handle... the difficulties."

"You mean the bestiality stuff? Or the maybe wanting to kill me because I'm a *glarus*? You all think the same way about what I am, don't you? From what Malun was telling me."

Turon didn't reply for a long time. Just looked at him, serious but otherwise expressionless. Finally, slowly: "We do mostly think the same way, yes. Malun came to Ray's quarters last night after he'd seen Ward. He told us what he'd explained to you. We wished he'd expressed some of it better. Not so... violently. But yes. Those were the important things to understand about us."

"Was he... Was he..." Bodie swallowed. "Talking about me as 'it'?"

Immediately: "No. Not even when I first arrived, when he was still very upset. And when West came and started asking questions about... 'the *glarus*'. Ray was even quicker than me to say, 'His name is Bodie.' It's very important to him that you should be treated well."

Yeah, but you'd say that about a favourite pet. Bodie frowned, rubbed his middle finger hard several times over the bridge of his nose. "How upset was he? Was he crying?"

Turon closed his eyes briefly, then nodded his head. "At first he seemed to need to explain to me exactly what had happened, all the inescapable details. And he started crying during that. All three of us did. But he stopped much more quickly than he did with Sasha at the beginning. He wanted to hear everything about how we'd spent the

afternoon. What we'd talked about, how you'd reacted, what I thought you were thinking, exactly what food you'd chosen. Everything."

"God, you didn't tell him about that picture, did you? The dancing girls."

Turon laughed. "I didn't have to tell him, he asked about it when I mentioned you'd taken some of the pictures. He said you were right: he would have been unsettled by seeing it again. Knowing that you could still have sex with a woman whenever you wanted."

"I don't want to. It's all about... him."

"Yes. I made it even clearer to him than Malun had. How important it is to you to be having sex with him. That he has to find a way to give you that."

That hadn't been Bodie's point. And he supposed he should be grateful to Turon and Malun for making that other point but... It felt to Bodie like Malun was just a few steps away from calling a fleet-wide meeting for ideas on exactly how and when and where Bodie should be getting fucked.

"And? What'd he say?"

"He accepts that. He very much wants to make you happy. But even more he wants... not to feel like a criminal of the most degraded type. And he has no ideas yet for what to do."

They must have the concept of tact. They must have. But maybe they only used it for work, for when they were making a business deal. "But you – Malun. You must not think it's that serious. That it's really a crime. If you're telling him he should go ahead and do it." Would Turon hear just how tight his voice was? Guess how close it was to cracking?

"It – It gives me a jolt. The idea of him with... someone like you. But less each time I think about it. Like you with Sasha and her girlfriends." A long sigh. "It turns out that is not a good line of argument to use with a policeman. He's heard it used many times. To justify every kind of... horror."

Bodie gave a twisted smile. "Well... You tried. Gotta appreciate the effort."

"Bodie. It reassured him so much to hear about yesterday. It calmed him so much. He stayed calm, even when Malun came and told us what a thorough job he'd done of making you despair of all of us. And about how else he'd spent his day, including getting Gereda Batche to take over wearing Udom Kol. He's one of the senior officers. Of course it had to be done but – I would have discussed it with Ray beforehand."

So Ray had been fired. Without ceremony. "What did he say about his meetings with my boss? The stuff he learned from my official file?"

"He brought the file in. Just to show us that he had it, though he said he'd give it to Ray later. He wanted us to understand that being patient with us was probably hard work for you. That we would see other aspects of your character sooner or later. And that you were accustomed to a level of physical activity that we might need to make special plans for."

Like taking the dog for extra walks? While making sure you always had the muzzle to hand. “What did Ray make of that?”

A long, frowning pause, then a small shrug. “Mostly, it excites him. It fits in with what attracted him to you in the first place. I admit, it made Sasha nervous, but I told her she wouldn’t be worrying for a second if she’d sat down and had a drink with you.”

Prince Turon Bakkel. The universe’s newest convert to the curative powers of a pint. Bodie raised an eyebrow, and tried to keep the smirk out of his smile. “I’d been thinking more that I’d get to meet her at your place over dinner. Maybe with West.” For Bodie, a drink out with a woman always meant a date. Dinner with a couple at their home – that was different. And West couldn’t be too nervous about “the *glarus*” if he was saying he should be the one to give the lessons.

Turon was nodding. “Let’s do that tomorrow.” A sudden broad smile. “By then we should be able to welcome you as our new Vasmar cousin, too.”

Bodie suspected he was blushing. “Malun told you about that?”

“I would never have thought of that myself. It’s an excellent idea. We all think so. Especially Ray.” Maybe that would help solve the problem for Ray. If he was officially a Hailin. Shift him far enough away from being an animal.

“How did it go with Ward? What did Malun say?”

“He said it went fairly well. That’s all I’d expect him to say in front of Ray.”

“Did you tell Ray you’re planning to have me meet him?”

“Malun did. Ray just... shrugged.” And judging from Turon’s version, it had been a shrug of “Do whatever the fuck you like. Why d’you think I’d care.” If Malun hadn’t already told Bodie so directly, that shrug would have shown Bodie how much of a little shit Ray had been as a teenager. Even worse than Bodie himself.

“Still sounds pretty calm. By his standards, where Ward’s concerned.”

“Yes. Calm enough that Malun said it would be fine for West to join us. Malun offered to come back after his ten o’clock meeting and keep Ray company during the night but Ray said he wanted me. Sasha and West left around eleven, and then came back for breakfast. Sasha’s with him now. West’s too young to be left alone with him. And given the way all this ties in to his worries about sex he’s... not helpful.”

“How’d Ray sleep?”

Turon had to think about it. “Fairly well, really. Too many thoughts at first. He wanted to talk things over for the tenth time. Some restless dreams. But I got as much sleep as I needed so I think fairly well.”

Bodie nodded. “Anything else I should know about?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then... Wha’d’you wanna do next?”

“I want to study the cookery books. To see what ingredients and equipment I’ll need. I want to give you a tour of the ship, especially of our exercise facilities. That is important to you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Malun had that right.”

“You can use the facilities whenever you want. I’ll need to go down and do shopping for the cookery. Probably at that Sainsbury’s. I don’t know if you’d want to come with me. I’m assuming you’re not very interested in ingredients.”

Bodie grinned. “Know I should start taking an interest but... Right again.”

“Then just tell me whenever you think of something you want to do. Visit a favourite place. Get more books. Anything. You have to keep out of the public areas between about six and eight thirty, when Malun announces the base and there’s a final reception. All the masks from the contact team have to be there so I’ll be the only person free to keep Ray company. Otherwise we can do whatever you want.”

First, Bodie had to take delivery of the books and music, so said he’d read while he was waiting. Turon took the cookery books over to the desk, and then seemed to be typing away at least as much as he was reading. He asked Bodie questions about whether he liked this dish or that dish, but said nothing about the details in any recipe.

The delivery was much slower to arrive than the day before. Maybe Malun’s sudden change of plan was causing extra work for everybody. By the time Bodie had put everything away, Turon had his shopping list. He’d chosen three recipes from each book, concentrating on ones that, between them, also covered the ingredients for many other recipes. He was hoping to be able to produce a decent spaghetti Bolognese or chicken sag for Bodie, but his main priority was to identify equivalent ingredients in their own cooking. He’d go to Sainsbury’s as soon as he’d given Bodie the tour.

The ship had three decks and they started on the lowest deck, which contained the long-term and medium-term holds. Or, at least, Turon took him down to that level, and briefly opened a door into the cold, black, echoing, oil-laden space of the long-term holds. Yes, a person could definitely stow away there for two months. But that person might be less than sane at the end of it.

The middle deck had three areas, two of which he’d already glimpsed: there was the crew’s quarters at the front, the main cargo bay and short-term holds in the middle, and the engine room at the back. The quarters were deserted, the cargo bay busy with individuals, and the engine room quiet with small teams intent on inspection and maintenance.

On the upper deck, the shuttle bay, transporter facilities, and conference area were all in the middle, and the family quarters were at the back. At the very front was the bridge, with the communications centre and the command offices, and behind were the communal areas. There was the galley, in the early stages of lunch, and full of smells that were definitely alien, but seemed fresh and fairly promising. There was a large library. A small theatre. A large laundry. A very large gym, with several areas of exercise mats, banks of equipment, including some for weightlifting and for running, and several courts for *gulshor*, a ball-and-racquet game that looked a lot like squash, but

with different rules and different proportions to the court - a good compact choice for a spaceship. Turon played, though not well, and the ship had a stock of spare racquets.

There were teams that competed, and groups for practising different sports and disciplines, including martial arts. The sessions wouldn't be in English, but of course Turon would come along to anything that Bodie wanted to try.

“Is there anywhere else on the ship where people run? I mean a track or a route between different places. Or is it all on the machines?”

“People just use the machines. You'd prefer to have a route? To be moving?”

Bodie shrugged. “I'm OK with the machines. I was just wondering.”

Turon looked thoughtful. “You might be able to use the holds. I'll ask Mosra Galpon. He's in charge of all of the storage. We'll see what would be involved.”

There were several lounges of different sizes along each side of the ship, all with large windows. The port side had the views of Europe. There were some swirling bands of cloud, but southern England still look mostly clear.

“I never thought I'd see this. I didn't know the seas looked that blue.”

“It's an unusually varied and attractive planet. Sasha and I came here to watch the approach. This is my fourth contact mission, and definitely the one with the best view.”

“You've visited four planets?”

“I've visited more than twenty, but contact missions are special.”

“When's the next one?”

“I don't know. Which means it's probably at least three years away. They take years of preparation.”

“Will we visit any other planets on the way back?” Hopeful. The idea that maybe in just a few weeks he'd be the first human to orbit another planet. He hadn't thought of what he was doing like that before. ‘The first human.’ He'd been thinking of himself as ‘the only human’. ‘First’ sounded much better.

No, they wouldn't be visiting any other planets. Visiting the nearest would add three weeks to their journey, and even with the early departure from Earth, there were too many people who had work waiting elsewhere.

Turon's garden was between two of the lounges on the starboard side. It was smaller than Bodie had been imagining, but large enough that if you sat with your back to the window, ignoring the view, the groups of trees and flowers and shrubs were dense and deep enough around you that you could almost forget where you were. It was pretty, like Turon had said. Bodie couldn't see, though, how it could supply that galley for more than a couple of meals, even if you turned all the flowerbeds over to vegetables. He didn't say that, and it turned out that Turon was thinking more in terms of herbs and spices. He pointed out some that had particularly distinctive flavours, and picked out leaves and seeds and petals to rub or crush and hold out to Bodie's nose. One made Bodie cough violently and another made his eyes water, but they would certainly liven up a sauce.

There was one area that Turon didn't show him, and that was the galley and lounge in the family quarters. It was on the other side of the secret corridor to Malun's quarters, and could be useful for privacy depending on what was happening in the negotiations. Anyone from the contact team might be there, and Turon didn't think it was the best place for Bodie to meet Ward, say, or even Sasha and West.

It was nearly midday ship's time. Bodie was going to have one of his M&S salads, then head to the gym and put in some time with the weights machine. He'd probably be finished before Turon got back from Sainsbury's, but if not, Turon would let himself in to Bodie's quarters. Turon had shown Bodie how to use the machine, but he wrote him a short list of instructions, explaining the most important characters in their language, and then he took the cookery books and left by the secret door.

After he'd eaten, Bodie changed into his gym clothes and used the public corridor. There were three people jogging: two next to each other, talking as they ran; and a session of some kind of stretching exercise underway on the nearest area of mats. He'd been worried that someone might try to talk to him but no one really paid him any attention. It was going to happen: the being talked to and making a fool of himself and being talked about. No point hiding away trying to avoid it. And soon he'd be able to tell people he was Bodie Vasmar, because that sort of thing was always the first lesson, he was sure, and that would really give them something to talk about.

Turon was back by half past one, quite satisfied with his trip. He asked Bodie about the gym, and said he'd try to talk to the officer in charge of the holds that afternoon.

"Well, I was thinking... While we're still here, I'd like to go down and run some of my regular circuits." Bodie had already changed into his tracksuit.

"Like the one past Kew Gardens?"

"Yeah, like that. Or there's one near Docklands I thought I'd do today. Takes about an hour. Ends up near some interesting old pubs. Dunno if you wanna join me on the run or just meet me at the end for a pint."

Turon laughed. "I don't like running. Where should we meet? What time?"

Outside Wapping tube station at 5.30 UK time. Turon went with him to the transporter area and got him set up for the trip to Battersea, and a few minutes later he was in one of the cabs and on his way to Blackheath. The five miles took half an hour, and not even the golden autumn afternoon could make Brixton, Peckham or New Cross look like places anyone would want to live. Blackheath, though, had serious class. For the space of three or even maybe four roads you could almost be in Hampstead.

Bodie had the cab drop him at the southern edge of Greenwich Park, and then he started his run down the hill through the park, towards the river. He stopped at the viewpoint at the end of the avenue, and spent a few minutes taking in the confident elegance of the Maritime Museum and the Naval College, and the wasteland of the Isle of Dogs on the other side of the river. Nothing on the island, really, except the long expanses of the disused docks, and the line of four ugly-as-sin tower blocks full of heroin addicts and the most microscopic of small-time gangsters. And he was the only human being who knew that this was going to become a spaceport. Would the Hailin fill in the docks? Maybe with the rubble from the tower blocks. What would this view be in five

years' time? In ten? Maybe he and Ray should come back sometime, for a visit. Or maybe it would be enough to get reports from Turon and the others who were out with the fleet.

Once he was at the bottom of the hill, he decided to chance taking the narrow path along the river, all the way along the front of the Naval College, and he was lucky and it was clear enough that he could keep running at a decent pace. The Naval College looked even better seen from the river, with the hill and the Observatory behind. It looked magnificent. Every line of it said that this was the centre of the universe, the place for the people who would be sent out to take charge of the world. Wealth and power determined on more, and presumably sure that it would never end. And 200 yards away across the river was the proof that it could end overnight. Someone gets the idea of shipping things in standardised containers and slashes shipping costs to almost nothing, and there's no possible way you can adapt, and the life of three hundred years, four hundred years just disappears. Did Malun lose sleep over stuff like that, wondering what bright idea was gonna put them out of business?

But head west from Greenwich and you were immediately in the shithole that was Deptford. Nothing good to be said about Deptford. No decent route through it either, you just had to resign yourself to the twists and turns of the little backstreets, and to only ever getting a glimpse of the river. Once you reached Greenland Dock it got better, with some good straight stretches, and some greenery, and more and more time along the river. In Rotherhithe, the landmarks for him were the pub the Mayflower had sailed from (they said) and the Norwegian church, and Bermondsey was the countdown to his first sight of Tower Bridge. That thrill didn't go stale, even when the warehouses he passed on the way looked more broken and hopeless each time he did this run.

He crossed the bridge on the side away from the Tower of London, to avoid the worst of the tourists. The river was sparkling in the sunlight, curving away to the left, urging you to follow it about this bend, and the next, and on and on until home was just a memory. He always got that feeling here, even when the river was grey and sullen, and even though the only ships were the tourist boats shuttling back and forth to Greenwich. The Liverpool docks had that feeling too. The excitement of starting something new, how everything here was built around that, whether the adventure was in the arrival, or in a departure. There was none of that in Chelsea or in Kew. God knows, he wouldn't want to live around here – where was the nearest M&S, was there even one in Greenwich? – but this was the run he'd most needed to do before he left.

North of the river and heading back east, it was just a matter of following Wapping High Street along the backs of the boarded-up wharves. Only glimpses of the river, again, but it was a good, quiet street for a run. He reached Wapping tube station just after five, so ran on further towards Limehouse. He thought Limehouse Basin was as far as he should go towards the Isle of Dogs. It wasn't very likely that someone from the delegation would be wandering around the area, but it wasn't impossible. After today, though, it would be a certainty. After today, lots of people would be passing through Docklands for the first time in their lives. He got back to the tube station at 5.25, and found Turon leaning against a wall reading the *Evening Standard*.

"You look as if you've had a good run."

“Yeah, just what I needed. You might wanna keep your distance, though, till I’ve cooled off a bit.” He pulled at the neck of his top a couple of times, getting some air in (and letting sweat out).

Turon looked slightly surprised, then laughed. “I might not even have noticed. I think we have different sensitivities. Where’s the pub?” He was looking around, trying to spot it.

“It’s about ten minutes’ walk this way.” Bodie pointed, and started to lead the way back in the direction of Limehouse. “There’s three pubs along here that all claim to be the oldest pub along the river. They’re all from about 1530. The one we’re going to’s called ‘The Prospect of Whitby’. It’s got the best views of the river.”

Turon kept on looking around as they walked along the narrow cobbled road. “This is really different from where we were yesterday.”

“Yeah. It’s always been a poor area. Even when there was work, it was hard work that would never lead to anything better. D’you have areas like this? I mean, d’you have poor people?”

Slowly: “I would say, not really. But given who I am and what I do, I wouldn’t meet them, anyway. Ray would be a better person to ask. Do you have much to do with poor people?”

“God, yeah. It’s how I grew up. My family wasn’t dirt poor but no way we could afford a car. I didn’t know anyone who was middle-class – know them to have a drink with, I mean – until I was at least twenty-two.”

Turon’s eyebrows had shot up. “That’s interesting. But you’re not poor now?”

Bodie shrugged. “I’m not rich but I’ve been doing fine. And you are rich but sounds like you’ve got nothing to spend it on. If your job has you moving around the fleet all the time. It’s not like you could get any use out of a big house with gold-plated taps.”

Turon laughed. “You’d be surprised how much you can spend on a really good *orbarcho* and *cormoran*. And Sasha and I really aren’t the musicians they deserve.”

“So d’you all have something you spend too much on?”

After about ten seconds of frowning thought, Turon said, “Ward’s probably the only one. At least, that I know about. He collects abstract art. He’s very serious about it. For now he just has things sent home and put in storage. But when he’s finished travelling he plans to build a gallery and put them on display.”

A mathematician. And now abstract art. Ward did sound worth meeting. But what the hell would they have to talk about?

This time Turon bought the pints, while Bodie went to find them a place on the river. The ground floor was already full but there was plenty of space on the upstairs terrace.

Turon was very happy with Bodie’s choice, and asked lots of questions about the history of the pub, and the features along the river, and the traffic, and the lack of bridges compared with Battersea, and local parks. Bodie could answer maybe two thirds of them.

From the discussion of bridges, and Tower Bridge in particular, it emerged that Turon hadn't taken a car from Battersea so hadn't crossed the river. Instead, he'd just beamed down to the building in Docklands that the Hailin had been given to use as an office, and he'd taken one of their cars.

"Where there many people around? I mean, connected with the British delegation. Who might recognise me?"

A definite shake of the head. "No one's visited all day. Our people there have the impression that the British have given up hope. Because of you stowing away – though the Docklands people were puzzled about the details of that."

"So you're sure there's no risk of me being recognised if we go back from there?"

"None."

Bodie let his breath out slowly between clenched teeth. "We should get a cab there. Not walk. That way you can check the coast is clear before I get out."

Turon nodded. "I'll call them when we're ready. Ask them to send one of their cabs."

Bodie relaxed and smiled at Turon. "Anything been happening on the ship while I've been gone? That I should know about." Like, had he seen Ray?

"Well... I went to see the people who run our computer systems. To ask about setting up an account for you. So you can send messages. And use the material we have in English. Books and films."

"But – I looked at the screen yesterday. From when you put a hold on the deliveries. Isn't it gonna be months before I can read any of that?"

"Yes. I asked about getting the interface translated into English for you. They said that Ward would be a good person to do it. Because he speaks enough English and knows the computer system. So I asked him and he's going to start on it today. Fortunately, it's enough of a challenge to get him interested."

"Even though it's for Ray's husband."

A grimace. "He might have taken the challenge, anyway. And he's always inclined to favour anyone who Ray isn't talking to."

And now Bodie was wondering if he shouldn't meet Ward. If that would upset Ray worse than all the rest. "What does he think about what's happened? Malun thought it might make him laugh."

Turon shook his head several times. "He didn't give any sign of that to me. He didn't show any concern for Ray. Didn't ask how he was. But he is concerned about the effect on the family as a whole. He's very curious about you. About what we might expect from you." A sudden grin. "When I told him you'd gone down on your own an hour earlier he said I was very trusting. 'What if he changes his mind?' " Again he shook his head. "That never occurred to me for a second."

"Me neither. D'you go to see Ray?"

"Yes. Shortly before I came down. Again, he wanted to know everything about what we'd done. He got very anxious when I told him where you were. I had wondered if I should

lie about that but then I thought it would help him even more when he heard that of course you hadn't changed your mind."

"Is he any further forward with ideas for how to... be with me?"

"No. But he's nearly ready to be left on his own. He says he doesn't need me to keep him company while Sasha is at the reception. And he was talking about leaving his quarters tomorrow to eat and go to the gym. So we'll need to coordinate times so you can avoid each other."

Bodie nodded, feeling suddenly very tired. Not as tired as the night before, after Malun, but wondering if there was such a thing as 100% good news about Ray. They drank in silence for a while, then Turon asked about the other two old pubs. Bodie had to put him off visiting "The Grapes". It was the nearest pub to the Hailin office in Docklands, and if anyone from the delegation had gone to the area to wallow in their lost opportunity, then that's where they would go afterwards to drown their sorrows. "The Town of Ramsgate" was safely in the other direction, and would give Turon a sliver of a view of Tower Bridge.

They had a half there, and then Turon wanted a closer view of the bridge, and then of the Tower of London, and then of the fragment of Roman wall. By then they really needed to be getting back to the ship before the delegations started arriving. Turon called the office, and Bodie spoke to the driver and arranged that he'd pick them up on the side-street immediately to the east of St. Katherine's Docks. The office was in a place called the Ledger Building, right at the north-west corner of the West India Docks. Docks accountants must have been next to lords in those days, because the building was like a little country mansion. Should have been looking out at parkland, not two square miles of broken windows and rusting cranes. The coast was clear, they got beamed up within two minutes of stepping inside, and the secret corridor got them back to Bodie's quarters a few minutes before the reception was due to start.

* * * * *

Bodie had been assuming he'd have one of his M&S meals for dinner, but Turon's plan for the evening was to start off his Earth cooking with spaghetti puttanesca, and he easily persuaded Bodie to join him. First Bodie showered and changed while Turon went to tell Ray that Bodie was safely back, and at 6.30 Bodie called at Turon's quarters with a bottle of red wine. The quarters were two doors past Ray's and were identical to Bodie's except for feeling like a home. There was clutter on the table, and a sea-green cardigan-like thing draped over the back of one armchair. Lots of pictures on the walls. Family photographs, with tiny delicate women and so many children Bodie couldn't sort them out. Some pictures of gardens, with a mixture of open vistas and enclosed corners. A few that looked like architectural sketches, one maybe of one of Turon's spaceship gardens, another that could be a cargo bay, and others that must be cities on other planets. And the rest were colourful abstracts (probably) in a range of sizes.

Turon also persuaded Bodie that they should have the screen on and see how British TV covered the news about the base. Bodie had been planning to avoid it all in case his name got mentioned (maybe even with his picture?), but Turon was right, it was a historic event, and he trusted Turon to help him laugh things off if his name did come up.

The decision reached London four minutes in to the BBC's *Nine O'clock News*, while Turon was still cooking, and it was obvious (to Bodie, anyway) that the media had been warned beforehand that the chances were not good. They were genuinely surprised, and the members of the team who were in London and available for immediate interview were also genuinely surprised. By the time Thatcher made her statement, though, she'd had over half an hour to adjust and was treating it as the only sensible decision that the Hailin could have made. And meanwhile there was a lot of aerial footage of Docklands, including the view over Greenwich and the route in from Tower Bridge, and discussion of the Hailin, including some shots of the whole contact team from soon after the arrival (and how had Bodie not realised straight away who Ray was? – there could be only one body, one walk, one set of curls like that in the whole universe). The first live broadcast from outside the Ledger Building was just before ten. Maybe the BBC had been so sure of bad news they hadn't bothered to have a team in place ahead of time. No one in the delegation came even close to mentioning Bodie. Probably he'd been instantly forgotten, assumed conveniently dead in some corner of the holds.

The pasta was very good, and much simpler to make than Bodie had realised. Turon found it very salty: bearable, but if he was making it for himself and Sasha he would leave out the anchovies, and put in more tomatoes. They'd meant to have just a small glass of wine, but then it seemed wrong to have an empty glass during a historic event.

There was still about a fifth of the bottle left, though, when Sasha came in from the secret corridor at 8.20. She didn't look surprised to see Bodie, but from the tight smile she gave him, Turon had understated how nervous she was of him. Bodie had immediately got to his feet and stepped forward, but he had no idea if he should shake her hand or not, and then it was too late and Turon was asking if she'd eaten. She hadn't, and would happily wait the fifteen minutes for Turon to make more spaghetti puttanesca.

She got herself a glass of water, then asked them if they wanted one. Bodie said yes, please, to start being friendly, and then asked what the reaction had been when Malun had made the announcement. She immediately laughed. Her laugh was unusually high and clear, almost musical. "Your people were so surprised. It was very funny. I don't know how West and I would have coped if we hadn't been wearing masks."

Turon said the surprise had been obvious in the TV coverage, and asked about the other delegations. Some had been even more surprised than the British, others just resigned. If anyone felt seriously aggrieved by the result, they had hidden it well. There had been no mention that she or West had overheard about why the British had clearly thought they had no chance. The other delegations must not have heard a word about the stowaway, and the British were managing to hold back from discussing it amongst themselves. She asked about the rest of the TV coverage and Turon described some of the highlights, connecting them, too, to the highlights of his Docklands pub-crawl with Bodie.

They weren't ignoring Bodie, but they weren't making any special effort to include him, either, which was unusual for the Turon Bodie knew. The two of them were best friends, who'd seen very little of each other for the last day and a half. With Turon spending the night with Ray, they'd had no time alone together at all. And it had been a very dramatic day and a half. So he shouldn't stick around. He wouldn't leave right now, it would look rude. But as soon as he could manage.

Sasha really was extremely pretty, in a way that still made him think of a bird, or maybe a deer. Large brown eyes, narrow, slightly-pointed nose, chestnut hair, shoulder-length and very straight. Pretty, in a very feminine way, but like Turon, not sexy. But maybe she was different with women.

When the pasta was ready Turon took it over to the dining area, while Bodie poured her the last glass of wine. They turned the screen off and Bodie and Turon sat back on the couch, picked up their glasses, and they started to talk about plans for the next day.

Turon was planning to get to Kew before eleven, and he and Bodie agreed that they'd meet at the "Rose and Crown" pub at four. Bodie drew him a map, showing him where the pub was on Kew Green between Kew Bridge and the main gate to the gardens. Bodie would go for another run of at least an hour, maybe starting on Wimbledon Common. He'd aim to get to Battersea for two, and he'd take the shuttle down now since there were no other humans around (and it used much less energy and was easier to arrange). Turon would find out the next day's schedule for the shuttle, and see Bodie at eight the next morning with the details. Bodie would be fine keeping to his quarters all morning, so Ray could use the gym at any time. Sasha was assuming she would be with Ray for most of the day. Malun was with him now. She and Turon would check in on him in about half an hour. Maybe he would want Turon to spend the night again.

Definitely they should have dinner here again. With West. Around eight. Turon thought he'd cook Beef Dopiazza.

Bodie thought Sasha was still quite wary of him. And why wouldn't she be? When he said something to her she replied perfectly happily, but apart from offering the glass of water she hadn't yet said anything to him off her own initiative. And she was studying him as much as she could without outright staring. He acted like he hadn't noticed, when back home he'd be quirking his eyebrows and playing the fool, or maybe doing some hard staring back. Turon wasn't doing anything to get them to talk more, and Bodie decided he'd wait a few days and see what happened, and then maybe ask Turon if there was anything he should do.

He finished his wine, stood up, thanked Turon for dinner, told Sasha it was good to meet her after all he'd heard from Turon, and after a brief round of good-nights he let himself out.

He made himself a tea and settled on the couch to read. After about half an hour someone buzzed at the door. He bet himself that it was Malun, and he was right. Malun wasn't going to come in, he just wanted to check that Bodie had everything he needed, and to confirm that he would be starting the adoption process the next day. He had all the information he needed in Bodie's CI5 file. Malun looked like a man who had had a very good day. So much better than the day before. Bodie thought about commenting on that, then about asking how Ray was doing, but in the end he just thanked him, and they agreed that they'd catch up some time the next day.

In bed, with the light off, he thought about that shot of the contact team from the news. He couldn't see himself following Udom Kol down to the cabin, it would be too strange a suggestion. But into one of the small meeting rooms near the conference area, maybe. He'd assume it was business, some question about Britain they thought he'd answer best. But all Ray would have to do - after he'd locked the door - would be to drop his trousers, show Bodie his cock, and Bodie would be on his knees and salivating, just the

same. Or not quite the same because he'd know from the start that this marvel wasn't human. That the man who was planning to come in him was an alien prince. He thought... He thought... Without a kiss at the start. Without a wardrobe making it an obvious choice to get undressed, he wouldn't have got on his back, would just have dropped his trousers like Ray and bent over the table. Would they have talked? Ray's comments about his pale skin, his black hair, the framing of his cock. They would have seemed more about Ray sizing up his first human. But he would still have moaned, and asked Ray not to move for a while. And Ray would have worked him just as thoroughly.

He put two fingers in his mouth, got them properly wet, then pushed them into his arse. Nearly two days now since he'd last had Ray. Impossibly long. But Turon had said he'd see Ray on Sunday at the latest. And how could they see each other and not have sex? He came thinking of Ray standing in the line for tea, managing to look so unconcerned while he must have been counting the seconds until he could spring the surprise about the cabin.

Chapter 6

Bodie was still in the middle of breakfast when Turon called. He accepted a coffee, which he also drank black, and a small orange juice.

He had spent the night with Ray again. Ray hadn't watched any of the TV coverage but had got himself into a strange state worrying about what might be shown, what might be talked about. Maybe a picture of the British delegation, with Bodie expressionless in the background? Or maybe the story had got out about Bodie stowing away, and there would be more pictures and his name, and people talking about him, including people who'd known him for years. Hearing from Turon that there had been nothing like that in the coverage made no difference. He needed to talk over and over about suddenly finding himself looking at Bodie, not knowing what he might feel, what he might do. Except that it would probably be the wrong thing, a bad thing.

"Sounds like he's got worse again."

"Slightly. Maybe. But he's not thinking of changing his mind about going into *gimana*. He's just thinking too much about the fact that he hasn't come up with any practical ideas. He's usually full of ideas, most of which could be workable. So having nothing is making him panic. And he's not used to panicking."

"Is he gonna need company all day? Still planning to go to the gym?"

Probably, and yes, Malun would stay with him while they had their curry. Was Bodie happy to take the shuttle down instead of the transporter? He was. Then there was a shuttle every half hour. There weren't normally any checks for the crew shuttles in the current type of situation, but in case things didn't go smoothly, Turon had a card for him to show people. It said that he was a personal guest of Malun's, that he only spoke English, and that he had use of all of the fleet's facilities.

From time to time during the morning Bodie made his way through the TV channels looking for more news coverage of the base, but it was the wrong time of day for UK news, and the images on the foreign channels were all ones he'd seen before. He was hoping for live footage from Docklands now it was daylight, and maybe a sight of some of the Hailin who would be running the base – who were the only Hailin outside the family and the contact team who knew about Ray and the *glarus*.

He got the midday shuttle down, without having to show the card, and got the cab to drop him off at the southern corner of Wimbledon Common. He headed directly north to Richmond Park, took a zigzag course through the park, seeing maybe forty deer, and ended up by the river and the path around Richmond, the golf course, and Kew Gardens. Again, he arrived with more than twenty minutes to spare. He thought the nearest newsagents was probably on the other side of Kew Bridge. There wasn't much over there, but there was a convenience store next to Kew Bridge railway station, and he got copies of the *Times* and the *Evening Standard*. While he was there, a shelf of curry sauces and pickles caught his eye, and he got a jar of mango chutney and one of lime pickle, because Turon probably hadn't known to get anything like that when he was shopping for ingredients, and curry wasn't the same without them.

The terrace at the front of the pub was nearly empty, and he took the two pints to the table nearest Kew Gardens. He'd just started flicking through to see how much the

papers really had to add when Turon arrived, carrying a couple of large bags with the Kew logo. He sat down, picked up his pint, and thanked Bodie with a nod.

“What’ve you been buying?”

“Some books and pictures. And lots of packets of seeds.”

“So it was the right sort of place? For your project.”

“It was perfect. I don’t know how much of what I saw today will be immediately useful. If we were here for a few more weeks I’d try to make appointments to speak with some of their experts. But now I know how to find those experts. And it’s a lovely park. So many different kinds of areas.” He made a sweeping movement with his arm, his fingers making small grasping gestures here and there, as if they were briefly touching down on different locations on a map.

“D’you see the whole place?”

A small shake of the head. “Probably not. I went on a couple of guided tours. And I stopped for lunch. I’m sure there are a few corners I missed completely.” A sudden frown, then he sat back heavily. “It made me think of home. Not our planet, but the Bakkel family...” A very long pause. “Our family home. It’s called Clover.”

“Your castle?” Bodie nodded towards the gardens. “I didn’t know they had a castle.”

“They don’t. All they have from the time when it was a royal estate is a very small palace and a cottage. And I don’t normally think of Clover as a ‘royal estate’. It’s home, it’s where Ferros and my mother live. But after the questions you asked... I was walking around thinking, ‘Our house is so much more impressive than that. But we really could do more with our grounds.’”

Bodie laughed. “But you’re never there. When would you get to see it?”

“Exactly. And Sasha and I probably won’t live at Clover, anyway, when we do settle back home. And if I did create something like Kew I’d want people to see it; that’s how I think of gardens. But that can’t happen at Clover.” A long sigh, then he shook his head and took a deep drink.

Bodie couldn’t tell how discouraged Turon really was. “Well... if Ward’s planning for his art gallery... Maybe you can persuade him it needs to be in a really big garden.” Bodie held out his arms, claiming the space.

Turon laughed. “I’ll try that. Though it might take a few years.”

For a while they talked about the pub, and Kew Green, and cricket and the newspapers. After a brief gap in the conversation, Bodie said, “There’s actually a lot of royal estates around here. I hadn’t thought about it before.” Turon looked interested, not homesick (or gardensick). “Further down the river, on the other side, there’s a huge palace. From our most famous king. Dates from the same time as ‘The Prospect of Whitby’. And on my run here I came through Richmond Park. Which used to be a royal hunting grounds. There’s still hundreds of deer there. D’you guys hunt?”

Turon was shaking his head, looking very puzzled. “I know what the word means but... We hunt for new trading opportunities. But what would a king be looking for in a park?”

“He’d be looking for deer and birds to kill. To impress everyone with what a great shot he was. And with how much land he had. All those animals just waiting around to get shot.”

Turon was nodding slowly. “It was a sign of status.”

“Still is. And the people who can afford to do it, I think this is where they tend to live.” He gestured out at the houses past Kew Green and on the other side of Kew Bridge Road. “When they’re not on their country estates. To give you an idea...” He pointed directly towards Kew Bridge Road. “There’s a small factory on the other side of the road, just before the bridge, where they make hunting rifles that cost £90,000. That’s more than most people pay for a house.”

Turon stared at him, then stood up, went to the railing and craned his head far to the left.

“I’ll point it out to you later. But you wouldn’t know. There’s no sign.”

Turon sat down again. “So how do you know?”

“I know a lot about guns. It was my job.”

Looked like Turon had forgotten that about Bodie. Until now. “Are their guns worth that much?”

Bodie shrugged. “It’s a status symbol. Like you said. Hard to tell. I’ve never seen a Boss rifle, let alone had a chance to fire one.”

“Do you hunt?”

A shake of the head. “Not for fun. Sometimes when I’ve had to, when it was the only way to eat.”

“We don’t – We just don’t have many guns. We have projectile tools, that we use to control dangerous animals and people. We appreciate the skill involved but – It’s not associated with status. Not for us.”

“Well... with us it’s either high status or low status. But I’d figured, anyway, that they’re not gonna feature for me from now on.” He briefly held up his right hand, rubbed his fingers across his thumb and back. “Year’s time, I guess I’ll have lost the calluses.”

Turon looked thoughtful, and made a similar rubbing gesture – maybe involuntary – with just the fingertips of his left hand. “I’m trying to imagine going to a planet where they just had no need for the sound of the *orbarcho*. And I’m not even good enough that anyone would pay me to play.”

Bodie gave a lopsided smile. “Yeah. I’ll try to think about it like the Docklands. Whole bunch of skills suddenly weren’t needed any more. But then something new comes along.”

Turon nodded, but his expression wasn’t encouraging. Bodie thought (hoped) it was because he was distracted, thinking about his music, not because he’d decided Bodie had no chance of picking up any useful Hailin skill. After a few more seconds Turon shook himself out of it, then nodded at the carrier bag on Bodie’s side of the table. “What’ve you been buying?”

Bodie showed him the jars and explained about chutneys and pickles with curries. “And I’ve been wondering for this evening... What am I gonna talk to West about? He’s a kid and it’s not like we can even fall back on football.”

“Well... you can make arrangements for your language lessons. He should be ready to start tomorrow. Otherwise if you ask Sasha about the pictures of her family on the wall, that would involve him, too. He sees a lot of them. And he was planning to go down to Docklands today, to look around. I’d told him to see if he could find that third pub. ‘The Grapes’. You won’t need to talk very much. I thought we’d only spend an hour over dinner. It’s just to make a start.”

“OK.” Bodie could picture the dinner now, which he couldn’t before.

“But why football?” Turon was very puzzled, almost complaining.

“It’s the one subject you know you’ll be able to talk about with another man.”

“Kicking a ball around?”

“It’s the teams. Who you support. What you think of the different players. What’s happening in this year’s big competition.”

“Ah.” Turon understood. “It’s a safe form of tribalism. Or am I not supposed to say that?”

With a nearly straight face: “Depends which tribe you say it to. You don’t have anything like that?”

“We do but – It’s all quite local. It doesn’t give a sure topic of conversation. I’d say the closest topic we have is the business and Malun. How he handled this matter or that one, what the business needs to do next. But maybe I just think that because it’s my tribe.”

Bodie smiled, then had a more serious thought. “What do they think back home? About him choosing London. And doing it so early.”

“They don’t know yet. We’re completely out of contact, and will be until we’re nearly home. That’s the job of two of the ships we brought here.” He pointed upwards. “To set up the communications links. That’ll take another couple of months.”

That must make it easier for Ray. That no one at home would know for nearly two months. Yeah, they’d still have to cope with getting home, like Malun had said, but with two months in hand, they had to be able to sort almost everything out.

They didn’t have a second pint. Turon wanted to catch up with Sasha and start getting ready for dinner, and Bodie wanted Turon to show him how to get laundry done. They crossed Kew Bridge Road at the nearest lights, which put them right next to the factory. You’d never guess it made guns, let alone some of the world’s most expensive ones. There were no passing cabs, but Bodie thought there was a taxi rank outside Kew Gardens tube station, so they followed the signs there.

No cabs, and Bodie was about to ask Turon if he would ask Battersea to send one, but Turon was looking at the tube station as if... well, as if it was a park.

“You want to take the tube?”

“Well... it’s what you do here, isn’t it?” Not if you could help it. “I know there’s no station really close to Battersea but... would it make sense?” So hopeful.

Bodie checked the map outside the station then sighed. “Yeah. This’ll take us straight to Earl’s Court. Then it’s about the same distance as the walk from Chelsea. Or we’ll find a cab there, no problem.”

There was so much waiting, but Turon seemed to enjoy it. When they got off at Earl’s Court he said, “That hardly went underground at all. If we stayed on, would it go deeper?”

A shake of the head. “Not on the District Line.” He nodded towards a Piccadilly Line train on another platform. “That one’s on a line that goes much deeper.” Immediately: “And we’re not getting on it. Take the tube into the West End at rush hour? Turon, not even for you.”

Turon laughed and shrugged, and they headed up the stairs. Their route took them through Brompton Cemetery, which fascinated Turon with all of its individual plots. There was no such thing on Pen Embrun, where everyone was assigned to their family tomb. His name had already been carved on the Bakkel tomb. Along with Ray and the other four.

Even with a five-minute stop before Battersea Bridge for Turon to look at the houseboats he’d asked so much about on Tuesday, they got back just after five o’clock, ship’s time. Bodie had a shower and got changed, ready for Turon to come around with his laundry bag and collect Bodie and his clothes. There were banks of machines in different sizes, and Turon chose one of the smallest, set the program, and then used his wristband to start the cycle. It would beep when the cycle was done, and he’d also get a message on the computer. He gave the wristband and the laundry bag to Bodie. They’d get him his own wristband in the next couple of days. And he could keep that laundry bag; Turon would get another.

Bodie read the papers, with the TV on low in the background. The *Times* didn’t have any extra news, but they had some good discussion of the changes that might take place in the area, including different ideas for improving transport, and how many jobs for humans the spaceport might create. The *Standard* was about six hours more recent and did have pictures and names of some of the Hailin who would be running the base, with discussion of where they would be living, who they would be dealing with, how much experience they all had of establishing a new base (between them, the four most senior officers had done this ten times already). And interviews with locals, some excited, but plenty complaining about how completely they were being overlooked.

Malun called in around seven, shortly after Bodie had got back with his laundry, and asked him to come to his quarters at 7.30 so that the adoption could be finalised in front of witnesses.

“You’re keeping Ray company this evening while the rest of us have dinner.”

Malun was. “Though I don’t think he really needs company now. He probably accepted just to humour me.”

“He’s been doing OK today? Turon said he had a bad night.”

A slight frown. “I hadn’t heard that?” Bodie explained about Ray and the news coverage, and Malun nodded briskly, reassured. “He must have found a way to get over that. He was out of his quarters for a lot of the day.”

“Where’d he go?”

Malun shrugged. “He ate in the galley with Sasha. He played *gulshor* with West. He went off on his own for an hour to sit in the garden.” Another shrug. “I think he went down to the cabin. Or someone did, anyway, according to the logs for the door. For about ten minutes.”

“What? You keep a log of every time a door’s been opened? That’s taking things to KGB levels.” Well. They were only one year from 1984.

“We don’t, but we can. I set a watch on that door because I thought it would be important information.”

Bodie looked up, scanned the ceiling of the room. “What about cameras? You got them everywhere?”

“In some public areas. Like the conference room. Not in any living quarters. Otherwise I would know beyond doubt that it was him.”

“D’you think he was... jerking off? Like I think you said he did on Tuesday morning.”

No. No chance. “*Mana* only stays fresh for about a day.”

So what was he doing? What was he thinking? It had to be a good sign, didn’t it? That he could face going down there.

The witnesses were Iran and her wife Sama, who both looked to be about fifty. They were friendly towards him, though this adoption had to be the biggest clue that Ray wasn’t in *russma* now, that the worst really had happened.

Iran asked Bodie and then Malun if they assented to the adoption, using formal language and in her deepest, slowest voice, and after they had said yes, she and then Sama typed for a few seconds and touched their wristbands to an area of the desk to the right of the keyboard – and with that it was done, and the two women were greeting him with his new name and congratulating them both. They sounded genuinely pleased. Which must be mainly a sign of how experienced they were as diplomats. Or maybe Malun had talked the adoption up to them far more than Bodie would have expected. Maybe they even thought Malun was lonely. Needing some sort of family of his own, as a change from all those difficult nephews.

Malun had gone to the fridge and brought out a bottle. There were four small glasses already on the counter. “This is *toroquil*. It’s a light wine we traditionally drink to mark occasions like this. You don’t even have to taste it. But pretend you’re planning to.” From Malun’s smile as he handed the glass over, he was joking.

Bodie laughed, and sniffed at the straw-coloured liquid as Malun was passing out the other glasses. It smelled sweet, like some kind of cider, maybe a pear cider. Nothing was warning him off so he took a sip when the others did. Yeah, pear cider was pretty close, but with an aftertaste of... perfectly cooked Brussel sprouts. He raised his eyebrows, took another sip to check, then shrugged and took a proper mouthful. Of course, they were all watching him. He raised his glass, like he was toasting them. “It’s good. If all your food and drink’s like this, I’ll be fine.”

“It isn’t.” Immediate, from Sama. “But you will be.” And she smiled at him and the others laughed, and he didn’t know if that was a comment about him or them or what, but he did believe he would be fine.

They didn’t linger over the wine. The women finished first, put their glasses on the nearest table, said they’d see Malun at breakfast, then left. Malun asked Bodie what his plans were for the next day.

Bodie shrugged. “Same as today, probably. Long run in the afternoon then a drink with Turon. And, yeah, first language lesson with West. In the morning, if he can do that.”

“Can I invite myself to dinner in the evening? If you can spare some of the food you got on Tuesday?”

“God, yeah, it’s gotta get eaten. I didn’t know Turon would be starting with his Earth cooking so soon.”

They agreed on eight o’clock. Again, Malun touched Bodie lightly on the arm as he was seeing him to the door, no sign this time he was thinking at all about anything in return from Bodie.

Chapter 7

Dinner went well. Bodie took along his four-pack of M&S lager in addition to the two jars. The consistency of the curry was a bit dry but the flavour was great, and Turon had made cucumber raita too, which helped with the dryness. All three Hailin liked the curry, and West loved the lime pickle, and the lager.

Bodie asked about the family photographs and learned, bit by bit, that Sasha's family had a small chain of restaurants in Monor – the main city, with the palace they had to take the masks back to, and with the main base for the business. Clover was about fifty miles outside. Sasha had sisters five years older, twins, one with seven children and one with six. West saw a lot of them, took his friends to the restaurants, helped out sometimes when they were catering a function.

West had a very square-shaped face to go with his stocky build. Amber-coloured eyes, wavy mahogany-brown hair, and full lips that seemed to be permanently pouting. He came across as very intense, in a teenage way, but some years past being sulky. Bodie could imagine him saying “the *glarus*” – and then shutting up and thinking about it properly when Ray and Turon put him right. They agreed on ten o'clock for their first lesson, which would be in the library because it had facilities for people studying together. Bodie thought he'd get the midday shuttle down again, take a cab out to Hampton Court – “That's the palace downriver that I mentioned, with our most famous king.” – and then do the run to Kew, which would all be along the river once he'd cut through Hampton Court's park.

“So what time will you get to the ‘Rose and Crown’?”

“Let's make it four.”

Turon was happy with that. There was no suggestion that the other two might join them. Sasha was looking mildly amused, and West would rather try “The Prospect of Whitby” with his friends.

When Bodie asked about Ray, all three looked quietly optimistic. Turon thought he might get to sleep in his own bed. They didn't know what progress Ray had made in thinking about Bodie – the questions he asked about what Bodie had been doing and saying didn't offer any clues – but he'd made quick work of handling his own panic.

West was the one who asked about the adoption, which had Turon exclaiming that he'd forgotten all about that. When Bodie told them it was finalised, they all looked genuinely pleased, especially Turon, and reached out together to briefly touch his hand. Turon and Sasha didn't have any of the *toroquil*, but Sasha fetched a bottle of a liqueur that they all agreed was appropriate. Liquorice and.. rosemary? Again, quite sweet but with a peculiar jolt. And again, manageable.

But how were Sasha and West managing to act like this was the best news they'd had in months? When two days earlier he had been “the *glarus*”. The *glarus* with the official file that explained how thoroughly he'd been trained to be dangerous. He'd ask Turon about it, when they were in the pub.

In the morning Bodie made extra coffee, but Turon didn't call in. Which was a compliment, really, to how well Bodie had settled in.

West hadn't said Bodie needed to bring anything, but Bodie took one of his notepads and a pen. West was already there, holding a slim folder. They went to a small side room that had a desk across the full length of the room, with a screen and with two keyboards set close together. There was a chair in front of each keyboard.

West went to take the right-hand chair, but Bodie said, "I'm gonna need to sit there if I'm gonna take notes. I'm right-handed. And there's not enough space between the keyboards for my notepad."

West didn't understand what he was getting at, not at all. "Right-handed?"

"I can only write with my right hand. I don't have the control with my left."

West stared at each of Bodie's hands in turn, then looked him up and down. "This isn't just you? It's common?"

"We're all either right-handed or left-handed. Well, almost all. You can all write with both?"

West nodded, like it was that obvious, and moved over to the left. As soon as Bodie had sat down, West said, "Show me. Write 'We're all either right-handed or left-handed' with each hand."

Bodie did the right hand first. "You can read that, yeah?" West could. With the left hand, he asked Bodie to stop after just two words.

"That's fascinating. You can't do it at all."

Bodie gave a lop-sided wince and shook his head. "It's something in how our brains are wired."

West looked weirdly impressed, not like he was thinking that this confirmed just how primitive humans were. Bodie was thinking that he'd got lucky with Turon. The only properly comprehensible Hailin.

The lesson was going to cover saying your name, where you were from, where you lived, asking the other person the same. Saying you were pleased to meet them. West had brought along sheets of paper with the lesson, but he'd also put it in the computer system, with recordings of himself speaking the Hass Embrun, and he brought it up on the screen to show Bodie how he could get in and study on his own. Ward had already set up an English version of the computer system – or of all of the parts that Bodie was likely to use – and Bodie was happy with what he saw.

What he heard though... That was going to be much more difficult. So many sounds he'd never heard before, let alone tried to pronounce. And as for remembering them, bringing them out when he was supposed to... They were all going to think he was so stupid.

West had been working hard to help him with the sounds. He'd come up with a system for writing the sounds of Hass Embrun with the English alphabet, using particular combinations of vowels and consonants for the sounds that didn't exist in English. He'd done this for all of the sounds, including ones that Bodie wouldn't meet for weeks or months. But what Bodie was looking at today was just his initial suggestion. If a

particular combination didn't work for Bodie, didn't help him learn, then they'd find a combination that did, and West would adjust other parts of the system as necessary.

West thought that Bodie shouldn't try to learn their writing system until he knew much more about the language, but Ward had started working on something else for the computer system, that would convert their characters into West's "transliterated" version (which was the word for what West had done, apparently). So he would be able to read Hass Embrun. Sort of.

By the end of the hour Bodie had had enough, though the lesson had been interesting and exciting in its way, and he was looking forward to the next one, which would be at the same time the next day. He had taken notes, but on the paper West had brought, not on his pad. And it wasn't actually paper but something like plastic, and it could be wiped clean and printed with something else. You could write on it, too, with a special stylus, and West had brought one along for Bodie.

At the end of the lesson Bodie asked West about folding the paper, and West showed Bodie the technique for tweaking opposite edges to make the plastic go ultra-flexible along that line. Another tweak would make it set again, at almost any angle you put it in. You could also roll it up very tight.

"I thought I'd take it when I go for my run. Work on it there."

"That's a good idea. But look..." He turned very serious. "Don't worry if it takes you a very long time to learn this. Any of this. I promise you I will never be disappointed if we find you've forgotten something. Just impressed whenever you remember."

Bodie studied him hard for several seconds. "You've got more patience than I would have thought from looking at you."

A very quick shake of the head. "I've got none at all. It's how I've decided I have to approach this. To stop myself going insane." Deadly serious, but when Bodie burst out laughing, he almost immediately changed to a smirk, as if he'd been fairly sure that Bodie would laugh. Looking like Turon had been telling the others a hell of a lot.

"So... how much do you mind doing this?" Bodie nodded towards the lesson on the screen. "Turon said you'd be glad of a project for the journey home, but –"

"I don't mind at all. I am glad. It's the most interesting work I've done in over a year. But some aspects of it will suit me better than others."

"Yeah. Dunno what aspects will suit me. But I'll work at it."

From the library they went to Bodie's quarters so West could pick up the cassette deck and headphones. The team that dealt with technological interfaces was very busy setting up the base, but he'd take it to them as soon as they set off for home.

Bodie had toast with sliced tomatoes for lunch, and some cheese. He got the midday shuttle as planned. He'd actually never been to Hampton Court – Henry the Eighth didn't feature that much in military history – and he hadn't realised just how huge it was. If they had more time, it might've been interesting to bring Turon here. Learn how this palace compared with Clover. Though the stuff about the six wives would probably send any Hailin into a state of shock.

What should he say, then, if Turon asked why this king was so famous? For hunting? Maybe Turon would believe that. After Bodie had laid it on so thick about hunting and status and royalty. By the time he crossed to south of the river at Kingston, he was happy enough with the hunting story, and he turned his attention to getting some first sentences of Hass Embrun properly driven into his skull. He did pretty well (he thought), and when he arrived at the pub at a quarter to four and found Turon already sitting outside with their pints, he was able to greet him comfortably enough in his own language – and got a delighted smile and the expected phrase in response. But when Bodie made to sit down, Turon shook his head, stood up, and reached for his pint and the Hatchard's bag that was lying on the table. "Can we go inside? It's turned cold, and this jacket isn't enough."

It had clouded over around three. Bodie had missed the sunlight at the time, and now that he'd stopped running, he was feeling the temperature too. They took a table in the corner by the window, so they could still look out at the Green.

"Let me guess." Bodie nodded at the Hatchard's bag. "You had the cab take you to Piccadilly so you could try out a proper deep tube train. You do OK with the change at Earl's Court? Find the right District Line train first time?"

He'd decided to change at South Kensington instead, so he could see what a different tube station looked like. The District Line platform at South Kensington was actually quite pretty. He was pleased with himself, and immune to Bodie's condescension – probably even amused by it.

"What d'you buy?" Expecting another cookery book or something about plants, but instead it was a history book about Henry the Eighth. Oh, shit. "What made you choose that?"

"I asked about your most famous king. Who had a palace downriver from Kew that was built around 1530. She knew exactly who I meant."

"Did she say what he was famous for?"

"His six wives and what happened to each of them, and the religious upheavals involved."

"And you still decided to buy the book? It's... messy stuff."

A smile that Bodie couldn't read. Maybe even sly. "I expect it to be reassuring. That Bakkels have managed to be famous for reasons that are less messy." Bodie laughed, Turon shifted to another type of strange smile, then put the book back in the bag and asked about the language lesson.

About half an hour after they'd sat down, while Turon was telling him more about Sasha's very boisterous (and sometimes exhausting) family, Bodie sensed out of the corner of his eye that someone was moving towards them. He looked up and it was Ray, ambling over from the direction of the bar with a pint in his hand, looking like this was something he did every day.

Bodie had no idea how his own face looked, except probably amazed. He was dimly aware that Turon had stopped talking. Then Turon's chair creaked, almost violently, he said something in Hass Embrun, sounding astonished, then got to his feet so quickly the chair skidded back several inches. "You came. I thought you weren't even considering it."

Ray was just a few feet away now. Bodie could almost reach out and touch him.

The barest shrug. "I slept on it."

Turon turned to look at the empty chair next to him, that had its back to the window. He took a step towards it, then stopped, looked back and forth between Bodie and his brother, then back at the chair. It would be funny how badly he was dithering about where it would be best for Ray to sit, except that Bodie's stomach was in the same kind of knots.

"Well, if you don't mind moving over. Be good to have a view of this Green you were talking about." Turon swallowed audibly but obeyed. Ray nodded briefly to Bodie as he sat down, then picked up his pint, took a long swallow, and said, "So what were you talking about?"

"Um... I was telling Bodie some more about Sasha's family. Ray hasn't met them either, but you probably both will sometime."

"There's more to tell? Didn't Sasha and West do a thorough enough job last night?"

After that nod Bodie had had to drop his eyes from Ray's face. It was too much. Now he was staring at Ray's forearm resting on the arm of the chair. Ray was wearing a green-grey shirt, the sleeves rolled up nearly to the elbows, and his wristwatch was set to London time. Just looking at the fine cords of the muscles, the layers of subtle curves as it tapered towards the wrist... The hairs so closely matched to the tone of his skin they appeared as just a vague haze at first, but once you'd settled and focussed enough to start picking out the different colours, the range of lengths making... how many layers? Why would you ever look away? Best not to look directly at his hand, not think about how he knew that those fingers were even stronger and more finely tuned than they appeared. Definitely not think about those fingers pushing into...

No. Look out at the Green. The sky was an even darker grey now. Of course it was going to rain. It was the start of a British weekend.

This time they would call for a car to come from Battersea. If Ray hadn't told his car to wait. That gave Bodie slightly less to worry about when it came to having a very obvious erection in public.

It wasn't that he'd started to forget how and why he was in love with Ray. But with all that had happened, the days of not seeing him, not being able to imagine anything about when he would see him again, what it would be like. Having to piece things together second-hand through Turon and Malun. Well, it had started to seem abstract. Something he knew was true and important, and so obviously sufficient as a reason for his new life that he didn't need to think about it. But Ray was here, and every cell in his body, every drop of his blood felt the pull. An electric field between them.

As for Ray, he hadn't looked at Bodie at all since he'd sat down, but he had an erection too, just as obvious as Bodie's. So the *mana* could reach him at a distance of a foot or more. Realising that, Bodie felt proud that he had what was needed to make this unique man fully whole. Was that ridiculous? And to be feeling such a glow of possessiveness. When he was the one who had broken Ray. And when that erection was the first for Ray since he'd learned that he wasn't properly married, that he'd got himself tied to an

animal. What must he be thinking, with that happening between his legs? What must he be feeling? No clue, to look at him.

“Well, they didn’t give Bodie any idea of how loud the family can be, when two or more members are gathered together. And they are always together. You didn’t get that from what they said, did you, Bodie?”

Bodie shrugged. “I got the impression the restaurants were the friendly local type that’s pretty noisy. Where you’d take the whole family. You expect a big personality to be running a place like that. But that’s just me reading between the lines. They didn’t say anything about ‘always loud’. No.”

Turon nodded. “And they also never give any hint that – the way the family tells it – Sasha is the first quiet person they’ve produced in at least three generations. And they love to tell it. I think she’s just normal but if something happens to make her self-conscious about being... ‘the quiet one’. About seeming shy. Then she – She thinks of it as being healthily stubborn. Not being manipulated into acting as if she ought to be an extrovert. If there must be this work of talking, let other people do it. Leave her out of it. But that’s when she’s been made most self-conscious. Other times she’s just not fully herself.”

Bodie said, “I think I saw a bit of that on Wednesday evening.”

Turon thought about it then nodded. “A bit, yes. It’s usually fairly easy to change the context so she doesn’t feel self-conscious and it doesn’t feel like work anymore. But some people do come away with the permanent impression that she really has nothing to say.”

“And you blame her family?” Ray was interested.

“But she seems very close to them. Asking about those pictures was definitely the way to go.”

“She is close to them. But I think it’s easier to be close to them when they’re a very long distance away.”

That made sense. After all, Sasha had chosen to spend years at a time away from home. She wasn’t born a Bakkel.

“This is the first time I’ve heard you talk about them being loud. In this way, I mean.”

A shrug. “It was something I felt like discussing with Bodie. I’ve never felt like discussing it with you.” The elder brother talking. Ray didn’t seem offended.

The rain had started, with enough wind to make the drops drum on the window. Bodie asked if anyone had seen the forecast for the next day. Turon had, and it was mostly for rain.

“Looks like today was my last run, then.”

“Last drink, too?” Turon was trying to make that a neutral question.

Bodie pulled a face. “It’d be different on a Saturday. Much more crowded. We’d have to start being careful what we talked about.” Which was true, but also the right thing to say to help Turon accept the bad news.

Ray hadn't told his car to wait, and they agreed on calling a car from Battersea – after another round for Turon and Bodie, who had nearly finished their pints. Bodie slid a twenty pound note across the table to Turon. The last pounds he would ever spend. "It's my round but you'll need to get them. I'm... so clearly pleased to see Ray again, it would..."

"Attract attention." Ray had spoken very quietly. No sign of a smile. He was looking at Bodie's face. If he'd even once checked the state of Bodie's crotch, Bodie hadn't caught him at it.

Turon went to the bar. They continued looking at each other, expressions very controlled. Eventually Bodie said, "It is good to see you. It's been a very long four days."

"You too. But I still – I'm not –"

"We're not gonna be able to just pick up where we left off. I know. We've still got a lot to work out. But this has been a lot easier than I'd been imagining." He gestured with his head towards the main part of the pub, meaning everything that had happened in the pub so far.

"Yeah. It has." After a brief pause. "You've done a lot to make things easier. I've heard. From everyone."

"I've had help." Finally, Bodie felt able to smile, break the intensity. "Have to admit, I like your family. Everything I've seen of it so far."

"Yeah, well, you haven't met Ward yet. Have you?"

Bodie shrugged. "Pretty sure I'm gonna get on OK with him."

An exasperated sigh and shake of the head. "You've been brainwashed by Turon. Turon's got this problem that he likes everyone."

Bodie laughed, and then they grinned at each other. They wanted to touch each other. Ray's pint glass should be melting from how much they wanted to touch each other.

"We gonna see each other every day, then? After this?"

"Bodie, I –" A long, pained frown, then to Bodie's surprise he was nodding his head. "Yes. Let's say yes. Let's not leave either of us wondering."

Turon came back. He didn't ask what they'd been talking about.

"D'you ever have a chance to talk to anyone about whether I could use the holds to run in?"

Turon had completely forgotten. He'd talk to Mosra Galpon that evening.

"You want to run in the holds? It's really fucking cold. And dark. Any wall of the gym'd give you more to look at."

"I like to move. To see the distance I've covered. You run? Or d'you feel the same about it as Turon."

He ran at home. Didn't like the machines much either. On the ship he mostly played *gulshor* and used the weights machines. "I'll get you a *gulshor* racquet tomorrow, if you like. Have a game around two?"

"Sounds great."

Ray asked about the language lessons. Turon clearly didn't mind hearing it all again, and Bodie went into more detail this time, bringing out the sheet for the day's lesson to show them. They said they'd ask West to send them details of each day's lesson, so they knew what they could help Bodie practice. Assuming he was in the mood to practice, of course.

After Ray got back from getting himself a half, Bodie said to Turon, "I've been wanting to ask you... When I told them about the adoption last night, Sasha and West seemed really pleased. Didn't they? Like they'd got a huge pay rise. And I don't see why they'd even fucking care. They don't know me. Or what they do know is..." He exhaled noisily. "Seriously dodgy. Iran and Sama acted the same when they witnessed the adoption and I..." Shaking his head over and over. "Just don't get it."

"They know Turon likes you. That counts for a lot. In some circles." Impossible to tell how much he was teasing. Or who he was teasing.

Bodie did think that could be enough, at least for Sasha and West, but Turon didn't look convinced. "I think it's probably more to do with Malun than you. He's been noticeably excited about the whole process. By his standards. It's good to see him with an interest that is 80% not about work. Normally, the only thing that concerns him about anyone is how they might affect the business."

Ray was nodding. "Or how they might affect our mother."

"He does take normal friendships seriously. Other people having friendships, enjoying gossip. But for himself he has almost no need for it."

"He's always had our mother."

Until a year and a half ago. When she became so sick she couldn't leave her room. Bodie swallowed. "What – D'you think he'll expect of me? As a son."

Almost exactly in unison: "That you'll surprise him." The brothers looked surprised themselves, then grinned at each other.

Turon said, "Everything about the way you've reacted has been a surprise to him." A slight shrug and a sigh. "You're family but not family. I think it's a relief for him."

Bodie thought about it, had a long drink, then thought about it some more. "Looking for more surprises from me... He threw up when he figured out... what I am. D'he tell you that?" From the looks on their faces, Malun hadn't. "Looked like enough surprise for a lifetime."

He was thinking he really shouldn't have said that when suddenly Ray's hand was on his arm, just above his wrist. "It's not your fault. Anything that happened. You know – That's obvious?"

Ray's fingertips were resting on his pulse. A direct line between that pulse and his cock. He put his hand over Ray's, to thank him, reassure him that he did know. But the need

and confusion in Ray's eyes looked as raw as his own, maybe even closer to the surface. He lifted his hand, slowly, not snatching it away, and turned his head and looked down at the table, and in the next second Ray's touch was gone. They were both breathing audibly.

After about ten seconds, Turon said, "Malun's very good at not taking things personally. And at not spending time worrying about things he can't do anything about."

"He's always moving forward. Always looking for something he can work with." Ray was calm and casual again, like Turon.

"And he's been enjoying that process with you. It's been noticeable."

"And people like him?"

The brothers nodded immediately. Turon said, "We do have many family jokes about him. His obsession with the business. But he's very easy to take orders from."

"OK. That makes more sense now. How Iran and the rest reacted. I've got him coming to dinner tonight. I'll..." A shrug and a lopsided grin. "Guess I'll work on being surprising."

They smiled back, then Turon asked what he was planning to feed Malun. Fish pie first, and lasagne second. He'd looked at all of the meals that morning, and there were no two that would work together on the same plate. Those seemed the best choice for separate courses.

Turon said it sounded fine and reminded himself – a few seconds before Bodie was going to – that he needed to show Bodie how to use the oven. Bodie asked who on the ship had kitchens, was it only in the family quarters? He was expecting a short answer but instead Turon gave a long, pained groan, because it turned out that the question touched on a problem in his job that he expected to be wrestling with for many more years.

Crew kept on saying that they wanted to be able to cook, and to eat in private: to entertain friends from time to time, or impress a new lover. But they couldn't put a kitchen and dining area in every cabin, it just wasn't practical, and no matter what arrangements his department tried out for communal kitchens, they just seemed to cause tension and hardly got used. And the storage of personal ingredients was nothing but trouble. Bodie didn't wish he hadn't asked because Turon was clearly enjoying the chance to rant. He and Ray asked questions and made comments, and laughed and sympathised, and exchanged raised eyebrows and many different grades of smile. And kept pace with Turon as he consoled himself with beer.

"Why do people have to be so annoying?" On a sigh, as he placed his emptied glass on the table with exaggerated care.

The others took a few more seconds to drain their glasses, then Ray said, "I'd think you'd be more used to it, after growing up with Ward."

Turon narrowed his eyes, tightened his lips, and looked very hard at his brother. After a few seconds he started drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair. Bodie wondered if he should be worried but a glance showed that Ray was enjoying this. That gleam in his eyes, that twist to his lips. Did he know how much that made Bodie want to fuck him?

Need to fuck him. No, it was just how he looked when he was happy, and confident. And playing a game that the other side didn't necessarily understand.

After about ten seconds Turon slowly relaxed. "You're right. I have as much experience as I could need of... unhelpful behaviour. Nothing should surprise me." A quick glance around the pub, presumably to check that no one was paying them any attention, and then he raised his left hand to his mouth and was calling Battersea about a car.

While they were waiting they talked about driving in London, about Turon's adventures on the tube. Ray mentioned that he drove for his work, but took the ferry in every day, and his town was so small everyone walked everywhere. Bodie asked if he had any pictures of the town. He didn't, but he and Turon would ask around.

Ray saw the car arrive. It was one of the black cabs. Just the walk out of the pub, down the steps and into the back of the cab was enough to show Bodie that he had to find the Gents' and have a wank as soon as they got to Battersea, because this hard-on was too much of a risk to take on the journey back to the ship, with who knew how many crewmembers to deal with on the way. Ray didn't look to be in such a bad way, from what Bodie could see sat next to him on the bench seat. But jeans – even those jeans – left more to the imagination than a tracksuit. And Ray didn't have to look far for a thought that would kill the mood for him.

How did Ray's erection work, with and without the *mana*? What would happen with Ray when they got back to the ship and their separate quarters, with their next planned meeting nearly a day away? He couldn't leave this as idle curiosity. He had to know what state he'd be leaving Ray in.

He leaned over, looking at the door, not at Ray's face, and said very quietly, "What happens with that –" A nod downwards. "When you're out of range of my *mana*? Are you... stuck with it for the rest of the day?"

Ray looked at him. No sign of surprise at the question. Just as quietly: "Without the *mana* the blood can't stay. Can't keep me hard. The blood vessels open almost immediately. Everything... flows back."

Bodie nodded, relieved. "I was worried that you'd be..."

A small smile. Maybe rueful. Maybe sympathetic. "I'll be more comfortable than you are." No glance down. The tone was a plain statement of fact.

Bodie blushed, closed his eyes briefly, then explained his plans for the Gents' at Battersea.

"That's a good idea. I'll tell Turon." Turon was in the seat opposite Ray, looking out of the far window as if he was completely unaware of their conversation. Ray leaned forward, they had a brief conversation in Hass Embrun, with Turon managing not even to glance at Bodie, and for the rest of the journey they were silent, each looking out of a different window.

Turon knew where the Gents' was at Battersea. He led the way, with Bodie following close behind so Turon could give him some shielding from people's view. And Ray walked next to him, on the side with most people. The place was less busy than usual –

a lot of the traffic had already moved to Docklands – but it was still busy enough that Bodie was very glad of the shielding.

Turon went in to check if the room was empty. It was, and Bodie went in. They'd agreed that Turon and Ray would stand guard, stop anyone else from going in.

Even with the two of them there, Bodie wanted the protection of a cubicle, and those were at the far end of the room. He was heading for the middle one when the door burst open and Ray was there, breathless, looking almost wild. He grabbed Bodie by the shoulders, pushed him hard against the nearest wall – about four feet from the door – and then pressed the whole length of his body against Bodie's. Not groin-to-groin, but groin to thigh. His face was buried in the curve of Bodie's neck, his hands flat against the wall on either side of Bodie's head. For the first five or ten seconds of the contact he was still, though his heart was hammering against Bodie's chest, and then he started rubbing his cock and thigh slowly against Bodie, at the same time as he started speaking quietly in Hass Embrun. Speaking to himself, it sounded like. Explaining something to himself. Tense and definite. And needing to explain it as many times as it took, even as his voice got rougher and rougher.

Bodie wanted to hold him, but with Ray letting go of him as soon as they were against the wall, he guessed that would be a bad move. He held his arms down by his side, hands pressed against the tiles, and forced himself to do nothing except arch his back, and tilt his head so his face grazed Ray's curls. And he shouldn't speak, because if Ray wanted them to be talking, he wouldn't be using Hass Embrun.

If Bodie had imagined this the day before – any part of this – he would have expected it to be frantic. How could dry-humping be anything except teenage-level desperation and clumsiness? But from Ray this felt like a caress, as tender and passionate and responsive as he could make it. There must still be so much in Ray that was horrified at the idea of him, wanted to weep and was scared to sleep alone. But there was no hint of that in this. They were two bodies in love with each other, as much as they had been on Monday night, when Ray was starting to fuck him for the second time, finally happy with the look of his cock. Because it was where it was meant to be.

Bodie came first. He tried to stay silent, but his pleading groan at the end was Ray's name. Ray took a couple of minutes more, and in the last seconds he did turn frantic, and he stopped talking, and he fastened his teeth on Bodie's shoulder. Bodie ached with wanting to hold him, wanting to kiss him. But he had to wait, and see what it was that Ray wanted.

After maybe twenty seconds, with his breathing gradually slowing, Ray pushed away from the wall, and turned away from Bodie to reach for the paper-towel dispenser above the sinks. He pulled out a couple of handfuls and held one handful out to Bodie – reaching behind himself without looking.

Bodie turned fully away from Ray before he started to tidy himself up, and once he was finished he stood in the same position, the balled paper in his hand, waiting for the sound of Ray zipping up his jeans and refastening his belt. And for the sound of Ray throwing the paper in the bin, because who knew when Ray would be ready to look at him again.

Ray walked away from the sinks, towards the door, which left the path free for Bodie to get to the bin. He'd thought Ray would carry on walking but instead he waited with his hand on the doorknob, and he smiled at Bodie as he opened the door.

Turon showed no reaction at all to their return. They had ten minutes to wait to board the 6.45 shuttle. Turon got out his book, and Bodie found discarded copies of most of the newspapers. Ray chose the *Times*, and Bodie started with the *Telegraph*. After just a few pages, though, he decided he wasn't in the mood – this had nothing to do with him any more – and he got out his sheet from the morning's lesson and started testing himself and mouthing phrases to himself. Ray asked if he wanted someone to practice with, and he accepted after a moment's hesitation which was about the embarrassment of practicing with anyone.

Ray was patient and encouraging, though it was a struggle for him not to try to teach Bodie a few extra things. He accepted that Bodie wanted to see things written down in West's system or he was going to get too confused, but most of his initial ideas for varying the phrases needed at least one extra word. For the pronunciation, though, he was really helpful, and was quick at suggesting words in English whose sounds could nudge Bodie in the right direction, and that were easy for Bodie to remember, too. Turon joined in a few times, when they were using phrases that involved his name, but mostly he read.

Back on the ship, they took the public corridor to their quarters. Turon's was first, but he was coming to teach Bodie to use the oven, and the next was Ray's.

"We still on for *gulshor* tomorrow?"

They were. Ray would book the court, get Bodie a racquet, and come to collect him at quarter to two. People generally changed into their sports gear in the gym, showered there afterwards.

Turon checked the heating instructions for the two M&S dishes, then explained the controls of the oven, and wrote it all down on Bodie's notepad. He asked Bodie to demonstrate the procedure, and once he could see that Bodie was clear on everything, he nodded and then immediately said, "I'm really sorry about this afternoon. If I'd thought there was even a chance he might come, I would have warned you."

Bodie shook his head, meaning Turon shouldn't worry. "I could see how surprised you were. And even if he had said he'd consider it... Would have been best if I didn't know. I'd've - Wouldn't've been able to think straight all day."

A relieved smile, then Turon turned serious again. "How was it – Are you OK?"

"I'm very OK. There were some... tricky moments, obviously. But..." A shrug. "It was fun. Whatever it's like being his husband, I'm not gonna be bored."

Turon was nodding slowly. "It was..." Suddenly he frowned, looked almost in pain. "I could see immediately how everything had happened. Between you." He averted his eyes for a second, then swallowed jerkily. "No one has ever looked at me like that. I don't know..." A long sigh. "What West will make of the sight of you together. What it will do to his ideas about qualifying."

Bodie didn't know what to say. But he had to say something. Quietly, almost matter-of-fact: "I have to be with him."

In the same tone: "You do." Turon ran his hand back through his hair, shook his head hard like he was trying to clear it, then said, "You probably don't need to avoid each other around the ship any more. But I'll check with Ray first."

"OK. Come and tell me at breakfast. I'll stay here all evening."

Turon nodded, then left. Would he go and see Ray immediately? Or go home to spend some time with Sasha and think about the reasons he hadn't qualified?

"Have you seen Turon or Ray this evening?" Bodie managed to wait until they were on the couch with beers before he asked the question, and to make it sound casual, too.

"I've seen both of them. Turon sent me a message as soon as he got back."

"So how was he? Ray, I mean. What did he say?"

"He was happy and relieved." A resigned-looking shrug. "I heard about every single amusing or perceptive thing you said. If I didn't know better, I would have thought you'd been in the pub for half the day."

Bodie laughed. "Damn. I was gonna tell you the same sort of stuff about him. I'll have to find something different to talk about over dinner now."

Malun laughed too, but when they were sitting down to the fish pie, he said, "I'll be happy to listen if you do want to talk about every single thing he said. I know how attraction affects people."

Bodie shook his head. "He's your nephew. You knew him in his cradle. It'd be weird." He'd never done that with anyone, anyway: gush about every last wonderful thing about his latest girl. He'd never had that sort of friend, or not when he was at the age to get giddy about a girl. Overheard enough of it, though, even in the halls of CI5.

"Yes, maybe it would. But you – It wasn't at all a disappointment, seeing him again? From what Turon said. You enjoy each other."

Bodie blushed. "Turon told you about all that? What happened at Battersea?" Of course he did. Turon told everyone everything.

Malun looked slightly surprised. "He did. I asked Ray about it, but he refused to discuss the details. He said they were private."

Bodie quirked an eyebrow. "As private as they could be, with Turon right outside the door."

A fractional shake of the head. "Turon didn't say anything, except that you'd had sex. The one thing Ray did tell me was that he was very happy about what happened and he hopes you are too."

Now Bodie was blushing so fiercely he had to look away. He coughed, took a long drink of water, coughed again, and was wincing when he finally brought himself to meet Malun's eye. Malun just looked interested, not remotely concerned or awkward. "If my

real father – My human father. If he could hear this.” Shaking his head, over and over. “You couldn’t get further from any conversation I would ever have had with him.”

Malun looked thoughtful. After a pause: “Can I ask what he thought of you having sex with men?”

“He would’ve been fucking horrified. Disgusted. But there wasn’t anything to know. At the time. It didn’t start until... years after I last saw him.”

A sigh. “Not like Ray. I’ve never heard of anyone being so...” Cock-crazy? Bodie decided not to suggest the term, and eventually Malun frowned and shrugged. “We have a word for it. Several words. But let’s see which of them West decides you need to know.”

The food was a success, and afterwards they moved back to the couch for coffee and chocolate. Bodie wished he’d thought to get some scotch or brandy from M&S, but it really wasn’t that important. If he wanted an after-dinner drink, he could just invite himself around to Turon’s or Malun’s.

“So it looks as if I’ll be alone with him tomorrow. When we play *gulshor*.” Malun nodded, looking encouraging. “We said on Tuesday evening that I’d have a way of calling for help. In case he tried to kill me because I’m *glarus*. And that we’d get it set up before the first time I was left alone with him.”

Malun jerked and exclaimed something in Hass Embrun. Obviously he’d forgotten all about that. “He’s not –” An emphatic shake of the head. “He’s happy. He’s calm. He’s looking forward to seeing you.”

“I think I’ll be safe tomorrow, too. But let’s not put it off until we notice he’s acting strangely. Could be too late. Can you arrange it for tomorrow? Or should I ask Turon to come and watch? You said something about beaming me to safety.”

Malun shook his head. “That won’t work onboard the ship. I’ll get you a wristband with an alarm directed to our security team here, so they’ll send a unit as soon as you trigger it.”

Bodie was happy with that. Malun said he would arrange the wristband that evening, and bring it to Bodie’s quarters at midday the next day.

“Are we still leaving on Sunday? Everything under control with the base?”

Everything was as planned with the base, and they would be leaving mid-afternoon on Sunday. “Are you sure there isn’t anything more you want? More food? More wine? Or beer? Or books?”

Bodie thought about it. “Maybe some more red wine and some beer. If Turon’s gonna be cooking more pasta and curry. And I could do with a spare set of exercise clothes. If I’m gonna be running in the holds every day. Playing a lot of *gulshor*. I didn’t know about any of that when I was packing. Be best to go down first thing. Before ten.” And that way he’d be back in time for his lesson with West.

Malun immediately went to bring up the screen and keyboard and send a message to Turon asking him to come and see Bodie to arrange a last shopping trip. After he’d finished at the desk, Malun said he should go to see about Bodie’s wristband, and Bodie

got up and walked him the short distance to the door. They didn't set a firm date for the next dinner, but it would be within a few days, in Malun's quarters.

Turon arrived very quickly. He'd been in Ray's quarters, with Sasha, playing and listening to music. They arranged that they'd go to the King's Road again. Bodie might be able to get everything in M&S, but if not, the driver would know a place for the sportswear. They'd get the 7 am shuttle down.

"Did you have a chance to ask Ray if we still need to avoid each other around the ship?"

Turon had asked, and Ray no longer felt any anxiety about meeting Bodie again, in any situation. Turon had also talked to the officer in charge of the hold, and he was happy enough with Bodie running in them, but didn't want the energy wastage of turning on all of the lights, so instead he would set up a lighting configuration to cover a circuit of about half a mile. It would be programmed by Monday at the latest, and he'd show Turon the procedure for calling up the configuration. If Bodie wanted a longer circuit or a different shape, they could make changes, but he should try this one first, to see if he really wanted to run in the holds. Off the circuit it would be completely dark. Very boring. And really cold.

Bodie shrugged. "I'll give it a try. Don't want it to be a waste of his time setting up the lighting."

Bodie wanted to ask how Ray had seemed to Turon, if Turon had anything to add to what Malun had said about Ray being happy about what had happened. Because Turon had been there. Turon might have picked up on something Malun had missed. But he'd be seeing Ray soon himself. Seeing him every day, if Ray kept to his promise. If there was something to pick up on, Bodie could do it himself. Turon went back to his music, and Bodie washed up and then was soon absorbed in the fourth year of the Peninsular War.

Chapter 8

M&S didn't have tracksuits, so they went to the nearest department store. Bodie also got a bag to carry his kit and towel in, since Ray had told him that people changed their clothes in the gym. The rain was light but it looked set to continue all day, and it felt like a relief to be getting above that when they left Battersea for the last time.

As he'd promised, West was impressed with how well Bodie had learned the first lesson. The second lesson was simple descriptions: saying your house was big and dirty, your friend was tall and kind. Bodie asked about "husband". There were different words for a husband in an *esmana* marriage like his (*iskolpa*) and for one in a *tolmin* marriage like Turon's (*nespa*). West wrote the two words down, and said he'd add examples for both on the computer as soon as he got back to his quarters. Bodie wanted to know about "sexy", too, and "impulsive", but didn't think West was the person he should ask.

No one had shown Bodie yet how to get into the computer system on his own. West said they would need to wait until Bodie got his wristband, because it was the wristband that told the computer who he was. If he was due to get his wristband at midday, then West would come over at 12.30. Ward had already set things up so that Bodie would automatically see the options in English.

Malun was prompt. He asked Bodie which wrist he wanted to wear the band on.

"Is my watch gonna be any use to me where we're going?"

None at all. They would switch to the Hailin clock and calendar as soon as they left orbit. Bodie took his watch off, and Malun fastened the band on his left wrist. To send the alarm, he needed to press from both sides, over the bones in his arm, until he felt a click, and then press on the top until he felt another click. When he felt an intermittent vibration, he would know that the alarm had been received and help was on the way. Once the vibration had started, the same sequence of presses would cancel the alarm. The security team had been told to expect a test between midday and 12.30, so Bodie got to try out the full procedure.

West showed him how to access the lessons – he'd added "My *iskolpa* is dark-haired and patient" and "My *nespa* is short and clever" – and they sent a message to Turon and to West himself. There were books and films in English on the system, and Bodie could set things up to watch the films on the large screen. Interesting, but Bodie decided to leave the details of that for another day. He was seeing Ray soon, and it was getting more and more difficult to think about anything else.

Would they have sex again? Just wondering about it, he started to get hard. Would it be more dry-humping, or would Ray be ready now to take things further? He shouldn't get his hopes up. He knew Ray was happy with what they'd done at Battersea, and dry-humping the way Ray did it was something to look forward to.

Should he have a wank while he was waiting? In a way it didn't seem fair, doing that when Ray couldn't. But an hour in the small space of a *gulshor* court with Ray. Watching Ray move. And with the friction of his own movements. Yes, best to take care of this first. Because he did want a proper first *gulshor* game with Ray. They needed sex, but they also just needed to get to know each other.

Ray was a few minutes early, and he used the public corridor. He had his kit in a bag slung over one shoulder and two racquets in the other hand. He was in uniform, which Bodie hadn't been expecting. The formality reminded him of Ray's Foreign Office suit, and that was very sexy and very confusing. Turon wore his uniform a lot, but then Turon was with the fleet, and wasn't Ray trying not to be?

In the changing-rooms, Ray pointed him to a cubicle in the corner to the left of the door. "You should change in there. I'll use the other one." Nodding at another cubicle on the other side of the door. It seemed a bit odd to use the cubicles when it was obvious – from the other men and women around – that the Hailin weren't shy about changing clothes. The cubicle had a shower, and a shelf large enough for his bag.

Ray wore shorts and a vest-top in a stretchy, rust-brown fabric. Of course. That must be why he used the cubicles. He really couldn't show that cock to a communal changing room.

Ray explained the rules and demonstrated the technique for the serve. For a while they worked on Bodie's serve, with Bodie getting used to the proportion of the court, the balance and tension of the racquet, and the behaviour of the ball, and then Ray said they should start a game.

Ray did not seem to believe in holding back for a beginner, or if he did, he was a very good actor, and at full capacity must be truly ferocious. He was very quick and frequently surprising, but Bodie had sheer power and steadily more impressive control, and by the end of the game he was winning nearly as many points as Ray. Their next game would be well worth watching.

Ray had been worth watching as well, but Bodie had found himself concentrating too hard on the game to think very much about sex. Same for Ray, even though the air in the court must have been thick with Bodie's *mana* before the game was halfway through.

Their time-slot on the court still had ten minutes left when they finished the game. Bodie suggested playing a few more points, but Ray shook his head. "Let's go back to your place and have some tea. Same time tomorrow, though?"

Bodie nodded, then grunted as he remembered and shook his head. "We're due to leave orbit at three. I don't wanna miss that. Thought I'd watch from one of the lounges."

"I'll watch with you." A brief pause. "If you want company?"

"That'd be great."

"We'll book the court for some time earlier, then."

At the door to the court, Ray raised his hand to slide back the cover for the recessed keypad, but then stopped and turned instead to look at Bodie. "I knew you'd be good." A slight gesture of the head towards the middle of the court.

Bodie looked as smug as he could when the compliment was so welcome. "The peak of physical form, that's me." Then serious: "And you – You're full of surprises. I'm gonna learn a lot from you."

Ray's eyes widened and his smile was fierce. "By the time we reach home, no one else will be able to beat either one of us," and he stepped forward, pressed Bodie to the wall,

and kissed him just as fiercely. Bodie gasped, and raised his left hand to pull Ray in even tighter – wanted to drop the racquet and wrap both arms around him – but Ray’s left hand was flat against the wall near Bodie’s head, the same as the day before, and that still seemed a clear signal. No holding, not yet, not today. He lowered his arm and held it against the wall.

He couldn’t hold Ray, but he could nudge his knee between Ray’s, get Ray’s bare thighs to clasp his own. The skin of Ray’s thighs felt so hot, and the hairs were coarser than on his arms, waking all of the nerves on Bodie’s inner thigh.

Such a simple contact, almost nothing, but it was getting him so hard, like he hadn’t had sex in months. The effect on Ray had been even quicker. He hadn’t started to rub himself against Bodie yet, but was arching his spine more and more deeply. Bodie opened his mouth wider, seeking, and arched his own back, and Ray suddenly broke the kiss and took a step back. After two deep, uneven breaths he said, “We should go to one of the cubicles. Let’s make it yours.”

There were people in the changing-room, Bodie did register that, but he had no idea if anyone noticed them heading for the cubicle. Maybe it happened all the time. Maybe that’s what the cubicles were for. Maybe that was the standard Hailin thing: sex against a wall.

They put their racquets on top of Bodie’s bag, then Bodie placed his hands lightly on Ray’s shoulders and started to urge him back towards the one wall that had space for them. “Feels like it’s my turn to be on top.” Said with a hint of a question, in case that was something else Ray wasn’t ready for, but Ray smiled and let himself be pushed.

At first Bodie just leaned his weight against Ray, let their cocks press together with only a few layers of thin, supple fabric between them. The kiss was nearly as still. The sounds of the changing-room were hardly muffled at all: people arriving and leaving, brief conversations in Hass Embrun, some laughter.

“You made it so good yesterday.” Bodie was whispering. “You made it sexy. I’d always thought dry-humping like that was only for when you were desperate. But you – You really wanted it to be good.”

A brief, lop-sided smile. “I was desperate. To be with you. To – To know pleasure again with you. I don’t know if I was thinking about being good. I was just... I was just... feeling.”

“That proves it, then...” With a broad grin. “I do love everything about the way you feel.” And they locked their mouths and their thighs together and started to explore what they could make themselves feel.

This time Ray came first, with Bodie soon after. As they stood panting against each other’s necks, Bodie felt Ray’s arms wrap around his back. He gave a sharp groan of surprise, then immediately took his hand off the wall, held Ray tight, and felt Ray’s long, shaking sigh against his damp skin.

It sounded like the changing-room was empty now. Anyone who’d seen them go into the cubicle would surely have moved on by now.

“Shower? Then you still fancy that tea?”

With the slightest smile: “More like I need it. Gotta stay hydrated.” Bodie laughed, so relieved that Ray could joke about that night, about any aspect of the hours when his bio-chemistry had been busy making its terrible mistake. Ray laughed too, maybe also relieved, then kissed Bodie briefly, mouth closed, and let himself out of the cubicle.

Ray did a tour of the shelves while Bodie made the tea. He seemed to recognise some of the history books – touched their spines – and he pulled out some of the novels to study the covers. He didn’t make any comments, though.

He asked for a small amount of milk in his tea, and he took the left side of the couch, like he had that night. He leaned forward and took a Jaffa cake from the plate, though he didn’t follow Bodie’s example and eat it straight away, but rested it on his knee, instead.

Bodie nodded at that knee. “What’s with the uniform? I’d have thought when you’re not on duty...”

After a pause, with a slight, tight shrug: “I couldn’t decide what to wear.” The most self-conscious that Bodie had yet seen him. Bodie raised an eyebrow and smiled, imagining Ray standing in front of the wardrobe, with five rejected sets of clothes thrown over the bed. Ray smiled back, almost a grin, and took a bite of Jaffa cake. Then he looked surprised and stared at the remaining half. “It’s sour. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Is it?” Bodie took the uneven crescent from Ray and ate it much more slowly than he usually ate Jaffa cakes. “Well, there’s the orange, but that just makes it taste sweeter to me. It’s really sour to you?”

Ray reached for another one, ate it in three bites, looking thoughtful, then took a mouthful of tea. “More than I’m used to. Especially with a biscuit. We like our sweet things to be soothing.”

Bodie nodded. “I’ll bring out the Swiss roll next time. The chocolate one. See what you make of that. Has Turon told you much about the cooking he’s done for me?”

Turon had, and Ray had asked to look at the cookery books, and was looking forward to cooking for Bodie himself, and to arguing with Turon about which combinations of Hailin ingredients came closest to the human dish. They talked for a while about the types of food that Bodie liked, then Ray gestured with his head at the shelves of books and said, “That’s a lot more books than I brought along but it’s really not that many when you think that you’re leaving home forever. For a place where there’ll be no one like you. Nothing you’re used to.” Said as a plain statement of fact. Hard to guess what response he was looking for.

Bodie thought of saying that he was used to it, it was what he’d done when he was fourteen. But Ray wouldn’t have forgotten about that. Finally, he said, “You were gonna do that. You were gonna tell Malun that you’d decided to stay. Enter into a *tolmin* marriage with me.”

A deep frown and a hard shake of the head. “There’d be all the people on the base. I know the languages. It would’ve been easy. Bodie, I’m – I’m sorry about what I’ve done to you.”

Bodie's eyebrows shot up. "What you've done to me? I'm... I made you want to – I dunno." He swallowed. "Tear yourself out of your own body. Get away from it."

Ray swallowed too, then shook his head hard again. "I spent half my life expecting that one day I would meet my qualified man. I would be in an *esmana* marriage. It was the most obvious thing to me, from the first time I had sex. A week ago you didn't even –" A pained sigh. "You've got no reason to accept any of this."

Bodie shrugged, thought of the version of this conversation he'd had with Turon, and clamped down on a smile. "What about the best fuck I've ever had? You know we're that good together."

The wrong thing to say. Ray closed his eyes and clenched his teeth, and flinched back. Bodie jerked once, blinked several times, then turned his head away and stared down at the carpet.

"The thing is..." Ray's voice was very quiet, sounded tired. Bodie kept on looking at the carpet. "I don't know when I'll be able to fuck you again. When you'll be able to fuck me. I know it's important to you. You've got to believe... it's important to me too."

Bodie raised his head then let it fall heavily onto the back of the couch. A long sigh and he rolled his head to the left. Ray looked like he hadn't fully come out of that flinch. "Let me guess. It's because I'm an animal, and you won't sully your superior Hailin biology with anything more than a dry-hump."

A strange mixture of relief and torment. "Yes." His voice was cracking. Three deep, shaking breaths and he got it under better control. "That's exactly what it is. I knew I had to explain to you today. It wouldn't be fair to leave you guessing. But I – How do you say something like that? To anyone?"

Ask Malun. Malun could give classes. Bodie lifted his head off the back of the couch and nodded slowly several times. "So what makes it OK, then? What we've just done in the gym. At Battersea."

A sharp wince, then: "You weren't naked. I couldn't see your cock. Couldn't see it getting hard, knowing I was the cause. I could manage not to imagine your... fertile semen inside it. Semen that's always been alive. Always been expecting to get out and – Be able to impregnate anyone. Because that's normal to you, that's how you've spent your life since the first time you had sex: with that inside you. Something that primitive. It's in you now and I – I can't be naked with you either. I can't involve my –" He swallowed. "My proper, civilised... My decent Hailin semen..." An abrupt shake of the head. "I can't expose it to that."

Bodie knew he should be feeling a blazing, righteous fury at the string of insults, but instead he felt mostly sad. So many things he could say. Ask if Ray knew that this was total bullshit. OK, Bodie didn't have the languages thing, couldn't write with his left hand, but he'd bet that every Hailin he'd spoken to thought he was at least as intelligent as the average Hailin. And the way they fucked, the way they wanted each other, that was just as damned primitive in Ray as it was in him. In the end, what he said was, "And that's what you're married to."

Bodie had been expecting another flinch, but somehow got a smile that was strained but seemed quite genuine. "I'm glad to be married to you. Of course you're right that we're

good together. Things would be easier if you were a Hailin, if you had our biology. But you are the man I –” Suddenly the strain was gone, and the smile was easy affection and appreciation. “I should have been expecting.”

Bodie grinned in return. “I wasn’t expecting any man. But you came over on Sunday night, with a mouth that knew exactly how sexy it was, and a walk that said that this man always got anything he set his mind on.”

They turned and reached for each other, and the beautiful full mouth was so eager as it opened against Bodie’s. It was true, that Ray was glad to have this, obviously glad. But also true that Ray really was serious about thinking that he was an animal.

It wasn’t a hungry kiss: too soon since the gym. Bodie thought it wasn’t going to turn hungry, couldn’t count as foreplay. So that made it a first for them: kissing that was separate from sex, kissing because they wanted to be close.

Bodie had no idea how long it was before he pulled back. He moved his right hand from Ray’s head to his shoulder. They smiled at each other, then Bodie turned more serious. “In Battersea you wouldn’t even look at me. I guess couldn’t. But today we can kiss. Hold each other. D’you think that’s how it’ll work? You’ll gradually feel that it’s OK to... do something with me after all?”

A long, frowning sigh. “Bodie. I don’t know how it’ll work. Yesterday at the heliport, I didn’t know what I was going to do until I was doing it. Didn’t know that I – Really could feel comfortable about it afterwards. Now I know that I can be comfortable as long as we’re not naked. I can’t see you like that, can’t see or touch your cock. And I don’t – I can hold you like this.” He tightened his hold slightly on Bodie’s back. “When I’m not turned on. When we’re not about to have sex. But when we are...” He swallowed. “I don’t trust myself. Not to rip your clothes off and do... everything imaginable with you. So I have to keep my hands out of the way. On the wall. We can’t hold each other then. I’m sorry. For now, the only kind of sex we can have is that kind of dry-humping. Believe me, I’m – I’m sorry.”

Bodie shook his head. “I can cope. From everything Malun told me on Tuesday, I thought – We’d be lucky if we’d figured out how to have a civil conversation by the end of the journey. Seeing that it still works between us. Works really well even like that. That makes it...” He nodded at the bookshelves. “I’m not leaving home with those tomorrow. I’m going home.”

They kissed some more. Again it was Bodie who pulled back. “I keep on expecting a buzz at the door. Turon or Malun wanting to check on us.”

“Me too. I thought they might come to watch us play *gulshor*. But if they were up in the gallery, it was during a time when I needed all my attention on the game.” A sigh. “Maybe I should go and find them. Tell them not to check.”

“Yeah. Could be useful. For later.” Bodie hoped they would be having sex again that day. Maybe even spend the night together? But if it was only after *gulshor*, with kissing and holding during the rest of the day, he would still count himself a lucky man. “D’you wanna have dinner here tonight? We can have a look in the fridge, see if I’ve got anything you fancy.”

“I’d love to. I’ll be happy with anything.”

“Then watch a film? If you haven’t already seen all the English ones that’re on the computer.”

“I’d watch any of them again with you.”

Did that mean he had seen them all? Not important. “I need to work on the lesson from this morning.” He nodded towards the desk, meaning the sheet of paper on it and the computer. “Give me an hour on my own?”

“Sure.”

They got to their feet and headed towards the door, with Ray picking up his *gulshor* kit on the way. Ray was already in the corridor when Bodie had a sudden thought. “I’ve got two curries. I think we’ll have those. So when you see Turon, could you get the jars of pickle from him? He’ll know what I mean.”

“OK.” The door closed, and Bodie went to the desk. He thought he’d try the computer first, and save the paper for practising with Ray.

He had a message from Turon. It must have arrived while they were playing *gulshor*, and he hadn’t heard the beep from his wristband. If there was anything that said what time the message had been sent, Bodie didn’t know how to read it. Turon was inviting him to dinner. With Ray, if he and Ray were comfortable with that. Turon was planning to cook something English, probably toad-in-the-hole because he had to know what a dish with that name could possibly taste like.

Bodie said they’d love to come to dinner, but it couldn’t be that night because he and Ray already had plans. How about the next night?

Ray would be OK about dinner with Turon and Sasha, wouldn’t he? Bodie decided not to mention that Ray was looking for Turon. If Turon started looking for Ray too, that would probably make sure they’d miss each other.

Ray came back after just over an hour, carrying the jars of pickles. It seemed he’d decided what to wear, which was jeans and a cream-coloured shirt. The top three buttons of the shirt were undone, which Bodie guessed was just his habit. It wouldn’t be deliberate, to tease Bodie with a glimpse of his chest. Every hair that disappeared into the shadow under the cotton seemed to be urging Bodie to follow it, slide his hand into the gap.

Ray was fine about dinner with Turon and Sasha. Turon had refused to tell him anything about toad-in-the-hole beyond the name, and Bodie had fun doing the same.

Bodie made more tea, and they settled on the couch to work on Bodie’s Hass Embrun. Ray did better at sticking to the limits of West’s lesson, and he said Bodie’s pronunciation had improved noticeably. Bodie had added the two “husband” examples at the bottom of the page, and after they’d gone once through all of the examples, Bodie said, “Do you have a ceremony of some kind for a *tolmin* marriage? Or do you always just decide on it and then tell people?”

A nod and a slight wince. “There is a ceremony. There’s supposed to be one for an *esmana* marriage too. To bring a formal end to the betrothal period, so the couple are

finally allowed to take their masks off and be alone together. But of course we didn't even start the betrothal process, so the ceremony wouldn't make any sense."

Bodie frowned and asked what he meant by the betrothal period. Neither Malun nor Turon had mentioned it. Ray explained that it was basically a way of stopping a couple who had started the process of *russma* from having sex. Giving them a chance to get over the initial excitement of the attraction and find out if they actually got on each other's nerves or worse, in which case the *russma* would go into reverse. During the betrothal they had to wear masks when they were together, they had to be chaperoned. It usually lasted for at least two months, and then the marriage ceremony would take place when medical tests showed that the *russma* was complete for both of them.

"Y'know... now I think about it, Malun did say something about that. Though I'm sure he didn't mention 'betrothal'. But the techniques that Udom Kol invented. That he used with Embrun. That's what Malun was talking about?" Yes, it was. Bodie bit his lip and shook his head slowly. "Ray. You fucked up so badly."

Ray's laugh had more than a touch of hysteria in it, and when it ended, it ended abruptly. "How was I supposed to know? Whatever kind of pair-bonding you had, it couldn't possibly affect me. And nothing about you said you were qualified. Though, OK, there's no reason the changes with you would be the same as with us but – I'd seen some of your porn and you looked in the same range as those young men who clearly weren't married."

"I know. I know. It's your Anthropology people who really fucked up. But what about me would have said I was qualified? What changes were you looking for?"

A rueful-looking smile. "Your cock would look more like mine. Because our cocks change when we qualify. We can always tell from that whether a man is qualified, and can often tell even when he's dressed. Five years ago I was... Well, not as elegant as you but exactly the right type of pretty. I thought. And plenty seemed to think."

Pretty. Bodie raised an eyebrow. "So whenever you meet a new man, you have to check first that he's not qualified." A nod. "And if he is and you fancy each other, then you have to get betrothed and wait it out."

A tilt of the head that said "more or less". "Or you become lovers when at least one of you isn't qualified. That's very common. In which case you assume that if you do both qualify..." A small shrug. "Did they mention Gavio? Turon or Malun?" Bodie shook his head. "He's the man who's been living with me for the last four years. He's not qualified yet. We'd been assuming that when he did..." A long sigh. "The sex was good enough that I never worried..." His gaze travelled the length of Bodie's body then fixed back on his face. "That there might be a lot of important things missing."

"Did your family meet him?"

"Some of them. Ferros and her husband Homa when they came to visit a few years ago. It went – About as well as I'd expected."

"I didn't get as far as wondering if you had a serious boyfriend. Of course you did."

"And you didn't. From what Malun told me about... how much you didn't want people to know. Was there a woman you had plans with?"

“God, no. I had a new woman every... well, every couple of weeks. And my job was too dangerous for dragging anyone else into any plans. And I sure as hell wasn’t gonna give the job up.”

A long pause. When Ray spoke, his voice was very quiet. “But for me – Even before – You were going to follow me to wherever we put the base.”

Just as quietly: “Well... I already knew by then that I was in love with you. I thought you might be in love with me. That was – That had become the most important thing.”

More silence. Ray was frowning, thoughtful. “We don’t – We don’t talk in the way I think you do about what happens between two people. The state of their bio-chemistry. That’s what says everything important. And people in *tolmin* marriages... I think they all talk differently about why they’re together.”

So Ray was never going to say that he loved him. Yeah. Why would he need to?

“What sort of marriage do we have? With what I am? Am I your *iskolpa*? Or your *nespa*? Or what?”

A deep, uneven sigh. “It’s easier in English, when I can just call you my husband. We have words for... what you really are, but I’m not going to say them. I think of what we have as an *esmana* marriage. I think of you as my *iskolpa*. But it’ll be difficult to know what to tell people.”

Bodie nodded and went back to the lesson, starting again at the top of the sheet.

“Don’t suppose you’d fancy a gin ‘n’ tonic?”

Ray looked puzzled. “Why wouldn’t I? I told you I liked it.”

Bodie grinned. “Yeah, but – I’m still not sure how much of that night you really don’t want to think about. I was giving you an easy way to say no.”

“Oh!” He frowned hard for a few seconds, focussed on some point on the far side of the room. “I can think about most of it now. Because I didn’t know then. But what you did after – After you sucked me off.” His voice had gone very tense. “That does bother me. Because – Because I could see everything. I asked for that.” He swallowed several times, like his mouth had gone very dry. Bodie had a feeling he was fighting the urge to look down at his chest, where the drops of come had landed. Fighting the urge to shudder.

“OK. We’ll steer clear of... anything to do with that.” Fighting, himself, to sound brisk and practical.

Ray carried on looking hard at him, lips parted like he was about to say something else, then suddenly got to his feet. “I’ll make the drinks. Talk me through it. How much of everything.”

He was so surprised and pleased that Bodie had brought the glasses with him, it made up to Bodie for the near-shudder. Maybe seeing the glasses had had a similar effect on Ray. Ray probably wanted to be tactful. Didn’t he? But yes, it was more important for them both to know what they had to avoid.

Ray made a good gin and tonic. They sat close together on the couch, arms on each other's waists.

Bodie nodded towards his hi-fi. "I should see about getting that working. Could do with some music. Would Monday be too soon to take it to – Turon said there's some special department."

"Technology Interface. Monday should be fine. I can take it. You can get music through the computer, but – Well, it's our music. I don't know where you'd start, if you wanted to look for something you might like."

Bodie thought for a few moments. "What about the stuff Turon and Sasha play? I owe it to him to take an interest. Be good to know what I'm gonna have to be interested in."

Ray laughed, then leaned forward to put his glass on the coffee table and uncover the TV controls at the corner of the table. He explained to Bodie that he was using the screen to set up a list of about twenty pieces of music, and then he set it playing and turned the screen off.

Some of the combinations of notes sounded very strange to Bodie, and a couple of pieces were so jarring, both in tone and in rhythm, that he had to ask Ray to skip to the next piece almost immediately. But most of them were OK. Some were lively and catchy enough that he found himself nodding his head and tapping his foot, whereas others had moments that were strangely sad, or spooky, or angry. When a new piece started, Ray would give him some background on it: how old it was, how well known, what the words meant if there were any words, anything special about the performers. And then they'd get back to their conversation, because most of the music fit well enough as background.

After about five of Ray's explanations, Bodie said, "You know a lot about this stuff. D'you play music too?"

A shake of the head. "A bit as a kid. We all tried something. I picked all this up from Sasha and Turon. Deciding to take an interest, like you."

"They any good? I couldn't tell, the way Turon talked about it."

A shrug that suggested Bodie hadn't really asked the right question. "They're fun to listen to. They work hard at it, want to do the music justice, make you understand why they like it. But they don't get anxious about it so listening to them is just fun. Especially when you can see how much they enjoy playing together. And they talk a lot about each piece. I spent a lot of evenings with them on the journey out and they'd usually end up playing for an hour. That's how I know this." A small twist of the mouth. "It's not my favourite type of music, but I've got quite fond of some of it."

Bodie nodded. "Yeah. Can see I'll get used to it."

The computer was still working through the list of pieces when they finished dinner and settled back on the couch with their cans of lager. They agreed they were ready for a film, and Ray turned the screen on, stopped the music, and brought up the list of films they had in English. "Jaws" was the first one that really caught Bodie's eye. Ray had seen it and loved it, so that was easy. Before he started the film he used the controls in the table to dim the room lights, and shortly after the first shark attack he took off his shoes, tucked his legs up on to the couch, and leaned even more heavily against Bodie.

Bodie brought his arm up to Ray's shoulder, rested his hand lightly on Ray's head, and got partly hard at the thought that this was the first time he'd done this with a man. The most ordinary quiet evening in. But on a spaceship. And with an alien prince who was addicted to his body chemistry.

The film was even better than Bodie had remembered, though Ray's noisy enjoyment could maybe take some of the credit. Bodie waited for a lull to ask if Ray wanted another beer.

"Not a whole one. I'll steal some of yours."

Bodie kept the can resting low on his stomach. He didn't spend the rest of the film waiting for the next time Ray's fingers would brush against his to take the can, but every time it happened his cock got a pleasant jolt.

After the film Ray kept the lights low and put the music back on, with the volume lower than before. They talked about the film, about sharks, about films in general. Pen Embrun didn't have anything particularly close to a shark, but they did have large sea creatures, and they did have things, in the sea and on land, that could kill you and eat you. The Hailin did make films, including porn, but they hadn't been making straightforward action films lately. The closest they got was police dramas, which Ray couldn't watch because they got so much wrong, and which tended to be more about local politics and family dynamics than edge-of-the-seat action, anyway. There were films about the trading business, or that had the fleet as a setting, and those that treated it as an adventure were either old, or dealing with quite distant historical events. There was a taboo against fictional depictions of the Mabein, which meant that films about contact missions were guaranteed to be about minor characters. There was a hell of a lot of talking in Hailin films of the last thirty years. Ray had nearly given "Jaws" a miss on the journey out, because their linguists and anthropologists had rated it as "low content", with little to teach except that humans were unsurprisingly nervous of sharks.

Bodie sighed and frowned. "Sounds like it'll be years before I'll understand enough to really enjoy watching any of your films."

A grimace that admitted he was right. "On your own, maybe. But if there's ever one you're curious about, you know I'll be happy to watch it with you. Explain anything."

"I'd just – You said you didn't have any pictures of where you live. Is there a film that'd give me some idea what to expect? I don't know anything about Pen Embrun except... you have cars and ferries and some dangerous animals. And you don't have continents."

"Of course." His eyes widened like he'd just thought properly about how little Bodie knew. "There's nothing set in Parass. Its politics are too local for even our film-makers to be interested. But there are some set in Dishna where I work. There should be at least one on the computer. If it's the one I expect, you'll even get a glimpse of the ferry."

"Sounds good. And you've got a small flat with a balcony and a sea view?"

"Yeah. It's on the sixth floor of a building that's shaped like a pyramid. It's just got one bedroom so –" A brief pause. "I'll try to draw it for you, but not while you're looking and you've got to promise you won't laugh."

"I promise." And he meant it, but had to smile at Ray's attitude.

Ray glared at him suspiciously for a couple of seconds then gave a sharp sigh. "I do have pictures of the flat. But they all have Gavio in them. I can't show them to you." A long groan and he dragged his hand back over his head. "He'll be so angry when I tell him I'm married and he has to move out. I bet we won't find a single plate or glass left when we get home."

"You're not gonna tell him in person?"

A shake of the head. "I'll send him a message as soon as we get through the last jump-point. There's no point doing anything else. We can't be anything to each other after this." He tightened his grip around Bodie's waist, then slid his hand slowly down to Bodie's hip. Staring at him, very serious: "I want to lie down with you. But I don't know how much I can trust myself with. I don't want to –" He swallowed. "I don't want to disappoint you. To say or do anything worse than I already have."

Bodie closed his eyes briefly, imagining Ray pushing him away with a shudder. Or worse. But he had to face the idea of that, that it might happen. Or give up on the chance that they'd learn something new.

"Ray. I'm tough as old boots. Old army boots. I know we'll make some mistakes. But anything you want to try... Of course I do too."

Ray was looking at him carefully. Not obviously sceptical. Maybe uncertain if he should be letting anything convince him. He kept on looking at Bodie carefully as he slowly released his hold on Bodie's waist and got to his feet. He reached for Bodie's hand as it slid off his shoulder, and clasped it tight between both of his own. "I'm used to thinking there's a way back from most mistakes, but that doesn't feel enough now I'm having to think... What if I did something to make you wish you didn't love me?"

Bodie blinked. "Ray. Ray." He stood up, deliberately not making any use of Ray to pull himself up, because he didn't think that was why Ray had taken his hand. He put his right hand lightly on Ray's shoulder. "We'll be careful with each other. We will."

A long pause. Bodie returned the grip on his hand, which hadn't eased. Finally Ray said quietly, "I want to go to your bed. I want to kiss you. I want to hold you for as long as... it's right."

Just as quietly: "Then that's what we'll do."

While Bodie was sitting on the bed taking off his shoes, Ray went over to the wardrobe and opened it wide.

"What're you looking for?"

"Nothing, I just –" A shrug. "I just wanted to see your clothes, in your bedroom. And see what you'd brought. See what I could recognise from Turon's descriptions. You don't have any jeans."

"They don't suit me. I don't have your acrobat's hips." He held his arm out and in the next instant Ray had crossed the width of the bed and was wrapped around him.

"You've got a soldier's hips." The hand that been cupping Bodie's buttock shifted up a couple of inches, and the thumb rubbed slowly around the ridges of Bodie's pelvis.

"That's it. Made for marching for days."

“Or running for hours. You’re really going to run in the holds?”

“Gonna give it a try.”

“I guess I’ll come with you, then.” A brief shiver. “Wish I’d known to bring my tracksuit. I only packed for the gym. Not – fucking Arctic jogging.”

Bodie laughed. “Borrow my spare one. If it doesn’t fall off those hips.”

“Really?” Genuine surprise and maybe excitement. Did the Hailin never borrow clothes?

“Of course. Your brother bought it for me. Or the business did. So I guess it’s as much yours as it is mine.”

Bodie was expecting the mention of family, business and money to annoy Ray, but instead he just looked disappointed. “Oh. It’s the one you got this morning. It’s new.”

“You’ve got something against new tracksuits?”

“I thought – It would be something you’d worn.”

“Have my old one, then.”

“The one you were wearing yesterday? At Battersea?” Again, not the reaction Bodie was expecting. Reluctance. Apprehension.

“Yeah.”

“I – I don’t think I can. Your semen must have got on it. Yesterday. It must have. I can – Cope with that idea from the outside. But not from the inside. I’m sorry.”

Bodie shrugged. “And putting it through the laundry doesn’t make any difference?” He hadn’t yet, but he would first thing the next morning, whoever was going to be wearing it.

A very definite shake of the head. “I’d know.” A sigh. “I’m sorry, Bodie.”

“I know you are. But good thing you staked your claim to the new tracksuit now. Before I had a chance to come all over it.”

A gamble, that, and at first Ray did look shocked, but in the next second he was laughing, and then pulling Bodie into a kiss.

Apart from the fact that they were fully clothed and on top of the covers, it was similar to Monday night, when they’d finally got to bed. Long kisses, hands drifting, hips flexing. Rolling sometimes so one was on top, to have the weight for a few minutes. But with the temperature all very low. Not this time because they’d just had sex, but because they were wary of what they’d have to give up once they tipped over into open hunger.

It happened when Bodie was on top, and Ray’s hand, stroking slowly down his spine, took an angle that brought the length of one finger directly along Bodie’s cleft. At least one inch away from his hole. And no possibility, he was sure, of Ray parting him further, giving any real contact. But still he gasped, and turned properly hard, and suddenly urgently wanted to fuck – and Ray instantly snatched his hands away, held his arms up on the pillow like he was surrendering. Bodie moved his arms up, too, and linked their fingers. Which limited how much control he had, and put his whole weight full on Ray.

But that didn't seem to matter. They were struggling for movement, but they enjoyed the struggle. Ray managed to roll them over, get some time on top, and when Bodie started to roll them back Ray resisted, and started muttering and snarling in Hass Embrun. And that had to mean he wasn't serious, didn't want Bodie to understand and stop. They fought, like they'd fought at *gulshor*, with the same satisfaction and thrill in each other.

"So we know you can trust yourself to lie down with me." They had released each other's hands some minutes before, and were lying on their sides, knees between relaxed thighs. Ray just nodded, and gave a slow smile of such relief; Bodie had thought Ray might be feeling mostly smug, but no, not a trace of that. Bodie gave a quiet, contented sigh, and said, "A week ago, I'd have taken the worst kind of mickey out of anyone who talked about dry-humping as 'having sex'. I'd have said that if you know there's not gonna be any fucking, the most you could call it is 'fooling around'. But with you... Can't see how anything would feel like fooling. It's a big deal. Every time. Whatever I get to do to make you come. So any time you're in the mood for me to do that... Of course we're having sex."

Ray's smile had shifted from relief to amusement, and then to a beaming satisfaction. "Of course we are."

"You gonna spend the night?"

With just a slight shake of the head, like he'd been expecting the question: "I can't. I can trust some things. But not my unconscious."

"Yeah, I thought you'd say that. Guess we'll need to think about what we'll do when we get home. How we'll decide whose turn it is to sleep on the couch."

"We'll need to find somewhere larger." A small smile and a resigned sigh. "I finally feel OK about asking the family for help. About using the family money. Since it's for you."

"Glad to hear it. What's the point in marrying an alien prince if you can't live in at least a two-bedroom palace?"

Ray looked thoroughly annoyed but then gave a grunt of concession. "Yes, I suppose I couldn't argue with Turon about what we are. Hell, I know we are. That's what I needed to get away from." A brief pause. "And I know Turon and West are fine. More than fine. The main things that bother me are at home. Or deep in our history. They wouldn't be obvious to an outsider." Another grunt. "Or maybe to anyone who isn't me."

Bodie shook his head. "Think I can imagine. If it comes to that, my brother didn't run away from home. I mean, he didn't react like I did. You know..." He pulled his head back slightly, to be sure Ray could see how serious he was. "I do get a bit of a kick out of the alien prince thing. Can't say I don't. But it doesn't mean I expect anything. From you or the family or... Anything."

Equally serious: "I know. I saw how you lived. I know you were happy with that. And I know I can give you at least as much as that." A sudden, broad smile. "But with better weather."

Bodie returned the smile, and they pulled each other into a kiss. After a few minutes, though, Bodie felt Ray growing tense and he pulled back. “What’s wrong? You’re practically squirming.”

“I – I –” A jerky swallow. “You have to go and shower. I can’t feel it but – I can’t think of anything now except... how it must be soaking through.”

Bodie was on his feet by the side of the bed, not even aware of having made the decision to move. “Alright. Yes. OK.” He thought he had his voice and face under control. He sounded calm, didn’t he? No tremor there.

It was Ray who was looking upset. Getting to his knees, starting twice to reach out, but letting his hand drop. “Bodie, I -”

Bodie didn’t want to hear it. Yes, he was sorry. They knew that. “No, I get it.” Turning away to walk around the bed to the wardrobe to get a fresh set of clothes.

“You don’t have to get dressed again. Not this late when you’ll just - You could wear your robe. If you brought it.”

It was in the bathroom. He supposed it did cover him at least as well as his *gulshor* kit, but it was a reminder of Monday night that he didn’t want right then, even if Ray didn’t care. “Rather get dressed.”

“I’ll...” A long pause. “Should I go?”

Bodie turned from the wardrobe to look at him, pair of brown cords in hand. “No. You know we can’t – We’d neither of us get any sleep. Look. Go and put the music back on. I won’t be long.”

Ray nodded, opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but then shut it with an audible click, nodded again, and stepped off the bed and went through to the living-room. By the time Bodie had collected a T-shirt and underwear, the music had started. One of the lively pieces. Completely against his mood. Well, it would probably be over by the time he was done.

He took about eight minutes. He found Ray sitting on the very edge of the coffee table, gaze fixed on the door to the bedroom. The music was much slower now. Smooth. Romantic, if the Hailin had romance. When Ray stood up, Bodie saw he was holding the Peninsular War book. Clutching it, back facing out. Not like he’d had it open. Just like he needed to hold something.

Bodie took the book from him, gently, dropped it on the couch, then pulled him into a loose hug. The sigh of relief was hot on his neck.

After about a minute: “I didn’t know I was going to react like that.”

“Yeah, I guessed. Me neither.”

Another long pause. “What should I -? What could I do differently?”

Be human? Or just bloody get over it? “Nothing. That I can think of. Anyway, we know now. That we can’t take too long afterwards. You need me to shower.”

An unsteady sigh then Ray kissed his cheek. “Thank you.” A near-whisper against his lips. “For not letting me leave. I didn’t know – I would’ve –” A brief, harsh laugh.

“Probably been dragging Turon out of bed at two in the morning. Telling him he had to keep me company again. Except of course this time I wouldn’t be able to tell him anything about what was wrong.”

Bodie pulled back to look at him. “What have you told them? About what we’ve been doing?”

A small shake of the head. “Nothing, really. They know we’re having sex but I told them we’re doing something that isn’t... that isn’t...” He looked away. “That isn’t bestiality.” He closed his eyes briefly then looked back at Bodie. “*Keklinas*. That’s what we call it. So they don’t think I’m – But otherwise I told them it’s private.”

“OK.” Jesus, their imaginations must be running riot. Yeah, I’m having sex with the *glarus* but really I’m not. Though maybe they wouldn’t bother to wonder, since it was Malun and Turon and between them they had only the dimmest flicker of a sex drive. And it didn’t matter what anyone imagined. Ray wasn’t going to tell them. He took his hands off Ray’s back, moved them to his shoulders, and leaned forward to cover and part Ray’s mouth. A shallow kiss, but sweet, making them both sigh. After maybe half a minute, Bodie slowly pulled away and said, “Now I think you can leave.”

“You don’t want to sit? Listen to the music.” Not arguing. Just checking.

“Not really.”

A nod, and Ray took a step away and turned to shut off the music. Then a few more steps away, though still facing Bodie. “But first can I – I want to read your books. Can I borrow one now?” A tilt of the head to the one on the couch.

“God, don’t start with the History. It’d bore you rigid. Look, why don’t you...” He went over to the bookshelves, and Ray followed. “Turon picked out a bunch of cop novels for me. Start with one of those, see how it all compares. I put the crime stuff up here.”

Ray looked interested in the idea. He scanned the spines, then said, “Choose one for me. I know you’ve not read them, but I want one that’s your choice.”

“In that case...” Bodie did some scanning of his own, pulling a few out to check the covers. The one he was looking for turned out to be called “The Glitter Dome”. “The cover says the guy who wrote this actually used to be a cop. I’m damn sure none of the other writers ever were. It’s American so they won’t be like the English cops I’ve dealt with. Be interesting to see what you make of it, though.”

“Yeah, it will.” Ray read the back cover, flicked through the first few pages. “This looks really different. Nothing like the films at home.”

They kissed again at the door. “I’ll come and collect you for *gulshor* at quarter to twelve, then.” Ray paused with his index finger over the button. “Unless... What about breakfast?”

Bodie thought for a few seconds, mainly about the timing for the load of laundry he needed to do. “Yeah, OK. Come over at eight. You drink coffee? That is, do you drink it when you’re not pretending to be with the Foreign Office?”

He did. For a second he looked like he was going to say something else, but a slight movement of the head, as if shaking the idea away, a broad smile, and he was gone.

Chapter 9

Ray stayed in Bodie's quarters and read while Bodie had his lesson. The lesson was numbers, telling the time, and time-periods like days and years. Their number system was base 12, which West thought was really going to confuse Bodie, but Bodie thought he'd get the hang of it. He wouldn't think of it like numbers, just like old pence and shillings, or inches and feet.

Their year was a bit longer than Earth's, and their weeks were nine days long with a three-day weekend – except for the week of midwinter, which usually had five days but which increased to six as often as necessary to keep the calendar consistent with the planet's orbit. The year was divided into twelve months, and the months had either three, four or five nine-day weeks, depending on how many of Udom Kol and Embrun's children had been born during that month. When people used "month" in a general sense, they usually meant "about four weeks", the midwinter week wasn't included in any month, and there wasn't a convenient rhyme or anything like that to remind you how many weeks there were in a particular month; West said that no one would need a reminder, because every Hailin grew up knowing those children's birthdays just as well as they knew the birthdays of their siblings and parents.

As for the ship, the crew didn't get days off – they had their shifts every day – but all of the ships did keep to a weekly schedule, with social events and different food at the weekends: people liked having the structure. That day was At Laura Var, the third day of the working week (or the first of the two Wednesdays, in Bodie's mind).

Bodie had a lot of questions, and this time West had set up a microphone in the study room so he could add examples on the computer during the lesson. They over-ran by nearly half an hour, but by the end Bodie knew how to say "The journey from Earth to Pen Embrun takes seven weeks and six days, which we call two months" and "I am playing *gulshor* with my *iskolpa* in an hour". Or, at least, he half-knew how to say it.

Ray insisted that Bodie keep the score for the game out loud in Hass Embrun, which Bodie noisily blamed afterwards for his narrow defeat. "You fucking knew how distracting that was going to be." An unrepentant shrug said Ray knew perfectly well.

They'd had an audience for about ten minutes near the start. It was Ray who noticed them: West, Turon and Sasha, up in the gallery. He pointed them out to Bodie, they all waved, and the game continued. So now Turon wasn't the only Hailin who'd seen them together.

Again, they had sex in Bodie's cubicle. They weren't wary now of the moment when they'd have to take their hands off each other. Bodie could see how they'd soon be looking forward to it, how it would add to the excitement. And he could also see that Ray would always find a way to make dry-humping sexy.

They weren't hungry enough for lunch, but on the way to the port-side lounge they stopped in the galley and Ray grabbed a couple of bananas and a couple of pears.

"Y'know, I'm ready to try your food. Y'don't have to cater to me every second." Mollycoddle me.

Slight surprise. "I wasn't. This is what they've got at the moment. If we find local fruit we like, we always use it. It's good to have things fresh."

That made sense. “But I am ready. How about we start with lunch tomorrow?”

It was agreed. They got to the lounge just after 2.30, found the couch with the best view of Britain, and Ray settled in the circle of Bodie’s arm. It turned out this was Ray’s first experience of being in orbit around an alien planet. He’d been in space several times, to the shipyards, and to the station next to the first jump-point, but this was the first time he’d been on a journey that involved going through any jump-points. Without the jump-points, the journey between Pen Embrun and Earth would take seven thousand years.

Seven thousand years? Bodie couldn’t imagine that. “What’re they like, then, the jump-points?”

After some moments of frowning, Ray said, “Everything I’ve heard says they’re like nothing. But it’s a nothing that – Makes some people hallucinate. At least, we think they’re hallucinating. So we black out all of the observations windows when we go through them. And going through doesn’t feel like anything.” A shrug. “It’s like going through a door.”

With a slow shake of the head: “Ray, y’don’t have to work so hard to make space travel sound exciting. I’ve already signed up for the trip.”

Ray seemed to need a few seconds to be sure Bodie wasn’t serious, then he gave a small, lopsided smile. “It used to be... very exciting. When we first found the jump-points about two hundred years ago. A lot of Bakkels... never came back.” A sharp sigh. “And other people too, of course. But we knew that, wherever they were, they had at least two members of the Mabein with them. They’d find some way home. On some plane of existence. And that was enough to make people willing to try again. It took us fifty years to really learn how to use the jump-points.”

“How many Bakkels didn’t come back?”

“Twenty three. And another seven came back with terrible injuries. There were a lot more Bakkels back then. Breeding couples would try to have twelve children. Because Udom Kol and Embrun had six pairs of twins.”

Twenty three in fifty years. “Are they famous? The Bakkels who didn’t come back?”

“I know all their names. Every Bakkel knows all of them. But no one else does, because officially there weren’t any Bakkels on any of the ships. You see, in the crew-lists, there were only the names of the Mabein that they wore, and they never appeared in public as themselves when they were onboard. That’s why at least two always went: to keep each other company. They are remembered, especially on the day that we have each year for... the casualties of our work in space, but they’re remembered through the other crew members. We have a memorial in the palace for each member of the Mabein, and it gives the name of each ship that was lost, and the date of the last contact, and the names of the crew. No one ever talks about the fact that each ship in the list also means a lost Bakkel, but it’s obvious in a thousand other ways that no one forgets it.”

Ray was proud of the lost Bakkels. He’d needed to get away from his family and its history, but he was proud of how far his family had gone in doing their duty. And why wouldn’t he be? Bodie was about to comment on that when a man in a group of three people that was passing by greeted Ray, and then said something in Hass Embrun in which Bodie thought he recognised “speak”.

The man seemed perfectly friendly but Bodie felt Ray go tense. It didn't show in his face or voice, though, as he replied with something about "my *nespa*", "Bodie", "speak", and "Hass Embrun". The three Hailin all immediately looked at Bodie, with a mixture of surprise, puzzlement and speculation. Bodie smiled slightly, nodded, and gave the all-purpose Hass Embrun greeting. They all smiled and nodded back, said it was good to meet him, and then quickly moved on.

Ray continued looking at them for several seconds, then turned back and stared out of the window. He was still very tense, and now Bodie could hear his breathing. They needed to talk about what exactly had just happened, but it should wait until they got back to their quarters.

"So who was that?" Mild interest, no hint of anything more.

A breath in, then slowly out, and Ray turned to him and explained that the man who'd spoken was Pamne, who worked in the galley, and who he knew from sometimes helping out there and from the ship's *gulshor* league. For the other two, he only knew one, and that was very slightly. By the time they moved on to talking generally about the organised sports on the ship, Ray had relaxed completely.

Just before three o'clock, the vibration of the ship changed, and ten minutes later it changed again and Bodie was able to see steadily more and more of Europe. They talked about places Bodie had travelled, stories he'd heard from other soldiers and around Whitehall. When the moon came into view Bodie fell silent, then got to his feet and went right up to the window, pressed one palm against the glass. Ray came to stand next to him, put an arm around his waist, and they watched in silence as the craters slowly became clearer until they seemed close enough to touch, and then suddenly they were past the moon.

They sat down again and Bodie asked if Pen Embrun had a moon. It turned out it had three, all fairly active volcanically, and Ray told him facts, and legends, and customs - and talked about how much he was looking forward to standing on the balcony with him at night, and looking up at the eruptions while listening to the waves on the beach. It was one of the things he'd been missing most.

Bodie guessed that the thing he'd actually been missing was watching the volcanic moons with Gavio. Maybe it had been something regular with them, almost a ritual. With sex, maybe? If the balcony wasn't overlooked. From what he'd seen, Ray enjoyed having to be quiet.

It hadn't occurred to him before: that if they did live in Ray's flat when they got to Pen Embrun, they'd be living in a place where Ray had had a hell of a lot of sex with this Gavio. In every room. Up against the front door. And with plenty of other men too, probably, but Gavio was the name he knew. The one Ray had been expecting to marry. It felt strange to know about Gavio - even with the small amount he did know. In the past, with men, all he'd know was that they wanted to fuck - and then to act like it had never happened.

He didn't think it bothered him, the idea of Ray and Gavio in the flat. If anything, it turned him on. And even if it did bother him, it wouldn't make any sense at all to be jealous, because Ray couldn't have sex now with anyone except him. As it had in the pub, that thought triggered a great surge of possessiveness, and he tightened his hold

slightly around Ray's shoulder, and closed his eyes for a few seconds as he felt Ray lean even more heavily against him. And as strong as the possessiveness, a protectiveness. He would make Ray forget completely that he was married to a *glarus*. He would never do anything to cause Ray a moment's doubt. Ray would introduce him as his *iskolpa* without thinking twice about it.

The Earth looked slightly larger than a pea. The blueness and whiteness still leapt out against the dark, but there was no chance of making out any features.

"Think I've seen enough. No need to wait till it just disappears."

"OK. Go home? Have some tea?"

If there was tea, then "home" must be Bodie's quarters. Bodie liked that. Might be interesting, though, to see how long it would be before he got to see Ray's quarters.

Ray made the tea, checking with Bodie how much milk to use. He'd already noticed that Bodie took one sugar.

"Was it what you'd expected? Leaving orbit?"

Bodie thought about it. "It was like leaving a port. Y'know, mostly gradual. Which is what I should've known to expect. I thought it'd be more dramatic. Where you wish there was a big soundtrack."

A brief smile. "I thought you might be... sad."

Bodie shrugged. "I thought I might be too. But you're very distracting company." Not said to be flirtatious. More about how he couldn't imagine how talking to Ray could ever bore him. But he had no complaints when Ray gave one of his wicked grins and pulled him into a kiss.

Bodie didn't want sex just then, though. Apart from anything else, sex with Ray meant a shower and a change of clothes, and he wasn't used to doing so much laundry. He'd rather wait until later, make the shower part of going to bed. Maybe Ray was expecting more, but he didn't seem puzzled or disappointed when Bodie kept the kiss short.

"What was it the guy said to you in the lounge? The guy who works in the galley?"

Again, Ray went tense. More even than in the lounge. "He was joking about the fact that I was still speaking an Earth language. Even though the mission was over."

Bodie nodded. "So you told him your *nespa* didn't speak Hass Embrun?"

A twitch. "Yeah. I—" A long sigh. "Everyone onboard knows that humans are dangerous to qualified people, and that can only have to do with *russma*. If I talk as if it's a *tolmin* marriage then they won't — They won't — No one will definitely know what happened. They won't have to... work out how much to pity me. How to act towards me." He suddenly twisted on the couch so his whole body was turned towards Bodie, and clamped his hands painfully tightly around Bodie's left arm: one on his bicep, the other just below the elbow. "You know I don't pity myself. Don't you?"

Bodie took at least five seconds trying to figure out the best thing to say. Something that Ray would really believe. Finally, slowly: "I think I make you as happy as you make me."

A relief so deep it looked painful. Felt painful too, as the hands tightened further on Bodie's arm. Bodie took a deep breath and held it, but almost immediately the grip eased and the hands were stroking his muscles instead.

Ray saying it was a *tolmin* marriage would probably also save the crew from having to work out how to behave towards a *glarus*. They'd know he was human, but if Ray was clearly happy, and calling it a *tolmin* marriage, then they'd guess that the worst hadn't happened after all, the danger wasn't what they'd thought. He placed his hand on top of Ray's on his lower arm. "Sounds like you did the smart thing, putting it like that."

A small smile. "Actually, I didn't say you didn't speak Hass Embrun. Just... 'hardly any'."

"Just enough to understand most of what you said back."

A nod and a broader smile. "D'you want to practise some more? We're on Pen Embrun time now. We could start with that."

They took two bottles of wine along to dinner, and a box of chocolate mints. Again, Turon had done a good job; Bodie had wondered if the batter might turn out too dry, but it was impressively spongy and moist. Turon had also made roasted-onion gravy, peas, and mashed potatoes. In return, Bodie should have been able to tell them how sausages in batter came to be called "toad-in-the-hole" but he really had no idea. And, no, the English had never had the habit of eating toads, as far as he knew.

It was a good evening. Sasha was quiet again at the beginning, but soon started joining in and laughing her musical laugh, which got more and more full-throated as they made their way through the wine.

They agreed early on that Turon and Sasha would play some music after the meal. Ray explained immediately that Bodie had already heard some Hailin music, and there were some pieces Turon and Sasha should definitely play for him, and some they should definitely not. Sasha's instrument looked exactly like a flute to Bodie, and if he had to describe Turon's, he'd say it was a triangular banjo with an extremely long neck. The sound was much richer than a banjo's, though, and with its complex patterns in deep-brown and golden woods, it did look thoroughly expensive.

Bodie really didn't have much of a memory for music and he'd wondered if he would recognise the pieces when Turon and Sasha played them and how disappointed they would be if he didn't. Ray too, after he'd given such a detailed description of Bodie's reactions. As it turned out, there was one he didn't recognise and one he thought he recognised but shouldn't have, and for the rest he was fine. They played a couple of the lively pieces that had him tapping his feet, and also the saddest. Turon's singing voice wasn't very strong – Sasha's seemed much more confident – but you soon forgot to be worried for him because he believed so completely in what he was singing.

The first time he'd seen Turon and Sasha together, Bodie had thought of them as best friends. Best friends who were very occasionally in the mood to have sex. But seeing them playing their music together, the smooth, wordless communication, the open appreciation of what the other was doing – it looked much more like love. He would bet anything that the times they were in the mood for sex were always after they'd been playing music.

Being part of two couples on a dinner date. Feeling a lump in his throat as he listened to his brother-in-law singing a song about failing to keep a promise to a friend. A month earlier such an ordinary domestic evening would have seemed as impossible for William Bodie as getting to fly over the far side of the moon. A week and just over three hours ago he'd had his first sight of Ray, and now he had a husband who fascinated him and a family he genuinely liked.

There was one awkward point in the evening, and that was caused by Bodie, very deliberately. He chose a moment over the coffee and mints to remind Turon that he hadn't yet met Ward.

"You told Malun on Tuesday you were planning to introduce us over drinks. 'In a few days,' I think he said. It's been a few days, so d'you wanna set a date?"

They all looked at Ray. His expression was both resigned and smug. "You know you're making a big mistake. But sure, get it over with."

"Thanks." Mostly sincere. He'd been expecting to get sworn at. To Turon: "Has anyone mentioned it to Ward? Us meeting over drinks."

Turon had, on Wednesday, when he'd asked Ward to set up an English version of the computer menus. Ward was very interested in meeting Bodie.

"But that was when Ray wasn't speaking to me. Does he know that's changed?"

Turon blinked a couple of times, and his mouth tightened fractionally. Either trying not to laugh, or not to look at Ray. Or both. "He knows." A gesture of the head towards the secret corridor. "I saw him this morning in our galley. In fact, he reminded me about the drink." A very brief glance at Ray, then a smile at Bodie like they'd just shared a private joke. "Around seven would be good for him. Any day."

They agreed that they would try for the next day. Turon would check with Ward and West and send messages to confirm.

Back in Bodie's quarters, Ray set a list of some of his favourite music playing, then said, "Did you want us to have an argument in there? About Ward?" He seemed more curious than annoyed.

"No. I wanted to be sure you knew exactly how it happened. Turon arranging the drinks. So you didn't think there was anything more to it."

A nod of concession. "Fuck knows what you'll talk to him about. He has nothing to say."

"I dunno either. But I have to thank him. For what he did with the computer. Don't wanna risk just bumping into him in the corridor. Most likely when I'm with you."

"We'd just ignore each other. Like we always do."

"Yeah. Well, before I start ignoring him, I need to thank him."

A twitch of the eyebrows, then Ray changed the subject to the music. When they sat down, Ray put his arm around Bodie's shoulder and pulled him close. Up to then it had always been the other way around. Bodie relaxed and gave Ray his weight, happy enough with the idea of talking even more about music. But Ray had stopped talking as soon as they sat down. He was restless, his hands and knees flexing to some rhythm

that had nothing to do with the music. He had an erection, too, that was growing steadily. Bodie decided to wait. Not try to make conversation, even when a change in the music gave him an excuse. Bodie quite liked the music. So far it seemed similar to the most cheerful ones from Turon, but maybe Ray had been thinking of that when he set up this list.

Bodie's wait came to an end shortly after the start of the third piece of music, when Ray suddenly flipped up onto his knees, straddling Bodie's left thigh. His hands gripped the back of the couch and he pulled himself hard against Bodie, forcing Bodie to tilt his head back.

With a clenched jaw: "You can't like him. My husband shouldn't ever like him."

Still the business with Ward, then. Bodie brought his hands up to cup and stroke Ray's buttocks. He wanted to make the erection nudge even more insistently against his sternum, but held back, kept the pressure light. One of these days, though, he would have Ray properly angry with him, for more than just a few minutes, and not feel in the mood to calm him down.

"Look, I'll be polite. But secretly of course I'll be thinking he's an asshole." Secretly, he probably wouldn't be telling Ray what he really thought of Ward.

A sigh, and Ray briefly closed his eyes. Almost a whisper: "Don't listen to anything he says about me."

"Ray. I'm not gonna be asking him. Am I? And Turon wouldn't let him."

"No. He wouldn't." Ray nodded a few times, then gave a slow smile. Bodie thought he was going to lean down for a kiss and parted his lips in readiness, but Ray stayed looking down at him. The pressure between their bodies had hardly eased, either, and now Bodie's hands were coaxing as they explored.

With the next change of the music, Ray sighed again and his mouth twisted. "I should be telling you that you can't be touching me like that now. You know I'm too aroused. This – I can't think of anything now except sex."

Bodie stilled his hands, hoping that would be enough. That this time he wouldn't have to stop completely. "D'you want to go to bed?"

A pause, then Ray's jaw clenched again, and he said something slow and emphatic and reluctant in Hass Embrun. It had "I" and "you", and Bodie guessed it was about wanting and fucking. About something they could not possibly do. Afterwards Ray closed his eyes, and turned his head hard away.

Bodie let his hands drop to the couch. It wasn't fair to push Ray. Not smart, either, to be spending time on hoping. After about ten seconds, with Ray's eyes still closed, he said, "Well, d'you mind if I wanna go to bed? My cock is complaining that it's so far from yours."

A long stare. Serious, but apart from that Bodie couldn't tell. Finally: "Of course I want to go to bed. I'll always want to go to bed." And he stepped off the couch, and reached for Bodie's hands to pull him up, and led the way to the bedroom.

After the first long kiss, Bodie said, "I've been thinking... Maybe it's best if we always make this the end of the evening. I mean you leave. As soon as you start to feel uncomfortable, start worrying about my – So there's no wondering if I'll get dressed again after I've showered. I'll just go to bed. And we'll know you didn't let yourself get too uncomfortable. And we're both fine."

"Yeah, I – I'd imagined us always kissing goodnight at the door. But we'll find something else that says that my day begins and ends with you."

Another kiss, longer, more hungry. "Will you always come for breakfast, then?" He would. "Is this where you live now? Is this where people should expect to find you? Except at night."

It was. "I'll keep my clothes there. But I'll move everything else in here. Not that I brought much. I didn't want to feel at home."

"We'll do that tomorrow. Tell Turon and the rest." And just on Friday Ray had been hesitating about promising that they'd meet every day. No, he shouldn't be hoping. But it had to be a good sign. And some day he'd tease Ray with the fact that he hadn't wondered for a second what Bodie thought about the move. But not right now. It was healthy, Ray able to take his *glarus* husband for granted.

It looked like five minutes was Ray's limit for feeling comfortable afterwards. But it was smooth this time. He pulled away, saying he had to leave, then knelt by the side of the bed to take the last kiss of the day. They were content. Maybe even content enough to stop all of Ray's anxiety about Ward.

The next day was a busy day. It all still felt like a Monday to Bodie, the beginning of the week, and he had to keep telling himself it was actually At Pontal, the second Wednesday. They worked more on Hass Embrun numbers over breakfast, and also while they were moving Ray's things into Bodie's quarters. He had about twenty books, a couple of pictures and potted plants, and some drinks, snacks and crockery.

During the lesson, Ray took Bodie's stereo to Technology Interface. The lesson was about wanting and liking. Bodie had "I like your brother and I want him to fuck me again" running through his head for most of the lesson, but he knew there was no danger of accidentally saying it out loud.

West was looking forward to the drinks that evening. The last he'd heard, Ward hadn't confirmed yet, but Turon was expecting to have things arranged by lunchtime.

"How easy is he to talk to? Ward." Bodie shrugged and shook his head. "I don't know a thing about maths. Or art. And obviously we can't talk about Ray."

"Ask what art he's bought recently. About the artists he's met. He'll show you photographs. He doesn't expect anyone to know about anything. But he likes to try to explain why he's excited about the latest pieces."

"Thanks. Is he – D'you get on with him OK?" Not fair, to ask the boy that about his brother. But Bodie wanted as much information as he could get.

A sharp look, like maybe he was trying to size Bodie up. Wondering how much Bodie expected him to say. But then a slight shrug. “Yes. Fairly well. Certainly not badly. But I’m much closer to Ferros and Turon, even though the age difference is even larger. Ward can be impatient. He hates having his time wasted. But he’s generous. He’ll always try to help if he sees it’s needed. Of course I’ve hardly seen him during the last five years. That’s been one of the good things about this mission. Spending time with him and Turon. And Ray. Now that I’m so much older.” Suddenly he was at his most intense. “Don’t ask me about him and Ray. I won’t say anything about that.”

“Fair enough.” Bodie hadn’t been planning to ask. He wasn’t ready to hear anything really bad about either of them. “So how d’you say, ‘My brother likes to buy art.’?” They added that to the lesson, and then “My brother wants to show his art to everyone in a museum”, which was mainly West’s suggestion, with “in a museum” from Bodie.

Bodie had assumed they’d be going to the galley for lunch, but Ray thought it would be better if they ate in their quarters. “You might just want to spit it out. And you don’t want the galley staff to see that. Believe me, they take things personally.” Ray went to the galley on his own and brought back three containers, with a salad, a risotto-looking mush, and slices of different types of bread with a choice of five things to put on them.

Ray explained all of the dishes to Bodie first, including when and whereabouts they normally ate it. There was meat in the mush and the bread-toppings – mostly fish in a range of states of rehydration – and that was what Bodie was most nervous of trying. But it turned out to be the salad that had him making rasping noises and needing urgently to wash the taste from his mouth. Unfortunately, the salad contained some very common ingredients, and Ray insisted that they needed to know if there were any that he could eat. Bodie gave himself a couple of minutes to recover with the mush (*tugela*, it was called), and with a dab of butter and some pepper it was really pretty good), and in the meantime Ray washed the dressing off the salad and lined up a sliver of each ingredient that he could pick out. First they established that the problem wasn’t with the dressing, and then they gradually narrowed it down to a type of leaf (hideously bitter) and to a pulpy fruit that tasted a kind of smoky sweet but somehow had Bodie’s system screaming that it was being poisoned.

They agreed it would be best to do some systematic tests, thoroughly separate from any mealtime, but Bodie said he’d be happy with the *tugela* and the bread for lunch for now – for the rest of the journey, even. “It’s being in the army. Variety in food just goes to the bottom of your list of priorities.”

Ray nodded, looking convinced. “Then you’d be OK if I cook us that spaghetti puttanesca this evening?” Bodie would.

The next item on their schedule was at half past one (or 1:36, as Bodie reckoned the Hailin clock): the meeting in the lower hold for the officer to show Turon how to deal with the lighting. They’d decided over dinner that they should be there too, and take their first run, so the officer could see that the effort would get put to use.

Turon was already there when they arrived. He raised his eyebrows when he saw what Ray was wearing, then shook his head. “I don’t know why I should be surprised to see you’re sharing clothes already. That’s exactly the kind of couple you are.”

Totally wrapped up in each other? Or desperate to seize on any way to get something that belonged to one in contact with the bare skin of the other? But of course Turon didn't know about that. What they could and couldn't do.

"You're just jealous. Because there's nothing of Sasha's that would fit you." Ray was grinning, radiating such satisfaction. With himself, maybe even more than with Bodie. Turon could have punctured that immediately with the news that the drinks were confirmed for seven that evening, but instead he waited until after the officer had come and gone.

The lighting configuration was easy to bring up. You selected *ranomufan gar* ("Running Circuit 1") from a menu on a control panel outside the door. This menu was all in Hass Embrun, but the range of options looked so small Bodie didn't think he could go far wrong. As far as the officer was concerned, the most important thing was turning the lights off afterwards. Bodie could tell his priorities from his expression and tone of voice as he demonstrated and plunged the holds back into pitch blackness, and then Turon explained that if anyone in his department found the lights on, they would assume that one of the runners ("crazy runners", possibly, in the original) was still in the holds. And that could waste his department's time and potentially even be dangerous. He insisted that all three show that they were clear on the procedure, then accepted their thanks with a brisk nod, and took his leave with a decidedly sceptical smile.

The cold was worse than Bodie had remembered, but after a few minutes they'd warmed up enough that Ray stopped complaining. Ray had looked at the day's lesson on the computer, and they practised as they ran, with Ray bringing in things from previous lessons, and making Bodie count their paces to have him deal with larger numbers. The brother/art examples didn't come up. Maybe Ray had looked at the lesson before West had added them. Or maybe it was just his normal routine of ignoring anything to do with Ward.

They'd kept their *gulshor* court booked for three, and this time Bodie won, and fairly comfortably. He'd thought he might, playing so soon after the run, as Ray hadn't looked like being one of the handful of people who could match him for stamina. Ray took the defeat well, was sincerely impressed, but once they were back in their quarters and Bodie had made tea, he suggested that they leave more time in future between the running and the *gulshor*. After some discussion they decided to book the *gulshor* court for 6:36 every morning (when it would definitely be available), making that their morning shower, and take their run in the afternoon.

"We gonna have sex after the run? I mean, if we'll be having a shower then anyway." There he was, being practical Bodie again. Malun would be so proud.

"I hope so." Briefly he raised his hand to touch Bodie's hand as it lay on his shoulder, then tilted his head to rub his cheek against Bodie's arm. "I supposed there'll be days when one of us isn't that much in the mood. Or both of us. Can't imagine it right now but..." Bodie tilted his head in turn, felt the softness of Ray's curls against his face – and was pierced from throat to balls by a bolt of love and need and sheer good fortune. They sighed together, the same sigh, and Bodie wondered if it felt like that to Ray, too. That hot, sweet shock. Maybe it didn't, with all the differences in the way their brains and bodies were wired. But whatever Ray was feeling, he could be sure it was something good.

After some more sighing, Ray raised his hand, pressed his lips to the corner of Bodie's mouth and said, "No matter how much sex we're in the mood for or when. I want to end each day by lying down with you." Bodie smiled and nodded, and they moved that fractional distance into the kiss.

"Turon's right. We are the worst kind of cooing, gooey-eyed couple."

Ray laughed, almost a snort. "We've just got married. Of course we are. He'd be worrying if we weren't."

"Does he worry? A lot?" Maybe more than he needed to about West, for example?

Ray thought about it. "About normal, I'd say, for an oldest twin. Lamon's our main worrier. And speaking of Turon, I should go and get the puttanesca stuff from him."

Bodie took a load to the laundry, then managed to get Ray's music playing, and was sitting reading when Ray came back. Ray was about a quarter of the way through the cop novel. He said he was fascinated by it (and, yeah, a bit horrified) but he was going to save all of this questions until he'd finished it.

They were both pretty focussed readers. Ray looked up from his book and raised an eyebrow when Bodie's wristband beeped, but when Bodie got to his feet saying, "Laundry," he just nodded and returned to the book.

Bodie put the clothes away as soon as he got back, then joined Ray again on the couch. "I just did my own. I wasn't sure if you'd want me to -"

A very definite shake of the head. "No. Don't. Please. We need to keep them separate. It's..." He swallowed. "It's the -"

"It's the semen thing. Yeah. I'd pretty-much guessed it would be. Y'can't have that... soaking through all your clothes." And this time Ray did shudder – just one twitch, but violent – and Bodie wondered why he couldn't have kept his fucking mouth shut. Especially when it was so close to seven when he would have to leave. He was almost wishing now that he could tell Turon exactly where he and Ray were with sex. That the problems weren't so painfully private. Be good to get some of that oldest-brother advice. Except of course that Turon was younger than he was.

"You know how my mind works, don't you?" Ray's voice was very quiet.

"Yeah. Think I do."

Nodding slowly, over and over. "I don't know about yours. You look simple but... All I'm sure of is that you'll do the brave thing."

Bodie blinked hard, several times, eyes prickling at how they'd changed everything for each other, the pleasure and the shock of it. A deep breath, then he leaned forward and put his hand over Ray's, on top of the book. "Well, I didn't know you were going to say that."

Ray shifted his hand slightly, rubbed his thumb over Bodie's knuckles. "Of course you need to thank Ward. It was good of him to help us."

They held the moment for about five seconds then Bodie narrowed his eyes. “Now you’re just trying to confuse me. Throw me off the scent.”

Ray laughed then shook Bodie’s hand off. “Go. Leave me to read about your fucked-up cops in peace.” Bodie left, taking the secret corridor for a change because it felt like that kind of event.

Ward was already in Turon’s quarters when Bodie arrived. The Bakkels weren’t strong on family resemblances anyway, but it took an effort to accept that this man was Ray’s twin. He was an inch or so taller than Bodie and Turon, but gangly with it, slightly uncoordinated, and with a large, beaky nose and prominent Adam’s apple. He wasn’t ugly, not by any means, but the other Bakkel men were genuinely good-looking – each in his own way – and Ward had missed out on that. His expression was openly curious as he stepped forward to shake Bodie’s hand. “My new cousin, Bodie. I’m very glad to meet you.” His hand was large, and seemed unusually warm.

Bodie returned the smile. “Same here.” A slight pause. “I’m sure you’ve heard a lot about me.”

“Daily rumours. I’ve been tracking them.” Then he immediately shook his head. “That’s not true. I’ve heard the most from Turon, of course. Some from West.” West wasn’t there yet.

Sasha came over with a glass and an open bottle of a Hailin wine; you could tell it was Hailin by the proportions of the bottle, even without seeing the Hass Embrun on the label. “We’re having a glass of *toroquil*. But maybe you’d prefer red wine. Or beer. Or something else.”

“*Toroquil* would be great.” He thought he recognised the name, and yeah, it was the pear-and-Brussel-sprouts stuff. “You’re celebrating something?”

Turon and Sasha exchanged a glance that maybe had a tinge of warning, but Turon’s reply sounded relaxed. “Well... it’s been an unusual week. And we’ve come through it remarkably well. I think we can reward ourselves for... a historic collective demonstration of under-reacting.”

Sasha giggled, while Ward tilted his head and looked amused but sceptical. Turon’s half-smile to Bodie was simply affectionate. Companionable.

Then West arrived and was given the last of the bottle. He asked the same question as Bodie, but this time Ward got in before Turon and said, “Well, it is an occasion. Bodie’s getting to meet the person his husband hates above all others.” Perfectly smooth, no edge at all. Which possibly made Bodie’s shock even worse.

Turon and Sasha swore at Ward in Hass Embrun for at least five seconds. Sasha was still swearing at him when Turon said, “I told you Bodie wouldn’t find that funny. I thought you weren’t going to mention Ray.”

“I said I would wait. To see what seemed appropriate.” He seemed entirely unrepentant but that changed when he looked at Bodie. “I’m sorry. It did seem appropriate. But of course this is all new to you.”

Whereas he’d had a lifetime of practice from what Turon had said. Bodie shook his head. “Don’t worry. If it helps, I’m under orders to decide you’re a complete and utter arsehole.”

Said with his stoniest expression, like he'd just seen enough to decide. Audible intakes of breath from Turon, Sasha and West, but Ward just nodded.

"I am an arsehole where he's concerned. But it goes both ways, you know."

"Yeah, I had figured that out." Finally Bodie smiled. "We both want to thank you. For what you did with the computer. It's been a big help."

"It was my pleasure." A shrug. "I enjoyed having a project I could finish inside a day." He asked Bodie what parts of the computer system he'd been using so far, and that took them onto the language lessons. West said he was enjoying them more than he'd expected. The questions that Bodie asked were making him think about aspects of Hailin life that he'd always taken for granted. He gave some examples, which led to a lot of discussion, and he also persuaded Bodie to demonstrate his trick of being a right-handed human – which did seem to be a sure way of impressing any Hailin.

"Did you buy any art on Earth?" Bodie didn't ask to fill an awkward silence because there hadn't been any, but because by this stage, on the second bottle of *toroquil*, he was genuinely curious.

Shaking his head: "A couple of pieces. Ones I obviously had to have. I didn't get as much time to look as I was expecting." Which was because of Bodie and Ray, of course, but Ward hadn't seemed to be making any kind of dig. "I'd be happy to lend them to you. Or any other works from the ones I have with me." It turned out that all the abstract paintings in the room were borrowed from Ward, and the ones in Malun's quarters too. They talked about the paintings and Ward really was good at explaining what it was about each one that made him decide he had to be able to see it again, and also at giving the background of the planet it had come from and its artistic life, and what he knew of the artist and the painting techniques. It also turned out – with Turon making quite a big deal of mentioning it – that the architectural sketches on the walls were all Ward's work.

"They're really good." As far as Bodie could tell, they really were. Very clear. Very detailed. He could believe that the places really looked like that. "No one told me you were an artist, too."

"I'm not." A slightly exasperated look at Turon. "I don't have any artistic talent at all. I can't make anything. I can only draw what I've seen. Or what we've been talking about building. I have a useful level of technical skill and I'm glad when it helps resolve discussions, but it's not art."

Bodie quirked his eyebrows, might possibly have rolled his eyes a fraction. "I won't ask to borrow any of those, then."

"I don't keep them. Turon stole those. Or got his spies to do it." A shrug and a sigh. "Yes, it's quite interesting to see them treated like that. And if you want to be reminded of what Monor looks like –"

"Which some of us sometimes do." Turon addressed that to Bodie, in a tone of cheerful explanation. This was clearly a favourite argument.

"Then I suppose it's better than a photograph. But I just don't think it's what walls are for."

“So your walls are completely covered in paintings, are they?” Bodie made a sweeping gesture with his free hand, meaning the whole space of the room.

“Sometimes. Right now I’m limiting myself to four or five. And playing with rules for trying different combinations and arrangements. So sometimes the rules mean that I have to claim a loaned painting back.”

Sasha said, “That happened to us twice on the way out.”

Turon nodded. “It’s a risk you have to accept with the Art Club. But it does also mean that you get a regular change of scenery.”

“Why don’t we go next door right now? See if there’s anything you like.”

Bodie grimaced. “I’d like to but... It’s Ray. I think it would bother him. To have them in our quarters.”

Heavy sighs from everyone, then Ward said, “Of course. You could ask him but... even so I think I would be worried about their safety.”

Bodie raised his eyebrows. “He’s broken things?”

“Not since we were... eleven or twelve, I suppose. Before that we both had some very destructive phases. Turon could tell you which one of us started each of them.”

Turon said dryly, “I could. But I’ll just say instead that it’s a good thing our family is rich.”

“And I thought I didn’t get on with my brother.”

“Oh, it’s ugly.” Ward looked truly sombre. “So many times I’ve told myself to stop it. Control myself. Tolerate him. As others do. An adult should be able to – Control. But then the instant I find myself in the same room with him... The angle of his head, the way he sits, the way he eats. Even before he’s opened his mouth and presented some attention-seeking triviality as the height of charm and wit, I’m -” He let his head drop heavily, so he was staring at the floor, and took a few seconds before he cleared his throat and looked up again. “And of course he’s going through a similar process with me. So. Every time. It is ugly.”

Bodie took a long time to decide how to reply. Slowly: “I’ve not seen any sign that he – That it bothers him that’s it’s ugly. He’s not said much but... He’s not interested in stopping anything. And –” He exhaled noisily and dragged his hand back through his hair. “Look, I’m sorry, but if you’re looking for me to act as a go-between, I just can’t. We’ve got too much of our own to sort out. I won’t let him bad-mouth you to me. I’ll try to control that. But I can’t let him think that I’m trying to push him. He would hate that. Wouldn’t he?”

“More than anyone else I know. I wasn’t expecting you to do anything. I just wanted you to know that I am trying to get some... perspective on the situation.”

“OK.” Bodie nodded, and then gave a smile that was almost a grin. “Good luck.” The others all laughed and agreed Ward would need it. “Yeah, I’ve come across people where almost everything about them bugged the crap out of me. God knows what would have happened if I’d had to live in the same house with them.”

“‘Bugged the crap out of me.’” Ward looked thoughtful then smiled broadly. “That’s my new favourite phrase in English. Yes. That’s what he’s always done.”

“Our parents said it wasn’t quite ‘always’. Ferros and I were too young to remember, but apparently the first few months were full of... peaceful indifference.”

Sasha shook her head and gave a disappointed sigh. “They weren’t trying. To be really bad twins you have to start fighting in the womb.”

Bodie wasn’t sure how much she was joking, if Hailin twins could do that, and West must have seen his expression because he started explaining that they had any number of legends about twins who could not get on, and that Udom Kol and Embrun’s second set were the classic pair who had fought in the womb. Bodie asked what sort of other fights they’d had outside the womb, and how the family had coped, and all four joined in with their favourite parts of those stories.

When Bodie drained his glass and asked what time it was, he found it was nearly half past eight. He had to go immediately. He’d told Ray he’d be back by eight.

Ray was sitting cross-legged up on the couch, with the book in one hand and a gin and tonic in the other. He had music on: a style Bodie hadn’t heard before, with a lot of drumming.

“There’s not a mark on you.” With a raised eyebrow and a tone of exaggerated detachment. “You did get into a terrible fight with him, didn’t you? Because of something he said about me. Turon couldn’t separate you, had to call security, which always means so much paperwork and they’ve only just released you.”

Bodie couldn’t tell at all how angry – or anxious – Ray really was. He went over and sat on the arm of the couch, his thigh grazing Ray’s shoulder. Ray didn’t move away. “I’m sorry I’m late. They started telling me stories about Udom Kol and Embrun’s children. And I didn’t think to check the time.”

Ray looked up at him, still not smiling. “I can imagine how you got onto that subject. Did you somehow get there without him saying anything about me that made you want to punch him? Or... Or... Think again about me. Change your... ideas.”

“Ray. Ray.” He pressed the back of his hand against Ray’s cheek, stroked slowly downwards as Ray turned his head into the touch. “You know I can’t think when it comes to you. I love everything about you.” He heard the book fall to the floor as Ray reached up to pull his head down, and the kiss suggested that yes, he had got pretty angry while he was waiting and worrying. Bodie didn’t blame him and anyway he enjoyed a bit of aggression.

“Turon got out the *toroquil*, I gather.” Again, without a smile.

“He said it was to reward ourselves for getting through an unusual week.”

Slowly, nodding several times: “Unusual. Yes.” A pause. “So. My husband. What did you think of him?”

Bodie had thought during the walk down the secret corridor about what he was going to say. After the briefest shrug: “I liked him. Think I can see why you bug the everliving crap out of each other and, no, he’s not the easiest company but... he’s interesting.”

Never met anyone before who talks about art like that. And don't worry. He's not lending me any of it."

"So he didn't like you? If he talked about the stuff on their walls and he didn't even offer." Sounding indignant. Puzzled, too.

"He offered." Immediately, but no need to tell Ray that much. "I didn't think you'd want me to accept."

A nod, then frowning deeply: "Do you think he liked you?"

Bodie needed some time for that one. "Well enough, I suppose." A shrug. "Think I lived up to whatever he was curious about. No one suggested drinks again, though. Ray, he didn't say anything against you. Except for explaining things I already knew from Turon. About how you react to each other. I'm really sorry I was late. Of course it'd bother you. And it's fucking rude, on the first night you're cooking for us."

Ray took his hand, pressed the knuckles briefly to his lips, then held it to his chest, just below the collarbone, where his shirt lay open at least an inch. "Even if you'd been exactly on time I'd still have had the same questions. I never imagined that my husband would even meet him, except at – If there was a funeral. When my husband and I would keep very far away from him. So to have you –" A long, harsh breath. "You're mine. And I don't trust him with anything of mine. In or out of my sight. But now of course I've realised that I can trust you. To decide for yourself about him. And still be mine."

Bodie uncurled his fingers so they lay against Ray's throat. The skin was slightly damp, and so tender. Almost like the skin of his cock. His mouth was filling with the need to kiss, but actually this felt like kiss enough for now. "I'm yours." And of course Ray was his, but so completely there was no reason for either to say it.

After four or five slow breaths, Ray finally smiled. "Are you hungry? Can I feed you?"

"I'm starving." Now he said it, he really was. It had been a long time since he'd spat out the worst of his lunch.

Chapter 10

“We’ve got a routine, haven’t we?” They were making their way down to the hold for their second run. “You just moved in yesterday and we’ve got a routine set up for well over half the day.” Bodie counted the things off on his fingers. “The *gulshor*.” Sex in the cubicle. “Working on my Hass Embrun over breakfast. The lesson with West. Eating *tugela* for lunch. More work on Hass Embrun. Our run.” He shrugged. “Then reading and music and laundry and dinner. Maybe a film.” And finally lying down together until Ray had to go.

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s a good routine. And we need one for a journey like this. I was just – CI5 had the least routine of any job I’ve ever done. Days, it could be, sitting around waiting for our type of crime. I’m not used to having a structure. Let alone getting to decide what it is.”

Ray nodded. “I was dreading the journey back. I had a job on the way out. Studying your languages. For the way back... I was hoping someone in the galley would break an arm so they’d need full-time help. Of course I’ll be glad when we’re home, but I’m not dreading it any more.”

Bodie dealt with the lighting controls. He recognised the symbol for 1 now, and 0, and 10 (from recognising when it was lesson time), but he should ask West tomorrow about the rest. Then he’d be confident about reading the time display on his wristband, not just rely on Ray, or on noticing that the hour-display had just changed.

As they ran, they discussed ideas for varying the routine at the weekends. Maybe use the weight machines instead of playing *gulshor*. Take their breakfast coffee to one of the lounges. Bodie could do the cooking (if Ray kept an eye on him, stopped him going too far wrong). Bodie would ask West tomorrow what he wanted to do about lessons at the weekend, as well as asking him about the numbers.

“Oh, I can teach you to read numbers. We’ll do it some time before dinner.”

They’d decided to make their runs at least an hour, and at about an hour and a quarter they agreed they’d make the next lap their last. As they were approaching the point furthest from the entrance, Ray slowed to a walk. Bodie stopped and half-turned, eyebrows raised.

“Let’s keep going that way.” A nod of the head straight forward, where the banks of shelves disappeared into blackness. He caught up with Bodie, took his hand, and kept walking. “I want to see how far we have to go before we can’t see each other at all. You count the paces.”

Bodie did the counting in Hass Embrun, though the paces got steadily slower and shorter as they got less and less confident about what they might be about to walk into. After twelve paces Bodie raised his free arm to test the path, and could just barely see when Ray did the same. The shelves probably went straight on for hundreds of yards, but this level of darkness was so solid, you could feel the tingling on your skin from the knowing that something was waiting in there, that the collision was just seconds away.

Twenty-four paces would have been enough but they kept going for thirty-six, at which point Ray stopped and pulled Bodie back. Bodie felt Ray’s free hand low down on the side of his rib-cage, then it slowly moved up to the back of his head and pulled him into

a kiss. They unclasped their hands and held each other tight, and compared with the bitter cold at his back, the heat of Ray's body against his chest and groin and thighs was such a pleasure. His skin was so grateful, and so excited. Not as good as being naked with Ray, of course not. But it felt closer even than lying in bed with him.

A near-snort of amusement, then Ray said, "You could be any soldier-shaped man. If I hadn't been holding your hand all the way in... If you didn't count with such an English accent..."

"Yeah. I could be any man you'd just bumped into in the holds. Gotta be one in every aisle. Just waiting for the next lost jogger."

They laughed, and held each other tighter still, and kissed more hungrily.

"If you were any man I'd bumped into in the holds. And we ended up kissing like this. Do you think – Would it count as being unfaithful to my husband?" Ray sounded very serious.

"I –" Bodie took a few seconds to think about it. "Think it would have to be. Kissing like that says you know you're gonna have sex."

"Yeah." Ray's sigh sounded disappointed. "He'd have to give up on me. Wait for an unmarried jogger."

"I think... after any kind of wait down here, he'd take whatever he could get."

"You could be right." Still sounding disappointed, and the next kiss was much less hungry. Bodie thought they still would be having sex before they showered, but probably not right here.

It was a long kiss, though. When Ray drew back, he loosened his hold on Bodie, and then he suddenly pulled away completely. Bodie thought he took three steps back: from the sound of his breathing he was at least two feet away. Then there was no sound. He must be holding his breath. Bodie did the same and started counting the seconds, only slightly surprised to find himself doing it in Hass Embrun.

Ray's exhalation started with a definite, warning "Shh". It had been eleven seconds. Bodie opened his arms out to the side and tilted his head back slightly so they wouldn't crack their skulls together. He guessed that Ray did the same, and when they did collide it was at the thigh and then chest, and it was gentle. A slight gasp from Ray, and then a sigh as Bodie's hand settled on the back of his head and pulled him into a kiss. Deep, with a slow, irregular rhythm. Not the type that would say they were about to have sex, no. More than that. The type that said they would be thinking of each other whenever they did have sex. Bodie wondered what Ray was thinking, what he'd been expecting. Maybe that sigh had been him recognising that he'd know this soldier-shaped man wherever and however he came across him.

He seemed happy at whatever he'd found out, judging from the satisfaction in his sigh as he pulled away. This time Bodie took a couple of steps back too.

"Bodie?" Quite sharp. Puzzled. As if he genuinely didn't know where Bodie was. "I'm going to head back. The cold's getting to me."

“OK.” Bodie didn’t try to catch up with him on the way out, but instead kept his stride even and did some more silent counting in Hass Embrun. Twenty two steps, it was, when you could see exactly where you were going, and knew it was a clear path.

“D’you wanna jog with that, or...” Bodie’s erection wasn’t urgent but it was definitely noticeable, as was Ray’s.

Ray shook his head. “Better walk.”

They forgot to turn off the lights on the way out, but Bodie remembered when they were halfway up the stairs. They took the secret corridor to their quarters and had daytime sex on the bed for the first time.

The main non-routine event for that day was the systematic test to see what Hailin foods Bodie had to avoid. Ray had gone to the galley during the morning’s lesson and come back with a sample of every ingredient he could find. For some he had two samples, one raw and one cooked, if it was frequently eaten both ways. Bodie didn’t have a bad reaction to any of the meats or to the starchy stuff, although there were some textures that would take a while to get used to, but there was bitterness, putrefying sweetness, and an immediate trigger to his salivary glands hiding in some of the vegetables, fruit and spices.

Good to have that done, but it had left him strangely shaken. Like he’d been in a fight, and not come out of it well. No, he didn’t want to learn the numbers now, he wanted to be left alone to read for half an hour. And not to go near any food for at least another two hours. Ray went to do laundry, then came back and read in the armchair on the other side of the table, not on the couch. He might be sulking. Bodie decided not to worry about it yet.

The hour-display had just changed. He was pretty sure it was now six, judging from the amount he’d read and the fact that Ray hadn’t got the call yet about his laundry.

“Is it six o’clock?”

Ray checked his wristband. “Yeah. Just gone.”

“OK. So that’s...” Bodie looked at the display carefully. “That’s a one, and with the ship running on a 24-hour clock, the other’s gotta be an eight. That doesn’t look too hard to remember. You in the mood to teach me to read the time?”

“Sure.” Ray got a sheet of paper and a stylus, and they sat side-by-side at the dining table. By the time Ray’s laundry was ready, Bodie was able to tell him it was 6.27. Bodie went to get the laundry, taking his own in the process, and while he was away Ray prepared a list of times for Bodie to read, and a list of times for Bodie to write. To give the times for Bodie to write he’d used the words in Hass Embrun, using West’s system.

“How d’you want me to read these, then? In English? Or in Hass Embrun?”

A shrug. “Whichever you want.”

“I’ll do both. Take it in turns.” It was easier in Hass Embrun, he found. Conversions above 48 still took an effort. Should he work on it? Or just work on ditching decimals and doing all his maths in Hass Embrun? Pointless asking a Hailin for advice. All of this

switching back and forth was so fucking easy for them they never had to think about it. The only thing they had to think about was how patient to be with the primitive foreigners.

He gave up on taking it in turns, and did all the rest in Hass Embrun. 9 and 11 were easy to get confused, but for now, for telling the time, that didn't matter: he wasn't going to mistake nine o'clock and eleven o'clock, and the difference between nine and eleven minutes past was too small to worry about. But he was going to need a break before they tackled the writing. He suggested a tea, and they both went over to the kitchen.

"You able to think about food yet?"

He was, and starting to get hungry – for the earthiest Earth food he could lay his hands on. The M&S meals he had left were beef stew with dumplings, meatballs in tomato sauce, and a ham and mushroom pizza. The stew was two days past its date whereas the others were just one. Throw the stew away, and they'd have the pasta and meatballs at the dining table, and then the pizza while they were watching a film.

Bodie picked up the teas and was heading back to the lesson when Ray put a hand on his arm. "Leave that till later. Maybe work on it on your own. You won't want me standing over you while you're getting started. And of course you don't need to be able to write them yet. I just thought, if you tried, it would help you remember."

"Makes sense, yeah." Ray hadn't wanted Bodie to watch him trying to draw the town. He must just have decided it wouldn't be like writing for Bodie, it would be like drawing. And he couldn't watch that. Bodie nodded towards the couch. "Let's put some music on. Decide what film to watch." Get back to their nice routine.

Bodie's laundry was ready at 7.38, and it was exciting, in a way, to know that now, whenever he looked at this wristband, he'd be able to read the time in full. And on this trip to the laundry room, he realised properly that the ship was absolutely covered in numbers. By every door, on labels at various points on the walls, on the controls for the washing-machines. And every machine had its own number, he could read the sequence now. He didn't know what the numbers on the controls meant, not in practical terms. But yesterday they'd just been squiggles. And today he knew that the door to Turon's quarters was 2-11-6, Ray's was 2-11-8, and theirs was 2-11-10. Should he go on to tackle some words now? Or was West right and it would only confuse him? He'd show West his new trick tomorrow, see what he thought. And if West still thought no, well... Ray could teach him in secret.

West thought it was wonderful that Bodie could read numbers, and that he himself hadn't had to do the teaching. He was hesitant about Bodie trying to learn more characters at that stage, though, as he thought it would slow down the vocabulary and grammar of the main lessons. Bodie decided not to argue. West was the one who knew the language, and he was doing all this for free.

However, when Bodie went on to ask what he wanted to do about the lessons at the weekend, West's face suddenly lit up. He'd been assuming they'd carry straight on with the lessons, but the weekends would be a great excuse to try something new. And if

Bodie didn't find that something helpful, then they'd try something different the next weekend.

For this weekend, Ray could teach Bodie any new vocabulary or characters he wanted as long as he let West know what they'd covered. No new grammar, though. And West thought it was worth starting Bodie on trying to follow simple conversations in Hass Embrun, joining in when he could. They'd do that in West's quarters. Might as well make it the same time as the lessons. He'd involve Sasha and Turon and Ray, though only one at a time, at least at first. Maybe even bring in Ward and Malun.

"We should take An Uraba off. I've just decided." The third day of the weekend. "Sunday", to Bodie. You could recognise the days of the weekend because they began with "An" instead of "At". And Bodie knew that the two Saturdays were named after Embrun and Udom Kol, so that was easy to remember. He didn't remember "Uraba" on its own, not yet, but with the "An" it had to be the Sunday. "You and Ray can do anything you like, but the two of us should have a break."

Bodie agreed it was a good idea and they got started on the day's lesson. Which was about knowing, thinking, feeling, remembering and wondering. Really useful, for any proper conversation.

At the end of the lesson Bodie decided to stay in the room for a while, to go over the lesson on the computer without having Ray listening as he talked to himself, and also to work on writing.

He'd only just got started with the computer when there was a buzz at the door and Turon walked in.

~Cousin Turon! It's good to see you.~ It was, but there was a tension in Turon's smile, and Bodie immediately had to drop the Hass Embrun and switch to English. "Is something wrong?"

Turon sat down "I – Um..." He swallowed. "It's what you said the other night. To Ward. About you and Ray having too much of your own to sort out. I have to – Can I help? Can any of us help? Are you OK?"

Bodie relaxed, smiled, and saw Turon do the same. "I'm still very OK. You don't need to worry."

Turon nodded. "You've always looked as if you're doing very well together. But he can have such difficult moods. I'd have some worry for anyone he'd just married."

Bodie shook his head. "I've not seen any of that. Well –" A slight grimace. "Only a bit. We got over it."

"So you just said that to Ward to close that line of conversation? You didn't really have anything in mind?" Sounding about 60% sure the answers were going to be yes and then no.

Bodie took too long to reply to be able to make those answers convincing. He didn't think he really wanted to tell Turon anything about the sex. It was private. It was humiliating. It was a discomfort that even Turon couldn't sort out. But some of the problems were going to have to become obvious. Like Ray saying "my *nespa*". Like them needing separate bedrooms. And other things they just hadn't come across yet.

A deep sigh and Bodie looked at the floor. “No. Well. What I had in mind. Being the type of *glarus* I am. It means there’s a lot he can’t do. We can’t do.” He raised his eyes, saw Turon looking as much interested as concerned. “What we can do. It’s enough. That you don’t need to worry. But when something happens to remind us...” A shrug and he looked away again for a few seconds. “It’s tough on both of us. I think we’re coping pretty well, but – Yeah. That’s what I had in mind.”

Turon was nodding slowly, looking thoughtful. “I was going to ask if it would help if I talk to Ray, but he’s made it extremely clear that – It’s completely private.” An exhalation sharp enough that he jerked his head back. “Of course you’ve got things to sort out. You’re just married. You hardly know each other. One of you is starting a completely new life. That would be enough for any couple. I’ve been worrying that because we’ve left the pair of you alone since – Well, that you’d assume that we’d all stopped thinking about you personally. That we’d left you completely alone with him. I tried to write you a message about it. Starting first thing yesterday. But I couldn’t work out how to ask.”

“Thanks. I hadn’t been thinking you’d dumped me with him or anything. But it’s good to hear it.” He asked Turon what he and Sasha did for ship-board weekends, what sort of routine they used for the journey home.

Their departments had assigned them projects they could do on their own: analysis, design, planning. Sasha was “working on a flirtation” with a woman in Engineering, and Turon had his Earth cooking and his gardens (the one on the ship, and the next few he was planning). And music, of course. There was a big joint birthday party that weekend, and they were playing as part of a group of eight. Bodie and Ray should come along, if only for half an hour. Bodie told him about his adventures with Hailin food and with numbers, and about the end of the M&S meals. They talked about Ward, about Henry the Eighth, about how the ship could do with a London pub.

“I enjoyed those drinks.”

“Me too.” He really did wish the ship had a pub. A regular early-evening drink with kind, restful, observant Turon. Of course, Turon would be just as kind, restful and observant if they met up in the garden, say. But without the excuse of a pint it just wasn’t something Bodie would ever suggest.

After Turon left, Bodie went back to the computer, and it was gone twelve when he got home – to find that Ray had got the stereo back from Technology Interface and had been struggling to control his impatience to see what Bodie would choose to play first. No, he hadn’t listened to anything himself. He knew how it worked, but it was Bodie’s. The first time he listened to a record in their quarters, he’d wanted it to be with Bodie, and something Bodie had chosen.

In fact, Bodie had been thinking himself about what he would play first, and he’d decided on “A Hard Day’s Night”. Introduce Ray to the only Liverpoolians that most people had ever heard of. The Beatles were about the only good thing he remembered from his last few years in Liverpool. He’d already left by the time the album came out, but it had followed him around the world.

Ray liked it, particularly the title song and “Things We Said Today” but it really struck him that all of the songs were about women (or “girls”, in the songs), and that “love”

appeared in almost every song (“I love you”, “I love her”, “if I fell in love with you”). He wouldn’t have guessed from the album that humans weren’t pair-bonding, though. He would just have thought they enjoyed an intense, romantic phase before they qualified, a bit like West had been doing, and he’d have wondered when he’d get to a proper record, that was saying the same things about “boys”.

“Do you have any? With songs about boys?”

Bodie shook his head. “They don’t exist. That I know of. None of the record companies would publish anything like that.”

Ray frowned hard, looking mostly angry. Maybe puzzled. Finally he said, “I’m glad to be taking you somewhere...” A shrug, then a sigh. “Where it’s easy to find songs about any type of person.”

“We won’t play the other side, then. I’ve got plenty of albums that don’t have ‘love’ or ‘girl’.” He must have. Like Pink Floyd. Or recent Bowie. “Let’s go and have lunch, and I’ll look them out when we get back.” He lifted the lid of the turntable to put the record away, but Ray put a hand on his arm and closed the lid again.

“I want to hear the rest. I just hadn’t known what to expect. It’s about the same feelings, whether it says ‘girl’ or ‘boy’.”

During the run Bodie asked about stowaways: how often it happened. Ray had no idea of numbers, but it certainly happened. On this ship? A long first-contact mission wouldn’t be a good choice, but desperate people could make desperate mistakes. On the run from something. Or maybe just desperate for adventure. Or wanting to give a range of cold-weather clothing a really thorough test. Or to train their sense of smell, or direction. Yeah, put like that, who wouldn’t be in line to spend months in the holds?

They ran for an hour and a half and didn’t have sex afterwards. Bodie took care of laundry for both of them. It couldn’t be the other way around: Ray couldn’t touch Bodie’s shorts and Y-fronts from the morning. Bodie got a message while he was away, which turned out to be Malun inviting him for dinner at eight o’clock on An Uraba. Only him. Not Ray. Malun had been leaving them very thoroughly alone. It had been four days since Bodie had last seen him, when Malun had brought around the wristband before the first game of *gulshor*. Bodie accepted the invitation, then told Ray about it.

They had the weight equipment to themselves on An Embrun morning. Bodie missed the adrenalin and aggression of *gulshor*, but on the other hand they got to admire each other, and talk about what they were seeing. Ray started teaching Bodie the names for parts of the body. Bodie was happier if he could see new words written down as well and was worried that nothing at all would stick, but by the end he could recognise almost every word when Ray said it, and reliably produce the Hass Embrun himself for “knee”, “mouth”, “hair”, “hand”, and “thumb”, and for most of the rest he at least had the beginning right. Ray would write it all down for him over breakfast, then he’d work on it some more, and see how much he remembered tomorrow morning.

In the cubicle, Ray taught him the words for “sex” and “kiss”.

“What about ‘cock’?”

Bodie had said it to continue the mood, but Ray frowned, looked uncomfortable. “We have different words, depending on the man’s qualification status. So mine is a *jarupard*. Turon’s is a *nespas*. And West’s is a *champal*. If you don’t know which he is or you’re talking in general terms then you use *tranomaro*. But that’s a medical term. You’d never use it about yourself. And it would be strange to use it about anyone you did know. You’d be making a point. Probably not a kind one.”

“I guess I couldn’t use any of them. Not really.”

Ray took a long time to reply. “No. Any one would be too misleading.”

There was another word again that they used for animals, wasn’t there? A word that Ray was trying hard not to think about. “Can we invent a new word for mine, then? To use between the two of us. Well, I mean, who else would we be discussing my cock with?”

In the space of a long breath Ray relaxed completely, then gave a brief snort of amusement. “‘Cock’. I like ‘cock’.”

Dryly: “Yeah. Think you’ve made that crystal clear,” and he rocked his hips against Ray’s, as Ray sniggered. “So ‘cock’ would sound OK in Hass Embrun? Or does it already mean something?”

“It’s a type of plant. A bit like a fern.”

“Well, it means a bird and a valve in English, and that’s never put anyone off. Yeah, I like ‘cock’, too.”

Bodie’s favourite smile. “But not as much as you like *jarupard*.”

“I’m told I broke records.”

“You broke every record.” They met in a near-violent kiss, and were done for a while with communicating through words.

West’s quarters were Number 2-11-7, between Ray’s and Turon’s, and Turon was already there. They greeted him in Hass Embrun, and then West offered him a tea, also in Hass Embrun. The lessons had hardly covered any vocabulary for food and drink, but from “would you like” and the things West pointed to, the meaning was obvious. West directed Bodie towards an armchair, while the two brothers took the couch and then immediately started talking to each other. It sounded to Bodie as if they’d planned out a lot of the conversation in advance: West might even have written a full script, and the beginning could have come from a textbook, and not a promising one, at that.

~I think you know my brother Ward.~

~Yes, I remember your brother Ward. He likes to buy art and is tall and clever. My uncle Malun says that you know my brother Ray.~

Everything they were saying was true, which did help Bodie keep the thread, but none of it could ever happen as a real conversation, and Bodie got steadily more curious to see how far they were going to take this.

Turon seemed to be the one who was pushing things, which might be a protest against the script, or all part of the plan. ~Bodie, have you met my brother Ray?~

~Yes, he's my *iskolpa*.~

Polite interest. ~When did you meet him?~

~Nine days ago. No. Ten days ago.~ Bodie decided to do his bit to add to the idiocy of the conversation. ~Do you have an *iskolpa*?~

~No, I have an *iskolsko*. Her name is Sasha. She is *!?!/* now.~ "Next door", that must have been, from Turon's gesture. ~She is from Monor.~

West asked Turon a lot about Sasha and her family. Bodie joined in from time to time, and after a while decided to change the conversation by asking Turon if he was from Monor too.

~No, I'm from Clover. It takes *!?!/* an hour to *!?!/* from Monor to Clover.~

~What about you, West? Where are you from?~

~I'm also from Clover.~

Mild surprise. ~Did you meet there?~

West opened his mouth but Turon got in first. ~Not often. It is a very large *!?!/*.~ They all laughed, and with that were immediately done with bad-textbook-mode.

~Did we *!?!/* some words that you did not understand?~

Bodie nodded. ~Four or five.~ West asked for details, and Bodie gave them in Hass Embrun, saying the word as well as he could remember, or repeating the sentence in which they'd used it. They gave all of the explanations in Hass Embrun too, with the help of drawings, and props, and lots of gestures, and West wrote the words down, along with their sentences. When they'd dealt with all of the words that Bodie could remember, West taught Bodie some ways of asking for an explanation during the conversation, or asking the person to repeat something, or to slow down.

It was a good start, and almost fun, but it took all of Bodie's concentration and he was very glad when West let them stop after forty minutes. West made more tea and they chatted in English: about how the session had gone, about tomorrow's party, about Bodie's reactions to Hailin food.

West was a slob. Bodie wouldn't have guessed, except the style of mess and the fact that he hadn't bothered to tidy up for them probably did have "teenager" all over it. The language books and tapes and West's pages of notes were spread out on the coffee table, on the shelves, and on the floor. And there were other books tumbled across the shelves, and clusters of colourful little ornaments, and large bags with clothes spilling out of them, like this was as close as his laundry ever got to being put back in the wardrobe. Bodie bet that Ray was even worse at West's age, but fortunately he'd grown out of it.

When Ray asked how the session had gone, Bodie gave him a replay of the best (or worst) of the initial conversation, with just a few words in English when the Hass Embrun escaped him. He'd only intended to give Ray an idea of the style, but Ray laughed so hard that Bodie kept going all the way to Turon's joke about how big Clover was.

Ray was impressed by how well Bodie had obviously understood everything, and wouldn't let him shrug it off as "a really simple conversation". "You followed it all. It sounds as if they slowed down slightly. But only slightly. You didn't get lost once, you learned some things, and you're speaking so much more smoothly. Maybe West should take up teaching when we get home."

"Yeah, he's doing a great job." Especially when you considered that West himself had never had to learn a language the slow way. "Is it getting smooth enough that other Hailin will understand me? Outside the family?"

"It's good now. It'll be great by the time we get home."

Bodie believed him, and nodded. "Probably no bad thing that I'll always speak it with an English accent, though. Give people fair warning that I'm different. Likely to be asking stupid questions."

Ray was puzzled. "Always? Why would you assume that?"

"Because that's how it is for us. For humans. I've never met a foreigner who didn't speak English with an obvious accent. Even if they'd lived half their lives in London. Well, apart from you lot. That's how I was so quick to take you for Foreign Office. You were obviously one of us."

"Yeah. Then. You will always sound different. People will always know."

"No need to look so worried for me, Ray. I've spent plenty of time in places where I didn't really fit in." He grinned. "Like the part of London where my flat was. There, they could see I was a thug as soon as look at me, before I'd even said a word."

Ray had stayed serious. Slowly, staring hard at Bodie, he said, "At home... I think what people will see is how you're beautiful in a way they've never quite seen before. Couldn't describe. And if you're not smiling they'll be scared. And excited. Because of how hard you look. But then if you smile they might end up even more scared. Because they'll be spending far too much time wondering what it would be like to have you."

When they finally surfaced from the kiss, Bodie said, "I wouldn't say that I was scared by your look when you're not smiling, but it sure as fuck gave me chills. I really scared you?"

"No, no, not me. I'm Dishna's best police interrogator. I'm the one who gives lesson in intimidation. But I can imagine how you'd look to a normal person."

"So that's what you do. Malun just said you were some kind of specialist. In a small team. I was assuming you'd tell me all about it when you'd finished the cop book. So that's what they get wrong in the films? Not enough intimidation?"

Ray grinned then shook his head. "It's not often that heavy. Not in Dishna. But I know a lot about how to get people to talk. I do give lessons."

Bodie's turn to study and be serious. "I can imagine that. You're strange. You'd keep them guessing, off-balance. And I bet you can pretend to be anything."

A lopsided smile. "I was supposed to be finding out what the problems might be with your Docklands. But you wouldn't tell me anything. You only moaned."

Bodie closed his eyes as all the blood in his body seemed to rush to his cock, and then he dragged Ray to the floor, where they had a better fight than any they'd yet had on the bed.

They decided to cook shepherd's pie – or “police interrogator's pie”, as they were going to call this version made with *ranobey* meat and with suitable mashable and diceable Hailin vegetables. Ray didn't invite Turon and Sasha to dinner when he borrowed the cookbooks, but Bodie did a few hours later when he went to ask for some onions and tomato puree.

Bodie did all of the work, while Ray took charge of leaning in the doorway, changing and turning over records, teaching Bodie some cooking-related words, and giving him another round of practice with parts of the body.

While the meat filling was simmering, Bodie asked Ray to do another list of numbers for him to write. He worked through them at the dining table then asked Ray to check them. There were some strokes he didn't have quite right yet – they were supposed to curve more, or have a hook – but there was no doubt he'd got a decent grip on all those characters. So next Bodie wanted to learn how to read the days of the week, which were also displayed on the wristband. Ray decided that they would do three a day over the weekend, starting with the weekend days themselves.

The taste was pretty close to shepherd's pie, properly rich and comforting, but the textures did keep on making Bodie blink and pause: a sponginess to the meat, the cubes of “carrot” still with a slight crunch, and little clumps of silky fibre scattered through the topping. Odd, when you were expecting shepherd's pie, but taken as the brand-new experience of police interrogator's pie, then it all worked together well.

They listened to Bodie's music before, during, and then for about an hour after dinner, with Ray doing the choosing. He started with the Beatles, because Bodie had, picked Pink Floyd for dinner, then some Bowie, and finally The Police. Sasha, in particular, had questions about the lyrics. Bodie tried to help, but had to admit that he tended not to listen that closely. He just went along with the mood.

That night, for the first time, they lay down without having sex. Ray seemed distracted, wanting just to curl around Bodie, press his face against Bodie's neck, and sink into his own thoughts. Good thoughts, from his sighs as Bodie's hands drifted, and from the occasional tightening of his grip.

Bodie didn't know how long he'd been asleep. Maybe only for a few minutes. He thought he was woken mostly by the loss of Ray's body heat, because Ray was being so careful and quiet as he backed away towards the foot of the bed.

“I thought we were always going to say goodnight.”

Ray looked startled, then guilty. “I didn't want to wake you up.”

“I'd have to wake you up if you fell asleep. Think I've got the same right to get woken up. So I can get a last kiss before you sneak off.” He gestured with his head to the space by the bed where Ray usually knelt to kiss him. A sharp gesture. An order. Ray obeyed.

“I wasn’t just going to sneak off.” Almost a whisper. “I was going to come and kiss you. Kiss your eyelashes, too. And then maybe watch you for hours. You looked so young. Younger than me.”

“Watch me as long as you like. But you’ve got to wake me up before the last kiss.”

Bodie couldn’t decide if An Udom Kol felt more like a second Saturday or a first Sunday. If it was a first Sunday, then he wanted a leisurely breakfast, with extra coffee, and a window to look out of. He asked Ray if they could take their second coffee to one of the lounges and Ray said they could, but they’d need special, sealable mugs to carry it through the corridor. He got a couple from the secret galley.

There wasn’t much to see outside. Just distant stars. No planets. No movement. But still much better than a wall. In the end they took a seat near the back of the garden, looking out, and Ray told him the Hass Embrun for some of the features of the ship, like the garden, galley, cabins and holds. The ship itself was called *Sivor Simalsa*, which was one of the longest rivers on Pen Embrun.

Ray seemed particularly full of energy during the afternoon’s run. When they’d met their hour’s minimum, Bodie asked how much more he wanted to do, and he said firmly, “Another four circuits.”

On the last circuit, as they were approaching the point farthest from the entrance, Ray slowed down as he’d done three days earlier. “You go in. I want to see how long it takes us to find each other. If we can do it without guiding each other.”

Bodie shrugged, nodded, glanced at the time (3.41), then headed confidently into the darkness. He took thirty-six paces, which he thought must place him about where they’d got last time.

When he turned round, Ray was still standing in the light. Maybe Ray had heard his footsteps clearly enough to wait for them to stop. Or maybe he’d been counting to at least thirty, like the last time. Then Ray stepped forward, and within a few seconds all Bodie could see was the gleam of his curls, and then that was gone too. The approaching footsteps were clear, though, and Bodie thought it would be easy to find him and grab hold of him. Best not to do it standing in front of him, though. The collision would be too messy. Best to keep to the side, let him go past, grab him from behind.

It really was easy. Bodie kept his breath particularly slow and quiet as Ray drew near, then with two steps forward he had him, hands finding his waist, arms immediately banding his chest, pulling him back.

Ray cried out in Hass Embrun, with exaggerated surprise. Ray Bakkel the lost jogger, that sounded like. Fallen into the clutch of arms that could belong to any strong man. As long as that man didn’t speak. Ray’s heart was hammering and he was panting, as if he genuinely had been startled, and was still badly alarmed.

Bodie tightened the grip of his left arm around Ray’s chest, leaving his right hand free to stroke slowly down Ray’s stomach, to just inches from his cock, then out across his hip and up again. He pushed his face against Ray’s curls, and his own breathing started to get rougher.

Ray's hands brushed past his hands, then settled on his forearms. Not trying to pull them off. More, testing and exploring.

When Bodie started to move his right hand down again, though, Ray's fingers clamped down tight. Trying to stop the movement. But also, in the process, pulling Bodie and Bodie's erection closer.

~No. We can't. I'm a /?/.~ Despite the uneven breath he sounded calm. He wasn't protesting. He was explaining something to this strong Hailin man. ~My *iskolpa* is /?!/ a few /?!/ away.~ Then something with ~you~ and ~I~ and ~sex~ and ~months~ and ~two weeks~ and ~I have an *iskolpa* now~ and ~I can't~. But still not making any attempt to pull away. And with his pulse and his breathing announcing how full he was of expectations.

Bodie moved his right hand downwards again, and Ray resisted for a second, then gave a soft gasp and let the arm slide through his grip. This time Bodie did cross those inches, and then was letting out a long groan as Ray's cock was finally in his hand. Ray's *jarupard*. As magnificent as he remembered, even through two layers of material. And hard for him – or for whatever part of him Ray's imagination was using right now. Ray was so relieved, so excited. Saying, ~My *iskolpa* is /?!/ a few /?!/ away. I can't do /?/,~ but pushing all the time against Bodie's hand, his voice deep and moist with pleasure.

At first he kept his hands resting lightly on Bodie's arms, just flexing his fingers in time with his gasps and moans, but when Bodie started thrusting in earnest against his cleft, he moved his left hand back to Bodie's buttock, and from then on kept a fierce, constant grip with both hands.

Afterwards, their hands all ended up on Ray's stomach, just below the rib-cage. Overlapping, thumbs gently stroking. No intertwining of fingers like they'd had after the fuck against Bodie's front door. But still sweet.

Soon, though, Ray started to shiver, and then to talk. Bodie caught ~This is why you didn't~ at the beginning, but then only ~sex~ and ~months~ and ~cold~. Whatever he was saying, he sounded content. Confident. Almost affectionate.

A long sigh and he fell silent for a good ten seconds, but after two violent shivers he gave another sigh, pulled away by a few inches, turned around, and pressed his mouth briefly to Bodie's cheek. ~I /?!/ to go /?!/ my *iskolpa*. /?!/ what he /?!/. What I /?!/ tell him.~

Then he pushed himself away. Bodie heard him take two or three steps back and then there was nothing, not even breathing. Bodie started counting seconds in Hass Embrun. On seventeen: "Bodie?" His voice was raised slightly, as if it might need to carry across a large room. "I think we're going to have to give up. I'm going to head back to the circuit. Bodie? You can hear me, can't you?"

"Yeah, I'm right here. I'm heading back too."

As soon as they were back under the lights, Ray said, "We're done for the day, right? Walk the rest, then go and change."

"Make it a brisk walk." Brisk enough for some heat. Not so brisk as to give full friction from damp cloth.

They didn't talk, and Ray went ahead up the stairs while Bodie was turning off the lights. Bodie didn't think it was a bad silence. Just the two of them knowing there was nothing they could sensibly say about what had happened, and nothing else they wanted to think about or talk about. Pretending they'd missed each other within a few square feet of hold, confident the other hadn't noticed the sounds of a Hailin man having sex with a man who was apparently not his *iskolpa*. No. That was not the stuff of a sensible conversation.

They read on the couch while listening to music, alternating early Bowie with the albums Turon had picked out in Tower Records. Turon had asked about them the night before, and Ray agreed with Bodie that they should listen to them first before playing them for Turon. It was a way of taking an interest, but also of being properly braced for the worst. They decided just to take them in the order they were stacked, because Bodie couldn't tell one folksy or hippy or classical album from another.

The first two were both folk, with covers and titles that had Bodie expecting fairy-tale mush about lords and ladies and hedgerows and milkmaids. And there was some of that, though with tunes that were catchy enough to make up for the mush, but most of it had Bodie suddenly remembering how gleefully gory fairy-tales could be. The jauntiest tune (with a sweet, soaring chorus) had words you couldn't ignore about a man sneaking into a castle and slaughtering an entire family. The two of them were particularly looking forward to seeing what Turon made of that, and they didn't get much reading done in the end.

Bodie cooked a risotto with bacon and a reasonable Hailin equivalent to mushrooms, and they wandered along to the party around nine. With a crew of 240, the *Sivor Simalsa* saw several birthdays every week, and a joint-party was then held on the evening of An Udom Kol, with each birthday-person's department contributing something department-specific to the occasion. So the parties were fairly similar, but Ray said they were sufficiently different from week to week to be worth a visit, even if you didn't know any of the birthday people.

Hailin wine and beer were made in a wide range of alcoholic strengths, but the fleet served only the weaker types at its parties. People were welcome to bring their own, of any strength, but few people cared about the strength enough to tackle the issue of deciding how much they wanted to share. Ray got a beaker of each of the beers, and after a taste of both Bodie chose the weakest, which was like a rather thin bitter. The other tasted richer, but there was something about it that was too much for the inside of his mouth. Not stinging, but a weird sort of puckering.

The live music was in the middle lounge, which was the largest. Bodie had been wondering if there would be dancing, and what sort of dancing the Hailin did, and how much they expected people to join in. It turned out that the Hailin did group dancing, or at least they did to this piece of music, on this ship. Not full-blown line-dancing, not involving the whole room, but all of the dancers were in groups of four or six or eight. They weren't all doing the same thing, though, or acting as if they were ticking off the steps in a sequence they all knew by heart. He could see there were some common moves, but the more he watched the more he was certain they were making it up as they went along. There must be rules, of course. A leader. Something that maintained the flow for each group. Like you'd find in sport, but without the spur of competition that he could see.

When the music ended all of the groups broke apart, and when the next piece started a couple of minutes later, the groups all seemed to be different. About 80% of the same people, Bodie thought, but all the groups had changed. Interesting. Maybe by the end of the journey he would have figured out how it worked.

Turon was at the back on the left, half-hidden by a man who was hammering away at some long, flat instrument. Turon might not have seen them come in, but the long neck of his *orbarcho* made him easy to spot. Sasha was at the front, quite close to them. It seemed she had seen them, because when she had a section with nothing to play, she caught Bodie's eye and smiled and nodded. When that piece ended, Ray asked if he wanted to move on, see more of the party. "I'm fine here. Half an hour will do me, but there's enough to see here."

Ray seemed happy with that, and they settled against one another and slowly drank their beer, and Ray told him what he knew about the other musicians, and the most noticeable members of the audience. They went over to say hi to Turon on the way out: just a wave, really, as he was busy.

Back home Ray made tea, and they sat on the couch for an hour's reading with no music. After about five minutes, Bodie said, "Turon told me that Sasha's 'working on a flirtation' with a woman in Engineering. I dunno about you, but I thought she was making a hell of a lot of eye-contact with the woman next to her." A red-head with lovely tits. "The one playing the deeper version of what she plays. D'you know if that's the same woman or – Has she got two on the go but Turon thought that would shock me too much?"

"It's probably the same woman. And yeah, there was way more eye-contact than at the last party on the way out. She was too focussed then, on the mission. On having to wear Halabron for weeks at a time. Now she looks like she's ready to relax."

There was a cynical tinge to Ray's voice that Bodie hadn't heard before and that surprised him. Protective of Turon? But Turon genuinely seemed to enjoy Sasha's affairs. They worked for him. Maybe that was what Ray was cynical about. Or maybe it was something else entirely.

"You said you'd been dreading the journey back."

"God, yeah. Two months of being useless."

"How d'you think you'd've filled the time?"

A shrug. "Hours in the gym. Cooking. Watching porn." A twitch of the eyebrows and a brief half-smile. "Writing a bunch of porn scripts for Gavio."

Bodie's jaw dropped. "He's in porn?"

Ray laughed then immediately shook his head hard. "No, no. Well, he did make some with some friends. Years ago, before we met. I haven't seen them. He says they're just bad, and he was the worst thing about them. But we watched a lot. We had our favourites. And we'd write scripts for each other as a game."

Bodie still had to make a conscious effort to close his mouth. And then take a few seconds to find any kind of response. "I don't have much imagination. Sorry."

“We’ll find our own games.” A brief hand on his thigh. “Look at *gulshor*. We’ll keep each other very well occupied.”

Ray was back in the mood for sex that night. Bodie had wondered if it would be too much of a disappointment for them, going back to having to keep their hands off each other after the hold. But instead there was a fresh thrill in being able to see each other, in talking. And the memory of mapping Ray’s whole hard length with his hand made the limited pressure between their groins seem more intimate and earned, not less.

They’d decided not to have an early-morning gym session on An Uraba. If West was making it a day off, then so would they. Bodie still woke up at his normal time, though, and he got up and worked on his Hass Embrun until Ray arrived for breakfast.

Shortly part ten, Ray said, “Do you fancy a run?” Very casual.

“Yeah, OK.” If you like. Nothing better to do.

They didn’t talk. Didn’t look at each other. Of course they weren’t going to hold out for the full hour, not when they both knew, this time, what was going to happen. But how long would they last? And who would be the one to crack?

It was Bodie, on the fourth circuit. He just ran straight in, kept running for twelve paces, then walked another twelve. Again, Ray was still in the light when he turned around. He got to see Ray dissolve into the dark.

This time Ray’s exclamation was open relief: ~You are here! /?/ I know you’re /?/ here. But /?/ a large hold. And you /?/ know my *iskolpa* is here too. You /?/ saw him. The beautiful /?/ man.~ He took hold of Bodie’s forearms, just above the wrist, pulled Bodie in closer still while pushing back with his hips. There was a throaty half-laugh, with something Bodie didn’t catch at all, then: ~My husband /?/ yesterday. We didn’t /?/. But he was /?/ to come in here again today.~

So that was Ray’s script for this? An accident yesterday: a lost runner and his more-lost husband. And the husband liking what he heard. Wanting to hear more. How far away was this husband supposed to be? Well, he had to be pretty close, or Ray wouldn’t be able to get hard. A few feet away and rock-hard too. Going to jerk off (somehow silently) while he listened. Yeah, that was a porn script alright. From a man with practice.

Bodie tilted his head and kissed the side of Ray’s neck, and they both sighed. Ray released his hold on Bodie’s arms and slid his hands down to cover Bodie’s, finger on top of finger. Hardly any pressure. Not asking anything.

His hands stayed on Bodie’s when Bodie’s left hand began to caress his chest. Bodie found his right nipple, circled it, teased it, enjoyed the play of the peak against his palm as they both sighed again.

He gave a sharp grunt of refusal, though, when Bodie started to push his right hand downwards. Bodie froze. He wanted to apologise, for whatever he’d done against the script. But he mustn’t speak. That was the part of the script he was surest of.

Ray took hold of his wrist, pulled his arm away, and Bodie’s heart clenched – and another twist of regret as he lost the touch of Ray’s left hand. But then a soft sound and

Ray was pulling Bodie's right hand back towards him – onto bare skin. The sound had been the tracksuit top being pulled up. Bodie gasped, and then groaned as Ray immediately pushed his hand downwards, under the waistband of the tracksuit, under the waistband of his boxers.

They both cried out as Bodie's hand closed around hot, moistly tender skin. A triumphant shout, like they'd each just won a game of *gulshor* with the perfect shot. Panting hard, Ray pulled his clothes down, then reached back to do the same for Bodie. He took hold of Bodie, pulling Bodie towards his hole, gasping something urgent and insistent where Bodie just caught ~you~ and ~want~ and ~I am~. A grunt of annoyance and a sharp, impatient complaint when Bodie was checking with his fingers – and yes, of course he'd got himself ready for this. He moaned almost like Bodie had moaned when he finally got what he wanted, and from then on his words were too disjointed for Bodie to follow anything. Enough repetition, though, for Bodie to learn the sounds. And he was listening hard, because once they'd got started he couldn't even let himself moan, had to keep his jaw clenched shut or otherwise he would have been yelling out Ray's name, telling him with every single gasping breath how much he loved him. And that was the last thing Ray wanted from him so he tried not even to think it. Just feel, and listen to Ray, and to the sounds of their bodies together.

Ray started shivering more quickly than he had before. Not surprising when his skin was bare, and they'd been sweating so hard. Bodie thought he was trying to control it, but that really wasn't possible, or it wasn't for humans, anyway. With each shiver Bodie's softening cock slipped further, and at the final, soft sucking sound they gave identical grunts of loss. Three breaths, with the shivering becoming more violent, then Ray pulled away and turned around like he had before. This time, though, his mouth was open and it met Bodie's mouth, and he put a hand on Bodie's buttocks to pull their damp cocks together. Still too brief, though, maybe five seconds, then he stepped away and was pulling up his clothes. Bodie did the same.

"Bodie?" The same raised tone as before. "Think we should head back. You OK?"

"I'm fine. Yeah, let's head back."

They both took their clothes to the laundry immediately after they'd showered. It wasn't by agreement: Bodie opened the door to the laundry room and found Ray already there. They kissed and read and kissed, collected their laundry, had lunch in the galley, took a slow, entwined walk through the garden and lounges, then went home to listen to music and kiss.

At 2.49, Bodie said, "How about another run?"

Ray didn't reply immediately, just looked at Bodie with a slight smile that wasn't quite smug, more serenely possessive. "Sure. I'll go and change. Meet you down there."

Lubricating himself got Bodie hard enough that he decided to use the secret corridor for as much of the route as he could. From the state of Ray, he'd probably done the same. They didn't make any attempt to run, and again didn't talk or look at each other.

~You are /?/ here, aren't you?~ ~Always here~, that must have been. ~My *iskolpa* and I /?/.~ ~Will be spending half the journey down here~? They probably would be, if it weren't for the cold.

This time it was Bodie who pulled their clothes down, then he turned Ray and brought Ray's hand to his cleft, pressed the tip of Ray's middle finger in. Ray let out a long, rasping breath, then several pants that probably contained words, and Bodie would swear he felt Ray's cock grow many degrees hotter against his stomach. God, Ray was going to fuck him so hard. He would have to bite his lip to keep quiet. Ray pulled his finger out and Bodie started panting too, ready for Ray to haul him around and slam into him.

But instead he got Ray's other hand, teasing him. Running down the length of his cleft, circling, just barely testing the muscle. He must be wanting to see how Bodie would complain. If Bodie would use the same impatient grunts that he had that morning. Bodie decided not to give him the satisfaction, and instead turned all his attention on controlling his breathing. Relaxing. Listening to the nerves under Ray's fingers. Expecting nothing.

~I'm going to /?/ you every day.~ A whisper in his ear. ~You'll be /?/. You'll /?/ Ray Bakkel's *jarupard*.~

So unfair of Ray, to say things like that when he couldn't answer back. Couldn't ask for more. It felt like the only thing he could do was move. Present himself if Ray was only going to talk about taking him.

He was scarcely halfway turned when Ray did grab him, and in the next second his arse was as full as he could have wished for. Alien cock. He knew now, what his body was going through. What it meant about the cock, about him. The last line in his CI5 file should say "3.7 turned out to be completely queer for a qualified Hailin cock. And he never looked back."

Chapter 11

“You look very well. Better even than anyone had told me. And they told me only good things.” Malun had poured glasses of pre-dinner bitter for both of them, and they’d just sat down on one of Malun’s smaller couches.

Bodie nodded, and hoped the haze of sexual satisfaction wasn’t too blindingly obvious in his smile. “We’ve had a good weekend. So who did you ask? I mean, did you ask Ray, as well as Turon and West?”

“Yes, I saw him early this morning. I didn’t know he could be that happy.” A slight snort, with raised eyebrows. “I feel rather foolish now, for telling you how difficult he was going to be. Thinking that we’d all be fully occupied in coping with him.”

“Well... At the time you warned me, things weren’t looking good. We had a few rough moments in the first couple of days. Figuring out where we stand. But we seem to be past that now. The only time he’s been anything like difficult was about me meeting Ward. And we got past that too.”

“Ward was very entertained by you. That’s his highest praise for someone who isn’t a mathematician or an artist.”

Bodie laughed. “They’re quite a collection, the Bakkel boys. It’ll be odd to get home and only have one of them around.”

Dinner was a stew from the galley. Malun had got the list from Ray of what Bodie could and couldn’t eat, and Turon was going to take it to the galley the next day and see what arrangements they could make to help Bodie.

“D’you think everyone knows by now there’s a human on board? Why I’m here?”

Malun nodded. “Each department covered it in their daily briefing the day after we left orbit. Saying it’s a *tolmin* marriage. The people who know the full truth won’t be talking.”

“But what about your Anthropology files? You’re gonna have to rewrite them some time. Aren’t you? Explain exactly why humans are dangerous.”

“Iran did that the day we announced our decision about the base. The files describe what happened with the qualified man, how we know the danger is real. But they don’t identify either of you or say what arrangements we made for the pair.” A shrug. “They could be on Earth. And no one in the crew, seeing the two of you around the ship, how you behave with each other... No one would ever behave like that with a *glarus*. We all know it’s not possible.”

“Yeah, Ray and I had that talk about telling people it was a *tolmin* marriage. That was one of the rough moments. So what about Ray’s files, then? There’s gotta be some kind of paperwork when someone’s married. It’s gotta go somewhere in the system. And I know by now how you lot think. There isn’t a word for just ‘married’. If it’s in the files, it’ll say what type it is.”

A slow nod. “You’re right. Ray’s files do say he’s in an *esmana* marriage. I made that update a week ago, after the adoption was finalised. But that information is restricted to people who are in a direct management relationship with him. People who determine his

working patterns and need to know if he can't be sent away from his husband. So when he gets home his supervisors will know, and presumably the rest of his team. But on this ship, on this mission, he reports only to me and Iran. So no one else can see that part of his file."

"Does he know all this?"

"Yes. I discussed it with him before we made any of the updates. And then, when it became obvious that you would be appearing around the ship together after all, we discussed what should be said at the department briefings."

"He hasn't mentioned the files. But then – He hasn't really said anything about... the days we spent apart."

Malun winced briefly. "We all want to forget those days." He reached out and put his hand over Bodie's. With an affectionate smile exactly like Turon's: "Because now we know better."

Bodie knew his own smile must be more relieved and grateful than affectionate, though of course he did like Malun. He turned his hand, to acknowledge the contact with a light squeeze. "You know I've got my difficult side too. I mean, you've seen all of my file. I'm not – Usually good with normal people."

A twitch of the eyebrows. "That's the first time that anyone's implied that I'm normal. You've been on your best behaviour. I can see that. Are we going to get any warning when that's about to wear off?"

Bodie thought about it then shook his head. "It's situations. People who – Need to be taught a lesson. Especially if I'm bored."

"It's probably fortunate that Ray's entirely comfortable with conflict. But it sounds as if we should try to keep you occupied."

Bodie closed his eyes tight and swallowed, thinking about how he and Ray had spent the day, with his arse still throbbing from the best of it. Then he grunted and nodded, and for a while gave all of his attention to eating.

Dessert was a syrup-drenched slice of something that wasn't quite cake. Malun served it at the couch with coffee and whisky, and they talked about the previous day's party, about discipline on the ship, about the pictures on Malun's walls, and about the projects that Malun was working on during the journey home. They agreed that they'd have dinner every An Uraba, alternating between Bodie's quarters, when Ray would be included, and Malun's, when he wouldn't.

At the door, Bodie raised an eyebrow and said, "How d'you and Turon say goodbye? When you – Wanna make a point of it."

Malun looked surprised, took a couple of seconds to reply. "Turon? We hug. He and Ferros have always been very enthusiastic with hugs." A fond, reminiscing smile. The least business-like that Bodie had ever seen him. Bodie guessed that the Turon he was thinking of was very, very young.

"D'you wanna – See how we do with that?"

Malun laughed, sounding amused and pleased, and immediately stepped forward and put his arms around Bodie. It was firm but brief, and Malun was the first to let go.

Yeah, they'd done fine with that. The liking Bodie felt for Malun wasn't particularly warm. Not yet. It was respect, and gratitude. Curiosity. From Malun's side, it was probably much the same. But it was still more than a bureaucratic convenience, and Bodie thought it was due some ceremony. The warmth would come in time.

They had sex in the hold every single day of the rest of the voyage. Usually they did it twice a day, but sometimes it was only once, and on An Uraba it could be three times.

The cold – and the nature of the script – put limits on what they could do. The floor and the shelving were too cold to touch with bare skin, or to lean your whole weight against even when clothed, so they couldn't get down on the floor, either on all fours or on their backs, and they couldn't brace themselves when they were fucking, or lean back when they were being sucked off. For the first few days Bodie wondered if they could get a mattress, or put padding on the shelves. But finding it in the dark could get complicated. Distracting. It might even ruin the illusion that Ray needed, and Bodie couldn't think of any way of asking him. By the end of the first week he'd stop caring, anyway, about the limitations, because they were doing so much with what they had.

They never discussed what they were doing. Not directly. The closest it got to having a name put to it was during a weekend conversation session that both Turon and Ray took part in. There was some chatting in English afterwards that turned to sport. Initially it was *gulshor*, but then West said, "I was thinking I'd come down. Join you on your runs."

"You can't." Crisp and immediate, without even a glance at Bodie. "We do run. But we've also got a... complicated sex thing going on."

Until then, Bodie had been thinking that the Hailin didn't blush, but both West and Turon flushed pink to the tips of their ears. For a change, Bodie didn't have that reaction – he was too absorbed in admiring the workings of Ray's mind. The way Ray chose his words. Yes, this really was Dishna's top police interrogator.

When they got back to their quarters, just a few minutes later, Bodie pulled Ray into his arms and said, "Ray. My *iskolpa*. You are the ultimate complicated sex thing."

Ray laughed, and looked thoroughly pleased with himself. "Well... you know I do my best."

Ray had implied that they both ran in the hold, when in fact by then it was only Bodie. On the third day after his dinner with Malun, after an early-afternoon visit to the hold, Bodie had said, "Y'know. I do want to get a proper run in every day. But it's not gonna happen if we keep going down together like that." They agreed that he'd run on his own for an hour, typically between two and three, and then Ray would join him. Ray usually spent the hour running too, but on the machines in the gym.

Before long, Bodie's knowledge of terms for sex overtook all other areas of Hass Embrun vocabulary. He didn't get to use the terms in conversation – obviously not with West and not even really with Ray – but it meant he got to understand more and more of what Ray said in the hold, and talking about the terms was exciting. They mostly talked

about them when they were lying together last thing at night. With each new term Bodie would ask questions, which frequently led to more terms. About half of the terms they discussed would never be relevant to them, even though they were all for sex between men. There were generic terms for many acts, like fucking (*sonduri*) and being fucked (*kedato*), but for most acts there were also terms that depended on the qualification-status and marital-status of the men involved.

The biggest surprise, though, was the range of terms for men in *esmana* marriages having sex with other men. There were different terms for threesomes and foursomes and more-than-foursomes, and again they could depend on the status of the other people involved, and also on whether both *iskolpas* had sexual contact with the other side, or whether one got his enjoyment from just watching, or was present only as a favour to his husband and was largely indifferent to the proceedings. As far as Bodie could tell, in Ray's script their "sex thing" was a *tomurat sempar*: a threesome with an unqualified man, with one *iskolpa* very excited at getting to watch. Well, at getting to listen, in his case, but that was one distinction that Hass Embrun did not make.

"So – How common is all that? Aren't there any Hailin men who... want to be faithful?"

Ray had no idea how common it really was, although he'd had quite a lot of sex himself with men in *esmana* marriages, both by himself or with a boyfriend, and especially with Gavio. Mostly in Monor when he was younger, but there was a couple in Dishna that he and Gavio had been having sex with regularly for several years. And he and Gavio had always assumed that they'd carry on having sex with other people once they were married.

Bodie couldn't decide how shocked to be by all of this. That it happened at all. That Ray had taken part in it. That Ray had never expected to be faithful to his *iskolpa*.

What was Ray expecting now? For them? Bodie couldn't bear to ask. He couldn't imagine wanting to share Ray. But maybe Ray wouldn't have been able to come up with their "sex thing" if he hadn't already had experience of that sort of threesome. The man you want to fuck can only get it up if his husband is there? No problem, because the husband loves to watch. No, he didn't want to think about it too much. Any more than he wanted to think about the fact that the fantastic sex they were having in the hold was possible because Ray was able to pretend that he was someone else.

Ray enjoyed the cop novel and hoped the others Turon had picked out would have some of the same grim sense of humour, or some of the same underlying compassion. He'd been really surprised, though, by the levels of racial hostility depicted in the novel. It felt like it was everywhere: a mist all the characters were wading through. And just as bad was the level of contempt for men like him who liked men. They were "fags", most often, or "fruits", or "pansies" – and probably others that he hadn't picked up on. Always used, unmistakably, as an insult. The book itself didn't depict queer men as pathetic or disgusting (or, at least, not as any more so than any of the other characters), but the way the cops and almost every other character talked about them... It had been hard to take. He did want Bodie to read it, to know how it compared with Bodie's experiences, and how much Bodie thought the writer was exaggerating. But he also didn't think he should ask Bodie to subject himself to that.

“Doesn’t sound any worse than what I grew up with. What you’d find in the army or CI5. Don’t think there’ll be much to surprise me.” No need to tell Ray how often he’d taken his part in dishing out the insults.

Ray had looked stricken, and had clutched Bodie tight. “If I’d known that before... I’d have tried to persuade Malun to cancel the mission. Told my mother that I just couldn’t take part, I wouldn’t be able to control my anger. In any dealings with – the humans. But then I wouldn’t have met you.”

Bodie pulled back, and looked deep into Ray’s eyes. “And I did know. And it didn’t stop me from flirting with you. Or going down to the cabin with you, and all while I was on duty. Because you are that sexy. Nothing else mattered.”

Bodie had an easier time with his first Hailin film. It was about a woman of about forty returning to Dishna after her *tolmin* marriage of twelve years had broken up. She and her ex-husband had been running a farm on an island at least a day’s journey from Dishna and the film was about 20% flashbacks, so Bodie got some idea of the countryside, as well as a fairly thorough tour of Dishna as she caught up with family and friends and looked for a job. All of the proportions and combinations of colours looked strange: in the trees, the animals in the fields, the cars, the road-signs, the houses, and especially in the crazy mixture of the buildings in the centre of Dishna. The most regular features in Dishna were the remains of the towers and ramparts from the time when it used to be fortified, and in fact Ray’s team was based in the largest fort, which glowered out to sea from a promontory, protecting the mouth of the river and the port on the other side.

The film took them two nights to watch because Ray paused it many times, giving a translation after every line of dialogue, pointing out general landmarks, that anyone would mention, and also personal landmarks like his college, or streets where he’d lived or made particularly satisfying arrests. He’d lived in Dishna for six years, starting with his two years of college. Then he’d made friends who lived in Parass, started spending more and more time there, and then finally bought the flat four years ago. You couldn’t see Parass from any point in Dishna, but there were two scenes in which the woman met friends in cafes along the ramparts across from the port, and they saw the Parass ferry in both scenes.

They’d initially assumed that they’d watch most of the film with the sound off, or start to fast-forward after a while, looking for the next landmark. But Bodie got interested in the story, particularly in the woman’s search for a job, and he wanted to know how it all turned out, and also to see as much as he could of how one looked for a job on Pen Embrun.

There must be some kind of job he could get, even when his Hass Embrun was still basic. The woman in the film had trained as an accountant, so she had it easy, really, despite twelve years away on the farm. And who could imagine him in an office, anyway? But there were all those factories by the port. Or the port itself. Or maybe the ferry? He’d be fine with any kind of manual work. He was not going to live off Ray. Or off Malun. He and Ray hadn’t discussed work yet. He was planning on raising the topic soon – definitely before they went through the last jump point – but he wanted to be able to raise it in Hass Embrun, and he thought that was at least three weeks away.

They went through the first jump point shortly after midnight on the second An Uraba, when the weekend's birthday party was just starting to wind down. Bodie had got quite excited about it but Ray was right: it was like going through a door. Yes, when the blackout was lifted from the windows the star-field outside was completely different, and he knew that meant they were fifty-four light-years away from the star-field from the start of the party and that was amazing. But it wasn't dramatic and the star-fields in themselves didn't mean anything to him, so he wouldn't make a point of watching any more jumps – except maybe the last one, that would bring them in contact with home.

Their dinner with Malun later that day had more drama in it than the jump, because Ray surprised Bodie (and Malun) by telling Malun that he and Bodie needed to have separate bedrooms and bathrooms, and asking if the family could help them with getting a larger flat in Parass. This was the first that Bodie had heard about "separate bathrooms". He'd been assuming that Ray would put off the conversation about help with the flat for as long as he could, and he'd also started to hope that what they were doing in the hold would get Ray completely over the stupid bestiality hang-up. OK, not overnight, but of course Ray knew perfectly well what type of semen he was getting in him and on him every day, and any shudders it gave him were of pure delight. One of these days he was going to realise that he didn't need the script any more, that the only point left to the script was the excitement of the game. He'd break out of it somehow. Maybe one day he wouldn't step away afterwards, but keep the contact between them and lead Bodie out into the light.

"Of course the family will help but –" Malun studied Bodie intently for several seconds. Bodie supposed that some of his disappointment must be obvious. "Has something gone wrong? I don't expect you to explain it all to me but... Could you tell Turon?"

Ray shook his head. "Nothing's changed for the worse. I've always known that I can't be asleep next to Bodie. For private reasons. I've always carried on sleeping in my own quarters. And having separate bathrooms... Well, I think we've found that useful. Haven't we?" Bodie nodded in concession, which Malun seemed to take as confirmation of everything Ray had said.

"Then we'll ask Ferros to find out what's available. As soon as we get through Li Anak." Everyone except Ray called the jump points by name. "I assume you want something in one of those same buildings? And facing the sea?" Yes, and ideally on the sixth floor or higher, away from the noise of the shops and school.

Bodie said, "What are you going to tell Ferros about why we need a larger flat?"

The other two looked at him sharply, then at each other. Malun said, "I'll write and tell her everything that's happened. Or probably Turon will. He keeps in closer contact with her, anyway. Does he know about the separate bedrooms?"

"I don't think so. A couple of times he's seen me coming out of my quarters first thing in the morning, but he's never made any comment."

"We'll tell him, then, closer to the time."

Bodie didn't do nearly as much reading on the journey as he'd expected. He took a break from the second volume of the Peninsular War to read the L.A. cop novel, and while it

did make him laugh a lot, it also made him wince. No one who had read this book would want anything to do with humans. He didn't get the impression that the book was exaggerated, though it must surely be concentrated. The various incidents probably were based on the guy's experiences on those same streets, but they'd have been spread out over the fourteen years, not crammed into a few weeks. And the contempt for queers... It felt like the cops were coming up with new insults on every single page. Ray probably had missed about half of them. Bodie didn't think the guy actually had it in for queers (police lieutenants and Hollywood executives came off so much worse), but he clearly got some enjoyment out of the inventiveness of the insults. Maybe it had been a good first choice. Put a quick end to all of Ray's guilt about taking Bodie away from home.

Bodie spent less and less time reading, because he was spending more and more time on his Hass Embrun, with the search for a job firmly in his mind. The lessons got longer, and then were brought forward to 9.36 and then 9.00, and West started to set him exercises in reading and writing, mostly in the transcription system, but some in the characters once Ray said he was ready. There were some days when he felt stuck and frustrated (and when West and Ray did show flickers of impatience or disappointment), but most days were good. It got easier to learn new words, because he had existing Hass Embrun words to relate them to, and the reward for the effort got better, too, as he started to understand whole sentences in real conversations and to decipher the titles of songs and films in the computer system. Sometimes they logged in as Ray so the menus were all in the characters, and he was never depressed at how much he still didn't understand, but only thrilled at how much clearer it was since the last time. There was a world (and a whole bunch of galaxies) where the Hailin were talking only to each other, being entirely themselves, and it was opening up to him, bit by bit.

The weekend conversation sessions were his main measure of the week's progress. Turon made a point of being involved in at least one every weekend, and he showed so much pride in Bodie it was almost ridiculous. Maybe a little insulting, if his expectations had been that low? He'd touch Bodie's hand or arm when Bodie got something particularly right or showed just how well he'd remembered a correction, and a couple of times (when Bodie had, indeed, really nailed it), Turon had looked like he was on the verge of grabbing Bodie by the shoulders and planting a kiss on him. Getting a footballer's kiss from his brother-in-law over his first successful string of conditional clauses. He'd given up on reminding himself that he was older than Turon: Turon was so completely the ideal of the kind, supportive older brother.

Ray was the other regular at the conversation sessions, but Bodie also got to practice with Sasha, Ward and Malun, and once with Iran and her wife. Ward's sessions were the biggest challenge. If he had any small-talk, it wasn't compatible with Bodie's, and he was uncomfortably alert for even the smallest of Bodie's mistakes. It was hard not to take it personally, even when you knew that he was only collecting the mistakes in order to improve the design of the dictionary and grammar tool that he was working on with West.

Bodie still had so much to learn, though. He was confident that he could get himself out of most types of practical trouble, get through a day in a Hailin town without starving or getting hopelessly lost or causing deadly offence. But it still took them two or three times the running-length to watch any Hailin film, because even when Bodie understood

the words, he might completely miss the point because he hadn't picked up on some reference that every single Hailin would know. That wouldn't matter for doing a worthwhile day of manual work, would it? But how the fuck was he going to crack jokes? Pick up on jokes himself. Make and keep friends. Avoid being such hard work for Ray's friends that they'd all be making excuses and edging away within a matter of months. He asked West, when they were two weeks away from Li Anak, how much more work he still had to put in, and what would be the best way of doing it once they were home.

"I've been discussing that with Malun, actually, in the last few days. I think I should move to Parass so we can continue with the lessons." A shrug. "I think we've found a method that works, and I've got nothing better to do back in Monor."

Bodie grinned, happy with the plan, but also amused by "nothing better to do". "That'd be great. You've not been there before, though, have you?"

West shook his head. "Ferros liked it, when she and Homa visited Ray a couple of years ago. More quiet than she would have expected for Ray. But everything you really need. And friendly. I'll rent a place of my own. We'll ask Ferros to start looking as soon as we're through Li Anak."

Hadn't the woman just given birth to twins? How much spare time and energy did this lot think she had? Malun must have hundreds of junior officers in Monor he could delegate the task to. Well, no, this was a family thing, so maybe it did have to be Ferros.

Ray was also very pleased with the plan. "You'll have someone you can speak English with while I'm at work. Or not speak English with, most of the time. But proper company, anyway."

What had Ray been imagining him doing, then? Just reading and running and listening to music. Cooking kedgeree and toad-in-the-hole? Bodie didn't feel ready but... it was time. ~I want to find a job. When I can speak well enough. I want to earn money. Can we think about what types of job I could do?~

Ray looked surprised, but immediately said, ~Of course. I think they will be boring, compared with that you're used to...~ He gestured with his head towards the Military History shelves. ~But of course you want to work. We'll all look for a /?/ job for you.~

A few days after they agreed on West's move to Parass, Turon mentioned during a midweek dinner that Ward was saying that they needed to decide as a group what they were going to tell their mother about Ray and Bodie. How much of the truth. Ward thought they would need all of the rest of the journey to fight it out, and Turon suspected he was right.

They were all afraid that telling her the full truth would kill her. In private, Turon admitted to Bodie that the families of people in *gimana* were usually very frank about their hopes that something – as quick and painless as possible – would appear and put an end to the suffering. Their systems were so weakened, a minor infection would often be enough. However, there was a difference between having hopes of the next flu season and knowing yourself to be the direct cause, so when Ray was present the idea of telling her the whole truth was to be dismissed out-of-hand – because they had no intention of asking Ray to take on that responsibility. The same went for Malun and even more so,

because Malun was the only member of the family who refused to talk about the possibilities of minor infections.

So it was a matter of choosing the most convincing lie, and then all keeping it up for maybe two years or more, depending on the strength of the next few strains of flu. She never left her rooms. She only saw family. So there should be a lot they could get away with.

Simply not tell her about Bodie at all? Ray was not married. Yes, his marriage was a matter of public record, but where was no reason to imagine she would look it up. She'd want to see Ray, probably want to discuss his experience wearing Udom Kol. Ray was a superb liar, nothing to worry about there, but was there any chance that she'd find out that he wasn't wearing Udom Kol any longer, that Malun had had to fire him? And why had West moved to Parass (or away from Monor, anyway, if they didn't say it was Parass)? And what if she asked about the dreaded event of Gavio qualifying? Say Ray had broken up with Gavio? Then was he with someone else? Or they hadn't broken up but had turned out to be bio-chemically incompatible? A great relief but with Ray there was always the risk that the next idiot would be even worse. "The next idiot" was from Malun and it made them all laugh, including Ray.

But if they did tell her that Ray was married then of course she would insist on meeting Bodie, and so she'd know that he wasn't Hailin – which at least would mean that they could tell her the truth about West being in Parass. And she'd see how good Bodie was for Ray, and that Ray had learned what she'd hoped he would wearing Udom Kol, so there was no need for him to wear it any more.

No one seriously thought they could tell her it was a proper *esmana* marriage. The idea of finding a compatible alien species was just too extraordinary. She would have hundreds of questions, and they would be sharp questions because she was smarter than almost all of them, even with *gimana* screaming along her nerves. Even Ray would not take on the job of inventing the script for the human version of pair-bonding: all the details of how their stages of sexual maturity worked, their equivalent of the betrothal period, the proportion who bonded, the arrangements for those who didn't.

A *tolmin* marriage wouldn't have any of those problems. Or not in such a dangerous, immediate form. She would assume that humans were pair-bonding – any Hailin would, of an intelligent species that looked like that – but why would she bother to ask any questions? Apart from maybe wondering whether or not Bodie was qualified. ("Of course he is." Pure impatience from Ray. "Who could look at him and think he failed to qualify?" They all did look at Bodie, while Bodie stared hard at the far side of Malun's coffee table.) She would still have some worry about Ray and pair-bonding, because as far as she knew, he could still meet an idiot and behave like an even bigger idiot. But they all knew that couldn't happen, they'd never have to bring her that awful news. So for however much time she had left, she could know that Ray and his mercifully non-idiot human were thoroughly happy together.

Would she want to see the record of the marriage, to savour it, and wish she'd been there? Yes. Possibly. They couldn't tamper with the Central Registry, but Ward could tamper with the computer in her rooms, and arrange for it to return a fake record that said "*tolmin* marriage". If they decided to tell her that Ray wasn't married, then they could use a similar approach to hide the record altogether.

With three days to go to Li Anak, they thought they were about 70% decided on the *tolmin* marriage story, with Sasha and West the ones still arguing for “not married”. They could all see the merits and dangers of both ideas, but they were each assessing the balance differently. They’d talked all they could for now. Turon would lay all this out in his message to Ferros, and they’d see how things looked with her opinion. Sasha asked if they could see the message before he sent it, and he agreed that he would spend the next day writing it, and they’d meet in the evening to review it. Bodie could read maybe one word in five, but the others said that Turon had been scrupulously fair.

Somehow, Ray and Ward got through the discussions in relative peace. They tended not to make eye-contact or address each other directly, but the discussions gave Ward a thousand opportunities to needle Ray over how badly he’d fucked up – and he managed to resist all of them. And Ray, in turn, managed not to bristle when Ward was the one handling a particularly delicate point. Ray did always do some ranting when they got back to their quarters, but Ward wasn’t the only person he ranted about. Malun didn’t imagine this toleration would last outside the current emergency, but he said he felt privileged to have witnessed it, and he wished he could tell Raina about it. Partly joking. Partly painfully sincere.

The day Turon composed his message to Ferros, Ray wrote his to Gavio. It was short, and he was able to show it to Bodie when Bodie got back from the morning’s lesson. Bodie could read more of this one, but he still had to rely on Ray for the full translation. Ray gave it quickly, in a flat tone: “Gavio. I have bad news for you. I met a man while I was on the mission, and we entered into a *tolmin* marriage two months ago. We are due to arrive in Parass on the 13th of Set Uchur, and I need you to move out of the flat before then. Please do not try to contact me after I return. There would be no point. I wish you well and am sorry to disappoint and inconvenience you, but all I want now is to be with my *nespa*. Ray.”

Bodie swallowed. “Wow. That’s – cold. I’d’ve said...” He shrugged. “Something about how much you’d enjoyed your time together. Tried to sound... a bit more sorry. Like you’d struggled to write the note.”

Ray shook his head. “I don’t need him to think I’m a nice, caring person. I need him not to hope. Because I know him. And he thinks he knows me. We need him to stay the fuck away from us. And don’t worry about him. There’s any number of men who’ll take him in. I might lose some friends if he shows them the message, but I’m happy to take that risk.”

Bodie raised his eyebrows. “If you say so. Just – glad you’ll never be writing me anything like that.”

Ray sighed, finally looking regretful. “I wish I could tell him it’s an *esmana* marriage. For our sake. But he’ll have told half the town about us by the time we arrive.” And anyone in Parass might end up meeting Bodie. It didn’t bother him on the ship that everyone who didn’t live in the family quarters thought it was a *tolmin* marriage. It’d be OK in Parass, too. It was the sensible thing to do.

They went through Li Anak shortly past three in the morning. After a contact mission, this was always marked with a small ceremony in the lounge facing Pen Embrun. The Mabein would all be present, and Inoni Sarai would make a speech when the blackout was lifted, and then the Mabein would serve *toroquil* to everyone, and show in the process that every one of them knew the name of every member of the crew.

The ceremony wasn't mandatory and old hands tended to skip it, but about a third of the crew turned up for this one. So Bodie got to see Turon wearing Hutton Iba, who looked like black volcanic rock cracking open to show the lava inside, and Ward wearing Un Beluran, who was a moss-covered skull. To Bodie, Turon's unhurried, willowy grace was unmistakable, and Ward's gawkiness. He didn't know the officer wearing Udom Kol, though he should be easy to spot around the ship, as there weren't many Hailin who were that hefty. They drank their *toroquil* looking out of the window, with Bodie's arm around Ray, and Ray pointing out star systems and telling a few stories about the first Hailin explorations. They took the secret corridor home, leaving shortly after the Mabein, and after Ray had sent the message to Gavio, they kissed at the door and went to bed.

That was on At Laura Var (the first Wednesday). From Li Anak, a message would take a day and a half to reach Pen Embrun. Turon got his reply from Ferros during dinner on At Oba Nyon (the Friday), and they all met in Malun's quarters an hour later.

Ferros must have expressed her own reaction to the news, but Turon didn't show them that part of her reply. Her opinion about the problem of what to tell Raina was that the most important factor was Lamon, who was the family member spending most time with Raina since the twins had been born. Lamon would not be able to lie to their mother (and all of the Hailin groaned, because, no, of course she wouldn't), so whatever they decided to conceal from Raina, they had to be able to conceal from Lamon, too.

With West, one of her closest friends, moving to Parass, they couldn't hope to hide Bodie's existence from Lamon for two weeks, let alone two years. But no one could see any problems with telling Lamon it was a *tolmin* marriage. Turon wrote back telling Ferros what they'd decided, and saying they'd work on a plan for who should break the news and how, and would keep Ferros informed about that.

The next day, while Bodie was in a conversation session with West and Turon, Ray received a reply from Gavio. He didn't show it to Bodie, said he'd deleted it immediately. Bodie guessed it was scathing, but Ray didn't seem even slightly shaken, just shrugged and said, "He didn't wish us well."

Early that evening they got a message from Malun summoning them to his quarters along with the rest of the family. The message said there was a new factor to take into account with Raina, but he'd tell them the details in person.

Sasha was the last to arrive, just after seven. She'd been on a date with her engineer. Malun offered drinks, poured himself a large scotch, and then told them that he'd received a message from Raina, and she'd found out for herself that Ray was in an *esmana* marriage.

She hardly ever used the computer in her rooms, but she'd set up an alert for the arrival of the *Sivor Simalsa* through Li Anak, and then had looked for news of the mission as the ship started to transmit its data to the base in Monor. She'd found some footage of the announcement that the base would be in Britain, and when she'd seen that Udom Kol was missing from the team, she'd feared the worst for Ray and had brought up his file. As a medical pensioner she did still have a rank in the company and it was a high rank, but it shouldn't have allowed her to see all of Ray's details. Malun thought she must have used his access; he couldn't imagine she'd have any problems arranging that.

She'd checked the medical data and seen that Ray wasn't ill or injured, but that he'd been tested for the state of *esmana* and confirmed. The information about the marriage gave his husband's name as Bodie Vasmar, and all that the system had on this Bodie Vasmar was his date of birth, the fact that he was born off-planet, and the fact that Malun had adopted him two days after the marriage. So what the fuck was going on?

There was no hint that she suspected that Bodie was human, so no reason to think that she would start reading the files on human biology. After all, Ray had completed the bonding process with him, so obviously he was Hailin. Maybe she was even assuming that Bodie was a stowaway, or some other type of highly dubious character. How else would a Hailin who apparently wasn't a crew member end up with the fleet?

Malun could not bear to tell her the full truth in a message. So his plan was to say that he would explain everything when they got home, and in the meantime to send her some footage of Ray and Bodie together, so she could see how happy Ray was, and how much they clearly had to offer each other. No, he wasn't asking them to pose or act anything out. He was going to spend the night looking through the archives for the cameras in the public areas. The lounges, mainly, for scenes from parties, and the *gulshor* courts. Ray suggested he also check the lounges and garden for breakfast time on the weekends, when they'd be alone, talking over their coffee. Turon volunteered to help Malun look.

They were happy for Malun to send whatever he thought was suitable, whenever he was ready; they didn't need to check it first. Ray said he'd be curious to see what they'd chosen, and Bodie said nothing, because he did not enjoy seeing himself on film. His chin always looked so prissy from the side, and his nose too small and somehow fake.

It also didn't sound as if Raina had discussed any of what she'd found with Ferros. So Malun would bring Ferros up to date and send her the same footage. She should stall in whatever way she saw fit, if Raina did ask her what she'd heard from Turon and the others. The full truth had to wait until they got home – and then Raina would understand perfectly why Ferros had lied.

They should think next about who was going to tell her, and how. But that could wait for several days. Three days, at least, to see if she replied to Malun.

They'd been planning to cook pasta and watch "Raiders of the Lost Ark", but Ray stopped Bodie when he was reaching for the chopping-board and said, "Let's go for a run. Now. Together."

After three circuits Bodie had decided that Ray had simply wanted a run, with company. It certainly wasn't because he'd suddenly got horny. It was good to have a proper run together, so Bodie stopped expecting anything and just enjoyed the rhythm, but on the ninth circuit Ray said, "Go on. I want to find you." Very quiet. Still not turned on.

Obviously, this one was going to be different. Ray didn't talk at all, and he didn't want to fuck or be fucked. He just wanted to stand cock-against-*jarupard* with Bodie, and finger him, and kiss him, and push their tops up so their chests could touch as high up as the nipples, for as long as they could stand the cold.

He wanted the contact, of course. A dry-hump on the bed just wasn't enough when you'd learned that you had only fourteen days to go until you had to tell your desperately ill mother that your body had been fooled into a marriage with an animal. In the meeting,

he'd been the one who had taken the news most calmly, sounding impressed, more than anything, that she'd found the energy and concentration to figure so much out. But that was Ray, wasn't it? He either showed you everything he was feeling, or nothing.

Gradually they did get hard. Ray wrapped his hand around both erections, explored them both together, pressed them to his stomach. In the end he sucked Bodie off while he worked himself with his hand, and then they kissed for much longer than usual.

"Bodie, I'm ready to go now." More command than statement. Also unusual.

"OK." And Bodie decided to do something unusual himself: finding Ray's shoulder in the darkness on the way out, and linking their hands. Ray returned the grip and they ended up completing the circuit like that, only parting when it was time for Bodie to turn off the lights.

For the rest of the evening, Ray carried on with wanting contact and not wanting to talk, though the film distracted him very successfully. Then he was eager to go to bed, though sex seemed to be the last thing on his mind. After several minutes of not even kissing, Bodie said, "It's the idea of telling her, isn't it. It's really getting to you."

A deep sigh and a slow nod. "I'm not a good son. Out of all of us, I have to be the one who's given her the most trouble. But what I'm about to do to her..." He swallowed and shut his eyes hard. When he opened them again, he pulled away slightly, and then placed his hand on Bodie's chest. "And you... Whatever happens, it's – It's got to hurt you. And I can't think of any way to – Make any of it any better."

"Yeah." Bodie gave a long sigh. "Can't say I'm looking forward to it. But we'll help each other through it. I wish you could stay the night. You look like you really need to, right now. Feel like you do, even more."

"I –" A deep frown, then he rolled away onto his back. The opposite to what Bodie had been hoping for. "You're right. I really don't want to be alone tonight. I wonder if – If Malun and Turon are still working, I could go and help them. And when we've finished, I could get Turon to keep me company. If the rest of Sasha's date went well, he might be quite pleased to have company himself." He thought about it for a few seconds then nodded and started to sit up.

Bodie grabbed him by the arm to stop him. "You really can't stay the night? You're as far off sex as I've ever seen you. You know I won't push it. Maybe you can change your mind about – Just how much of an animal I am."

Ray didn't try to pull away, but didn't come close again, either. "Bodie. Bodie. This isn't a good time."

"When's it gonna be a good time? Haven't I –" Gone along with everything? Been good enough to make you decide that it can't be wrong after all?

"I – We've got to get home. See how – See what it's like at home."

With no pitch-black hold? No convenient history of stowaways. With three moons, the nights on Pen Embrun weren't nearly dark enough; he'd been looking for that, when he'd watched the films. OK. Yeah. He bet without that, Ray would soon rethink his priorities.

“OK.” He let go and lay back. “Guess you’d better go and find Turon, then. God, he’ll be glad to get rid of us. Get back to just people moaning about kitchens. Look, let’s forget about the weights session tomorrow morning. No need to wake Turon up that early. And you should invite him around for breakfast.”

Ray agreed and came around to the side of the bed for their goodnight kiss.

“So whose bedroom d’you think we’ll use when we’re home? Maybe save yours for the weekend? Special occasions?”

Ray just smiled, and took another, much briefer kiss. “I’ll be better tomorrow, I think. Or – More used to the idea.”

“Yeah, try to sleep. And don’t worry about me. Tough as old army boots, remember.”

Ray and Turon arrived for breakfast around eight, and Ray did seem much better. Turon and Malun had nearly finished going through the footage when Ray had arrived, but they’d then spent the next hour deciding on their favourite six pieces, which made nearly twenty-four minutes in total.

There was no sound, and Turon said no one would be able to tell that they weren’t speaking Hass Embrun, but that anyone would enjoy guessing what they were teasing each other about, or challenging each other over, or reminding each other of. Ray said his favourite piece was the *gulshor*. Not, he insisted, because he won, but because Bodie was so impressively generous in conceding defeat. Turon’s favourite was from the last party, with the two of them talking to him, Sasha and West during a break in the music. Malun had got less and less worried as he had looked through the footage, and was almost cheerful by the time he sent the message off.

Over dinner in Malun’s quarters the next evening, Malun told Bodie that his favourite was from the ceremony after Li Anak, with Bodie smiling as he accepted his glass of *toroquil* from Ward and they exchanged the ritual words, while Ray watched with an expression in which even the most cynical would find nothing beyond a mild curiosity. Raina would be watching all six many times a day, but Malun knew she would watch that one twice as often as the others.

This would be their last dinner together on the ship. The next An Uraba was the day before they were due to reach Pen Embrun, and everything would be packed, and everyone too busy. Malun wanted to continue with regular dinners – maybe once a month? With the transporter, they could meet in Parass, or in Malun’s house near Monor. Or anywhere else, really. Malun would be away sometimes, including occasional trips out of system, but they would keep in touch.

“I’ll get another wristband set up for you. We’ll program it to beam you to one of the orbiting stations if you press the alarm. And any other kind of help you need, you know you only have to ask.”

Bodie shook his head. “Dunno what I’ll need. What it’ll be like with just West around. Ray going back to work. What his friends’ll make of me.” The briefest of shrugs. “I’m not worried except... What he’ll do if there’s a night he feels he can’t spend on his own. And Turon isn’t four doors down anymore.”

Malun looked very thoughtful, then said slowly, “Is there any point in asking you why you need separate bedrooms?”

Bodie stared at a point on one of Ward’s paintings and took a long time to reply. Eventually he said, “No. Don’t think there is.” From a practical point of view, maybe Malun should know. But Bodie couldn’t imagine ever finding any set of words that would be bearable to say out loud.

“Then what if I tell you some theories I’ve discussed with Turon. And maybe you can... Yes, pull a face more or less like that one to show me how many miles off we were.”

“Fuck sake! I could have lived without knowing you’d spent any time gossiping about us. Why the hell would I wanna hear the details?”

“Of course you wouldn’t. But I’m worried that it might be important. And I think you’re physically unable to talk about it. I wouldn’t call it gossip. I would call it an attempt to reconcile contradictions in our observations of Ray. Based on our many years of experience with him. No one ever bothers to try to gossip with me. Especially not about sex.”

Bodie had to smile at that. “Yeah, but Turon? I bet you every word of every conversation I’ve ever had with him he’s told to at least someone. Meaning to be helpful but – Who’d tell him a secret?”

“I couldn’t argue with that. But he’s also good at knowing who to trust. And with this – you and Ray and the separate bedrooms – he only trusts me. So do you trust us? Enough to listen for half a minute anyway.”

Bodie frowned, shut his eyes hard, then exhaled sharply. “The ‘contradictions’, then. Get right to that.”

“Well... we’ve had opportunities in the past – Turon in particular – to observe Ray when he’s glowing with what we know to be sexual satisfaction. And he’s been in that state for all of this voyage. Which leads us to think that you have been engaging in a wide range of activities.” A raised eyebrow. “Were we wrong?”

Bodie took a deep breath, then shook his head.

The smallest of nods. Of course they hadn’t been wrong. “And that seemed at odds with what we’d understood from both of you about limitations in what you could do. Limitations imposed by Ray’s concerns about being involved in bestiality. Of course, the details of someone’s married life would be ‘private’, but it seemed that, with you, ‘private’ could be taken as a code for ‘being directly related to Ray’s concerns’. Now, it was right at the beginning of the journey that Ray told us explicitly that whatever he was doing with you, it was something that no one would consider as bestiality. We assumed that – being Ray – he would very rapidly adjust his ideas about how a sensible person would regard the situation. Turon said it took him less than two weeks to feel perfectly comfortable with the thought of any unqualified Hailin having any type of sex with any human. And Ray glowing seemed to confirm that. But then I’m hearing that you need separate beds. For ‘private’ reasons. And we’re confused.” Again the raised eyebrow.

Bodie gave him a stony glare for about ten seconds, then said, “Hate to break it to you, Malun, but you’ve been up to your armpits in gossip.”

Malun looked disappointed, but not surprised. “Could you at least tell me if his remaining concerns are specifically about sharing a bed or a bathroom with you? I mean, does the ‘wide range of activities’ represent an adjustment in his ideas? Or were we completely wrong in our assumptions about what he might think other people would consider as bestiality?”

Bodie had been going to put some extra granite in his glare, but instead found himself sighing. “No, you probably weren’t wrong. I don’t think there’s really been any adjustment. It’s about a lot more than separate bedrooms but...” A shrug. “He figured out a loophole. We can do almost anything we want. If the conditions are right.”

“Ah.” A lopsided smile. “Turon and I were thinking too much like ourselves. Not enough like Ray. Do the two of you talk much about the situation? What you’re... hoping for?”

Bodie pulled a face. “Not really. Think we’re – Not really.”

“Do you think it would help if I talked to him? Or maybe Turon. Explain the same things about what we’ve observed. Why we’re confused. I think without mentioning that we already know about the loophole.”

Bodie shook his head. “He’d deny – It’d – We might lose what we do have.”

“OK. Should I not have asked you? Is there any way I could have asked you why you need separate bedrooms?”

Bodie laughed. “Jesus, man, you are relentless! The interrogator thing really runs in the family. No, I – I can see your reasons. Can see why you’d bother with the gossip. But if I did tell you...” Again he was shaking his head, over and over. “I don’t see what you could do with it. Like I said, I’m not worried.” Suddenly he grinned. “The thing you can always trust Ray for, is to keep on coming up with loopholes.”

Alone in bed, Bodie wondered if there was actually something Malun could have said that would have got him the answer he wanted. Maybe if he’d asked about the “complicated sex thing”. And if he and Turon had come at all close to guessing that the “thing” was entirely about the darkness. But they probably thought that was just one “sex thing” among hundreds. They weren’t going to guess, not even now they knew there was a loophole.

On the morning of At Laura Var, they got back from *gulshor* to find they each had a message from Malun to say that he’d got a reply from Raina. She’d said that she was assuming that the first thing he’d explain was why Ray and his handsome *iskolpa* were wearing those off-world clothes, when everyone else was dressing normally. Ray assured Bodie that she was teasing, and in the next line of the message Malun said the same. She was purely interested now: in meeting the man who could hold Ray’s attention in so many ways, and so completely, and also in hearing the details of their obviously-unconventional courtship. Malun was calling a family meeting for six that evening, to decide who should tell her what, and in what order.

During that morning’s lesson, West mentioned that he’d heard from Lamon. When she’d taken Raina her breakfast that morning, Raina had asked her to get Ferros, and then she’d shown them both the footage, starting with the ones that included other family

members, so Lamon wanted to know what West could tell her about Bodie. Obviously he wouldn't tell her anything, except that Bodie was fitting in to the family very well, and yes, there was a strange story to how he and Ray had met, but that would have to wait until they got home.

Then after the lesson Turon called in. He'd heard from Ferros, who had been amazed by the footage. They'd told her that Ray was happy, but she'd taken that to mean "by Ray's standards" or "somehow coping bravely with being married to a *glarus*". It was going to be an effort to remember to tell people outside the family that it was a *tolmin* marriage, because she thought of it now as a full *esmana* marriage.

Regarding the flat in Parass, they were going to have to compromise over something. There weren't any two-bedroom, two-bathroom flats on the right level facing the sea. There were some other one-bedroom flats with the right view and height, but none was in the same building as Ray's. To get the right size with a sea view, the only option at that moment was a three-bedroom, two-bathroom flat on the fourth floor. Would they consider having two one-bedroom flats in separate buildings, or having a flat together on one of the family floors?

When Ray asked Bodie what he thought, Bodie shrugged. "You know the buildings, I don't. The separate buildings sound a pain. Worse than here. But if it's all screaming kids on the fourth floor then that might be a worse pain."

Ray frowned as he thought it over, then said decisively, "We'll take the fourth floor. It shouldn't be that bad. I've had enough of leaving you at night, and that's only to go two doors down. West can take my old flat."

It was agreed. Ray would check with West first, in case he wanted to live in a different part of town, and then he'd write to Ferros and ask her to buy the fourth-floor flat.

In the hold that afternoon, Ray started to talk for the first time about the fact that the encounters there were going to come to an end. ~Today's At Laura Var. I think the last time we'll be able to meet will be An Uraba. Only six days. I'm going to /?/ this so much. You've been so good.~

The argument in Malun's quarters that evening was over whether Raina should meet Bodie first and discover for herself that he wasn't Hailin, with all the risk that she would ask questions in a way they hadn't prepared for. Or whether someone else should tell her the truth first, in a proper order, with an agreed wording – with the risk that no matter what they said, she'd still end up so shocked that she'd refuse to even meet Bodie.

They had some confidence in their collective ability to find the best possible way to present the situation to her, but even more confidence in Bodie's ability to charm any Bakkel or Vasmar. The only voice of caution was from Sasha, who wondered, hesitantly, with a lot of wincing, whether they could be sure that the charm would work on the women of the family as well as it did on the men.

Ward, West and Malun all looked at Turon, like the most important thing was whether he'd known about this. "But you like Bodie. Don't you?"

"Of course I like him. But I've never had a conversation with him on my own. It's always been with at least one of you. And I've always suspected that on our own, we would have no idea what to say to each other. Of course I'm only one example and I certainly haven't

noticed any women on board reacting badly to him. But I'm wondering if the urge to spend as much time as possible with Bodie is something that's specific to the family's men." She shrugged, and gave Bodie a sincere-looking but shaky apologetic smile.

Bodie shrugged in return, with a tight smile. He wasn't offended, exactly, but he'd always thought his charm worked just fine on women. Well above average, in fact.

There were a few moments of silence, a mixture of thoughtful and awkward, then Malun sighed and said, "Maybe we shouldn't be too confident, then. But since Ray will be there too, she should have some chance of liking him. And of being able to talk to him. If I understand Sasha correctly." Sasha nodded, they all agreed that they would have Raina meet Bodie first, and they moved on to the questions she might ask, and the safest way to respond to each of them. For anything skirting too close to humans and their pair-bonding and the details of how the courtship had been conducted, they were hoping to get away with: "Yes, there is a story behind that. But it's something Malun thinks he should tell you."

It would be Malun doing the telling, with maybe one of the others for support and confirmation. It had happened on his watch, and even if it hadn't, he wouldn't want his twin to get that news from anyone else.

Malun had said the meeting would be an hour and he stuck to that. They would meet again the next day at the same time, and in the meantime they should think more about the questions Raina might ask, and Malun would make his first plan for what he would say.

Over dinner, Bodie said, "How d'you think it'll go with your mother?"

Ray sighed and shook his head. "I've no idea. She might just be so exhausted she'll only have energy to spend a few minutes with us. Maybe not ask any questions at all. And when Malun tells her... I've no idea. But it's enough for me that she saw all the right things in the footage. That she understood, at least for a few days, why you're the one. What about you? Are you worried?"

Bodie shrugged. "Worried about doing something to make it worse. Because I don't really know what we're dealing with. Just gonna take my cues from you."

By seven the next evening, they all felt they'd done as much as they could to prepare for Raina's questions. Malun would go in on his own, but with both Turon and Ward close at hand in case they were needed. She was usually at her best in the early evening, after her six o'clock evening meal. It was always a very light meal, so Ray and Bodie would be able to go in at half past, with Malun immediately after.

The ship was going to start decelerating late the next day, which was At Kamanan, because they would need four and a half days on the brakes in order to enter orbit around ten in the morning of At Mordez. Malun's first priority was to take the masks back to the palace. They never used the transporter for the masks, so he'd take the shuttle down to the base and drive in to the city. Ray and Bodie were going to join him: Ray felt Bodie should see the palace, and they needed to go into the city in order to buy Bodie his first Hailin clothes. After they'd driven back to the base, they'd take Malun's flyer to Clover.

Malun had never mentioned to Bodie that he flew his own light aircraft. Maybe he considered human planes so primitive that it couldn't count as a skill they had in common. Bodie would ask, at their next dinner. West had a car at the base and would be driving to Clover. The others might get a ride with him, or might take the transporter.

On An Embrun, they had their last dinner with Turon and Sasha. They ended up drinking more than they usually did, which did seem to help in breaking the remaining ice between Sasha and Bodie. Turon told them that Ward wanted to give Bodie a painting for the new flat, but hadn't offered in person because of his doubts about how Ray would react.

Ray shrugged. "What's the painting? Have you seen it?"

"Probably. He's planning to let Bodie choose from the paintings he's got on board. Bodie would need to decide by lunchtime tomorrow, before Ward starts packing them all up." Ward had been claiming back his paintings over the last few days; Turon and Sasha's walls were almost bare.

Then Bodie would go for the square one that was almost entirely black, but with different textures of black, and with a pool of deep coppery browns glimmering restlessly in one corner. It had been in West's quarters until the day before, and every weekend Bodie had surprised himself by seeing something new in it. He told Ray which one he'd choose, and Ray immediately nodded. "Yeah, I could live with that." Turon sent a message to Ward, and by the end of the dinner it had been arranged that Ward would bring the packed painting around to their quarters at seven the next evening.

Afterwards, in bed, Bodie said, "So you're OK with us having one of Ward's paintings? It's not gonna be winding you up every time you look at it?"

After a few moments of frowning assessment, Ray said, "Don't think so. If it does, we'll take it down. Put it somewhere safe. Or lend it to West again. And if you're about to ask if I still think he's an arsehole, yeah, of course I do. Never gonna like him. But I can see he's got some uses."

"Wasn't gonna ask. Just checking on the safety of my valuable new painting."

When Ward delivered the painting the next day, Ray went so far as to thank him, with actual eye-contact, and then as Ward was leaving, he asked if Ward was going to the evening's party. Ward never went to the parties, or, at least, they'd never heard about it if he did.

"Yes. Probably around nine. It'll be my last chance to see some people."

Ray nodded. "We'll see you there, then."

They did most of their packing during the morning of An Uraba. The purchase of the flat had been agreed on At Kamaran – Malun was buying it, and would be giving it to Bodie – but the various formalities meant that they wouldn't be able to move in until At Oba Nyon, at the earliest. They could stay at Clover until then, but Ray said that three nights was the most that he could stand. So they would go to Ray's flat on the morning of At Pontal, and Ray would sleep on the couch. They had work to do, anyway, to pack things up and get the flat ready for West. Ray would have the next week, too, to sort things out with the new flat, and then he was expected back at work.

They were dividing their packing into things they could live without until the new flat (such as Bodie's music, and most of Bodie's books), things they'd want at Clover (such as their exercise gear), and things they'd probably want in Ray's flat. The containers for both flats would be sent to the transporter centre for Parass, with instructions to hold the deliveries until they were cleared by Ray Vasmar.

They had a run before lunch, and went into the dark on their first circuit together; the smallest gesture of the head from Ray was all that Bodie needed.

~You're going to fuck me now. Harder, even, than you've fucked me before. And then when I come back this afternoon I'm going to fuck you. As slow as we can make it. And then... I'll be gone.~

They did their laundry immediately after they showered, and then the afternoon was a mixture of excitement and dread. It was Bodie, in the end, who gave in just before five, with a raised eyebrow and "Down to the hold?"

During the sex Ray was almost silent, apart from echoing Bodie's grunts and moans, and low, possibly unconscious mutterings of ~Such a beautiful...~ and ~So excited~ and ~Always so eager~. Afterwards, when they were face-to-face, Ray pulled up Bodie's clothes, which he'd never done before. Bodie guessed that Ray wanted him to do the same but he hesitated, not willing to hasten the moment when Ray would step away. Eventually Ray whispered, ~I'm getting cold. But I don't want to let go of you. Can you /?/ my trousers?~

They held each other tightly enough to keep warm, but with one hand free to caress, to trace each damp curve. The kiss was deep, but almost motionless.

~You're so important to me. You're such an amazing /?/. I was so /?/ about these weeks. But this has been so /?/.~ A long, shaking sigh. ~And for my *iskolpa* too. This has been just as important to him.~

"I love you" was rising up in Bodie's throat, but of course he couldn't say it out loud. He mouthed the words instead, once – Ray probably heard the movements – and then he seized Ray's head and sealed off any further words with the heat of Ray's mouth. This was going to be the last kiss. He could feel it.

"Bodie? You ready?" Flat. He'd stepped away very suddenly in the end, with just four or five short, panting breaths for warning.

"Not really. But let's go."

They did their last load of laundry and read. They had dinner in the galley with Turon, Sasha and West, listened to Turon and Sasha's music for a while, and then home for more reading. They read leaning against each other, as they usually did, but when, around eleven, Ray suggested they go to bed, Bodie shook his head.

"Feeling too antsy. I'm done with last time for this, last time for that. I wanna save it all for a first time. Tomorrow."

Ray looked disappointed. Slightly puzzled. "We're not even going to kiss goodnight?"

Bodie smiled, then knelt up on the couch and bent to press his lips to Ray's. "Of course we are. But we'll do it so many times..." Another kiss. "None of them will really count as the last." And another.

After maybe twenty more, with both of them breathing heavily, Ray said, "And you still don't want to go to bed?" Sounding more curious than hopeful.

"Yeah, still wanna save it till tomorrow."

A long, serious look, then Ray was nodding slowly. "You're probably right. Maybe even until tomorrow evening. Give me something to really look forward to. For after Malun's meeting with her." He gave a sad-looking smile, then sighed. "I think I'll go to bed then. Try to decide which of the hundreds of bedrooms in Clover we should use first."

"Hundreds?"

"Well... more than fifty, anyway. I'll give you a choice."

It wasn't really about being antsy and being done with "last times". Though it was about one particular last time. In the hold. He didn't want to follow that up with just another dry-hump. Yes, that might be all that would be on offer for a while, until Ray figured out the next loophole, but he wanted the one after that special fuck to have something special too. He lay and thought of Ray inside him, of how much he loved Ray, and he touched himself, and said the three words out loud as he came.

Chapter 12

They had breakfast in the galley, then went to the lounge to watch the approach to Pen Embrun. Ray had dressed in Hailin clothes, which were the first that Bodie had seen him in apart from the uniform. They were fairly formal clothes, Ray said, more suited to a dinner with the officers or a job interview than to a party. He was feeling he had to make a visible effort, partly for their visit to the palace when they went with Malun to take the masks back, and partly for his mother. No, you didn't have to dress formally for a visit to the palace, but for him, on that particular day, it was a way for showing respect to the Mabein and the other Bakkels. After he'd failed so completely to do his duty.

They had the lounge to themselves. Everyone else must either be too busy or too used to the sight. From a distance Pen Embrun looked similar to Earth: mostly blue, with a draping of clouds. But as they got closer Bodie could see that there really weren't any continents, just clusters of island, though some of the clusters extended for thousands of miles. No ice at the poles, and all of the islands looked green.

Their home was in a relatively small cluster called Ikara in the southern hemisphere. Dishna's island, Tenna, was large enough for them to make out, but their island, Roslin, was too small. They flew close enough to one of the moons that Bodie could see the movement of the smoke and the shifting colours of the lava, and the views they got of the other two moons showed that any one of them would liven up the night sky. When they came into orbit, it was over a large cluster of islands centred on the equator; the Ikara cluster was just visible, thousands of miles away to the south east.

When the masks weren't being worn during the contact mission, they were kept in a cabinet in the galley off the secret corridor. Malun had said he would start to pack the masks up as soon as the ship entered orbit, and by the time they joined him in the galley, the cabinet was empty and Malun was waiting with a large carrying case in each hand. Malun would be doing all of the carrying on the way to the palace; neither of them wore a mask, so it wouldn't be appropriate for them to handle the masks in any way.

Malun said they should leave their wristbands in the galley. He had Bodie's new wristband with him. Ray didn't comment as Bodie took it and fastened it. Maybe he knew exactly what it was for. Or maybe he assumed it was just part of their father-son thing.

They were on the first shuttle down, as the only passengers. The base was to the north of the city, and extended along several miles of coastline. Ray pointed out the main features of the city, and got Bodie oriented: Clover was inland fifty-six miles to the south east, and Malun's house was on the coast about the same distance to the east of the base.

"Welcome to Pen Embrun, Bodie."

Bodie returned the pressure of Ray's grip on his hand, and stood for some moments looking around and breathing in deeply. Then he smiled at Ray and said, "With better weather. Like you said." Mid-80s, it felt like. Just a few traces of clouds. A dry heat. The air smelled of machinery. And then probably mostly of the ocean. The green tinge to their concrete, and the style of the buildings, he already recognised from the films.

They took a small, driverless train three stops to the main car park. Ray drove, with Bodie in the passenger seat and Malun in the back with the masks. Bodie could read a lot of the signs, he could name some of the trees (mostly those whose fruit he had to avoid), and he could easily pick out schools and train stations and restaurants.

The palace was more of a temple, really. No one lived there, unless you counted the masks – which every Hailin probably did. So, yes, it was a palace. The masks lived in the innermost room, hanging in a long, tall display cabinet. There were five in the cabinet when they arrived. Six if you counted the black and green fragments scattered across the wooden base of the cabinet at the far right.

Bodie was about to ask why no one had done anything about the broken mask when the panels in the cabinet slowly started to descend, to a murmur of excitement from the nine other visitors. The palace had a complex of underground rooms, and Malun was down there, about to put the eight missing masks back.

Everyone waited in silence through the four or five minutes, and then there were sighs and exclamations of greeting and relief as the panels rose again. The masks were evenly spaced across the whole length of the cabinet, with Inoni Sarai in the centre. Udom Kol and Embrun were next to each other, a few spaces to the left.

If Ray was still wearing Udom Kol, if they'd been properly pair-bonded, then Malun would have placed Udom Kol so he was touching Embrun, and Bodie would have had to take part in the ceremonies in the palace to mark the birth of their children. It wouldn't matter to the Hailin that Embrun was being worn by a man. All they cared about was the way that the two belonged to each other, the way everything had changed when they met. Udom Kol's mask showed the moment of the meeting, and Embrun's showed the change: the forehead and eyelids were a sleeping, metallic immortal, the lower jaw was bleached bone, and in between she was mortal flesh. All as Ray had described it when he'd been telling Bodie about the palace and the ceremonies. Sounding almost wistful. You might think that Ray needing to get away from the family meant that he had no patience for any of this, but Bodie was starting to think that it was actually a sign of how seriously he took it all.

Malun joined them a few minutes later, and Bodie saw other visitors recognising him, smiling to themselves and each other, then looking with increased interest at the two men that Malun was talking to.

~Shall we go?~

Ray shook his head. ~Not yet. I want to show Bodie the /?/ for lost ships. I've told him quite a lot about them. ~ Malun nodded, and Ray led the way.

As they were walking across the plain, broad lawn to the car, Bodie said, "Maybe I'm not supposed to ask but when are you going to do something about that broken mask? I guess you have to wait until the palace is closed to get in and clear it up."

The two Hailin looked at each other, expressions sombre. A fractional widening of Ray's eyes seemed to be the signal that Malun should give the answer. "That mask is Gagra. He's always displayed like that. He's... He's *glarus*. He's the original *glarus*. Our spirit of destruction and betrayal. We use a new mask for each ceremony he appears in. And then it's broken and displayed like that."

Bodie swallowed, and took a deep breath before he said, “And what poor sod has to wear him, then?”

“Lamon.” Ray had taken this question. “It was her first choice. He’s the only one who doesn’t have any words to say in the ceremonies.”

Not even to beg for mercy? Well of course not. No Hailin would ever waste time imagining how a *glarus* might feel about anything.

The area of clothes shops that Ray had decided on was a few miles further south, near the centre of the city. Malun drove, then dropped them off and went to find parking. He would use the waiting time to have lunch.

The whole process took less than an hour. Much better than Bodie had been expecting. It turned out that Ray had been giving some thought to what Bodie might like, and to what he would like on Bodie. They started off with a formal outfit similar to his own but in black and white and grey, then in more-casual wear they got three pairs of trousers in a range of weights, four tops in different styles, and two jackets. Two pairs of shoes. Kit for *gulshor*, and for running. The people in the shops initially assumed that Bodie was in Monor on trading business and wouldn’t know any Hass Embrun, so were visibly surprised when he answered questions directed at Ray, and when they referred to each other as “my *nespa*”. Then they’d typically be asked where they’d met and how long they’d been married and how long Bodie had been in Monor. And then Ray paid and they saw the Vasmar name on his account, and in Monor, apparently, when you were in the company of an alien, people did bother to wonder how closely you might be connected to the famous Malun. No one asked, but there was eyebrow-raising and blinking, and the surprise turning distinctly thoughtful.

On their way out of the second shop, Bodie said, “D’you think they’ll wait till they get home? Or are they calling all their friends and family about us right now?”

Ray snorted, then nodded. “That’s one thing about Parass being so small. The news’ll get around so quickly we’ll only have this for the first couple of days.” A gesture with his head back towards the shop. He seemed resigned more than annoyed, and stayed patient through the rest of the shopping too. Bodie was happy with Ray’s choices. He might not have chosen that pink or that pale blue for a top, but with the jackets Ray picked out they did bring out his colouring in the way Ray said he’d been after – while still making it easy for him to look dangerous.

They were halfway to the café where they’d agreed to meet Malun when Bodie said, “You’ve got me thinking what it’d be like to see you in clothes I’d chosen for you.”

Ray stopped dead, then half-turned back to the shops. “I’d love that. What did you spot?”

Bodie had to shake his head. “Nothing specific yet. I’m only starting to see what you lot really wear. On the street. I never really noticed at the parties. Not when I had you next to me in your tight jeans. With your sleeves rolled up to show off your arms.”

Ray grinned, leaned forward and pressed his lips briefly to Bodie’s, then carried on towards the café. “You have clear priorities. That’ll be helpful.”

Malun was sitting outside with a glass of tea and a book. He had already paid and they headed immediately for the side-street where he’d parked his car.

“I thought you would have changed clothes. Wasn’t that the point?”

Bodie shook his head. “Too much hassle to do it in the shop. I’ll wait until we get to Clover.”

Malun drove back to the base, where they took the train two stops past the shuttle terminal, and then it was a five minute walk to the hangar where Malun had left his flyer. The take-off was steep and they flew at about the height of a helicopter, but the ride was quiet enough that they didn’t need hearing protection and both Malun and Ray provided a running commentary during the twenty minutes or so of the flight. The landscape got steadily more hilly as they headed inland, and the populations smaller and sparser.

Clover turned out to be very easy to spot, as it was by far the largest building in forty miles, and it stood on its own in a vast estate. There was a river running through the estate, and at first Bodie assumed there were separate groups of buildings on each side of the river, but as they started descending he saw that the structures across the river were roofs and terraces, not bridges.

“It’s built right over the river!”

“Right over a waterfall, actually.” Malun sounded distracted. He was preparing for the landing. “There’s a hole in the middle so you can –”

“Malun!” Bodie had never seen Ray quite so annoyed with anyone. “Did you have to tell him?”

All they could see was the back of Malun’s head. Malun shook his head once, sharply, like he was breaking himself free of the whole conversation, and then didn’t speak again until they were on the ground in a large clear area some 300 yards on the far side of the river.

“Why wouldn’t I tell him? That is how it’s built.” Perfectly calm. Not taking things personally.

“I was hoping to keep it a surprise.”

“Oh. Then I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK. I’ll pretend I don’t know.”

Again, the two Hailin were looking at him, but this time amused, not sombre. After a few moments, Malun raised an eyebrow and said, “I somehow doubt you’re that good an actor.”

Bodie made a big show of being offended, which ended with all three of them laughing.

The landing area was an extension of the staff car park. You couldn’t see the house because there was a hill in the way, but a broad, curving, well-lit tunnel took them through the hill to a courtyard and the back entrance to the house. Turon was waiting for them at the door, with a woman who must be Ferros. With the tight curls and broad face and fine-strung slenderness, she looked far more like Ray than any of the others. Her curls were black, though, and her eyes very dark. Big breasts for her frame, too, but then she had just had her babies.

~Bodie. My new brother and cousin. Welcome to our home. I am very pleased to meet you.~ She reached out, smiling, and put a hand on his arm.

With both hands full of shopping bags, Bodie couldn't do more than smile back, and give a nod of acknowledgement towards the hand. ~Thank you. I have heard a lot about you from Turon.~ Not many details, actually, but all the passing mentions had been warm.

For Ray, she had a tight grip on both shoulders and a kiss. ~I've put you in /?/. Your /?/ is already there. /?/ and then join us on the /?/.~

She led them through a large locker-room and up a narrow staircase, then left into a long, plain corridor. The fourth door on the left led to a bright, good-sized double bedroom with a couple of armchairs and a low table and a wardrobe. ~Bodie, I think you should take this one. It's got the best /?/ in the /?/.~

~Alright.~ Bodie dumped the bags on the bed and Ray did the same, and before Bodie could ask where Ray was going to sleep, Ferros had opened a door to the side of the wardrobe, and was leading them through a combined living-room and kitchen to a near-identical bedroom on the other side. Ray took a brief glance, then nodded. ~This is good. Are there towels downstairs?~

~Yes. In both bathrooms.~

~Thank you.~ And he wrapped her in the hug he hadn't been free for at the door. ~We'll join you in about a quarter of an hour.~

Ferros and the other two left the way they'd come in, shutting the last door behind them.

"Servants' quarters?"

"Yeah. There's a staff of about thirty to look after the house. But only a handful live onsite these days. D'you mind getting put here?"

"No, it's great. Should I change into the suit?"

"Only if you want to. We won't be seeing her for another five hours."

"I think I will. It's time to get out of this." A gesture to his brown cords and shirt. "And no point in changing again in five hours' time."

"OK. Let me get my stuff from your room first." Two of the containers were Ray's, most of it clothes.

The mirror on the wardrobe told him he looked good in his Hailin suit. Even better than in the evening wear he'd worn during the negotiations. And when he stepped into the living-room, Ray's expression confirmed it.

~Beautiful man.~ A rough, unsteady whisper then a deep, slow kiss. "You're going to have to keep on the other side of the room from me for the next five hours. Or we're both going to have to change." But far from pulling away, he pressed into another kiss.

He was right, though. They couldn't do this yet. Bodie put his hands on Ray's shoulders and forced himself to step back. He took a few deep breaths, then said, "So where is it we're supposed to be joining them."

Ray sighed, then nodded. “The breakfast terrace. It’s on the other side of the river. Let’s take the long way around.”

That involved carrying on down the corridor then through a heavy door, which took them into exactly the hushed world of obscene wealth that Bodie had imagined the first time Ray had talked about his family. Ray opened a few doors, to show him tapestry-hung bedrooms with huge, high beds. The front of the house was one long, outward-curving gallery, with the river rushing away immediately below, sparkling in the sun, and then snaking away into the distance past fields and woods and hills. Yes, everything you could see was part of the estate.

On the other side of the gallery Ray opened a small door to the right. They took a stone staircase up, towards a square of blue sky, and then they were on the terraces. There were steps up, and steps down, and walls of various heights, and plants and little ponds, and areas to sit on your own, or just with your husband, or with all six pairs of twins. As they made their way to the back of the castle, Bodie thought he could detect waterfall in the sounds of the river. Of course it wasn’t a castle, there was nothing military about it, but “stately home” or “country house” didn’t seem enough for this scale of confidence.

They were nearly at the back when he started hearing voices over the sound of the river, then two more turns and the whole family was coming into view. Turon saw them first and his eyes widened and he got to his feet. ~You look... You look very good. Together.~

Ray grinned, then reached back to take Bodie’s hand with his best wicked smile. ~That’s how I chose him. For how well he’d /?/.~

The breakfast terrace looked built to seat twenty, so if you didn’t count the two babies in their carrycot, it was about half full. Homa also got to his feet – he’d been sitting next to Ferros, with the carrycot between them – and was stepping forward to shake Bodie’s hand. He was about 5’8”, maybe shorter than his wife, with a heavy jaw, big nose and barrel chest. Short medium-brown hair, and skin only a few shades lighter. The main impression, though, was a puppy-dog friendliness. Such a warm welcome in his smile and handshake. Another member of the family who liked everyone. Poor Ray. So out of place.

They sat in slatted wooden chairs next to Malun, and accepted Turon’s offer of light beers and some bread and meat and fruit. There was a small kitchen off the terrace, and Turon said he’d be just a few minutes.

~Where’s Lamon?~ Ray had waited till he’d got his beer to ask the question.

Ferros answered. ~With our mother. She got /?/ down a few minutes ago.~

Ray nodded. ~What were you talking about?~

~You. And dinner. We’re /?/ tonight. But Turon thought you could cook us all some Earth food tomorrow.” That was a form of “you” that included Turon along with Ray, and up to four other people.

~That’s a good idea. I should check the /?/ for tonight. In case there’s something we’re not sure if Bodie can eat.~

They were still discussing Earth food and Bodie’s reactions to Hailin food when a girl of about twenty with a curtain of heavy, dead-straight black hair scurried out of the

kitchen and over to whisper something to Ferros. Bodie might have taken her for one of the staff, except that the glossiness of the hair and the length of the nose had something of Turon, and except for the expectant way in which Ray was looking at her.

It was unwelcome news, judging from Ferros's frown. She asked some questions, too quiet for Bodie to catch, then sighed heavily, looked at Bodie and her brother, and said, ~She knows you're here. She heard /?/. She wants to see you now.~

Ray swallowed. ~But we -~ Two slow breaths with his eyes closed, then he shook his head and shrugged. ~If she's ready now, then we have to be.~ He looked at Bodie, and Bodie nodded, and they stood up together.

Malun, Turon and Ward came down too. They would wait close-by on the assumption that she would want the explanation from Malun as soon as she'd talked to Bodie.

Her rooms were on the ground floor, off a broad, curving corridor that ran the full length of the back. There was a keypad next to the door, the only one Bodie had seen outside the ship. Ray pressed the buzzer and spoke into the panel. ~Mother. It's Ray and Bodie.~

~Come in, my sons.~ The terrible pain in Malun's voice when he talked about *gimana*. Turned out that was just a faint echo of the state of Raina's voice, and Bodie suddenly felt genuine fear, and gripped Ray's hand hard.

She was perched on the edge of an armchair right by the window, and her face and body were twisted with agony. But she was somehow managing to smile at them as she struggled to her feet. Yes, this was where Turon got his narrow, pointed face and the deep brown of his eyes.

Ray held her and kissed her cheek, and then it was Bodie's turn and he tried not to tense with shock at the tremors that shook her continuously. He eased her back down into the chair, and she thanked him and patted his arm.

~Now sit down. Let me look at you /?/.~

They sat on the couch that was set at an angle a few feet from the chair. Bodie reached for Ray's hand again, and they looked at each other and then back at Raina, and they waited.

They weren't quite Turon's eyes. There was a toughness to them. An air of constant assessment. Even with the devastation of *gimana*, Bodie could easily see her as a ship's captain. He could even see himself taking orders from her.

~So where were you born, Bodie? You do /?! some of the /?! I've known.~ The smile was friendly interest.

Bodie's mouth had gone dry. He had to pause to wet his lips. ~I was born on Earth.~ Her eyebrows had shot up at his accent. ~I'm a human.~

~A human?~ She was amazed, but there was no sign of worry or rejection as she stared from one to the other. Finally, with a rueful smile: ~I suppose, with Ray, I shouldn't be so surprised that he had to travel so far to find the /?! to make him /?! happy. I feel... And Savas would have felt... That we should be giving you a new planet to show our /?!.~

~We should. It would only be /?/ after the /?/ he showed in leaving his people.~

~You're my people.~ Immediate, with the form of "you" that just covered the one person you were talking to. Direct from his sub-conscious without any translation from English. And as quiet and unselfconscious as if he and Ray had been alone in the room.

Ray was looking at him, too, like suddenly there was nothing else. After maybe five seconds he raised their joined hands and pressed his lips to the back of Bodie's hand. Then they smiled slowly at each other and turned back to Raina, who in that moment did look exactly like Turon.

~You met on Earth, then.~

~Well, on the *Sivor Simalsa*, actually. Bodie was a soldier /?/ one of the /?/.~

Again she was surprised, and openly appraised Bodie's physique. Bodie somehow managed not to squirm, though his expression probably looked thoroughly uncomfortable. Pain-wracked mothers-in-law did not do that. People who looked like Turon did not do that.

~Then with the /?/ of the /?/. And the date of the marriage. It must have been a very quick /?/.~

Ray cleared his throat and looked guilty. But only as fraction as guilty as he must actually be feeling. ~It was /?/ quick. That's one of the many things that Malun is waiting to explain to you.~

She looked towards the door and frowned. ~Waiting right now?~

~Not /?/ outside. In the /?/, I think.~

She sighed and looked suddenly exhausted. ~I'm going to need... Tell him to give me half an hour. Now, both of you come and give me a kiss.~ They got up together, and went over and bent to kiss her cheeks. She smiled and nodded, then gestured them away with a trembling hand. ~Go. Show Bodie Clover. Try to find some /?/ things to say about it.~

Once they were out in the corridor, Ray suddenly sagged against the opposite wall. Bodie put his hands on Ray's shoulders, concerned. "Was it that bad? I thought..."

"No, it was... " A shaking sigh. "Just can't believe we got away with it. That she could see... And that she was able to spend so much time talking to us. Properly. I can't think that she'll be able to face us again after Malun – But that was good. I've got that to remember." He slid his arms around Bodie's back, held him tight for a few moments, then said, "So let's go and see Malun. And then I'll show you some parts of Clover well away from her rooms. So we won't overhear anything."

Malun said they'd wait out the half hour up on the breakfast terrace, and bring the group there up to date. They were all meeting for drinks in the library at 6.36, and Ray and Bodie should do what they liked before then.

The first thing they did was to go back to their rooms to change out of their suits into something more suitable for sex. Maybe they would still save it until after dinner, but there was no harm in being prepared.

They kept to the front of the house, starting with the lower floor, which they hadn't seen at all on the way to the terrace. The family hadn't lived in that part of the house for nearly a hundred years, but the business used Clover a lot for entertaining, and the family put visitors in the bedrooms, and made regular use of the gym, the library, the terraces, the semi-formal dining area, and the main gallery. There was another gallery, looking inwards towards the waterfall, that was a favourite with people – such as moody young princes – who wanted to get away on their own.

There was no *gulshor* court, but they could have an early morning gym session with the weights. If they wanted to get back into a routine so soon, and they almost immediately agreed that they did. They didn't discuss running, though there must be some great routes through the grounds. It was too soon. They needed to talk about their complicated sex thing. Somehow. They needed to be able to fuck. But there was far too much happening now. Bodie had decided that he'd leave it for a few weeks. Until they were settled in their flat and Ray was back at work, and they knew where they stood.

By five Bodie had seen everything, and they decided to get their books from their rooms and some beers from the fridge in the library, and then read on the front terrace until dinner. Shortly after they'd chosen their spot, Bodie noticed Turon making his way slowly across the terraces, stopping frequently to examine the gardeners' work. He waved, and Turon waved back but continued at the same pace. Ray had turned his head to see his brother, but hadn't waved. "Malun must be finished, then. I wonder if he did call one of them in."

Eventually Turon reached them. He sat down next to Ray, in the shade. Ray sounded almost indifferent when he said, "Did you see her? What did Malun say?"

"I didn't see her. She wants to hear from us, but it can wait until tomorrow."

"So how did it go? What did Malun say?"

"It's still going. He's assuming he'll miss dinner."

Ray winced. "That bad?"

"No, not bad at all. She wants to hear every detail of how her difficult Ray could come to look so easy and happy, while knowing that he was married to a *glarus* from an... from a non-*isidrol* species. She'd assumed at first that you'd accepted the situation straight away, and when he said that you hadn't, that it had taken several days... Well, she wanted to know exactly how you did come to accept what had happened. At some point he mentioned that Ward and I were waiting. That we were there to reassure her. And she said she didn't need it and he should go and stand us down. That was about an hour ago. But it's going slowly because they keep stopping to let her rest."

"So she didn't -? She wasn't shocked herself when she heard the truth about Bodie? How did he go about telling her?"

"He showed her the entry on human biology in the fleet's files. Yes, she was shocked but then... Fascinated. Wanting to understand how everyone had behaved, how we'd all managed to surprise ourselves."

Ray gave a deep sigh of relief, then closed his eyes and let his head drop back.

Bodie said, "How's Malun doing? I mean, how hard's it been on him?"

“Oh, he’s so relieved. And I think he’s even been enjoying her questions. She always used to ask the best questions. Didn’t she, Ray?”

Ray opened his eyes and sat up. “Always too good. When you had something to hide. So where is everyone?” He nodded towards the back of the castle.

Sasha and West were helping Homa with bath-time. Lamon and Ward had gone for a walk. And Ferros was in her office, catching up with messages.

Bodie asked them to tell him about Homa. Ray and Turon both liked him. They’d known him since Ferros had met him in college, where he’d known Sasha, too. He was good for Ferros, who’d used to feel the need to take responsibility for everything, and they knew he was going to be a wonderful father.

“His milk was very late starting, though. Which got him quite anxious and frustrated. No matter how often Ferros reminded him that the men in his family are always very slow the first time, and then get quicker with every one. In the end she asked his father and brothers to come and show him their favourite techniques. And he started the next day and of course each one of them claimed the full credit.” Turon’s laughter was affectionate and Ray smiled too, but Bodie was left frowning in confusion.

“Sorry. ‘His milk was late starting’?”

“Yes, over a week. Ferros says she was coping perfectly well on her own, but he was so impatient to be doing his share. He’s still insisting on doing most of the night feeds, to make up for the delay.”

“You are saying...” A very long pause, then slowly: “That your men breast-feed?”

They looked nearly as taken-aback as Bodie felt. After some moments, Ray said, “So yours don’t?”

“Fuck, no. I mean... we’re not built for it.” He gestured at his chest, then at Ray’s, which he knew was just as flat as his own, and hairier.

“But you’ve got nipples. The same as me.” Ray sounded part fascinated, part complaining. “Shouldn’t they be for the same thing?”

“Yeah, but –” Bodie stopped dead, and looked down at his own chest again. “OK, I dunno why I’ve got them. But they don’t do anything except –” He’d been about to say “feel good”. But he couldn’t with Turon there. Their first night together – their only night together – Ray had paid his nipples so much fine attention. He shook his head, blinking hard. “I’m just... Can’t get my head around... Your father did that with both of you? All of you?”

They both nodded, and Turon said, “We could show you pictures. There might be some in the library. Ferros would know. Or Malun.”

“I – Thanks, but –” He swallowed. “I’m gonna need time to...” Seeing any man like that would be freakish. But everyone had said how much Ray took after his father. And Bodie really didn’t want that to be his first sight of the father. He gave a lopsided smile, shrugged, and then asked Turon what plans he and Sasha had for that week.

Malun did miss dinner, but he joined them afterwards, when they'd gone back to the library for a last drink and for some music from Turon, Sasha and Ferros. Raina was asleep. She'd heard the whole story, and then fallen asleep when they were watching the footage again together. She didn't understand, herself, why she wasn't more shocked – even as shocked as Ray had been. Maybe it would hit her later. But she'd still know how proud she could be of all her boys. She'd like to see Turon in the morning, assuming she was feeling strong enough. Malun poured himself a drink, listened to two pieces of music, then excused himself to take care of some work. West and Lamon left soon afterwards, and then Ward.

While the three musicians and Homa were choosing the next piece, Bodie said quietly, "Go outside and look at the moons? Or are you saving that for home?"

Ray smiled and shook his head. "Let's go."

It was a pleasantly warm night and there were two moons out: Bisha and Uspa. Ray explained the easiest way to identify them, and some folklore, and what he knew of the geology. And then they were mostly silent for a while, as they leaned against each other, with the sounds of the river and of animals hunting, and the scents of the terrace gardens, and the occasional lights of traffic.

"Did you see a bedroom you want to try?"

Bodie thought about it. "What about the one on the ground floor, over there?" He pointed to the front left corner. "It's not so grand it'd distract me. But it's still got a hell of a bed."

"That's Cam Chara. Good, it's always been my favourite. For the tapestries. And the bed."

At the door to the room Bodie hesitated and looked down the corridor that led to the back of the house. "Maybe I should change into my tracksuit. It doesn't seem – With new clothes."

Ray put a hand on his arm, and stroked the slate-grey linen-like material. "It'll wash easily. Please. I want you like this."

They kissed by the door after Ray had locked it, then gradually made their way to the richly-embroidered couch under the floor-length windows to take care of their shoes - and then to the huge bed.

Once they were in bed, though, they just lay together admiring the painted mountainscape on the ceiling, Ray on his back, with Bodie against his side.

"How's it been, Bodie?" Ray's tone had turned very serious, his hand on Bodie's hair gone still. "Your first day on Pen Embrun?"

"It's been good." Without hesitation. "Y'know, some things I wasn't expecting." The breast-feeding men. The smashed *glarus*. "And the things we were expecting... Well, we got away with them."

"Yeah. We did." A quiet sigh and he turned his head and kissed Bodie's hair, and his hand started drifting again.

“I can see, though. Why West got terrified of qualifying. Why Malun – Got that look when he was explaining to me about *gimana*.” Maybe, even, he could see why the Hailin might feel the urge to stone a *glarus* to death. “Ray, that’ll never happen to you. Never.”

“I know.” Calm certainty. “You love me. You have to be with me.”

Bodie sighed, closed his eyes, tightened his hold on Ray’s waist, and savoured the feeling of growing hard against Ray’s hip. Their pulses were getting steadily faster, and after a few minutes Bodie slid his hand up from Ray’s waist to his chest. He kept his palm pressed flat as he stroked, but his thumb was rubbing and testing.

“You’re feeling for the difference, aren’t you? From a human chest.” Ray sounded amused.

“I – Yeah, guess I am. But I – I’d never know.”

“I wouldn’t either, with you. So it must be that you don’t have our hormones. Your tissue isn’t made to respond to being in a pregnant couple.”

“Does it change, then? I couldn’t see... On Homa.” He’d forced himself not to stare during dinner. The babies had needed attention a couple of times, but that had been in the nearest bedroom, out of sight. And Homa’s top was too loose-fitting to give Bodie any hint.

“There’s some swelling. About like this, I think.” He put his hand over Bodie’s and then arched it up by about half an inch. “Of course I’m not around breeding couples so I – But I remember being very curious when Lamon was born. Wanting to feel. And I think that’s about right. For how it was with our father, anyway. Ask Homa. I bet he’d be happy to show you.”

A jolt of heat to his cock at the thought. Not a healthy excitement, though. Almost all about how wrong it was. About being on his own on this planet of freaks. “No, I – Can’t see myself doing that.” And even without the fascinated revulsion, how fucked up would it be to feel up another man’s bare chest, when he wasn’t allowed to do the same to his husband? “Can I – Can I put my hand between your legs? Just to feel the shape of you?”

Ray had breathed in sharply, and then held his breath for several seconds. “I think... Yes, but – Not if you get too deliberate. And I – I’m sorry but I can’t do the same to you.”

Not too deliberate? What the hell would that be? Something coy and accidental? OK, he might do that with a certain type of bird, but with Ray?

Well, he wouldn’t worry about what Ray meant. He’d do it like he’d had in mind when he’d asked. “No, I’d guessed you couldn’t. That’s OK.” He moved his hand down slowly, and from the simple excitement in Ray’s sigh, he guessed that this obvious intention didn’t count as “too” deliberate.

Ray held his breath again while Bodie was fitting his hand to the length. After two ragged sighs he lifted his head to look, and the sight stiffened him further against Bodie’s hand. After he’d let his head drop back heavily to the pillow, he rolled it to the side to gaze at Bodie, then brought his hand up to graze the back of his fingers over the line of Bodie’s jaw and his throat.

Slowly, intense: “The way you salivate for *jarupard*. You were waiting for me.”

“Yeah. I think I was.” And then they were kissing, and Bodie’s hand wasn’t just cupping it was squeezing, and Ray’s hips were bucking, then trying to be still, then bucking again.

After too short a time, though, Ray twisted out from under. He pushed Bodie onto his back then immediately lay on top of him, and Bodie took his cue and lifted his arms to the pillow, because it was time now for them to link hands and have their normal sex. It was good sex. Very good. They both cried out as they came.

They walked back to their rooms hand-in-hand, and after they’d showered they sat on the living-room couch in their bathrobes and shared a small brandy, and decided on a long walk for the next day, and on what they’d cook for dinner.

Bodie came awake a couple of times, missing the vibration of the ship. He’d left the curtains open, and the faint tracings of moonlight were his first clue to where he was.

Oh yeah, in a whopping great castle. In the servants’ quarters. A better type of servants’ quarters than he ever got put in when he was in a castle as a CI5 bodyguard. Well, after all, it was his husband’s castle. And he’d smiled, and turned over, and been asleep again in minutes.

They’d agreed that they’d get to breakfast fairly early to give them a good chance of bumping into everyone they might need to make plans with. It felt like a treat to be getting up with Ray, to see him fresh from bed, or rather not so fresh but scratching his stubble, and meeting “good morning” with only a nod and an unidentifiable monosyllable. So, crumpled and grumpy, but his, and he’d be able to see this every day from now on.

Ray came out of the bathroom much brighter, perfectly willing to talk.

“What about today’s clothes? I need to wear anything in particular?”

Ray shook his head. “Whatever you like. Weather’ll be the same as yesterday.”

Bodie chose the most light-weight of the casual clothes, which meant the pale-blue top. Ray’s clothes were in a different style. Favourites, he said, that he’d had for years. He had a jacket slung over his shoulder and said Bodie should take one too, in case there was still a chill on the breakfast terrace.

The only person there when they arrived was Turon. He’d woken up at five, knowing he was due to see Raina some time in the next seven hours, and even though everything had gone so well the day before, he’d had no chance of getting back to sleep.

The breakfast kitchen was already stocked with coffee – Malun had arranged it – and there was still some left in the pot that Turon had made for himself. Turon insisted on making the next pot, too, and on getting them toast and juice. They guessed he wanted to keep busy.

“Bodie and I thought we’d cook kedgeriee tonight. D’you know who’d be the best person to buy the fish? And the other stuff we need fresh.” Turon knew what “the other stuff” was. The Hailin version of kedgeriee was mostly his invention.

“Sasha and I can do it. We’ve driving into Monor to see her family. We’ll stop at Tenomi on the way back.”

Bodie asked about Tenomi, which turned out to be a large food shop ten miles outside Monor, and the closest place where they could be sure of getting the right type of fish.

“But there’s somewhere closer for ordinary stuff, right? Like bread. Milk.”

The nearest village was four miles away. That’s where Ray had chosen for their walk, and probably to have lunch. Clover normally got all its food delivered. When they were children it had always been on At Mordez and At Oba Nyon, and Ferros probably hadn’t changed that. If you wanted to be spontaneous at Clover, you had to do your own shopping.

Bodie had other questions about the practicalities of running and living in a castle, and that conversation continued as the other members of the family arrived, switching to Hass Embrun with Lamon. Bodie had to ask about a few words, but he never completely lost the thread, and he was happy with that.

When Lamon took breakfast down to Raina, she included half a mug from the third pot. She brought almost all of it back, though Raina had said that she’d been glad to know what Ray and Bodie had been drinking during that weekend breakfast in the ship’s garden. Raina had also said that she’d like to see Turon at ten. Ray asked if Turon wanted them to stick around, to be there when he got out, but Turon didn’t think it was necessary: they could go on their walk whenever they wanted.

“Now?”

Bodie shrugged. “Why not?”

The path Ray had in mind was mostly along the river, and mostly heading east so the sun was behind them. West had covered that in the second week of lessons: the sun rising in the west on Pen Embrun. They defined north in the same way as humans: by the way magnets behave.

Bodie wanted to carry on speaking Hass Embrun, and they kept with that for most of the morning. English words did crop up fairly regularly, from both of them, but neither got frustrated or distracted enough to slip into English for an entire sentence. They talked about the landscape, the local villages, their plans for the next few days. They should get to Parass early in the morning of the next day, and Ray wanted to spend the day just showing the town off to Bodie. The day after that they’d go into Dishna, to get Bodie added to Ray’s bank account, and to choose a couch, chairs and beds for the new flat.

~Are you... How long do you think it will take us to choose?~ Of course there was nothing camp about Ray. Maybe the Hailin didn’t have camp men at all. But Bodie had this image, for someone who was lifelong queer, that he would be fussy about how things looked in the house. Need to see every option, and then see them again. For Ray’s sake he’d be patient, act interested. Try to, anyway.

~An hour, I suppose. Maybe two. It depends what the shops have /?/.~ “In stock”, that was, or for delivery within a week, in their case. OK. Bodie could cope with an hour (or two). Ray was assuming they’d be in the new flat by At Laura Var of next week at the

latest, giving them half the working week and the weekend to settle in before he had to go back to work. Of course they also had to get Ray's flat ready for West, but that wasn't as urgent.

They didn't talk non-stop, and when the view was particularly good they would find a rock to sit on or a tree to lean against, and drape arms around shoulder or waist, and maybe exchange some lazy kisses. They had the path to themselves and there were plenty of places where they could have had sex – that is, they could have if they were any other besotted couple. But not possible for them, with their bathrooms several miles away. Bodie might have expected it to be frustrating: knowing they couldn't be spontaneous, that nothing was going to happen. But he also knew that it would happen some time that day, and that made it easy just to enjoy what he had, that no one else could have: Ray close against him, and as content as he was. Ray surprised at himself, too, that he could enjoy showing anyone around the family estate, let alone his husband.

The village of Garad was just beyond the eastern boundary of the estate, on a tributary of the river and about half a mile to the north. It was too early for lunch when they arrived so they carried on into the hills above the village, which gave them a good view of Clover.

Garad had one grocery store, a café, and a small school. It had been Turon and Ferros's school. Ray and West had gone to Elsas, further to the north, and Ward and Lamon to Longmi, to the south. The café catered mostly to the local farmers, and it was busy. They had baked vegetables with salad – after Ray had insisted on a full list of the ingredients of the salad. This got him some strange looks, but then Bodie said, ~There are some things I can't eat,~ and the looks changed to surprise, and excitement, and speculation, and they fetched the cook from the kitchen to get the definitive list, and then were all very curious about what he couldn't eat, and where he was from, and how long he'd been on Pen Embrun and how long he was staying. (~Well, of course he's at Clover,~ he overheard from somewhere by the door.)

~I'm staying forever. I'm in a *tolmin* marriage with Ray.~

Fascination, with everyone immediately staring at Ray, and then rapidly becoming self-conscious and maybe slightly wary. Realising the chances were high that Ray was a Bakkel? There were a few questions about how long they'd been married and how long he'd been learning Hass Embrun, and then people suddenly remembered that the two of them had been trying to order food. The salad was safe for Bodie and so was the lemonade-like standard summer drink, and they chose a table and then were largely left to themselves.

They ate quickly, but drank slowly and ordered a second glass, and talked about the cafés and restaurants in Parass, and about doing some more food tests for Bodie with ingredients that the ship hadn't stocked.

They were the last to leave, just before two, which was when the café stopped serving lunch.

~Thank you. I hope we'll see you again.~

~We're going to our home in Dishna tomorrow.~ Unusual for Ray to volunteer information. Against all his professional instincts. ~But we'll !?! whenever we're back

visiting Clover.~ Even more unusual. But maybe safe for him to say if he was planning that they never would visit.

“So will we go back? Next time we’re here?” They were taking a different route back to Clover. Bodie had waited until they were out of the village, though no one there would understand English anyway.

Ray shrugged. “Don’t see why not. Bet they won’t forget us or what you can’t eat. So at least we won’t have to go through all that again.”

They both laughed, but then Bodie said, “I like it. Telling people you’re my husband. When back on Earth I – A place like that, I could never let them think I’d even noticed you. That we were anything more than friends. Here it’s normal. We’re normal.”

Ray stopped walking, and reached for Bodie’s hand. Quietly: “I like it too. Hearing you say it.”

They kissed for a long time, but with their pulses barely rising.

After they’d pulled apart, Bodie gave a sharp sigh then said, “We’re doing a good job at faking a *tolmin* marriage. Don’t get me wrong, I – But that’s what I imagine for Turon and Sasha. Not for a couple of red-blooded men like us. Never thought I’d get so much practice at...” He shrugged. “At cuddling. I’m not complaining just – Just saying.”

Ray had been nodding in agreement, not looking, either, like he had any complaints. “Yeah. That’s how I imagine it too. For them.” With a smile, and he leaned forward and pressed his lips very lightly to Bodie’s mouth and then to his cheek. They smirked at one another for a few seconds, then Ray turned serious and said, “I like it. That there are times when we just have to wait. Find a different way to know each other. Before I never waited. Anyone I wanted, I had to have him now. And sure, his boyfriend and friends, if he wanted them along and they looked like fun.”

“Yeah. You were the surest bet ever to get qualified. I heard.”

Nodding, with a fondly reminiscent smile. “I was a really great slut. And I expected things to be just the same once I was married. And it’s good that they’re not. That what I have with you is so different. That I can’t take anything about you for granted.”

This time they held each other close without kissing, just breathed in time with one another, and felt the slow rise of their pulses and the faint nudge of cock against hip-bone.

They stepped back at the same time, with Bodie warned by Ray’s sigh, and after a few seconds Bodie quirked an eyebrow and said, “No waiting when we get back, though? I wanna be a red-blooded man in your bedroom for a change.”

No reaction from Ray, except maybe a flare of the nostrils. “No waiting. Otherwise... we’ll see.”

They didn’t hasten their walking pace and they talked as easily as they had on the way out, but they didn’t take any breaks to admire the view.

Ray had decided on a fight over which bedroom. Bodie won, eventually, and in the course of the fight they got to manhandle each other in all sorts of new ways. Afterwards,

in the minutes they allowed themselves before they had to go and shower, Ray said, “Well, I don’t imagine Turon and Sasha do anything like that.”

They sniggered, then Bodie said, “And we’ve got three bedrooms to fight over in the new flat. You think we’ll have the neighbours complaining?”

“Yeah.” Slowly, with great satisfaction. “I’ll blame it all on you. Say humans can’t help being loud.

After they’d showered they dressed in Earth clothes, set loads of laundry going, and went to look for the rest of the family. Apart from the odd member of staff cleaning or repairing, the communal rooms in the front section were all empty. So were the terraces. They found Ferros where they probably should have tried first: in the apartment above the main entrance, where she and Homa had moved after Savas’s death. Homa had gone to do laundry – they must have missed him by about five minutes – and everyone else was out.

Ray asked about Turon’s talk with Raina, which had apparently gone well. Raina would like to see Ward and West the next day, but just in order to spend time with them; she understood enough now about Ray and Bodie. She did want to try some of this kedgerie, though.

Ferros asked about their walk, and laughed at the flood of questions in the café. Clearly she was going to get a lot of questions, too, the next time she was in Garad. Ray was hoping the word would get around very quickly in Parass (as any prime gossip usually did), and that the questions would have stopped by the time he went back to work.

They talked about the new flat, which she’d visited briefly to be sure there were no drawbacks that couldn’t be deduced from the sales information. She thought it was a lovely space but could do with some touches of colour. Bodie played peekaboo with the girls and didn’t try to follow the discussion.

When Homa came back, Ray made a large pot of *kenit*. He poured Bodie’s cup a good three minutes before everyone else’s, because that way Bodie could pretend it was just tea that had been shipped too close to a huge sack of cumin, rather than an oily, greeny-brown concoction that he imagined you could use to deworm an elephant.

The conversation moved on to the girls, to expected and unexpected aspects of becoming new parents, to the adjustments that Ferros and Homa were making in their work. Ferros was a financial analyst with the business and also managed the family’s finances, and Homa was an event planner. They could both do a lot of work from Clover, and each of them made different days available for meetings or site visits, alternating through the week, so one was always at home. When they had their second pair of twins – in two years’ time, they thought – then they’d cut back considerably. At some point they might well give up work altogether.

This time Bodie didn’t catch many details. He thought he kept track of changes in the main topic, and Ray helped with things like “financial analyst” and “event planner”, but mostly Bodie looked alert and nodded along with Ray, because he wasn’t that interested in the details of new parenthood, and he didn’t want to interrupt a conversation the three seemed to be enjoying. Ferros and Homa were the only members of the family

who'd visited Ray in Parass. And Ray was giving Ferros a level of attention Bodie didn't think he'd seen with anyone else. Of course Ray liked Turon, but he didn't take him seriously. Not like this. Maybe part of it was the fact that Ferros had qualified. Because sex was something that Ray certainly took seriously.

At about half five they heard a car drive up, and a few minutes later there was a knock on the door and Turon and Sasha walked in.

"You're here." Turon seemed slightly surprised. "That's good. We got everything. I thought we'd start cooking at six. Everyone should be back by seven."

Six sounded fine. Ray got to his feet and said, ~Let's go and finish our laundry.~

Bodie nodded and stood up. ~See you later.~

As Ray had promised, Bodie's new suit did wash well, and after five minutes pressing, it looked like new. He was going to need more Hailin clothes, and soon, but now he knew he could look presentable at least until the end of the week.

With four people to do the chopping, egg-peeling, spice-grinding, and checking-for-bones, cooking for eleven wasn't too different from the cooking they'd done for each other on the ship.

Turon had spent over half an hour with Raina. He didn't think he'd added much to what she'd already heard from Malun, but she'd appreciated hearing it again. She didn't need to see Ray and Bodie again before they went to Parass, but she'd like to have a photograph of them, showing them settled in the new flat.

He and Sasha had spent the rest of the day with Sasha's family, and expected to be spending most of the next two weeks dividing their time between Clover and Monor in a similar way. Then they would be out in space again: they knew their exact departure time on the *Rab Dumaran*, and their cabin assignment. They'd be travelling the fleet again, for at least two years.

No, they wouldn't be in family quarters during any of this, just in regular married quarters. Each ship did have at least one secret corridor, with family cabins so that the ship could carry at least two members of the Mabein, but only three ships in the current fleet ever had or were expected to carry any: the *Sivor Simalsa* and its sister ships, which had been built specifically for contact missions, or for the rare situations in which a trading partner insisted that a new deal could only be negotiated with the Mabein. If you weren't wearing a mask on a particular journey, you didn't use the family cabins.

"So Ray and I shouldn't have been there."

"Well... No, that's true. But you're family in the other sense. And it would have been so awkward to have you in crew quarters. I don't think it occurred to any one of us to question it. Did it?"

Sasha shook her head. "I'm wondering now what Malun would have done if it hadn't been Ray. If it had been..." A shrug. "Tayu Aceli in the galley, say."

Yeah. Malun had said, at the start of their first talk, that they'd be having that talk no matter who Ray was. But Tayu Aceli in the galley almost certainly didn't have his kind older brother on board. Or his younger brother with enough time free to design a

language course. Turon and West would probably still have been willing to help. But Malun might not even have thought to ask them. Where would he be now, what would he be doing? If Ray hadn't happened to be a prince? Bodie didn't like that idea at all, but after a couple of seconds he managed to shake it off. Who could imagine that, anyway: a Ray who wasn't secretly a prince?

When the fish was poached and they were breaking it into flakes, Turon said that he was thinking of visiting them in Parass one day next week. "Just for the day. Maybe on At Pontal. If I wouldn't be in your way."

"That'd be great." Bodie grinned. "Stay overnight if you want. We've got three bedrooms."

"Yeah, but we're only planning on buying two beds. Which might not even be delivered by At Pontal." A small, sharp shake of the head, then Ray smiled and said, "Course you won't be in the way. That would be great. We should know by At Rahdan whether we'll have a bed for you." To Sasha: "You're not gonna come?"

She shook her head. "Too many friends and family I need to see here."

Ray nodded slowly. "It'll be goodbye, then, tomorrow morning. Malun said he'd be taking us into town around nine."

Everyone was back at Clover by seven, and they ate in the kitchen at half seven. Lamon seemed very wary at first, asking for a half-serving, but then explained after a few slow mouthfuls that she just wanted to be sure of what she was about to take to Raina. They gave Raina a half-portion, because she certainly wouldn't eat more, and also a glass of the light melon-tasting wine they were drinking, which she probably wouldn't touch but it was a way of including her. Lamon went to bring the tray back at half eight, and they found that Raina had drunk half of the wine, and eaten almost all of the Turon's kedgeree, which had been established during the meal as the dish's official name.

Bodie had thought that they'd made a ridiculous amount, but in fact there were only a couple of servings left over for breakfast. Homa thought at first that Bodie was joking about breakfast, but Bodie explained that it was how he'd first eaten kedgeree. ~It's something rich people do. Every castle I've ever been in for my work as a soldier, they had kedgeree for breakfast.~

Homa still looked sceptical, but said he'd take care of putting the leftovers in the fridge in the breakfast kitchen, ready for morning.

Malun, Ward, Lamon and West stayed to do the washing-up, while the others went up to the library. Turon suggested they put on one of the lists that Ray had made of Bodie's favourite Hailin music – one of the quieter ones – and everyone seemed happy enough with the result that they all stayed in the library until gone ten, some (like Ward and Malun) mostly reading, others listening to the music or talking in small groups.

Bodie kept thinking how much he was going to miss them, and had to remind himself that they didn't keep this comfortable company with each other every night. It had been six months since they'd last been together, and then maybe two or three years before that (probably without Ray?). Well, there'd been the father's funeral, about a year and a half ago, but had Ward and Turon and Sasha managed to get back for that, if they'd been out with the fleet at the time? Who would be the best person to ask about that? Probably Sasha, but he wouldn't get a chance, not before he and Ray left. He didn't

know that the Bakkels were close, exactly, as a family – not in the way that Sasha was with hers – but he admired the way they worked together.

Malun was the first to leave the library. He'd be at breakfast at eight and then taking Bodie and Ray with him in the flyer at nine. "On the dot" was strongly implied. They were the second to leave, about ten minutes later, at Ray's suggestion.

"Were you thinking of Cam Chara again?" Bodie had waited until they were at least five yards down the corridor.

Ray shook his head. "Your room. But just for a cuddle. We haven't got time to do laundry."

Bodie winced hard. "Look, I know I was the one who said it earlier, but can we not use that word?"

"Laundry?" He must be teasing, but Bodie truly could not tell.

"No, the - What you said we were going to do. In my room. I can't – It's just so..." Effeminate. "Fucking twee. It's a real turn-off for me. Which, OK, is kind of the point but – You know I like doing it. But I don't wanna be cringing every time we talk about doing it. Can we find something that sounds more like us?"

Ray had a frown of deep concentration. After about ten seconds he said, "A *tolmin* fuck?"

Bodie laughed so hard he had to lean on the wall to stay upright. Ray looked briefly surprised, then grinned, and finally adopted a pose of exaggerated patience against the opposite wall.

When he had breath enough again: "Ray. That is perfect. But it's not kind."

A small head-tilt of concession. "I suppose not."

"What's the word in Hass Embrun? Or is it a word that would be too twee for you?"

Slowly: "There's a few words and some would put me off, but for a red-blooded couple like us, who just have their reasons to wait... It would be a *tassuram*. We'd be going to your room to *tassuram*. And that just makes me think that you're mine. And I get to hold you every day."

"*Tassuram*. *Tassuram*. Going to *tassuram* with my *iskolpa* Ray. Yeah. I can look forward to that now."

Chapter 13

They packed everything up before breakfast, took it down to the castle's transporter room, and sent it to the transporter room for Ray's building. They got the last two spoonfuls of kedgeriee, which Homa had been guarding for them with some determination. It was very good for breakfast, he agreed, especially with this new coffee stuff. The next time he had a suitable breakfast event, he'd try serving both. The word would get around.

Lamon stayed on the terrace to watch the babies, but everyone else went across the river to see them into the flyer. Ferros, Homa and Sasha stepped forward to hug them both, which was a surprise. Bodie thought he could feel the mounds of Homa's breasts, just a slight yielding. He told Ward he'd send him a picture of the painting, once it was in the right place in the flat, they confirmed plans with Turon and West, and then they climbed in and were in the air, and the waving group was out of sight behind the hill by 9.06.

The government offices that dealt with citizen-registration were close to the palace. There was a landing-strip about ten minutes' walk away, and Malun had booked a slot. In the offices, they were seen promptly, as you'd expect when the appointment was for Malun.

Malun and Ray confirmed Bodie's identity, Bodie had his photograph taken from several angles and a scan taken of the whole of both hands, front and back. There were double-takes at the scans, and muttered consultations ending in shrugs. He caught ~human~ several times, but nothing else.

That was only a minor blip, though, and within a quarter of an hour they were handing him a package with his ID card and with details of the computer account that came with his ID number. That was his main account for messages on Pen Embrun, but he could connect it to his account with the fleet; Ray would show him how.

Outside the office Malun and Bodie hugged briefly and agreed they'd keep in touch and have their first dinner within a month. Ray and Malun did not have the habit of hugging. They looked at one another, very serious, and after a few moments Malun said, "Look after my son."

"I plan to."

"And send your mother that picture."

"We will."

Malun nodded and Ray nodded back, and Bodie raised his hand to wish Malun goodbye, and then Malun was heading back to his flyer and they were crossing the road to go to the nearest commercial transporter station, which was three blocks away.

"What was all that muttering about my hands?"

Ray laughed. "Your skin. Dunno how I hadn't noticed but the patterns in it really aren't like ours. They were arguing how to classify it."

"So when they shrugged, that was, 'Oh, sod it. Call it Human Number One.'?"

"Yeah. Bet by now they've called everyone in the office to take a look."

Bodie grunted, pretty sure Ray was right. “Is this what it was like being a Bakkel? Growing up. People always having some kind of reaction?”

Ray took a while to reply. “Not really. Most of the people I met growing up were very used to dealing with Bakkels. It was the attitudes inside the family that I – Had to get away from. Not using the name at home, at work, that’s not so much about what other people would think. They’d see it wasn’t gonna affect them either way, they’d get over it. It’s about what I think. And wanting fewer moments when I have to think about it.”

“So the reactions aren’t gonna bother us? We’ll get into a routine for handling them, show it’s no big deal?”

A lopsided smile. “You, me, and a routine? We’ll have it in place by the end of the day. Probably by the time we’ve had lunch.”

Malun had made a booking for them at the transporter station, too, paying in advance, and supplying the coordinates for Ray’s flat that were stored on the fleet’s systems. They’d be arriving in Parass just before seven in the morning. They’d take the hold off their deliveries, then have a walk around the main part of the town, finishing at the building’s grocery shop. The first deliveries would probably have arrived, and they’d have a second breakfast on the balcony, and take more deliveries over the morning.

As they arrived, Bodie was primed to locate the balcony and the sea view, as that was the first image he’d formed of the flat and was still the strongest. The blinds were half-closed but the light was very bright, and he turned towards the windows, shielding his eyes, and took a step forward.

But Ray was swearing violently in Hass Embrun. Bodie turned back, and in the process his subconscious recognised that there was something wrong with the state of the room. There were pictures scattered around every few feet, all at different angles. Not like someone had ripped up some glossy book or magazine, because they were over the walls, too. And they all had neat, straight edges, without rips.

Ray seemed frozen, with his arms half-raised. His head was turned towards the couch, but his eyes were darting back and forth, from picture to picture. Bodie focussed on the nearest picture on the couch, and gasped when he saw it was a photograph of Ray naked and erect. Sitting on that couch. Or, rather, on the lap of a man who had huge square hands and very hairy forearms, and who was looking down between their bodies, obviously admiring himself inside Ray. The next picture on the couch was Ray with a different man, younger and skinny, with shoulder-length blond hair. They were side-by-side, hands wrapped around each other’s cocks. And the pictures on the coffee table all seemed to be other men again. Mostly, they were getting fucked by Ray. And clearly it was everything they’d hoped or remembered.

Bodie turned to scan the room. The pictures were everywhere. Maybe they weren’t all different pictures. Or not a different man in every one. He couldn’t tell yet. But some – like the one on the middle of the TV screen – had more than one man.

Bodie wanted to see, he didn’t want to see, he wanted... some sort of promise. From someone. About what was going to happen with the blazing erection he had at that moment.

He looked back towards Ray. And suddenly Ray stopped swearing and had a hand on Bodie's back, urging him diagonally across the room away from the couch, towards a door. There were pictures stuck onto the door, too. "You have to get out. Just for long enough to – For me to see if he's left any space we can use."

They were in a small hallway with two other doors leading off it. There were more of the pictures on both of the doors, and on the floor and the walls. Ray punched at the keypad by the nearest door and then pushed Bodie through. "Please, Bodie. Wait out here for ten minutes? Maybe fifteen? I'll cover up enough of them so we have a place where we don't see them. Where we can think. And I'll make a path there that's safe, too."

"Yeah, OK." The door was already shut.

Bodie sighed, let his head sag forward, then took a deep, gusting breath and turned around to see where he was. He was on a walkway about six feet wide, and beyond that was a pyramid-shaped space that stretched up for four or five storeys. There was a wall about four feet high on the other side of the walkway, and looking down he saw a square platform that took up most of the space at ground level, with a random-looking collection of buildings on top of it. He knew there were shops, a school, a library, a gym, and some offices. Maybe more, that Ray hadn't mentioned.

He leaned further over, looking for the broad paths – with hoverways for freight – that Ray had said ran through each pyramid between opposite sides. He did catch a glimpse of the one on the opposite corner, but leaning over had brought his erection against the wall, and he'd immediately had to step back.

He stood with his arms down by his side, eyes closed, and concentrated on breathing slowly, deeply, and evenly. Trying not to think about the flat immediately behind him. About what Ray might be seeing at that second. He needed to go somewhere and have a wank. But he had no idea where he could go. Was there a Gents in the building? Was there one anywhere in town? And if there was, would it even give him the privacy he needed?

He knew nothing about the Hailin, how they really lived. Nothing.

And he couldn't go and have a wank, anyway. He had to stay by the door, and wait for Ray. So he had to distract himself.

OK, so how would you defend this building? If your VIP (or whoever) was having a top-secret meeting in Ray's flat. If you had just two men, what could they do to boost their chances? What if you had four? Or eight? How many more than eight to be completely confident? What if the meeting was in the restaurant up on the roof? Or down in one of the offices? And what about civilians? What kind of control can you get over the civilians?

He paced back and forth along the walkway on either side of the front door, craning his head, assessing sightlines while imagining the commandos with rappelling hooks about to swing down from the walkway above. Of course, you could guard against that, but you needed men, or you needed time to prepare.

There were civilians. Quite a lot of them. Whichever side of the pyramid he looked, there would be at least one person heading along a walkway at one level or another. The most people in view so far at one time was six, or seven if he counted the footsteps on the walkway below. Well, it was seven in the morning, of course. People were going to work.

No one on the lower levels noticed him, but for those on the same level or above, he thought at least half did. The looks ranged from curious to suspicious – and he'd be fucking suspicious himself, of anyone studying a building's angles like that – but no one had even broken stride on their way to the elevators at the corners. What would Ray do, he wondered, if he saw someone hanging around the walkway, acting like that?

Well, six months ago he would probably have dragged him inside the flat and fucked him over the coffee table but –

No. Back to work. You've got a team of two and a day to prepare. What's your best protection against the commandos upstairs?

He was sideways on to the parapet with his head tilted far back when he heard the door open behind him, about halfway along the walkway. He straightened up and turned, and saw a small middle-aged woman standing outside a flat three doors away from theirs. She was staring at him and frowning. He stared back, really not in the mood to play nice with a civilian. After maybe five seconds she closed the door, looked away from him while she used the keypad, and then was heading towards him, unhurried but clearly with a plan.

~Can I help you?~

So it was universal. The polite way of saying, "Who the fuck are you and what the hell are you doing here?" Bodie clamped down on five possible smart-arse replies and just shook his head and said, ~I'm waiting for my *nespa*.~

A twitch of surprise at his accent, but she was still going to follow the plan. ~Would I know your *nespa*?~

Bodie shrugged and gestured with his head towards the door. ~Ray Vasmar.~

Somehow that was enough to reassure her completely, and now she was just curious and interested, though not yet smiling. ~Ray? You know, I haven't seen him in...~ Trying to remember. ~Months.~

~He was on a voyage with the fleet. Meeting me.~ Not smiling either. He would just have said that Ray was "away", but he didn't know how.

~Oh!~ She was now looking at him with a different kind of attention. ~I always thought he -~ Was going to marry Gavio? Was the last person who'd enter into a *tolmin* marriage? Now she smiled, but awkwardly, and then immediately looked at her wristband. ~I need to /?/ my ferry. But I must welcome you to the building. I'm Shilda.~

~It's a pleasure to meet you, Shilda.~ This was the right time to use that form, he was sure. ~I'm Bodie.~

They smiled, and gave the particular, formal first-meeting nod. ~Please give Ray my /?/. I hope to see you again soon.~

~Yes. Thank you.~

The elevator arrived very quickly, and she turned her head to smile again before she stepped into it.

So that was Shilda. The local busybody? Or just a good and cautious neighbour? Couldn't be that good, though, if she'd only just noticed that Ray had been gone.

No more sizing up the building. He shouldn't be worrying people. But he still wanted a distraction.

OK, he'd look around and find something whose name he didn't know in Hass Embrun, and then try to describe it using the words he did know. Like.. "skylight".

He was tackling "heavy-duty carpeting" when the front door opened. "We can use the balcony. I've made a path there with blue sheets. But you have to keep your eyes down. On the sheets. Don't look at anything in the flat except the blue sheets."

"OK."

Ray led the way. The path was about two feet wide. It took six lengths of sheets to get out to the balcony. Half-sheets, rather, from the thickness underfoot. Or maybe Ray had even had to cut them into quarters to get the length he needed. Out of the corners of his eyes he could see that Ray had draped sheets over the TV and the coffee table and the couch – some rust-brown sheets, and some moss-green – and maybe further back in the room, too, but he would have needed to turn his head to be sure, and Ray had been looking back to check on him.

On the balcony, there were sheets draped over the floor and over parts of the parapet, but the parapet at the end of the path was clear. Once they were side-by-side against it Ray sighed and closed his eyes and reached for Bodie's hand.

"Bodie. I'm so sorry. I should have come first. Made sure."

"Hey. It's OK." Squeezing his hand hard. "Nothing I haven't seen before." Not that he'd ever sought out queer porn, but there'd been a few men who liked to show it to him.

Ray opened his eyes. "I wanted to make you at home."

"I know."

"Now I'll have to spend the day clearing up that." A backwards jerk of the head. "Most of them are really stuck down hard. It'll take hours. And god knows how many more he's hidden around the flat. I found one in a drawer. And another under a chopping-board. I'll have to go through every book. Not just for your sake. Because of West."

Bodie grunted. "For an idiot, Gavio did a thorough job."

A snort and a twisted smile, then Ray released his hand and took a small step away. "You should go back to Clover. Until tomorrow."

"No chance. I'm here. I'm home. I can keep my eyes down, on the blue sheets. For as long as it takes."

Ray looked at him, frowning and worrying at his lower lip with his teeth. Finally he shrugged, exhaled sharply and said, "I'm still gonna need you out of the flat. For the morning, at the least. I'll clear spaces for you to sit, so you can read or watch films while I'm dealing with the rest."

Bodie nodded. "Any ideas where I should go?"

“Well... would you mind going down to the shops for some milk and bread? And beer. I should see...” He’d half-turned towards the balcony doors but paused and then quickly turned back. “You know, I don’t care what he’s left me; I’m throwing it all out. I’ll make you a list. Then we’ll have our second breakfast. And I’ll draw you a map for the longest run I take. If you take it at a walk you’ll be back by lunchtime.”

“I can make lunch.” Needing to help. Somehow.

But Ray was shaking his head. “We’ll go out. I’ll clear the kitchen last. We need the bathroom and bedroom more. And I’ll be ready for an hour’s break by lunchtime. Really ready to get out of the flat.”

The list ended up with about twenty items, including eggs, and some fruits and vegetables, and a couple of types of cooked meats. Ray had a lightweight black backpack that he used for grocery shopping, with a couple of carrier bags of the same material stuffed in a side pockets. Bodie had easily enough cash to cover it all, with the stack of pre-loaded cards that Malun had given him the previous evening.

The nearest elevator to the grocery store was the east one, so he walked over to that corner to take the elevator down, rather than take the north elevator by their flat. The elevator shaft was inside a tilted cylinder about twelve feet across, and the ride was fast enough that he could feel the force pulling him sideways as well as down. The doors opened on the side facing into the middle of the pyramid, and there was the Karasu grocery store right in front of him. Ray had written down the name, but he wouldn’t have needed it as there was only one building with lights on at that time of the morning.

Ray had always referred to the place as a grocery store, but to Bodie’s eye it was large enough and impersonal enough to qualify as a small supermarket. He got a trolley and started looking for the vegetables, which were the first thing on the list. Ray had ordered the list according to the layout of the store, assuming they hadn’t changed it while he’d been away.

Bodie guessed afterwards that they hadn’t, but he’d stopped focusing on the list even before he reached the vegetable section, because there were so much to look at and puzzle over. What were the big rectangular packs with a grid of twenty inch-sized cubes of... coal-streaked suet? And why did the packs have a picture of a girl and a huge pair of boots on a small sailing boat? What were those three-foot-long, orange, knobbly-stick things right next to the *algabas*? So many vegetables he’d never seen. And fruit, too. They’d need to test all of this out. When Ray got them their kitchen back.

How long had he been here? Shit, nearly an hour. Would Ray be worrying? No, Ray knew how thoroughly West’s lessons had dealt with shopping. He knew Bodie could cope with anything that was likely to happen, including chitchat at the tills about the weather or plans for the weekend. Ray probably thought he was dawdling deliberately, to give Ray more time to clear a safe space for breakfast.

The chat at the till was about the beer. That was obvious from the direction of the man’s nod, but Bodie had to ask him to repeat and then to explain some words before he understood that there was three-for-two offer on. For that week only!

~That sounds good, but I can’t carry any more now.~

That got a nod towards a bench at the back of the store, and a long suggestion that he just could not follow. He should ask, he should work at this stuff, but there was someone behind him in the queue now. Someone who probably had a job to get to.

~Thanks, but I'll come back later.~

~Before An Uraba?~

Bodie grinned. ~Probably tomorrow. My *nespa* and I are on holiday. We might drink all of this today.~ Not much of a holiday, especially for Ray, but the beer would ease them through it.

Ray had taught him the code for the door a week earlier, but he rang the bell rather than let himself in. Ray would want the warning, to be able to cover things up.

Ray didn't comment on how long he'd taken, just told him to put the bags down by the coffee table and go and sit on the balcony. One of the sheets was still there but the left-hand side was clear, with a small weathered table and two chairs, all in slatted wood.

Ray had taken the hold off deliveries a few minutes earlier, after he'd managed to cover up the pictures in the hallway. They would have coffee tomorrow, but for now it was *kenit*. With milk it was no worse than the tea that Anson used to make. They had a slice of toast each, with a gooseberry-like jam that Ray said Gavio wouldn't have touched.

"Was the shopping list in the right order?"

"Yeah, it was fine. No problems finding anything."

"And people were helpful?"

With a twitch of the eyebrows: "A bit too helpful," and he described the conversation about the beer. It turned out that the bench was the place where you boxed things up and put them in the building's delivery system. But for that you needed special address labels, which Ray did keep in that backpack but hadn't thought to show Bodie.

"I'll show you tomorrow, when we go down for more beer." Ray was grinning, but underneath it he seemed tense. Too business-like. He'd set the chairs a good two feet apart. They hadn't touched since they'd got to Parass apart from that brief holding of hands. And except for Ray shoving him out the door. Nice job, Gavio.

They'd be OK, of course, but... He didn't know if there was anything he should be doing to make things easier. Should he go back to Clover?

No. He'd arrived home and he was staying. No running away, even for a day. Yeah, they had problems with sex. It was Ray who'd promised they'd tackle them properly once they'd got home. And it turned out that it was starting earlier even than he'd expected.

For now he'd carry on making it clear to Ray that he was going to keep to the path, not run any risk of seeing more pictures. And he'd wait and see what state Ray was in by lunchtime.

Ray was useless at drawing anything three-dimensional, but his map looked fine. There were no cafés or shops or anything on the route, but there were streams and they were all safe to drink. Bodie didn't need to take water or cash.

He took their elevator down, then went around to the other side of the cylindrical pillar and through the deep archway towards the sparkling sea. Ray's sea view, which neither of them had been in a state to comment on when they'd been on the balcony. It was a good view. Straight ahead was the mainland: gentle green curves gathering into almost aggressive hills in the far distance. He knew that Dishna was out of sight to the left, but he could guess how far away it was from the angle of the ferry that was just pulling away. And to the right was the coastline of their own island, very jagged-looking compared with the mainland, with a scattering of smaller islands in between, heading as far out as he could see.

There was a broad stretch of grass in front of the building, then a sea-wall almost six feet high, with a set of well-maintained steps down to a beach of the whitest sand he'd ever seen. He'd go on to the beach later. When he had sunglasses. And more than one set of shoes to choose from.

He turned around to look at the building, searching for their flat. And there was Ray, still on the balcony. They waved at each other and Bodie was about to blow him a kiss, but then thought that Ray wouldn't know what it meant. And even if he did, it didn't fit, did it, with the day's mood?

Ray always did the route clockwise, so he'd do the same. He turned east towards the jagged coastline and followed the narrow paved path along the top of the sea wall.

The line of nine pyramids really was impressive. And strange, to just plonk in front of an ordinary little fishing village. But Ray said most of the villagers had wanted it.

The route kept close to the coast for over an hour. It wasn't all rocky: there were little sandy coves, and dunes threaded with a dark-purple shrub that gave off a scent like wood-smoke when he trod on it. Some of the coves had huts built above them, mostly of wood, but one of stone. He kept his distance from the first hut, but by the second he was certain he was the only person within two miles and he peered into all of them.

They all had just one room, with no sign of any bathroom. But plenty of signs that couples and even families visited. Lots of people around who liked roughing it, clearly. And presumably had their own boats.

Ray had marked a yellow and blue hut on the map as the place where the route turned inland, through dunes that gradually turned into moorland. Most of the route ran along the right bank of a stream that was at least six feet across. Ray said that the moorland on the other side went on for miles. Very easy to get lost in because it was full of little hills that all looked the same and made it hard to keep any view of where you were. Famous for wild animals, too, especially small packs of *sogarons* ("a bit like dogs"), that were normally wary of people but were unpredictable during the mating season and when the pack had very young cubs to protect. If you weren't sure what state the *sogarons* might be in, then it was best to stay out, especially if you were on your own. At this time of year they were perfectly safe and the area was popular at the weekends for watching the wildlife, but Bodie was under orders not to get lost on his first day.

The moorland was low, with no view of the sea or of the pyramids of Parass. He passed a couple of huts, or rather the remains of huts. For shepherds, or whatever the Hailin equivalent was? And had the shepherds packed it in at the same time as the Parass fisherman, or before?

By the time he reached the second hut he was in need of a piss, and he chose the outside of the tallest remaining wall to do it. Not that he needed shelter or privacy; it was just habit. He wondered what Ray did when he was running this route. Did Hailin men have that same habit? But then Ray usually did the run at the weekend, when the place was apparently crawling with bird-watchers. You'd play it safe, wouldn't you? Use the inside of that wall, not the outside. Along with every other jogger and bird-watcher in town.

It suddenly occurred to him that he'd been married to a Hailin man for over two months and yet he didn't know what Hailin piss smelled like. Even what colour it was. Not that it was a fetish of his, fuck no, but... But that was a type of ordinary, everyday trust that Ray just didn't want them to have. Because Ray despised him.

Abruptly he turned his back on the hut and carried on along the stream. Trudging now, when he'd been ambling before.

Despised? Wasn't that too much?

No, he didn't see that it was. When Ray couldn't face the pollution of having his clothes washed in the same water as his husband's. Wouldn't you have to say that, at some level, he despised his husband? At "some" level? On as many levels as you wanted to count.

Of course Ray also adored him. You could tell that they were never going to bore each other. Have rows, sure, but never imagine they'd be having better rows with someone else. Until Ray, he'd never known how queer he could be. Look at him today, the rush he'd been in to mention to everyone he met that he had a husband.

Thinking about how much Ray loved him. That usually made everything feel so much better – new each time, a gift – but today it was making things feel worse. It was a perfect summer day, and he was cold.

It was the pictures, of course. Hundreds of pictures of Ray busy being a really great slut. It had been his main hobby, the reason he hardly read anything in his own time. Writing porn scripts for Gavio had been his only real plan for the journey home.

He'd already known that about Ray. Ray hadn't tried to hide it. But seeing the proof... Of how much it had meant to Ray. And how little. So many men. How many of them could Ray put a name to now, if he'd ever known it? And Gavio there with the camera. Trusted with every single aspect of that body.

Again, Bodie had an erection that he really didn't want. Ray, now, would have the opposite problem. A flat full of the ripest reminders, and not a twitch. No way to raise one, unless the container of yesterday's clothes had already been delivered. And that was assuming there was enough of Bodie's *mana* in the clothes, when all they'd done was *tassuram*.

Yeah, that had to be a worse problem than Bodie's. Miserable and wrong and humiliating in a way Bodie knew he couldn't really imagine.

OK, so he'd pretend his erection belonged to both of them. Which it did, he believed that it did. And he'd be the square-handed man on the couch. And he'd be proud of how good the fuck was for Ray. But he'd know that there couldn't be anything more. Because Ray's body was also longing to meet its husband. To be thrown into the great adventure

of having to relearn everything. Things he'd never suspected about himself, about what he could feel for someone else.

Afterwards Bodie washed his hands in the stream, wiped himself off with a tissue, and then sat on the grassy bank with his eyes closed, taking in the sounds of the stream, the calls and flutterings of birds, and the countless clicks and rustlings from the moors.

That had been the right thing to do. He never would have thought it. He felt warm again, and filled with enough patience to see them through anything. Moaning that it had been two whole months and some things weren't perfect yet. Fucking ridiculous! Because some things had turned out to be so easy, he'd lost sight of how huge the changes were that they'd taken on. Huge for both of them. Two months was nothing.

He should forget about the pictures. Because Ray obviously wanted him to. Not let himself be the square-handed man again. But remember that Ray's body had chosen him. Had chosen to start something completely new.

He took a few handfuls of water from the stream. It did taste good, but his lunchtime beer would taste better. He tried to amble, but his body refused to understand that rhythm now; it was all simmer and spring.

After the moor the route crossed a road and went around the far side of the cliffs to the west of Parass, and Bodie got his first in-person view of Dishna. He couldn't pick out Ray's police station, but he could name five or six other buildings from their colours alone. He just saw slivers of the river, which seemed half-hidden by the bridges. Ferries in both directions, each about a third of the way into the journey, and many more ships of all sizes clustered around the port area. He'd be working somewhere over there. Sometime soon.

It was shortly after eleven when the pyramids started coming into view. At the point on the cliff where they all became visible there was an expensive-looking restaurant – which didn't open for lunch during the week, so Ray was right that there was no place on the route where cash might be useful. Then a long series of steps down the hillside behind the town, where he started to see houses: scattered at first but then closer together. Most were in the plain, top-heavy style he'd seen in many countryside scenes in the films, but near the bottom of the hill he came across some shaped like huge, brilliant-white snail shells, six on each side of the broad flight of steps. He gawped for a few seconds, then thought of the architectural frenzy he knew was waiting in Dishna, and he shrugged and moved on.

The old part of Parass was only about four streets deep, but from what he could see it was wide. From the number of store-fronts and people on the street, the town still seemed to have its own life, ticking over nicely. He decided not to explore but to head straight for the beach. Their building was At Oba Nyon, which meant it was the fourth along as you headed away from the ferry terminal.

Ray had changed his clothes for something downright scruffy, and he had music playing. The blue sheets were gone, the couch and all of the space between it and the TV were clear, and so was the balcony. He was nearly finished with the bathroom: Bodie could go in there now, if he wanted, but he mustn't move the sheet that was over the bath. Ray would change out of his decorating clothes, and then they'd go straight to lunch.

“I must say, you’re more cheerful than I’d been expecting.” They were on the walkway, heading for the south elevator. “I thought you’d be grim. Dealing with that for a solid four hours.”

“Well, the first hour was a lot of swearing and sighing. Trying to keep my eyes shut. Then I figured my techniques out for making them unrecognisable before I start prising them off. And after that, each one just made me more and more relieved that I’m with you now.” A sudden grin which then turned rueful. “Yeah, which was cheerful enough that I forgot to worry about how upset it must have made you.”

Bodie shook his head. “I’m fine. You’d told me...” A shrug. “What you used to get up to. And you’d mentioned that you had pictures of him that you couldn’t show me. No surprise that he had some of you.”

Ray was pulling a face. “I got rid of mine. The same day I mentioned them to you. I assumed he’d done the same.”

“He’s not gonna do anything else with them, is he? Send them to your work? Or to a newspaper.”

Definitely not. “No one else would care. Just you. He thinks you’re not qualified. Because I told him it was a *tolmin* marriage. He wanted to make you worried that you wouldn’t be enough for me.” A deep, uneven sigh. “It would be a reasonable thing to worry about if I was in a *tolmin* marriage. All of my friends here – Some of whom are in the pictures. I know they’ll be watching us and expecting me to – Let you down. It’ll take time for them to understand how much I’ve changed.”

“Don’t think I wanna know. When we meet someone. If he was in the pictures.” They were at the elevator. Bodie pressed the button.

“No. Of course not.”

On the way down Ray asked about his walk, and they talked about the huts on the coast, and about getting him sunglasses.

They went two streets south and then turned west. “There are two decent places along here. In any place there’s a fair chance of meeting someone I know.”

Who he might or might not have had sex with. “OK. Oh! I met Shilda earlier. The woman three doors down. To the east. She sends you her regards.”

Ray looked surprised and asked how they’d met, and then laughed at the story of the confrontation. Yes, Shilda Tashlam was very active in one of the groups that looked after the building. That did sound pretty typical. No, she wasn’t a busybody just... involved. Responsible. Most of the conversations he’d had with her had been on the ferry. Always without Gavio.

At the first restaurant they came to, both tables outside were taken. There was space inside, but Ray suggested they try the second restaurant, a few blocks further along the same street. They had better luck there, and got the table on its own around the corner, partly on the side-street.

~Ray!~ The waiter had done a double-take just as he'd started holding the menu out to Bodie. Bodie thought the guy was pleased to see Ray, but there was obvious panic in there, too. So what the hell had Gavio been telling people?

~Buka. Hi.~

~I... thought you must be /?/ back soon. And your *nespa*?~ A distinctly nervous smile at Bodie.

~Hi, Buka. I'm Bodie. It's good to meet you.~

The nervousness had vanished, burned away by a wide-eyed fascination. ~You're... You're not Hailin. Are you?~

~No. I'm a human.~

Buka's head rocked back slightly. ~That explains it.~ Muttered, with his gaze somewhere to the right of Bodie's shoulder. Then he blinked, and the next smile was warm. ~Hello, Bodie. It's good to meet you too. Please /?/ the menu."

Bodie took the menu, and looked at it for long enough to decide that he couldn't really read it. ~What dish is best today?~

~Um... The *usak* is always good.~

Bodie looked at Ray. ~Can I eat that?~

~Probably, but...~ And then he had a string of questions for Buka that Bodie couldn't follow. Buka had to go into the restaurant to get some of the answers.

"That explains it.?' Me being a human. What's that, d'you reckon?"

Ray shrugged. "I think we'll have to wait and see. What d'you want to drink?"

"Beer? But something different to what we've got at home."

The *usak* was guaranteed safe for Bodie to eat and Ray ordered it for both of them, and a beer that Buka agreed went well with *usak*.

When Buka brought the beers out a few minutes later, Ray said, ~Do you know where Gavio is? Is he somewhere in Parass?~

A sharp shake of the head. ~He said he'd /?/ in Dishna.~

Ray nodded slowly several times. ~How many people has he been /?/?~

~Everybody. Everybody who would listen.~

A grunt. ~Yeah. That's what I'd guessed.~

Buka took a brief glance around at the other tables, then lowered his voice considerably and said, ~He was saying that your real name's Ray Bakkel.~

Bodie jerked, expecting an immediate scathing denial. Something cold and ugly. Ray did seem frozen for several seconds, but then he raised his eyebrows and his tone was even and mild when he said, ~I choose to use my mother's name. There's nothing /?/ about that. But all of my brothers and sisters do use Bakkel.~

~Ah.~ A long, low exclamation. ~We didn't know whether to /?/ him. He was /?/ visiting Clover.~ To Bodie, with a sort of urgent wistfulness: ~Have you been to Clover?~

~We were there until this morning.~

A deep nod, as if Bodie had just confirmed something very important. ~Are you /?/ a Bakkel on your planet? Is that how you met?~

Bodie grinned and shook his head, and was about to say he'd been a soldier when Ray got there first, adding, ~He was /?/ on the ship.~

~There was /?!/? Did he /?/ you?~ Buka had forgotten all about lowering his voice.

Ray laughed. ~No, there wasn't any /?/. He was there /?/. You're such a /?/.~ Shaking his head: " 'Was there fighting on the ship?' You know, with soldiers aboard. 'Did you rescue me?' He's been watching too many very old adventure films."

Bodie laughed too, but then took pity on Buka, who was looking very embarrassed. ~We noticed each other. We started talking. It was very...~

~Ordinary.~ Ray's smile could mean a hundred different things. All good. They stared at one another. When they thought to check on Buka they found he was at another table, so they poured their beers and stared some more.

At the end, while Bodie was paying the bill, Ray said to Buka, ~You'll be telling everyone about Bodie. And me. What we talked about.~ Not a question. Closer to a command.

~As soon as I /?/. Probably start with /?/.~ Some hint of a challenge. Maybe testing Ray's mood.

~Then it'll be /?/ by this evening. Good.~ A nod and a small smile. ~This conversation is /?/ but only the first ten or twenty times.~

~Is this the first time?~

~Yes. With a friend who knows Gavio.~ A sudden grin, almost flirtatious. ~I was hoping you'd be here.~

Buka looked distinctly self-conscious. He glanced at Bodie, then swallowed and said, ~People will want to know... Are you and Bodie going to /?!/? Will you still /?!/?~

~No.~ Very crisp. ~That's finished. I'll never /?/ again. Anyone who /?/ is going to /?/.~

Surprise, and another glance at Bodie. ~Do humans not -~

Ray cut him off. ~I don't. I don't want anyone else.~

So that was what they were talking about. How everyone would want to know if Ray was still going to be a really great slut. Now Buka's expression when he looked at Bodie was almost awe-struck. Bodie felt he should be smirking, but they were so complicated, and so secret, the reasons that Ray had changed his ways.

Again, Buka swallowed. ~I'll tell people that.~

~Yes. Thank you.~

Bodie got his cash-card back and they said their goodbyes to Buka and carried on down the main road.

“Where are we heading?”

“A clothes shop behind An Uraba. To get you some more choices, and some shoes for the beach.” That sounded fine to Bodie. “How much did you understand? Of what we were saying back there. Before we left?”

“Sounded like he was checking if we were gonna be up for threesomes. Or foursomes. Or whatever. But he’s clear now. That the answer’s no.”

“Yeah. And he knows everyone so... He was the right first person for us to see. That was lucky. I thought he only worked evenings.”

It was a small menswear shop, tending to smart-casual as far as Bodie could tell, and fairly upmarket (again, as far as he could tell). Smart-casual was the Parass style, apparently. People would come over from Dishna for the day at the weekend, to be seen on the beach or in the cafés of the old town. Or not to be seen, in some cases, in the coves or on the moors.

Ray also wanted to get all-new bedding for them. The sheets he’d shared with Gavio were going down the rubbish chute as soon as they were done with hiding Gavio’s damage. As it happened, the best linen-store in town was in their building, near the west entrance. Ray already knew what he was going to get: a double-sized set and a single-sized set in *pasalur*, which came from the planet Tabarka. Raina had led that contact mission. You could say that *pasalur* was her discovery. The material was pale cream in colour, with a slight sheen, and it felt like the finest possible chamois. To Bodie it felt like the skin on the inside of Ray’s arms.

The double-sized set was for their bed, starting that evening, and the single-sized set was for the second bed in the new flat. They’d decide when they got into the flat which of the children’s rooms they’d put the single bed in, and who would be sleeping in it. But whatever they decided about that bed, they’d know now that they were sleeping between the same sheets. Bodie stood watching Ray while he was paying, and got partially hard at the thought of them feeling that same warm, yielding smoothness against their naked bodies.

Bodie spent the afternoon reading on the balcony and taking care of deliveries. He stocked things for the kitchen and bathroom on the coffee table, and draped clothes over the back of the couch. When the bedroom and kitchen were clear, he’d put it all away.

Ray took breaks from time to time, and would change the music and come out onto the balcony for a few mouthfuls of Bodie’s beer.

“You’re sure there isn’t something else I can do? It’s gotta make it feel like harder work, having me lazing around out here.”

“It feels like watching my *iskolpa* making himself at home. So at least this day’s going half the way I’d been planning it.”

They still hadn’t touched, apart from Ray grabbing his hand right near the start. A couple of times he’d thought Ray was about to lean in and kiss him, but it hadn’t happened. Ray didn’t seem tense or anything, but maybe he was seeing enough of the

pictures that he didn't want to confuse himself. Bodie would wait until Ray had cleared everything before he made any move.

The last delivery arrived around three and Ray had the last picture unstuck by five. He hadn't finished his search yet for hidden pictures, but as long as Bodie promised not to uncover any space or surface large enough to contain a picture, that could wait until later.

Bodie put the clothes away while Ray had a shower, and then they made the bed.

"Early night, tonight?" They were on opposite sides of the bed. Bodie's hands were resting on top of the light quilt, his right thumb slowly rubbing back and forth.

"Yeah, we'll want that." Ray left the slightest pause, then said, straight-faced, "Because of the time-difference."

For dinner, they decided on their Hailin version of pizza. Ray made the dough, and while it was rising they went down for a walk on the beach. The half six ferry docked, and about ten minutes later the stream of foot-passengers appeared on the path above the beach. Mostly people on their own but some were talking. The stream thinned steadily as people headed into the pyramids. Ray usually got in at seven, and he drove because he often needed his car for work. He liked having the ferry trip. He used it for reading the day's news.

There was a place by the north entrance that everyone used to kick the sand off their shoes before they went in. There was no sign, it wasn't official. Just a very strong tradition.

Ray had got them connected to the fleet's computer system and he suggested they watch a film with their pizza, but Bodie asked to see the local TV. Maybe some news. Ray started out trying to translate and explain but everything went past too quickly and needed far too much explanation. So they just let it run and picked things out as they caught their attention, and that still gave them plenty to talk about. There were more ways of pronouncing Hass Embrun that Bodie had realised. Different rhythms from the ones he was used to. They'd have to see what West could do to help with that.

They went to bed at nine. "Can I put my hand between your legs again? If I'm not too deliberate?"

A doubtful look, maybe puzzled, but then Ray nodded, and lay back, and parted his legs slightly. This time he kept his eyes on Bodie's face, though, didn't make any move to look down.

Ray was wearing his favourite Parass beach trousers, which Bodie guessed had the thinnest material and loosest fit of anything he owned. Very different from the suit he'd been wearing at Clover on At Mordez. It was still far short of having him naked, but the heat was that much greater, and the pulse stronger, and every nerve in Bodie's palm and fingers felt each fractional, second-by-second change in pliability. They sighed against one another's lips.

Until Ray, without warning, pushed Bodie's hand away and then practically threw himself on top of Bodie. On top of Bodie who was wearing his own brand-new, paper-thin Parass summer clothes. Ray didn't move, just stared down. Glared, almost. Finally

Bodie said, “You gonna tell me what I did wrong?” Nothing too bad, presumably, because Ray was still getting harder and harder.

Abruptly: “You didn’t.” Then more gently: “You did what you said. But my cock...” A sigh. “Yeah, you should ask. Each time. Before you put your hand there. I’ll need to decide each time.”

Quietly: “OK.”

“You know you didn’t do anything wrong.”

Hard to tell if that was meant more as a challenge or as reassurance. Either was fine with Bodie. He smiled and said, “Well, I thought I wasn’t. At the time.” He slid his hands onto Ray’s back and then down, and Ray soon started to move.

* * * * *

Maybe it wasn’t a factor with Ray, the thickness of their clothes. Maybe it was set by the temperature of his skin or some chemical in his blood, how and when the danger of Bodie’s body crept up on him. But it felt to Bodie like it should be a factor, and he didn’t want to have Ray shuddering again.

Allow half their usual time, he thought. Or less. So he’d give them until their heartbeats had properly slowed. He eased them onto their sides, and leaned forward into a shallow, lazy kiss.

When he pulled back, it was with a decisive grunt. “Shower.”

Ray looked slightly startled, then nodded and started to sit up. “I’ll move to the couch.”

The sheets did feel wonderful against bare skin. Bodie turned out the light and enjoyed the slide down into the crisp smoothness. A faint scent, almost like ginger. He stretched strongly, and thought about the new flat. They’d be able to walk in the door knowing they didn’t have to worry for a second about Gavio.

A light changed colour on the keypad by the bathroom door, and soon afterwards he heard the sound of the shower. Useful, having doors into the bathroom from both the bedroom and the hallway. And being able to lock both with a touch on one button. The shower was quick, there were other sounds of water, and the light changed again. Bodie turned over, shifted his focus to the faint sounds of the waves on the beach, and prepared to sleep.

“Bodie?” A knock on the door to the living-room. Not sounding urgent. But still something Bodie needed to know. That Ray had realised they needed to get an earlier ferry?

He turned the light on, got up, and put on his robe.

“Hey. What’s up?”

Ray took a step into the bedroom. The opening of his robe went down nearly as far as his navel. “That was too short. For a goodnight kiss.” Intent. Unsmiling.

Bodie gave an amused snort and reached out, but Ray pushed him back towards the bed, and then lifted the covers wide for him, and slid in after.

This kiss was much deeper, though determined rather than hungry. And it was long.

“See? Like that.” He was dragging his knuckles very slowly across Bodie’s stubble, still very serious, still clearly with some points he needed to make. “What? What is it that’s funny?” Bodie had been fighting not to smirk, but he’d obviously failed.

“Ray.” He rolled his head against the knuckles, gave a small smile. “You’re so commanding. Even when it comes to a *tassuram*.”

Ray blinked a few times then gave a brief frown. “And that’s funny?” Genuinely curious.

“Just that you don’t notice you’re doing it. I like where it gets us.” Which was another deep kiss, though not as long.

“Maybe it’s the sleeping on the couch.” Ray sounded thoughtful. “Looking at it... I realised I needed more if I was gonna get to sleep. I didn’t wake you up?”

Bodie shook his head. He’d spent so much of his life as a professionally light sleeper, it would have felt true even if he’d been much more deeply under. He asked Ray about timings for the next day, and they talked about things that Bodie might want to see in Dishna, how long they might stay, with pauses to give Ray more of what he needed to be able to go back and sleep on the couch.

“Gotta say you reacted better than I expected. To Buka and the Bakkel thing.” He felt Ray take a deep breath, and it was several seconds before the sigh rushed past his face. “Thought you were gonna deny it all.”

“Yeah.” A brief tightening of the lips. “A year ago, I might’ve. But now... With West coming. All the questions people are gonna have around you. If I tried to make West deny it too, Turon would never speak to me again.”

Bodie could believe that. He didn’t see West being able to keep up the lie, anyway. “How you doing? Knowing it’s all around town by now.”

“Round half of Dishna, too.” A shrug. “OK. I was thinking about it during the afternoon, while I was working. Asking myself how I felt. I think... Well, you said it. I fucked up so badly. No one’s gonna have me wear one of the masks again. Even if I begged. So. Yeah. Every expectation that comes with being a Bakkel... I’ve already wrecked them. I can’t get any worse at being a Bakkel. So the expectations are... Maybe I don’t really know yet how I feel but I think now they might be irrelevant.”

Slowly, after a very long pause. “You know you’re saying that to the man who turned you into the worst Bakkel? And I guess I don’t understand how your mind works after all because look where we are.” He wrapped his arms tightly around Ray, slid one hand up to push through the silken coolness of the curls and cup the back of Ray’s head.

Ray gripped back even more tightly, but only for a few seconds. “I’m the man who turned me into the worst Bakkel. You’re the man who’s turning me into... Well, of course not the best but a far more interesting *iskolpa* than I ever thought I would be.”

Bodie had to laugh at that, and then Ray tightened his grip again, and for minutes they were kissing, or murmuring, or sighing.

“Bodie.” Almost a whisper. “Of course you’re right. I don’t pretend to understand all of the feelings I have about you. Except how lucky I am that it’s you I get to figure things out with.”

Bodie smiled and raised an eyebrow. “Like now? Figuring out you and your goodnight kiss. What days we’ll have to plan on it lasting half an hour?”

Ray looked outraged, raised himself up on an elbow. “That’s your idea of a hint?”

“Says the man who barged in and took over my bed. After I went to the trouble of rescuing you when that fighting broke out onboard the *Sivor Simalsa*.” Shaking his head in sorrow, and then they were laughing. “So can I kick you out now, and get some sleep?” With the back of his fingers brushing the corner of Ray’s mouth.

The lightest kiss to his fingers. “Yeah. I’ll even go quietly.” A moment to check the fastening of his robe, then he was on his feet, and then the door was closing behind him.

Bodie gave a huge, contented sigh, turned out the light, and was asleep almost immediately.

Chapter 14

They got the half nine ferry, and took a table by the window and looked at the day's newspaper. Bodie had taken in more than he'd realised of the TV news the night before.

Their first stop in Dishna was Ray's bank, to get Bodie added to all of his accounts. The main eyebrow-raising in the bank was about the fact that their IDs both gave their family name as Vasmar.

~How closely are you /?/?~ Asked mainly to Ray, in a tone of mild curiosity.

~We're cousins.~ And then something that involved ~adoption~ or ~adopted~ – and that got a glance at Bodie and a nod of curiosity satisfied.

It would take the bank a few days to process the change, and they'd send the new cards and the paperwork by post. It should arrive by At Rahden, at the latest.

From the bank they took the subway north to a large furniture store. Bodie reckoned that Ray was about five times more interested in the process of choosing furniture than he was. Bodie would have taken the first thing he saw that he could live with and that was in their price-range, but Ray wanted them to find at least three possibilities before they made their choice. Ray did agree that they'd try to get it all done in this one store, and that was enough to save Bodie from feeling like the campest type of sitcom queer.

They discovered quickly that Bodie liked patterns more than Ray did, and they both adjusted for the other in adding to the list of possibilities. That was the main interest for Bodie: guessing what Ray would like. Fortunately, Ray's extra interest didn't mean that he was on the hunt for something that would be perfect, and he was efficient and decisive in making the shortlists and in coming to a final decision.

They chose a large couch in a lichen-green with a triangular pattern in the texture, and a pair of armchairs in a very dark purple. The dining table and six chairs were in a pale wood, plain except for a simple inlay of thin lines of three different darker woods. The beds were wooden-framed and matching, in a deep, gleaming reddish-brown, with high, slatted headboards. They were going to need some smaller tables and some shelves, too, but they could get those in Parass.

The money that Malun had paid into Ray's account would comfortably cover everything they'd chosen, and it could all be delivered next week, on any day after At Laura Var that suited them. It was agreed that Ray would call to arrange the delivery as soon as they knew exactly when they'd get the door-code to the new flat.

For lunch Ray suggested taking the subway nearly to the end of the line, where there was a very old and traditional restaurant with a pleasant shady courtyard. But Bodie wanted somewhere in the centre of the city, like on the battlements over the river. The old restaurant sounded great, but he wanted to see the Dishna from the films.

"It'll be packed." A mild warning.

"Sounds great. It's what I'm used to."

Ray shrugged and nodded, and started to lead the way to the subway station.

"How long would it take us to walk?"

“About three quarters of an hour.”

“Why don’t we do that? I’m not starving. Are you?”

Ray shook his head. “We’ll need to cross here, then.”

Ray hadn’t gone silent or anything. He pointed things out, he cheerfully answered Bodie’s questions, but a good part of his attention was somewhere else. By the fourth block Bodie was sure it was the type of preoccupation he knew best: that of a bodyguard on duty.

“What you on the lookout for? There been a wave of muggings or something?”

Ray looked startled, and then very uncomfortable. “No, I -” He swallowed. “We have people who patrol in this area. I was looking for a police car. Or a uniform.”

“So you could do what? If you were looking that hard?”

A long, uneven sigh. “Turn casually into the nearest side-street. Probably.”

“Why? Because of me?” Well, what else would it be?

Ray winced and nodded slowly several times. “I’m sorry. My team knows it’s an *esmana* marriage. By now the whole station will know. I get seconded to the fleet for half a year and come back married. That’s news by anyone’s standards. And I don’t – I don’t know what to do when someone who knows I have an *iskolpa* finds out that it’s you.”

“That’s why you wanted to get me out of sight at the end of the subway line.”

A pained grunt, and Ray dragged a hand back through his hair. “Just for more time to – To come up with something better than...” He was shaking his head. “Introducing you as my *iskolpa*’s friend William. Because my husband is an off-worlnder, and it would make sense that he’d have friends who aren’t Hailin. But I can’t, I – I’d choke if I tried to say you weren’t my husband.”

“Thank fuck for that. Not your *iskolpa* and getting called ‘William’...” He gave an exaggerated shudder, and in the next second they were grinning at each other, and then Ray slid his arm around Bodie’s waist. “So what do we do? Until you’ve figured out a better story?”

“God, I dunno. Say you’ve lost your voice? You’re too shy to speak?”

“Shy?” Bodie was all optimism. “Like this?” And he dropped his head down and to the side and did his best imitation of Bashful from “Snow White” complete with fluttering eyelashes. Ray cackled, thumped him on the arm, planted a light kiss on his lips, and then gestured with his head for them to keep on walking.

“Since that option’s out, I think we just have to take the subway whenever we can. Or keep a lookout and make sure there’s always a side-street handy.”

“Or never come in to Dishna together.”

Ray shook his head, very definite. “I’ll think of something. I’ve always been really good at finding a convincing way to present things.”

~Or ‘lying’. As most people call it.~ With a fractionally raised eyebrow.

~No. No. I always believe everything I say.~

~That just means you're a very good liar.~ "But we will think of something. I suppose... We could be having a row. If someone from the station spots us. I could just look dangerous and grunt."

No cackling this time. Instead, Ray widened his eyes and looked impressed. "That would work. And wouldn't surprise anyone who knew how often Gavio and I had blazing rows. Trying to choose a couch with Gavio..." He sucked air in hard through his teeth. "We'd've come to blows."

"Did they meet Gavio? Your work, I mean."

"Not really. He never came to the station. Or to parties. He didn't want to. We'd bump into people in clubs, mostly. I didn't complain about him at work. Just so you know. But they overheard enough phone calls."

"OK. So we're always having a row. Until you've come up with your convincing story. And then... Are they good, your work's parties?"

They varied. Ray went on to explain some of the variables, which was the first time that Bodie had heard the names of any of Ray's colleagues.

Ray kept on the lookout for the rest of the walk, but with only about ten percent of his attention. Bodie was on the lookout, too, for how men dressed in Dishna, and for clothes that he might someday buy for Ray. With his focus on clothes stores, he'd taken several steps past the sports store before he realised that the dramatic posters probably meant that the unidentifiable objects in the window were equipment for some complicated Hailin sport.

"I need a *gulshor* racquet. Is this the kind of place that sells them?"

It was, and they came out with the latest version of the racquet that Ray had. They'd have a game the next morning, before breakfast.

The lunchtime rush was dying down by the time they arrived at the riverside, and they had no problems getting seated at the first restaurant Ray suggested. Technically their table was indoors, but the front of the restaurant was wide open onto the broad pavement, so the roof just felt like a more-solid extension of the awning.

It was a seafood restaurant and they both had grilled fish. Afterwards Bodie was in the mood for a dessert and they shared a slice of the sort of dense, syrup-soaked cake that Malun usually served Bodie at their dinners, which was the only thing on the menu they were sufficiently sure of.

"I could really do with a coffee now. D'you think it's gonna take off here? Enough that a place like this will start serving it?"

"Maybe but it'll take at least ten years. Monor's full of little cafés that make a point of having the newest and best discoveries. And there are a couple like that here. But for something to spread further..." He shook his head. "It'll be years."

It was gone three by the time they finished lunch, and they decided not to rush for the half three ferry, but to take a long route back to the port using the next bridge upriver, and to get the four o'clock.

The ferry seemed slightly busier than in the morning. They took a table near the front so Bodie could see the approach to Parass.

“Well, we didn’t have to pretend to have a row.”

Ray nodded and smiled. “You bring me good luck.”

“Of course we are gonna have rows. About normal stuff. Not just about me wanting to meet Ward.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Has it been an effort for you? Being on your best behaviour for so long?”

Bodie thought about it then shook his head. “Not after the first few days. No. What about you?”

“No. Not really. I’ve never had anyone before who I’ve wanted to take such care of. And I know how ridiculous that sounds when you’re easily the most dangerous man in this entire archipelago. But I spend so much time thinking about how to make a home for you. A new home.”

As much time as he spent trying to find the most convincing lie to tell about his husband? No, that was unfair. When they were here because Bodie couldn’t face for a second the idea of making a married life for Ray on Earth.

“Like I said to Raina, you’re my home. You have been since our first night together.” Since the first moment of their first fuck. But apart from Ray’s line about ‘a *tolmin* fuck’, they hadn’t used any real words for sex since that last time in the hold. Hard to believe that was only five days ago.

Ray reached for his hand across the table. Slowly, very low: ~I found you.~

They leaned heavily against one another, still apart from the occasional tightening of their grip, or a lazy circling of thumbs, and they watched in silence for their building to come into view.

* * * * *

A blinking pale-blue light at the lower left side of the TV screen showed that Bodie had a message. It was from the Parass lawyer who was handling the purchase of the new flat, saying Bodie could come to the office any time after two on At Oba Nyon to collect the code to the door. So they would be in before the weekend. Ray gave a yell of triumph in Hass Embrun, wrapped his arms around Bodie, lifted him off his feet, and spun him around for the space of a few steps. Then Ray immediately called the furniture store to arrange delivery for a week’s time, on At Pontal. They could do a morning delivery, between ten and midday.

At Pontal was the day when Turon was thinking of visiting. But he’d probably enjoy being there for the delivery. Seeing the flat get properly comfortable. So they sent him a message suggesting he arrive by eight so they could all have breakfast, and asking him to pass the news on to everyone else.

Next, Ray checked the bookings for the building’s *gulshor* court, and took the half six slot for the next two days and for all of the next week. The court was already fully booked for the weekend. Half six would still work for Ray once he was back at work, but

he'd have to go straight from the shower to the ferry. Maybe they'd just play every other day, so they'd still have regular breakfasts together.

Bodie was hoping they'd get back to running together too, but he'd wait at least until the weekend before bringing the subject up. Obviously it was just going to be running, nothing like on the ship. But apart from anything else, it would be a way to get Ray talking about what they'd done in the holds. About what needed to happen so they could do all those things again. He could wait, that wasn't a problem. But he wanted to be sure that Ray had some kind of plan.

They went down to the supermarket to get three packs of beer, and when they came back the message light was blinking again. Yes, Turon would arrive in time for breakfast on At Pontal. He'd be bringing a sack of coffee beans with him. Did Ray have a suitable grinder, or should he get them one? Ray thought his spice grinder was too small, and having one specifically for coffee would be good.

Ray still needed to check the books and the other places where Gavio might have left pictures. He'd spend an hour on it now, and then send Bodie off for a run tomorrow, which should give him enough time to finish everything. Bodie made them tea then took his book onto the balcony.

Ray did find pictures: some stuck onto the covers of books, others inside. He'd have to throw the books away.

"What are the chances you'll bump into him in Dishna? Now he's moved there."

Ray took a long swallow of beer before replying. "If I was still going to the clubs... It'd be a hundred percent. As I'm not..." A shrug. "It'll happen sometime. He can say what he wants. Nothing about him matters any more." The ice-cold look. Bodie hoped for Gavio's sake that the man kept his distance.

"What about the chances that he compares notes with someone from your work? If he meets them in the clubs. About what type of husband you have?"

Ray frowned deeply for a few seconds then abruptly shook his head. "I don't see it happening. He was never friendly enough that they'd approach him. And he knew we were never going to have sex with anyone from my work so I don't think he paid enough attention to them that he'd recognise them again. Probably, when he hears from Buka that you're not a Hailin and that we're exclusive he'll assume..." A twitch of the eyebrows and a sideways twist of the mouth. "That what you've got is so exotic and alien and satisfying that I won't even look at a Hailin anymore. Which is true of course but – He's not going to want to discuss that with anyone. He'll try to imagine but he'll keep it to himself."

Bodie stared out to sea. There was a small boat threading its way between the islands to the north east. "Never been called exotic before. Will they all assume that? The people Buka's told?"

"I would. I'd need a damn good explanation for Ray Vasmar being in a *tolmin* marriage."

"Those aliens. They *tassuram* like you wouldn't believe.'" The boat was nearly out of sight now behind one of the larger islands. Just the top of the sail still showing.

The boat was fully visible and halfway to the next island by the time Ray spoke again. “I shouldn’t have told you. I hadn’t though if it would bother you. Is it – I made it sound like that’s all anyone’ll think about and – Buka will have told everyone, too, how much we make each other laugh. And how well you speak Hass Embrun. And how you look like you’ll be a much easier friend than me. That’ll interest my real friends much more than any stupid ideas about ‘aliens’. They’ll want to welcome you.”

Bodie had turned his head to look at Ray after the first words. Ray. So serious about taking care of him. And apparently with no clue that the thing that bothered Bodie was hearing Ray himself talk – so casually – about this spectacular alien sex. When Ray was the one refusing to let them have it. He didn’t give a fuck what Ray’s friends were thinking. But it would be nice to get through a day in Parass without once finding himself drenched in confusion about the sort of thinking Ray did, when it came to the pair of them. Which probably made him half as confused as Ray himself, from what Ray had said the night before.

Should he tell him now? That it was about how much he wanted them to be fucking. But from the way Ray had reacted on the ship when he’d just suggested he stay the night, nothing about that conversation was going to go smoothly. They’d be arguing for days. Maybe weeks. And they had things right now where they needed to be working as a team. Moving in to the new flat. Turon’s visit. West arriving. Ray going back to work, even.

No, he’d been wrong earlier. The weekend was far too early to go anywhere near the subject of what they’d done in the holds. Give it at least a month. West settled in. Ray firmly back at work. Bodie maybe already with a few friends in Parass. And until then just accept that Ray was a confusing person to want.

“No, I know. I’m sure they’ll be fine. I just – It just got to me right then, the idea of being the only one on the planet. And I know I’ll fit in, no one’s really going to care, I can see that. But three months ago I didn’t know any of this existed. And now every other human is seven hundred light years away. I haven’t been missing them, but – Can be a jolt if I let myself think about it. Being the only one.”

Ray was nodding. “I was the only normal person in a house of Bakkels. Which I know isn’t -” He raised his hand then let it fall heavily. “But sometimes it hits you. And you can’t think of anything else. Will you tell me? The next time it hits you?”

“Course I will.”

“Dunno what I’d – Well, what should I be doing right now? To help.”

Bodie hadn’t had to reach too far to imagine having moments of sitting stunned at the thought that he was so completely alone. “I guess... Introduce me to some more of your friends? Get them started on taking me for granted.”

“That’s a good idea.” Ray had bounced to his feet. “How many d’you think you can cope with? At one time, I mean.”

“Right now?”

“After we’ve eaten. Maybe around nine?”

“Let’s say one. To start with.”

“I’ll call Plassen, then. He lives on the eighth floor.” He’d gestured upwards with his head. “Invite him down for a drink. Though...” A sigh. “He is one of Gavio’s oldest friends. They grew up together here. In town. If he’s not speaking to me then...” He frowned, clearly flipping through a mental list.

“What about Shilda from three doors down? I know she’s not a friend but she’s close. She was friendly enough. We could cope with half an hour, right?”

Ray had looked surprised, but then nodded. “Easily. I’ll try Plassen first, though.”

Plassen was in, and definitely still speaking to Ray, and he’d be down at nine, promptly.

Ray cooked them omelettes, using a couple of salad vegetables and one of the cooked meats as fillings. Bodie did most of the chopping and made the toast. After they’d washed up, Ray turned the balcony lights on and moved one of the spare chairs over to the table. They didn’t have any wine chilled, so Ray put a bottle in the freezer.

Plassen was tall and thin in Ward’s gangling style, but with much better skin – almost creamy – and with hair that made Bodie think of a bowlful of cherries: that deep a red, and that shiny. No need to open a bottle of wine for him. One of those beers would be perfect tonight.

Once they were seated, he asked Bodie if they had beer where he was from. What about balconies? Or buildings like this one? Ray had to help him out a few times, but Plassen was quick to say that Buka had been right: Bodie had learned Hass Embrun so well.

~I always /?/ that learning our language was almost impossible for /?/. To be honest, I wouldn’t have thought Ray would be such a good teacher.~

~I’m not. /?/ that my brother West is, though. He was on the voyage too.~ And he explained that West would be coming to Parass soon to continue the lessons.

~I need to learn more. So I can find a job.~

~As a soldier?~ Tentative, not wanting to have to break the bad news.

~I know I can’t do that here. I’ll do anything. As long as it isn’t too boring.~

~So if you hear of anything that isn’t too boring, let us know.~

Plassen asked more about West. Ray explained that he was the youngest in the family, that they’d barely seen each other since West was twelve, that he’d started the ship-building programme but decided it wasn’t right for him. And he hadn’t really started looking yet for what might be right.

~Teaching?~ Said with high expectations.

~Maybe. You can tell him all the /?/.~

Bodie asked what Plassen taught, which turned out to be music, at a school for mentally handicapped children. Yes, he did play music outside of work: he was a percussionist. Bodie mentioned Turon and Sasha and what he’d learned about Hailin music, and Plassen said he’d send him some of the music that his groups played, and wouldn’t take offence if he decided not to come and hear them. Plassen didn’t comment on the fact that another brother of Ray’s had been on the same voyage. It had been a contact mission;

every Hailin knew that the flagship would have been crawling with Bakkels. So where was West now?

~He's at Clover. He'll probably arrive the week after next. Once we've got this flat ready for him.~

Plassen's eyebrows shot up, and he darted a glance towards the small living-room.

~That'll be /?/.~

Ray laughed. ~It would be, but the two of us are /?!/ a fourth-floor flat in At Laura Var next week. We get the /?!/ on At Oba Nyon.~

~The fourth floor?~ If anything, he looked even more surprised. ~They're large flats down there. You'll really have a lot of /?!/.~

Ray shrugged. ~We want to be able to have /?!. Like my family. They /?!/ Bodie so much more than they /?!/ me.~ It was said with an affectionate smile, whatever it was.

~Whoever comes, it'll be to see him.~

Plassen asked Bodie about his family: what did they think of Ray, when would they be coming to Pen Embrun?

~They won't be coming. They didn't meet Ray. I haven't seen them in a long time.~

~Oh. I'm sorry.~

~Don't worry. Do you see your family frequently?~

He saw his family several times a week, as they lived two buildings away, in At Pontal. His brother and sister were on the mainland, but they came to Parass on the last An Udom Kol of every month.

Ray went to get more beers while Bodie was asking Plassen how long he'd lived on the eighth floor and if that was where he'd grown up. No, no, the flats there were very small. He'd grown up on the second floor, and his parents had moved to the seventh floor of At Pontal five years ago, once the children had all left home. He'd never lived anywhere except Parass and didn't expect to leave. Now that, to Bodie, was exotic. He wondered if Ray thought it was weird too.

Plassen hadn't taken a drink yet from his second beer, was just holding up the bottle and frowning at it slightly.

After maybe ten seconds, Ray said, ~It's exactly the same as the other one.~

~Yes, I -~ A brief glance into the flat towards the kitchen. ~I know you've always /?!/ drinking beer /?!/ from the bottle. But I was wondering if you had any glasses /?!. Gavio was /?!/ about breaking everything. I was worried.~

Ray shook his head. ~He didn't break anything. He didn't /?!/ my plants, though. They all died. He showed you my message?~

~Yes.~ To Bodie: ~Did you see it?~ Bodie nodded. ~Did it /?!/ you?~

~I don't understand what you just said.~

~Had you thought, before you read it, that Ray was a kind and /?!/ person?~

Bodie glanced at Ray, who just looked curious, maybe amused. ~Before I saw the message, I thought he might be as much as 10% nice. After I saw it, I knew the amount was less than 1%.~ Actually not out of 100 in Hass Embrun but out of 144, so an even worse score, which Ray was clearly perfectly happy with.

~/?!~ Plassen raised both hands in the air to show that his point had been made, spilling a few mouthfuls of beer in the process. ~I don't know why Gavio was so !?/. He knows Ray better than anyone. It was exactly the !?/ I'd expect from you. What any one of us would have expected from you. In his place I would have broken all of your glasses as well as !?/ all of your plants. But I wouldn't have been !?/.~ Now he drank, downing about half the bottle.

Ray was nodding. ~Have you seen him? Since he moved to Dishna?~

Plassen hadn't, though he'd spoken to him the previous night, and planned to call him as soon as he got home.

~How quickly do you think he'll !?/.?~

A noisy sigh. ~I don't know. Finding a flat of his own would help. A nice new man but – I doubt if he's !?/ for someone nice. I suggested he leave Dishna for a while. But you know how much he needs his friends, even when he hasn't just !?/.~

~I'll ask !?/ at work. About flats he could !?/.~

~Yes, we're all asking.~ Another drink, much briefer. ~I think the more he hears about Bodie, the more he'll decide he was always wasting his time with you. Which will be easier on everyone.~

~He's not planning to !?/ my work, is he?~

~He talked about it. But just to explain he knew it would !?/ him much more than it would !?/ you. He says he never wants to see you. But I can tell you he's not !?/ talking about you.~

Bodie said, ~Will he be angry with you for having this drink with us?~

~No. He was asking last night when I was going to visit you. I said at the weekend. I'm sure he'll want me to !?/ you, Bodie. But I won't.~ ~Bad-mouth~, presumably, rather than ~punch in the face~. Or ~proposition. Or whatever else you might imagine from the man who'd left the pictures.

~Thank you.~

Plassen smiled, and said they should come to his flat for the next drinks. Ray asked Bodie if he'd be comfortable if Plassen invited a couple of other men along as well. Bodie was, so Ray and Plassen had a discussion of who Bodie should meet next, in a Hass Embrun that was too quick and probably too specialised for Bodie. They eventually agreed on two, with another two in reserve in case of scheduling difficulties. It was pencilled in for eight o'clock on An Uraba, depending on how much work they needed to do on the new flat before the furniture was delivered, and how much energy they had left by the end of the weekend.

Plassen asked what work Ray had in mind, and Ray explained about Ferros visiting the flat and thinking it needed some colour, so he was assuming they'd be doing a lot of

painting once they'd decided on what colours, and where. Plassen asked about the furniture they'd ordered, and Ray was about to fetch the brochures and fabric samples, and the pictures of the flat, when they both looked at Bodie. Bodie had thought he'd been hiding his growing boredom pretty well, but obviously not, judging by the guilt with which Ray and Plassen then looked at each other.

Ray said, ~We won't do that now. But Plassen is an artist as well as a musician. He has good ideas about colour. His opinion would be useful.~

Bodie shrugged and nodded. ~You should come and see the flat. As soon as you can after we've got the...~ He didn't know the word for "door-code" so mimed pressing the numbers.

~I can't on At Oba Nyon. What about early on An Embrun? Then I can see it in the morning light.~

~That would be good.~ To Ray: "I can deal with the deliveries. Or make coffee. While the two of you argue it out."

Ray nodded and gave Plassen a brief translation, and then they talked for a while about Plassen's art. He painted. Mainly small-scale. Portraits. Plants. Rooms. Sometimes people bought his paintings. Sometimes he gave them away to make space for more. ~You'll see on An Oba Nyon. Space in my flat is !/!.~ A wry smile. ~Ray would never !/! any. He says he finds painting !/!. He prefers photographs.~

That was true. Bodie had never consciously noticed, but the few things that Ray had on the walls were all photographs. Bodie would bet a brand-new purple armchair that the photograph thing was to do with Ward.

~Bodie will !/! some. He likes paintings enough.~ Said with an affectionate smile at both of them, followed by an eyebrow-twitch at Bodie, which surely meant that Ray was thinking of Ward, too.

~You'll !/! have space, on the fourth floor.~ Plassen sounded wistful.

~You'd fill it up within a month.~

Plassen nodded in concession, then drained his beer and stood up. ~I should go. And call Gavio.~

Ray stood up too and went to walk him to the door. They both gestured to Bodie to stay where he was. He heard them agreeing that Plassen would bring Ray up to date about Gavio on An Embrun, and that Bodie probably wouldn't be interested in the details. Which he probably wouldn't.

"One friend down, fifteen more to go." Ray had dropped in a sprawl on the chair, his bottle propped high on the inside of his thigh. "Did that help? With being the only one?"

"Yeah. It did. And he'll spread the word about West and the new flat?"

"Well... as part of spreading the news that he's met you, I would think." A sharp sigh and he took a long drink. "We talked about so many members of my family. Never done that before. Not here."

"That give you the 'only one' feeling?"

“No, I was thinking more how much has changed. Because of you. Which is -” Suddenly he grinned and straightened up a few inches in his chair. “I realise, only about a tenth as much change as moving seven hundred light years from home.” He held up his hand with the fingers stretched out, marking a level just above his knee. “But when you’re as nice and sensitive as me, you feel these things deeply.”

They laughed, then Bodie reached over and patted him on the knee. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. I had nearly a week to get ready for the move. That brings it down to just five times more.”

Ray made it clear, even before they lay down on the bed, that he wasn’t in the mood for sex.

“Is it because of talking so much about your family?”

“No, it’s Gavio. I’m not feeling guilty, I know I did what I had to. I’m just wondering how long it’ll take him to get comfortable again. Because of what he’s like, especially the way he needs to have company all of the time. I dunno if that’ll help or if he’ll annoy too many people while he’s not at his best.”

“You’re worried about him.” Which you’d hope, really, after four years together.

Ray briefly pulled a face, then sighed. “I suppose I am. In a way. I do know perfectly well why we spent those four years together, and most of our friends here understood why, too. Not that they’d claim we were good for each other, but...” A shrug. “At his best, in the right company, he can be a special kind of fun.” Another sigh, then he slowly nodded his head, several times. “He will get back to that. He’s tough, too, in his way, he might manage it quickly. But right now, trying to assess his probabilities, it’s got me too distracted for sex. I want a long, soothing goodnight kiss. And then I’ll take my distraction to the couch.”

“You still gonna be distracted during *gulshor* tomorrow?”

“Nah. You know I’m never distracted during *gulshor*.” With a gleam that could have been flirtatious or could have been competitive. Or both. Either way, it sounded like a solid promise, and Bodie easily dismissed Gavio from his own mind and applied himself to finding out what Ray considered particularly soothing in a goodnight kiss.

Chapter 15

The building's gym was near the west corner, and the *gulshor* court was underground. The changing-room in the gym had a pair of cubicles, the same as on the ship. It was Turon who'd explained to Bodie that they were for the use of betrothed couples, who couldn't use the communal facilities because they had to keep masks on when they were together. Bodie had never thought to ask, and if Ray had ever thought about explaining, he'd decided against it.

They spent a few minutes letting Bodie adjust to the new racquet, then Ray declared they were ready to start the game. They had a week's worth of energy to burn, it seemed, and it was their most competitive and strenuous yet. Bodie won, by a very safe margin, which Ray said had to be down to the new, improved racquet and his all-new Hailin sports gear.

"That you bought for me. That's gotta hurt."

They'd had the changing-room to themselves earlier but now there were seven or eight people.

"Did you see the raised eyebrows? When we headed in here?" Mumbled against Ray's ear. "I guess on the ship, they already knew to ignore me."

Ray shook his head. "Wasn't looking at them. Got you here. Running with sweat. It's all the way through your hair." His fingers pushed up hard against the grain, clutched, and pushed again.

"You're not so sweet yourself, love. Though actually..." He lowered and tilted his head, and ran his tongue slowly along the ledge of Ray's collarbone. "You're more like bread. Fresh brown bread." He parted Ray's mouth for just long enough to pass the aftertaste to Ray's tongue. "Told you, didn't I? About eating my way through a whole loaf. With nothing. Just good butter." Still all in a murmur, and very, very slow.

"You..." A liquid sweep along the line of his jaw. A second of heat then a clear, lingering chill. "You're the sea." Up the side of his face. "And everything in it." Salt. Ray's mouth was charged with it, enough that it seemed to pour into Bodie's mouth like a tidal race.

"Everything in it?"

Now straying lazily downwards around the curves of his chin. "Everything."

"So... Sharks? And sunken ships? And forests of kelp?" On deep, almost shuddering breaths.

"Especially forests of kelp." Ray's breath was even more uneven. His voice so intense.

"Ray. Ah, Ray. How d'you do it? How d'you manage to make kelp sound sexy?"

"No. No." Gasping. "I'm getting it all from you."

They stared at each other, then Bodie slowly raised his arms and held them to the wall by his head. With anyone else: I quit. Between the two of them: It's time to fuck. Or time to ditch the foreplay, anyway, to get serious about making each other come. Whatever a red-blooded man would call what they did.

Even more slowly, still staring, Ray slid his hands up the inside of Bodie's forearms, making him shiver, and then interlaced their fingers. "Our routine." Rocking his whole body against Bodie's. "Does this feel routine? To you?" Now almost still, apart from a slight shift of his hips from side to side that felt to Bodie's cock nearly as good as the grasp of a hand.

Bodie shook his head. "You do things. With this."

"You make me. You... You're a sunken ship. In shifting sands. I have to map you. Again. Each time." He was rocking forward again now, and Bodie arching hard to meet him. "Find out how to approach you."

"Y'reckon I've got secrets? Carrying a fortune in pirate gold?"

Ray moistened his lips, shaking his head. "I don't know what to make of those rumours. I just know you're beautifully made. Wanna discover your full shape. Admire all that fine craft."

"Claim me? In the name of..." Not the business, not with Ray. Or the Bakkel family, either. "Parass and Dishna and the Ikara archipelago?"

"Of course."

"That's good. You've earned it. Next stage is you start hammering at me. Hard. Make me shudder."

"You'll feel it from end to end. Shake off everything except the paint that spells out your name."

"Yeah. That's good for today. Another time for going past that. To where I don't know my name."

No more murmuring after that. Grunting, and gasping, and swearing, and thudding at the wall. Though trying to keep it down, because they couldn't really forget where they were. The people outside would have to think they were really fucking, would never guess they were only dry-humping. As that went, though, it was a masterclass. Since the start of Ray's talk about "mapping" him, Bodie's arse had been imagining the exploration more and more vividly. With pure excitement right now, not an ounce of frustration. Let them think what they liked outside. Ray and Bodie Vasmar would do whatever they wanted, whatever they needed to make each other happy.

* * * * *

"D'you know your name?" Whispered. Quieter than the suction when they'd finally broken the kiss.

"Just. Only just. Had deep-sea sand shaken out of places I didn't even know I had."

A slow smile, then Ray grazed the tip of his middle finger along Bodie's upper lip, and then across the tip of his tongue. "But the salt. It's stronger than ever."

"You're unbeatable, Ray. As an all-round workout."

Another long kiss, then Ray sighed and said it was time for them to shower. They agreed that they'd each go straight up to the flat afterwards, not wait in the changing-room for each other.

After breakfast they went to the supermarket to find twenty common ingredients that the ship hadn't stocked, for Bodie to try out during the day. Ray also got the ingredients for a safe and simple soup, on the assumption that some of the twenty items would ruin Bodie's appetite for anything solid.

Bodie asked about the things that had puzzled him on his first visit to the supermarket, starting with the suet-and-coal-dust. It turned out to be a sort of gritty cheese, that people sliced thinly, fried, and then ate for breakfast stirred into something like porridge. Ray couldn't imagine that Bodie would like it, and anyway he refused to have the stuff in the house. The picture of the girl and the boots in the boat was a reference to an advertising campaign from at least five years earlier. The girl's family were lighthouse keepers, the boots were for an important guest, and the cheese just made the visit even more of a success.

They put everything in for delivery and then went for a short walk on the path above the beach before heading home.

"So what is kelp?" Ray was shielding his eyes, surveying the horizon beyond the small islands. When Bodie explained, said it was sometimes called "seaweed", Ray nodded. "That's what I'd guessed. We call it *ecken*. I just hadn't heard that word."

Well. Ray had said that Bodie's sweat contained everything in the sea. Which would include any number of things that Ray himself had never heard of.

The ingredients had arrived by eleven, and they started the tests immediately, giving Bodie a rest after each one. There were two vegetables and one spice that he spat out before he could try to swallow them, and a spongy type of meat that he brought up after a few minutes. It was a real help to know that lunch was going to be Ray's simple soup.

When it was all over, they celebrated with a gin and tonic. Ray was done with handling ingredients for the day, and for dinner he suggested going to the restaurant in their building's roof garden, whenever Bodie felt hungry enough.

Bodie felt hungry by eight, and for a steak. The type of wine the Hailin normally had with steak was too sweet for him, so he had one of the heftier beers instead.

"I should've brought some more red wine."

"Tell Malun. He'll get some put on the next ship out."

Bodie thought about it. "I'll wait until our next dinner at least. He's just bought us a couch. And a flat to put it in. Don't wanna seem like I..." He shrugged.

"He'd be happy to get it. And he knows you know he can afford it."

Bodie shook his head. "Rather do without it. Until I've got a job and can talk about buying it from the business. All above board."

Ray nodded. "He'll be so proud when you do get a job. He'll want to frame your first payslip. Rush to show it to Raina."

Bodie could believe that. "Was he a good, proud uncle? When you lot were growing up?"

"Yeah. Think he was. As much as Ward and I would let him. Ward always liked him so... But now I think he coped with that damned well."

“He doesn’t take things personally.”

“Except you. And the fact that you chose us.”

The sun had set (very impressively) by the time they ordered dessert (liqueur-soaked fruit with a type of custard). It was so sweet the *kenit* actually acted to balance it out, and Bodie poured himself a second cup, which was stronger, but tameable with extra milk.

“D’you think we’ve got ourselves a reputation? With what we did in the gym?”

“Taking *gulshor* so seriously? At that time in the morning?”

“You know what I meant.”

“Nah, that goes on in the cubicles all the time. Though again, we were at it a bit early. At certain times of the evening, we might have people asking to join in.” A fractional shrug. “I can let it get around that we’ve only been married a couple of months.”

Bodie shook his head. “It doesn’t bother me. I was just wondering.” And after seeing Ray’s shrug, it really didn’t bother him.

* * * * *

The next morning Bodie won again at *gulshor* but only barely. In the changing-room, he didn’t pay any attention to who might have noticed them, and in the cubicle, neither said a word. Shortly after that he set off for a run, taking the same route he’d walked on At Laura Var. By the time he got home, Ray had searched every last place he could think of looking, and there were no more pictures in the flat.

They had soup and sandwiches for lunch, and presented themselves at the lawyers’ office near the snail-houses on the dot of two. The lawyer took Bodie’s ID and scanned and checked his handprints, which was his proof that he’d handed the documents over to the real Bodie Vasmar.

They all had a small glass of *toroquil*, and Bodie gave short but polite answers to the lawyer’s questions about when he’d last seen Malun, and whether Malun would be visiting him in Parass. The guy didn’t seem to be angling for more business or even an introduction; he was just uncontrollably curious about the great Malun Vasmar. Bodie had introduced Ray as “my *nespa* Ray” and Ray helped out several times with translations, but the lawyer seemed to assume that Ray was a local lad who’d somehow got lucky, and never showed any interest in him beyond professional affability.

Bodie had been braced for problems with the door-code but it worked first time, and they found themselves in a long, broad corridor, much longer than the hallway in Ray’s flat, with the door to the living-room open in front of them. The blinds were nearly fully closed and the room was cool and dim, so Ray immediately went to open them, and they stood blinking, and exclaiming that this must be at least twice the size. It could fit two couches, easily. Not that they needed a second couch. But it could.

All of the doors in the flat seemed to be open, and from the living-room they could see right through the main bedroom to the far end of the corridor, where the doors to the two smaller bedrooms stood side-by-side. They immediately went exploring and decided that the main bedroom and its en-suite bathroom were about a third larger than those

in Ray's flat, and the other bedrooms and the second bathroom maybe two-thirds the size. Ray said it was meant for a family with four children and the design was generous, from what he'd seen through his work.

Ray was particularly impressed with the amount of storage space: first the cabinets in the kitchen, and then the deep wardrobes in each of the bedrooms and the many cupboards they found along the corridor. The only open shelving was along one wall in the living-room, opposite the windows, but they could definitely get the deliveries started straight away and not have to worry about tripping over the boxes while they were decorating.

Bodie supposed he could see what Ferros meant about the flat needing more colour. The only colours as bright as their couch and armchairs were in the kitchen, which was dark brown with some touches of green. All of the carpets were mushroom-coloured, all of the walls were a pale greyish-green, and both bathrooms had white tiles and pale wooden floors. He still didn't want to spend more than maybe five minutes discussing colours with Ray or Plassen, but he would look forward to seeing what they came up with to make the place more interesting. Ray asked him quite early on what he thought about the colours, and wasn't at all surprised or disappointed to hear that the only thing he wanted to be involved in was the good, practical work of painting.

Once they'd done a complete circuit and were back in the living-room, Ray unstowed the keyboard from its slot in the frame of the TV, turned the system on, and then talked Bodie through the process of logging in, taking the hold off deliveries, and then adding Ray as a member of the flat's household with full authority. Bodie had assumed at first that the previous family had left their TV behind, but in fact it was included as part of the flat in the same way as the light-fixtures and the plumbing.

So what to do next? Bring over some essentials like coffee, tea, *kenit*, milk, mugs and beer. And towels and soap and toilet paper. And the table and chairs from the balcony so they'd have somewhere to sit. Buy a kettle. Go to the paint shop for Ray to pick up some colour-charts. And start buying pots and plants for the balcony, because Ray had missed his plants almost as much as he'd missed his sea view.

The garden centre was at the far east end of town, with the moorland stretching out behind it. Ray bought two small fruit trees, twelve pots in a range of sizes planted with flowers and herbs, twelve empty pots, two bags of soil, and some seeds. The shop would deliver it the next morning, between ten and eleven. In the paint shop Ray concentrated on browns, greens and purples, though he did also take a couple of all-round charts to give Plassen a fair chance of persuading him to go in a different direction.

By the time the delivery service stopped work at half six, they had Bodie's stereo, three boxes of books, two boxes of Bodie's clothes, two boxes of Ray's clothes, a box of Earth food, and Ward's painting.

The painting was larger than Bodie had remembered, and those blacks were really aggressive. He still liked it a lot, but there was a big difference between seeing it surrounded by other abstract paintings and seeing it on its own in a very empty, deliberately boring room. OK, the room wouldn't be this empty for long, but it was still likely to remain the only painting in the whole flat, and even he could see that a painting like this needed to be factored in to your colour-scheme.

“You’re still OK about having this here?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“It’s gonna be hard to ignore.” Any questions about it, Ray would have to mention Ward. “I could have it in my room. Out of the way.”

“I’ll be in your room every night. I’d still see it.”

“That’s my room?” Bodie nodded towards the door to the main bedroom. “When’d we decide that?”

“I gradually realised since we got home. It’s where we’ll lie down together. Can’t think of that as anything except ‘your bed’.”

“Feel I should argue but... Thanks.” They grinned at each other, then Bodie propped the painting up on the shelving, in the far corner, to be safely out of the way of further unpacking.

They had a beer on the balcony, which really was huge. They should get a larger table, a couple more chairs. A bench would be good, for sitting next to each other. Ray was thinking of a screen, too, placed between Bodie’s bedroom and his own bedroom. He’d grow flowers up it, and they could have the racks for drying clothes over on the other side. The small bedrooms didn’t have doors onto the balcony, so the racks wouldn’t be in the way of anything.

Bodie had to laugh – the things that Ray thought through! – but he liked the sound of the screen, and of having sun-dried clothes.

After some discussion they decided to go back to Ray’s flat for dinner. It would be too much of a pain going to fetch the pans and other things they needed, especially when they’d probably find they’d forgotten something and have to go back. They’d bring some small plates and some mugs over for breakfast, but otherwise they’d move the kitchen properly: pack it into boxes and bring them over on a trolley. They’d get everything new for West – after writing to him first to check if he had his own kitchen stuff he wanted to bring. They’d do that after dinner, and while they were at it they should thank Malun for buying the flat and Ferros for finding it.

* * * * *

They’d agreed to meet Plassen at the flat at eight. Bodie went straight there with the plates, the cutlery and some glasses, while Ray went to a bakery in the old town to get some of the best pastries in Parass.

Plassen arrived bang on time. He was keen to try this coffee drink, but first he wanted to have his pastry with a nice strong cup of *kenit*, because that was what his taste-buds expected when he saw a box from the Selvet bakery. Ray said he used to be like that, but his taste-buds had switched over to coffee during the first week of breakfasts with Bodie.

Plassen’s eyes had widened when he’d seen the painting. ~I’m /?! that’s Bodie’s.~

Ray nodded. ~My brother Ward gave it to him. Ward collects /?! art.~

~I like it. Those are some /?! blacks.~

They showed him around the flat, then Ray spread out the brochures and samples for the furniture on the kitchen counter, pointed at the stack of colour-charts in the corner, and then topped up all of the coffees and stepped back.

Plassen did a couple of circuits of the living-room with the furniture brochures fanned out in his hands, then moved to the middle of the room and nodded towards the TV. ~Are you going to /?/ that there? Or are you going to move it to the wall by the kitchen?~

Ray looked at Bodie, who gave a shrug to say he didn't mind, and Ray said, ~It'll stay there. It makes more sense to have the dining-table by the kitchen, so the couch and the TV will be over there.~

Plassen nodded, then went to bring the painting over and prop it against the wall next to the bedroom. After that he moved back to the middle of the room and spent some time looking back and forth between the kitchen and the painting.

~I'm thinking...~ But he didn't say what, and instead wandered through to the main bedroom, did a slow turn on the spot, deep in concentration, and then carried on into the corridor and the other two bedrooms. They stayed by the kitchen with their coffees, and watched.

Quickly back to the middle of the main bedroom, then slowly and steadily again to the end of the corridor, with his head turned towards the left. A pause of about ten seconds outside the last bedroom, then he turned and walked briskly back to the living-room and the stack of colour-charts. He was obviously immediately happy with what he found there, and eager to explain what it was he'd been thinking.

He was thinking that the painting shouldn't be on the same wall as the TV, and that it would be exciting to put the painting against a deep, rich background. Like a green as deep as the brown in the kitchen. It would be good for the painting, and also give atmosphere to the dining area. He showed them the sort of greens he had in mind, which were pine greens, and he held them against the painting and Bodie found himself agreeing that it would be exciting, especially against the copper in the painting. Hard to ignore, anyway, and wasn't that the reason he'd chosen that painting? Plassen assured them none of his rich greens would make the green of the couch look washed-out or too yellow, and Ray checked and was happy.

So, with that type of green on that wall in the living-room, Plassen was thinking of a different shade of green on the wall in the same position in each of the bedrooms, getting steadily lighter as you moved away from the living-room. He thought it would give a nice effect as you walked the length of the flat, but let each room have its own character. Ray really liked that too, Bodie nodded, vaguely curious to see how it worked out, and less than a quarter of an hour later Plassen and Ray had chosen the four shades.

Plassen didn't think they should paint anything else. The bathrooms were fine, the corridor needed all the light it could get, and once they had the furniture, Ray's pictures, and their books and other things, no one would think the space was bland or needed anything extra.

Plassen and Ray went to the paint shop while Bodie stayed to take delivery of the plants. Ray came home with a step ladder as well as the paints and painting tools, and then immediately headed out again to fetch another step-ladder and his set of decorating

clothes from the old flat. Bodie's decorating clothes were going to be cords and a T-shirt, which had been in one of the boxes delivered the previous day.

Having all the plants on the balcony made the flat feel so much more like a home. Bodie was surprised at how much more. And he was getting puzzled now about why Ray called it a balcony, because with the new flat it was obvious that these spaces were really terraces. But maybe, to Ray, any space smaller than the terraces at Clover had to be a balcony.

They started doing the lightest colour first, in the small bedroom at the farthest end of the flat. They took a break for a sandwich and a beer between the main bedroom and the living-room, and by the time they'd finished cleaning all of the equipment, it was nearly three o'clock.

The walls really looked good. They did the walk between the living-room and the last bedroom several times, coming back via the corridor so they could walk into the living-room and get the full impact of that deep, deep green. They'd do the second coat first thing the next morning, and otherwise they might as well take things easy for the weekend. They'd have plenty of time to move things over from the old flat next week, before the furniture arrived.

Bodie wanted to get out and get some exercise, and Ray suggested they go for a run along the cliffs to the west of town. There wasn't a good circular route, so they could either just run for five or six miles and then come back, or they could get a bus from the ferry terminal to Antoness, a village on the other side of the cliffs. Antoness was only seven miles away by road, but the path back along the cliffs was nearly twelve miles. If they went back to the old flat to change at that moment, they would be able to catch the bus that connected with the half three ferry.

Bodie liked the idea of seeing more of the island, even if it involved the indignity of travelling by bus. They took the path above the beach, and once they got to the ferry terminal Ray led them down some steps that Bodie hadn't noticed before. He'd known that Ray took his car on the ferry when he went to work, but he hadn't seen any major road heading into the terminal – or thought to wonder where it was. Turned out that it was underground, and it connected with an underground roadway and car-park that ran all the way under the line of pyramids. There were three ramps down into the roadway from the old town, and that was how people who lived or worked in the old town got onto the main road, either to go to the ferry or to drive inland.

The bus was already there, and filled up rapidly when people arrived off the ferry. They emerged from the tunnel within a minute of setting off, and a couple of minutes after that, Bodie recognised the place on the jogging route where he crossed from the moorland and started to head up to the cliffs.

There was a scattering of houses along the road, mostly standing alone, but with a few groups of up to ten or twelve. The bus stopped at the two largest groups, but no one got on or off.

They were in Antoness within a quarter of an hour, where they were the only people who got off. Ray said most of the people on the bus would be going to Budjard, another fifteen miles further on.

Antoness was about half the size of old Parass. It didn't have a beach but it did have a small harbour, with three boats inside it and with fishing equipment stacked alongside. It had a café, a hotel with a restaurant, a tiny primary school, and a few shops. Almost all of the gossip that Ray knew about the place he knew through Gavio, as the older kids from the village had all gone to Gavio's school - although from time to time someone would do something interesting enough to get the police involved. He wouldn't want to live there himself but a lot of the kids did stay, especially those in the fishing families.

The path to the cliffs was just outside the village, back up the main road. The cliffs snaked back and forth and dipped up and down, and there were good, constantly-changing views in all directions. The island was about eighty miles across at its widest point, shaped a bit like a whale (or like a *linton*, to the Hailin). They were near one of the tips of its tail. After they'd finished their painting the next day they'd go for a drive to the whale's head, and then see where they felt like stopping on the way back.

There were quite a few other people on the path, some running, but most walking. There were even a couple of little kiosks selling drinks and snacks. Ray had brought water along so they didn't buy anything, but the kiosks were close to particularly good views and they took most of their breaks near the kiosks.

~How did Plassen's call with Gavio go? Did he tell you while you were buying the paint?~ Running with Ray made Bodie think in Hass Embrun, it seemed. Even when there was no chance of Ray using even a single one of those thousands of words for sex.

~He did tell me. He said Gavio was mainly asking what you looked like. He's going to see Gavio tomorrow. Gavio will probably ask Plassen to /?/ you.~ To draw him, because Plassen was known for his portraits of men. ~But we don't think that's a good idea.~

~Would he try to find me?~

Ray didn't think so, but he didn't want to take any chances. And he didn't want Gavio to think of comparing Bodie to any Hailin man the two of them had known. Thinking he knew something about the marriage. Ray thought it would be best if Gavio decided that he'd never really known Ray.

The restaurant on the cliff-top was open. Ray had said it was easily the best restaurant in Parass, with prices to match. He asked Bodie not to argue against it if Malun suggested taking them there. For most people it was a place for special occasions like birthdays.

~When is your birthday?~ Ray had said he was a couple of months away from twenty-nine, hadn't he? And that had been a couple of months ago.

It was just over two weeks away. The eleventh day of Set Naru, which fell on the At Rahden of Ray's second week back at work.

~What do you usually do?~

Ray looked self-conscious for at least three seconds, which said loud-and-clear how much of his traditions had involved sex. Maybe something like acting out the filthiest porn script he'd come up with all year. Bodie blinked a few times, but forced himself not to swallow, not to look away.

~Have a /?/, usually.~ A party. Either in the flat or on the beach or somewhere in Dishna, depending on what day of the week it was.

~What do you want to do this year?~

~Something quiet. We should come here. With West. It would be a way to welcome him to Parass, too.~

~Good idea.~ Bodie pulled a face. ~I don't think I'm ready for a big party, to be honest.~

Ray nodded. ~Gavio had to have a party. I enjoyed them but I'll be glad to have a rest. Maybe until your birthday. With as many people as you feel ready for.~

A party with his friends. Which he would definitely have made by then. Yeah, that would be OK.

Bodie spent the last part of the run wondering if they were going to have sex when they got home, and thinking that they probably weren't. Ray wasn't giving off any of his usual signals, and Bodie wasn't feeling the mood enough to want to make a move that might get rejected. So much for the idea that their first run together back home would get them thinking so much about sex that it might be more than they could handle.

As soon as they were through the door of the old flat, Ray announced that he would take the shower first, which meant that Bodie had been right about not seeing any signals. He hoped Ray would be in the mood by that evening, though; he fancied a steady build-up on the couch, with a film.

There were messages for both of them: Malun and Ferros glad they were so happy with the flat, West saying he'd be bringing bedding and towels but nothing for the kitchen, and Plassen saying that Buka and his boyfriend Gamlan would be able to come over for drinks on An Uraba.

West was planning to arrive the following weekend, probably during the morning of An Embrun. They decided they could leave West's kitchen until the last minute. It was more important to get a coffee table for the new flat, and the larger table for the balcony. Maybe more shelves, too. There was a furniture-maker in the old town who would have all that in stock. They'd buy it on At Mordez; most shops didn't deliver on An Udom Kol or An Uraba, anyway.

They watched "Superman", which Ray had avoided before because sorting out all of the aspects in a fantasy was always too confusing. Bodie had seen it, but he'd remembered the flying and that it was surprisingly funny, and forgotten that Superman was an alien. The only one of his kind. The Hailin did have plenty of fantasy stories where people could do impossible things, but they didn't have much in common with each other. Certainly nothing like costumes or masks or secret identities.

They joked about when Bodie would discover his superpower, apart from the obvious one of making Ray Bakkel happy enough that he could mention Ward to someone without flaring his nostrils even slightly. They ended up having sex on the floor, and then meeting again in their robes, in bed, for a leisurely goodnight kiss. This time, though, Bodie was expecting the knock at the door.

Chapter 16

There weren't many trees near Parass but the rest of the island made up for that. There was gentle farmland, and lakes, and hills of different shapes and sizes, including expanses of bare rocks. There were good rocks on the island, especially to the south-east, near the top of the whale's head, where the quarries had been producing top-quality tiles for hundreds of years.

The route they took to the far south-east passed through several towns larger than Parass, and on the way back, along the western coast, they passed through Harding. It wasn't quite a city, but it had a theatre and several cinemas and a small university, and 90% of the island's lawyers.

At least half of the buses from the ferry terminal went as far as Harding. The one they'd got the day before didn't, because it was connecting with a half-past ferry, at the weekend. No, Ray hardly ever took the buses. It was the sort of thing you learned as a policeman, and if you lived with someone who'd been a teenager on the island. They'd make it West's first priority: teaching Bodie the Hass Embrun he'd need to take the driving test. They should probably get him his own car, but they'd wait to see what job he found.

They had lunch near the end of the whale's lower jaw, in a very traditional café overlooking a beach. It was busy, as was the beach. Maybe a third of the table in the café had children, and of those all had at least two, and in the largest group Bodie counted eight. They were doing a decent job of keeping each other entertained, though – no twins here who bugged the crap out of each other – and with the good food and view and glimpse of bustling Hailin weekend life, he ended up admitting that Ray hadn't been mad to take them there. No one seemed to notice anything odd about Bodie, but then everyone was far too busy.

The other place they stopped was Chast, a diamond-shaped peninsula sticking out between Harding and Budjard like an oddly-placed flipper. It was about six miles around and used to be a prison (with a small, intermittently-successful quarry), but now was best known for its gardens. Most of the island was public space, with a population of about 200 and some pleasant walks, but Ray paid the small fee so they could get in to see the remains of the prison buildings and the best of the gardens. The last time Ray had been there was when Ferros and Homa had visited. Turon would like it. If the furniture was delivered promptly on At Pontal, they'd have time to bring him here. They could have lunch here too.

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Immediately after breakfast on An Uraba they removed the masking-tape from around the walls, propped the painting against its wall, did a circuit of the flat, then another, and felt very pleased with themselves. And with Plassen, of course.

They borrowed a trolley from the caretaker's office at the old building and spent the day moving things across and putting them in place, starting with the contents of the kitchen. They propped all of the other pictures against the TV walls and the shelves. No hurry to decide where to hang them.

After they'd returned the trolley they sat out on the balcony with some beers, listening to Dire Straits and to the sounds of their neighbours. The family to the west had two kids, they thought, just starting to talk, and the one to the east had three or four, all school-age from what Ray could gather. Bodie found the kids very hard to understand, which might help to keep them from being annoying. And in time he'd get used to having noisy neighbours. Ray looked used to it already, just mildly amused and resigned.

When the record finished Bodie stood up to go and put something else on, then paused and turned back to Ray. "D'you wanna go and lie down? Or stand up. By a good wall."

Ray grinned, reached out for Bodie's hand, and hauled himself up. "Lie down. We've got so much floor to choose from."

Bodie shook his head. "Bedroom. You know we've gotta start in the bedroom."

This time Ray asked for Bodie's hand between his legs, and told him how much pressure he wanted now, and what angle, and also gave him a few seconds' warning of when he needed it to stop.

Afterwards they lay for a while with Bodie on his back and Ray curled over his left side. Ray watched his fingers slowly circling the buttons on Bodie's shirt – not like he might ever undo one, just testing the texture and the ridges – while Bodie played with Ray's hair.

~I like this room.~ He did. With the blinds mostly closed, he could have been in some glade. Just a few rays of sunlight getting through the leaves. And the squeals and chattering from next door... Just possibly birdsong.

~Me too.~ "We'll take care of each other here."

Bodie gave a snort of amusement and raised his head to press his lips to Ray's curls. "That's one way of putting it."

Ray clenched his fingers in Bodie's shirt, then smoothed it out. "I meant we'll be good to each other." Very serious. "Always try to make things easier."

There was an obvious line there about how being with Ray just made him harder. But Ray didn't want to think about him getting hard. He enjoyed the process as long as he had his alibi: that he hadn't seen, it was nothing to do with him.

"I know." ~I know we will.~

Bodie liked his bathroom as well. He liked knowing that Ray was just next door, that they could call through to each other, but having the two bathrooms so close meant there'd be less effort now to keep Ray comfortable, fewer awkward manoeuvres.

After the shower, Bodie got dressed for the drinks over at Plassen's, and he decided on the pink shirt that Ray had bought in Monor. It was the first time he'd worn it, and it did make him look very pale, even more than he'd remembered from the shop. Somehow distant. Not much like a soldier but definitely least like a Hailin. Which was the message they apparently needed Buka and the others to get through to Gavio.

Ray was kneeling by the turntable putting away LPs when Bodie came out of the bedroom. His eyes widened, he said something in Hass Embrun, and then slowly got to his feet. "Dear god, I've got good taste." He looked down at his comfortable, aged beach-

and-quarry coloured clothes. “I can’t go like this. I’ve gotta look at least five percent Bakkel next to you. Or they’ll think... C’mon. Help me pick something out.”

Ray was using the wardrobes in both of the small bedrooms. He’d put clothes for work in his own bedroom, next to Bodie’s, and the spare bedroom held both his weekend clothes and his most-formal clothes. Bodie couldn’t see much difference between the work clothes and most of the weekend stuff, but maybe there were hundreds of details that would leap out at any Hailin.

Bodie was looking for anything in the same style as his pink (or at least the same to his eyes), and the closest he found was crisp and pure-white, and in the formal section. “Would this be too much?” It was just drinks with friends, after all.

Ray looked back and forth between Bodie and the shirt. “Normally, yeah. But not with you. That’s great. Thanks.” And he pulled his short-sleeved top off over his head in one movement, let it drop to the floor, and reached for the shirt.

Bodie didn’t think he’d cried out or anything, but then he didn’t make the decision, either, to drop to his knees and wrap his arms tight around Ray’s waist and press the right side of his face hard against the tender, freshly-washed heat of Ray’s stomach. But there he was.

The reaction wasn’t sexual. Or not immediately sexual, anyway. No part of him had any hope that anything was going to happen. It was shock, he thought. Out of nowhere, the reminder that those shoulders, those nipples, that riot of hair – they were always there, a fraction of an inch, a fraction of a second away. He was here on his knees, he guessed, because it saved him from seeing. And because it had needed less coordination than running out of the room.

“Oh, Bodie. Bodie. No. No. I’m sorry.” Ray’s hands on his head, briefly, gentle, then on his shoulders. Bodie took a deep breath, ready to be pushed away, but instead Ray let go, and Bodie heard the whisper of fabric and the clatter of a hanger, and then felt the brush of the cool near-linen against his hands and face as Ray shrugged into the shirt and started to fasten it, working from the top down. Or as far down as he could with Bodie there.

This time the hands on Bodie’s head were firmer, but they were there to caress, to ride the grain of his hair. “Bodie. Oh, Bodie. I’m sorry. You have to let go.”

He did, immediately, slumping back onto his heels, and keeping his eyes closed and his head turned hard to the side.

Half a minute, he needed, to compose himself, then he’d be OK. Able to shrug it off. But Ray had broken all records to finish fastening the shirt, and now was kneeling at Bodie’s left side, cupping his shoulder, taking his hand.

“Bodie. I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

Bodie held his breath for several seconds, then let it out and opened his eyes. “What? What weren’t you thinking?”

“That – I think so much about what I want with you. All the reasons why I have to control it. All the things I can’t allow myself. And you don’t have those reasons so I – I

don't think as much as – As much as I should about what you're controlling. What it costs you."

Bodie swallowed then nodded. "Yeah. It costs something. Pretty-much every day, there's something."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." His grip on Bodie's hand tightened to the point of pain. "I didn't think. I'll never do that again."

"Don't say that!" Again, Bodie surprised himself. "I mean, not 'never'. Because we're gonna work it out, aren't we? How you can have what you want? Here. With me. Like this." He gestured with his head at the space of the room, meaning 'able to see each other'.

"We have to. We have to. It's what I want most in the world. Out of every world."

"So how? When?"

"I – I don't know. I don't know how to start."

Well, how had he started with the hold? But this wasn't the time to ask. "Not right now but – Soon. Like after your birthday? We've gotta talk about what we're dealing with. What you can change."

Outright dread on Ray's face, but he was nodding. "After my birthday. The weekend after? We're going to need time. We're going to say terrible things."

"I've got worse than an animal?" What could be worse than what Ray had already said?

"You, you're the same but I've –" A ragged sigh. "After my birthday. Right now... You do believe I'm sorry?"

Bodie brought his hand over and briefly covered Ray's fingers where they touched his shoulder. "Not sure. Try telling me another ten times."

Ray smiled, slid that hand around Bodie's back to hold his waist instead, then closed his eyes with a sigh and leaned heavily against Bodie. Bodie closed his eyes too, and met Ray's weight with his own. He guessed that with Ray, the recovery he needed wasn't from the shock of what had happened, but from the idea of what was going to happen in less than three weeks' time.

A sudden disagreement next door turned quickly into a fight, with throwing. Adults took over, the balcony emptied, there was stomping and near-slamming of doors, then something almost like peace.

They raised their eyebrows at one another, then gave lop-sided smiles.

"We'll get used to it. I guess. What time do Hailin kids normally go to bed?"

Ray shook his head. "Pretty sure I was never a 'normal' Hailin kid. I dunno. Maybe eight at that age?"

Bodie freed his left hand and checked the time. Nearly a quarter past seven. "That'd be OK. Let us forget about them for most of the evening."

Ray asked what the time was, and they started to get to their feet. “So what d’you wanna do before the drinks?”

“Go and enjoy the peace of the sixth floor? While we’ve still got it. Finish our beers on the couch?”

Heads definitely turned during their walk to the old building. For Ray, Bodie thought, who was pure Bakkel in that gleaming white, while Ray insisted it was the other way around. As soon as they were in the flat they went to check themselves out in the wardrobe mirror, and agreed that it had been the two of them together. Had two men ever looked more married? And then why were they standing and staring like that, when they needed to be kissing?

The drinks went well. Buka’s boyfriend Gamlan was a vet, with a house of his own in the countryside between Budjard and Harding. Ray mentioned that his sister Lamon had just started work as a vet near Monor, and no one commented on the fact that this was the first time that Ray had mentioned her, even though he’d obviously already known that Gamlan was a vet, and Lamon must have been in training for quite a few years.

They were all keen to hear what Bodie had seen of Pen Embrun so far, what he thought. Bodie glossed right over Monor and Clover, and they ended up talking mostly about the new flat, and the housing supply in Parass (Buka rented a flat in the old town), and where else on the island Ray should take Bodie during the next week, while he was still on holiday. And there was the mainland, of course. Some good trips you could take over a weekend. Buka and Gamlan recommended some hotels, and Ray nodded and sounded interested, while Bodie thought about them needing to book two rooms in any hotel. They’d probably be better saving that money for something else, like Ray’s screen and bench for the balcony.

By the time they left, they’d agreed to have a house-warming party. A small one, maybe twelve people. Probably the weekend after next, when West would have had a chance to settle in. They’d also agreed to take six of Plassen’s paintings – only small ones, Ray insisted, and only landscapes – because they had all that free wall-space. They had exciting walls, thanks to Plassen, so of course they had to help him out. They picked out the six paintings, all seascapes around Parass, and arranged a time on At Laura Var for Plassen to bring them over. He was keen to bring them, so he could see the walls.

* * * * *

Bodie was in the kitchen making coffee when Turon beamed into the middle of the living-room at ten to eight. There was no shimmering or fading in or anything like that: just a sudden, electric sharpness in the air, and then Turon was standing there. He arrived facing the balcony and took a step towards the open doors, maybe looking for the two of them further along.

“Hi. You’re early. Ray’s out getting us pastries for breakfast.” Ray had gone straight to the bakery from the gym, while Bodie had come back to the flat.

“Bodie!” For a few seconds he stared. You’d think he’d never seen Bodie in a kitchen before. “Am I too early? You’re just starting the coffee.”

“Yeah, it’ll be a few minutes. Hey, weren’t you supposed to be bringing us a sack of the stuff?” He was looking Turon up and down, craning his head to the side like the sack might be hidden behind Turon’s back.

Turon grinned and gestured away from the windows. “It’s in your freight system somewhere. Along with the grinder and my toothbrush.”

“It should turn up soon, then. They’re pretty quick here. D’you wanna go and sit on the balcony? Well, it’s the only place you can sit, right now.”

Turon went outside and turned towards the table, but then stopped short and leaned on the tiles of the parapet, taking in the full view. Once the coffee was brewing, Bodie went to stand beside him.

“It’s good, isn’t it? Not the Thames at Wapping, of course.”

“Or Battersea. Or Kew.”

“Yeah, not found a really good pub yet. But this is damned good to wake up to.” He pointed out the landmarks that he knew on the mainland, some of which he’d seen close-up on a long drive the day before, and then he explained that the local coastline was even more varied than you could see from the balcony, and that their favourite jogging route that took in all of that and more.

When Bodie took in the coffee and fruit juice they did sit down, and Turon asked what else the two of them had been doing, apart from buying clean-lined wooden coffee tables and unpacking Bodie’s books and LPs, which was all he could see of the living-room from where he was sitting. Bodie had just got as far as their first drinks with Plassen when Ray got back. The brothers raised a hand by way of greeting, then Ray went to the kitchen to pour himself a coffee and get plates for the pastries.

The till hadn’t been working at the bakery, and the queue had got ridiculous. “I was so close, so close to pulling rank. ‘I’ve got Turon Bakkel coming for breakfast. You can’t make me wait like this.’ So what were you talking about?” A sharp look at Bodie. “Have you given him the tour?”

“Course not. Wouldn’t even let him look at the wall. Not without you.”

Ray nodded, satisfied, asked again what they’d been talking about, and Bodie picked up where he’d left off.

A second pot of coffee brought them up to date, and then Ray declared it was time for the tour. Turon knew the painting from West’s quarters, but Ward hadn’t mentioned that he’d given it to Bodie. Turon was impressed, and doubly impressed by the wall, and by the way Plassen had placed the painting so precisely off-centre alone on the wall. Ward would be delighted (or entertained, at the very least).

He loved the effect of the four greens, and it got him wondering where else that idea might work. At Clover? Onboard a ship? In a garden?

The rooms were all very welcoming, and the balcony was almost too big. He really liked Ray’s choice of plants, and the way he’d grouped them, and they should definitely get the screen and the bench. In fact, they should go to the garden centre that afternoon, and he’d buy both. A house-warming present. And if they were thinking of protesting,

which Ray might be, then just remember that otherwise he'd only spend the money on slightly better strings for his *orbarcho*. In that case, Ray was glad to accept.

After that they settled in to wait for the furniture delivery, listening to the LPs that Turon had picked out for Bodie, and catching up on Turon's week. Ward had scarcely been at Clover; he'd been all over the planet staying with mathematician friends, and at the vault the other side of Monor where he stored his paintings. West was looking forward to the move; Turon had the impression that he'd found that he and his friends had grown apart during the months he'd been away. Well, he and his friends were at an age when people did go through a lot of changes. Turon had orders from Raina and Ferros to take photographs in Parass: of the two of them settled, for Raina; and of what they'd done with the flat, for Ferros. He and Sasha had gone to a lovely little music festival for the weekend. And by the time their ship left on An Uraba, he would have had enough of Sasha's family to last him for at least three years.

"You're looking forward to getting back to work." Ray was nodding.

Turon shrugged. "I always do. I enjoy the contact missions. But it's a struggle sometimes to be useful." A glance at Bodie, then back to Ray. "You know. You must be looking forward to going back on At Mordez nearly as much."

A slight grimace. "Yeah, but I'm gonna miss Bodie. I'll be running back from the ferry."

Bodie quirked an eyebrow. "Then you gonna tell me all about your day? The seventeen people you intimidated. And exactly how you did it?"

"You wanna hear it? It's not gonna make you..."

Jealous? Horny? Yeah, it would probably do both. They glanced at Turon then Bodie shrugged and said, "Gotta get used to it. Be good to get back to work with West, too. And see how he changes things now we're here." That was true. He was looking forward to more lessons. He wasn't sure, though, how much he really wanted to hear about Ray's work. For now he'd assume the best: it might not bother him; the police on Pen Embrun might be nothing at all like CI5. He'd give it at least the first week. And then figure out how to tell Ray that he'd changed his mind.

The coffee was delivered around half ten. The grinder went in the kitchen, Turon's overnight kit in the small bathroom, and the shipping container with the coffee in the storage room by the front door. The furniture started arriving about an hour later, starting with the couch. Next came the large bed, then the small bed, the mattresses, the dining table, and finally the eight chairs. The beds and the dining-table arrived in pieces, and by the time they were assembled and Ray had given his ID and fingerprints to confirm that everything was in order, it was nearly a quarter to one.

They wanted to get everything in its proper place, but even more they wanted lunch. They decided to go to Buka's restaurant, where he would be on duty if he was working the same shifts as the week before. First a detour, though, to the garden centre. On the way to inspect the benches and the screens, Turon saw a twisted little silver-barked tree that he particularly liked, and he easily persuaded them to accept it as well.

Buka was on duty, and the same table on the corner was free. Ray immediately performed the introductions.

~Turon...?~ No, it's West who's moving here, isn't it?~

Turon nodded. ~West is the youngest. I'm the oldest. I'm just visiting for the day. Before I go back to the fleet.~

~Were you on the same ship? Where they met?~ Noticeably hopeful. Like he knew there was a story here he needed to hear.

~I was.~ Turon smiled, and gestured with his head towards Bodie without looking at him. ~Bodie made it an unusually interesting journey for all of us. /?/ enjoyable.~

Unbeatable if you were a fan of family emergencies. But Turon had Buka imagining some cosy romance. Ray nervous and excited about inviting Bodie to meet his family. Days, maybe weeks, that would have been, before the ceremony for the wedding.

~Turon helped a lot. He was... the best friend.~ Wanting to say "the best friend I could have had", but the grammar was too much of a tangle for him. Maybe just as well, because it wasn't something he could see himself saying in English, anyway. And Turon looked taken by surprise even with the short version. Pleased, but self-conscious.

Buka asked about Turon's job with the fleet, and for a while there were too many words that Bodie didn't know. Turon mentioned Sasha very early on, and a bit later he thought they were talking about a friend of Buka's. Someone in the fleet? Ray was interested enough to ask some questions of his own, but as soon as he realised that Bodie was lost, he found a place to interrupt and asked about the day's food. Ray was getting very good at recognising that Bodie had stopped following, even when Bodie had everyone else fooled.

They were talking in English when Buka brought their beers, and Bodie guessed that he took that as a hint to leave them alone. Ray told Turon more about their first lunch in the restaurant, and Buka's question about fighting onboard the ship. Turon liked that, but thought that a romantic would get even more mileage out of the idea of Bodie as stowaway. There were some classic old films featuring stowaways on the fleet: heroic fugitives, to a man and woman. Did Ray know if Buka had seen them? Ray didn't know, but it'd be fun to ask. Bodie prayed to god that Ray wouldn't ask when he was around. How the hell did Ray not even blink at the mention of stowaways, when it had him guilty and blushing and half-hard?

Turon thought that West would like Buka. And he was sorry for himself that he wouldn't get to meet Plassen. He made Bodie promise to go and hear at least one of Plassen's groups play, and to write and tell him all about it. He expected a full report on the house-warming party, too. Was Ray going to give Bodie any choice about who got invited? Or was he going to keep it a surprise?

Bodie shrugged. "Doesn't bother me. There'll be six people there I know. Who've all laughed when I've made jokes in Hass Embrun. Reckon I can cope with the other five or six."

After lunch they took Turon up onto the cliffs for the view across to Dishna. He had actually been to Dishna, but it had been at least sixteen years earlier, when the whole family had been there as part of a holiday. He remembered that Ray wouldn't talk about anything else for weeks afterwards. Months, even. His room became more and more of

shrine to Dishna. Until suddenly it was wall-to-wall mostly-naked boys, but still there was never any question of where Ray would be going to college.

He'd enjoyed Dishna himself. The next time he visited he'd stay for longer, and they'd go across for the day. He'd take them to the cliff-top restaurant too, but for today they were obviously going to cook at home, and get their first use out of the new dining-table. They told Turon to choose the menu, and he chose a curry.

On the way home they called in at the old flat to collect the bedding. Bodie stripped the bed and managed to get it all into a single large freight container, while Ray dealt with the single-size bedding, with the quilt and pillows that they'd bought earlier in the week. Turon didn't follow when they headed for the door, but stayed where he was by the couch, looking very confused.

"But what am I -" He pointed at the couch. "Do you have a spare sheet, at least? Another pillow? I don't need a quilt in this weather, but... We have to take care of your new couch."

"Oh. We thought you could share with Bodie. You've seen how big the bed is. And neither of you snore." No. A very definite no. Turon was shaking his head, over and over. Bodie was almost too surprised to be offended. The discussion he'd had with Ray about whether anyone would need to sleep on the couch had taken just seconds, as neither of them had any doubt that Turon would be perfectly happy sharing with his favourite cousin; Ray had said that Turon had been taking Bodie for granted as a full, no-questions-asked member of the family before they'd even left Earth. "No, OK then. Sure, we'll get some spare sheets. You can have one of my pillows."

Quickly, Bodie shelved his surprise to get in and say, "Or I'll take Ray's bed. The two of you can have ours." It wouldn't be a big deal, of course, to get more sheets and they were going to need them anyway. But he'd been looking forward to having some time with just Turon, and if he wasn't going to get that time, then Ray should. That might be even better, in fact. Turon would be asking, wouldn't he, about "Ray's bed" and "our bed"? Anyone would. And whatever Ray said, Turon would have something that would help. Turon just didn't have it in him, to make a situation worse.

"I - Yes, we could do that. It'd be more comfortable than the couch, I'm sure."

Once they got home they made up the beds, with Bodie doing Ray's and the brothers doing the main one, and then they sorted out the living-room. They got the dining-table in the correct, not-quite-centred position in relation to the wall, then put the six chairs in place. They did want the couch and coffee table centred on the TV, but Turon thought that the armchairs shouldn't be too symmetrical. There were a few rounds of readjustment before they were all happy with the angles and distances, and the side-tables were the last touch.

They all went out into the corridor and came back in, and yeah, it was perfect. Everything easy to live with, but strong. Dramatic. They stayed out of the way on the balcony while Turon was taking his photos for Ferros, then moved to the couch so he could take the photo for Raina.

But Turon wasn't happy with it. They looked too stiff. It wouldn't be what she was expecting, after the footage from the ship. They draped their arms around one another

and Bodie tried to relax and that was better. Probably good enough. But he'd see what he could get that evening, while they were cooking and eating and watching a film.

They had a pot of *kenit*, with Bodie's last pack of M&S biscuits. Turon asked if he wanted more sent over, or anything else, but Bodie said he was fine for the moment. Next, Turon wanted to go down to the beach, and to see this coastline that Bodie had talked about. They ended up following the route most of the way across the moorland, and then taking a side-route north that was new to Bodie, and that came out behind the garden centre.

Turon could see why Ray had chosen Parass, far more than Ferros had. She'd thought it was charming, but that made it even stranger as a choice for Ray. The only thing that put Turon off was the two hours on the ferry every day. But it was going to take over three weeks for him to get to work once this holiday was over, and more time on top of that travelling between projects, so two hour-long journeys a day were nothing, really. The idea of the routine was what bothered him, now he thought about it. He and Sasha could be sent almost anywhere, at almost any time (depending on when the next ship left), and he liked that. It made up for the times when even he and Sasha had to admit that they were bored.

It was Ray who pointed out that Bodie's work had been like that, though of course with a totally different time-scale for the changes of plan and for the stretches of boredom. "Yes, of course. Will it be strange for you, having a commute?"

It's all strange, mate. Case you haven't noticed. Bodie shook his head. "I'm in an *esmana* marriage now. I like knowing where I stand."

Turon took so many photos over the evening that they soon just ignored him. They listened to a lot of music and drank a lot of beer while they cooked and ate, and then drank more beer while they watched "Duel". Turon took one of the chairs, while Ray did his thing of kicking his shoes off and curling up on the couch in the circle of Bodie's arm.

It was a very comfortable bed, Ray's bed. Bodie sat with his book in his lap, but didn't take in much as he studied the shadows and light from the bedside lamp, and listened to the sound of the surf, and to Turon and Ray talking on-and-off in Hass Embrun as they got ready for bed. He couldn't make out the words; Ray's bed was by the green wall, and they might have been too quiet, anyway, even if he'd been right up against the other wall.

He wasn't surprised by the knock at the door. They hadn't said anything about a goodnight kiss in front of Turon, but Ray was obsessive when it came to some aspects of his routine. Bodie put down his book and held out his arms, and felt a sharp thrill when Ray came to kneel astride his thighs. Ray's right hand cradled his head, while the left hand gripped his shoulder. For a goodnight kiss, it was too hungry by far, their breathing much too ragged. But nothing was going to happen. It couldn't, with both of them too close to being naked: Bodie in just his T-shirt and Y-fronts, and Ray in his robe and whatever type of underwear he was wearing now he was home.

Ray knew that too, of course, and they did gradually ease down. After about five minutes Ray pulled away with a sigh. He gazed at Bodie, smiling to himself, then gave one abrupt, satisfied nod, and stepped off the bed. He kept his eyes on Bodie during the short walk to the door, only looking away to find the keypad. Bodie raised his hand at

the end, the most casual wave, and Ray grinned and gave the same wave back, and then quickly closed the door. They hadn't spoken, not since Bodie had answered to the knock.

Bodie could so easily have had a wank after that, but it was out of the question while he was in Ray's bed. Ray wouldn't know – would he? – but that was no excuse when Bodie knew how much it would disturb him. He could take it to the bathroom but maybe Ray wouldn't like that either.

He wasn't in a bad way. Go back to his book with proper concentration, and he'd be as good as *esmana* husband as Ray after just a few pages. But it would've been nice, to let himself build on that mood.

Five pages was enough, and then he turned out the light and lay down. He thought the other two were talking next door. They probably were. But the sound of the surf was noticeably louder in this flat, down on the fourth floor, and it was hard to be sure.

* * * * *

They'd talked about cancelling their morning *gulshor* booking, but Turon had reminded them that he was on Monor time and half six wouldn't be too early for him at all. He'd come and watch, and then he could put the coffee on while they were changing.

Ray had thought that Turon wouldn't be interested enough to stay for the whole match but in fact he did stay, giving his noisy support to Bodie from beginning to end. That might actually have cost Bodie the match. Ray's indignation had been so overdone it looked like an act, but his game had never been sharper or more slippery. No one had ever learned so much about Bodie's moves, to find so many ways to turn that knowledge against him. Bodie did start to adjust, got harder to fool, but not quickly enough.

In the changing-room Bodie headed straight for his cubicle, but stopped when Ray's hand snagged his elbow.

"I'll see you upstairs. I'll go to the bakery again. So don't worry if I'm late."

Bodie just nodded, hoping his disappointment wasn't obvious. Damn it. The sex would've been great, after a match like that. Was Ray just too annoyed still with him and Turon? Or Turon had asked all those questions during the night and it had left Ray in a strange mood?

Either way, this time Bodie was going to have that wank. He closed his eyes under the shower and thought about the night before. Imagining the bedding and their clothes magically disappearing, and of course Ray had got ready for him. They stared at each other and held their breath as he guided himself in and Ray slowly sank down, and then it was frantic gasping, and swearing in a mixture of Hass Embrun and English. It was quick, when in reality Bodie would have been determined to make that last.

The bakery had got the till working, and Ray got back very shortly after Bodie. He was in a strikingly good mood, which appear to be partly about the till and partly about the *gulshor* – so Bodie was left guessing again about why Ray hadn't wanted to have sex. Not that there had to be a reason. Did there? Even a Ray Bakkel would have some days when he'd just rather have a cup of coffee. With a really good fruit pastry.

Turon wasn't going to stay to see his house-warming presents delivered. He and Sasha had plans in Monor for the afternoon. He would appreciate some photos, though, once Ray had managed to get some plants growing up the screen.

He didn't hurry over breakfast, but as soon as they'd finished the second pot of coffee he went to get his overnight kit from the bathroom.

They said their goodbyes in the living-room. Turon was one of the people that Ray did hug. A brief kiss, too, on the lips, and some quiet words in Hass Embrun, and then it was Bodie's turn. Turon only loosened his hold slightly after the kiss. "You will write?" Frowning. The older brother being stern.

"Course. I promised, didn't I?"

Another kiss, even briefer, then Turon stepped back and made a call on his wristband. The team on duty in the transporter room must have been the most efficient in the fleet, because just a few seconds later the air tensed and he was gone.

Chapter 17

They'd started getting Ray's flat ready for West even before Turon's visit, when they decided that they had to repaint the walls because the damage from the pictures was just too noticeable. After Turon's visit, they gave the flat a very thorough clean, added West to the system as a full member of the household, and bought just a basic set of cooking equipment because West wasn't very interested in cooking.

West's first container arrived shortly after nine of the morning of At Oba Nyon and the last around half two on An Embrun, just a couple of hours after West himself. They'd thought they might be stuck in all day waiting for deliveries, but maybe there'd never been any danger of that since the containers were addressed to West Bakkel. Not that Bodie was going to point that out.

They gave West a similar tour of the town to the one they'd given Turon, and West said the place was even prettier than Turon had described it. He wanted a few hours to finish unpacking, and then he came around to their building for dinner-and-sunset in its restaurant.

On An Udom Kol they took him for a drive around the island, stopping in Harding for lunch and to give him a wider choice of crockery than Parass offered. He liked patterns even more than Bodie did, and chose a set with a broad band of multi-coloured birds and tiny leaves running around the rims. They cooked him dinner at his flat and then asked him to show them his favourite film in English ("North by Northwest"), which was when Bodie discovered that the bags of clothes lying around his quarters hadn't been laundry but his various knitting projects. Or *davanap*, in Hass Embrun. West always did his *davanap* when he watched a film; he liked to keep his hands busy. He was making a shawl with a pattern of waves. Not to wear, but for warmth on the couch during the winter because he was sure the weather wasn't always this nice. Ray said he was right, and it was forecast to change early next week. Could be heavy rain on At Laura Var.

* * * * *

For Ray's first day back at work, they'd decided that breakfast was more important than *gulshor*. At quarter past seven they went down to the car, kissed briefly through the open window, and then Ray drove off. Ray was jittery: excited on one level to be going back as a married man, with the two best photos from Turon to show off his wonderful man, but also nervous about what questions people would have. Of course, he was the best they had at asking questions, but there were plenty in the station who also had to be taken seriously.

Ward had given West a painting, too, one Bodie hadn't seen before. It was smaller than Bodie's, and made up of tiny triangular shapes, many so pale they were almost invisible against the background. It made Bodie think of the beach just before dawn. West had it hung on the wall near the dining-table, getting as close as possible to the same position as Bodie's painting given the different layouts of the two flats. He said Ward had asked him to try that, and it was always more interesting to go along with Ward's experiments.

Ward had also given West two of the fleet's portable computers, one for himself and one for Bodie, with all of their language tools already set up. Ward could have given West instructions for getting everything set up on the TV systems in the two flats, too, but

West thought it was best to study at a desk, or at a dining-table, in their case, and keep the couch as a place to relax.

West's plan was that they would have two lessons every weekday: from nine to eleven, and from two to four. The morning would be the same as before, with themed lessons that West had prepared in advance, but in the afternoon they would watch or read something, and get Bodie to understand it and then discuss it. West thought they'd start with the news, but they should both keep on the lookout for anything else suitable. Bodie should aim to study on his own for another two hours each day, while West would prepare themed lessons and work on the dictionary. He'd like them to have some sort of conversation sessions at the weekend, because that had worked well, and he hoped some of Ray's friends would be willing to take part.

They didn't have lunch together. Bodie suggested it and West said it was a nice idea, but he'd rather do it on a day when they weren't having dinner together. Moving to two lessons a day, he was worried they they'd get sick of each other. They should start off knowing it was OK to take a break.

After the morning's lesson Bodie took his computer home and set it up on the dining-table. The spare bedroom would be better, though. He'd talk to Ray about buying a desk; he thought they should have enough left from the money Malun had given them for furniture. He studied for an hour, had a sandwich and a cup of tea on the balcony, and then went for a walk up on the cliffs. How was Ray getting on over there? It would be good to have a message. But Ray must be busy. And there was nothing that Bodie could do, if Ray's day wasn't going well. He'd hear about it all that evening, or as much as Ray could tell him before West came around.

West had also had a sandwich on his balcony, but his walk had been through the town and then along the beach, to see what it was like on a weekday. He'd recorded the local lunchtime news and the main items were about a strike at Dishna airport about arrangements for anti-social hours, delays in construction work on a sports stadium where an archipelago-wide event was being held in the autumn, and the results of an investigation into an accident on a cargo ship the previous winter in which a crew-member had been crushed to death.

The first time around, Bodie understood almost no words except ~airport~, ~ship~, ~sister~, and the names of the autumn and winter months, although the accompanying images showed him that the airport story was about a strike, that a sports facility full of construction equipment was making people indignant, and that the people in suits making serious speeches were talking about the ship and about a dead woman (she only appeared in a still photo, and there was footage of an upset man talking about his sister). He explained his guesses to West in Hass Embrun, then West filled in the details in a simpler Hass Embrun, writing down both the simple and the complex terms, they watched each item again enough times for Bodie to be able to pick out the other important words, and then they had a discussion on the item, or on topics with some relation to the item, however distant.

It was very hard work, but interesting. Two hours, they'd spent, over maybe twelve minutes of news. But he understood it now, and he'd understood it through Hass Embrun (and some dramatic gestures). West hadn't once taken the shortcut of giving

him an English translation. With two hours a day of this, he could learn so many different things.

He went for a run immediately after the lesson, describing things to himself in Hass Embrun all the way. He and Ray had agreed earlier that they'd cook risotto, and after he'd showered he went to the supermarket to get the ingredients. An hour of studying then put the computer away on a shelf in their bedroom, and had just started lining the ingredients up on the counter when Ray walked in the door at a quarter to seven.

~You're early!~

~My boss told me to go. He could see how much I was thinking of home.~

Ray's mouth tasted slightly of *kenit*. Bodie decided not to comment. He guessed they drank a lot in the police station, and drank it strong. "So how'd it go?"

It had gone well. There had been lots of questions, especially over the lunch that the boss, Dixtan, had treated the team to, but they'd all been things he'd been prepared for like how soon into the trip had they met? What was Bodie's job on the mission? And how soon after that did they become betrothed? Who had made the offer? And who had acted as their families? Did they have to work as normal during the betrothal? When was the wedding? Was there a big party? Did Bodie know Roslin or the Dishna area well, did he had friends or family there? What about a job?

Bodie had been part of a team of three dealing with contact security: keeping their people, equipment and stores safe during the negotiations and while the base was being established. He'd been expecting to spend at least a year on Earth. So he was in a very different department from Ray in the galley, but they'd met almost immediately because of a mix-up with them both having the Vasmar name. (If they were related, it was so distant they hadn't been able to trace it yet, any more than either had been able to trace a connection to Malun.) They'd become betrothed just a few days later. Bodie had made the offer, and their supervisors had acted as family. They'd both had to work all through the betrothal, but they'd got enough time together that it had proceeded normally, and they'd been married almost exactly two months later, while they were in orbit around Earth. There was no party at the time as everyone was too busy, but they'd been included in the first weekend party on the way back, when the galley had done them proud. Bodie didn't know the area at all, he'd never lived on Pen Embrun before, all of his family was off-world and almost all of his friends, apart from a few in Monor. He'd decided it was time to find a different, safer line of work, more suitable to an *iskolpa*. They didn't know what yet, but his family had got rich enough off-world that he could afford to take his time.

Then there were questions about how Bodie was adjusting to so many big changes, which Ray had answered by bringing out the photos again and looking quite impossibly smug (to judge by the retelling) as he said he thought that Bodie was adjusting very well indeed.

"And you believed every word of this as you were telling it?"

"Every word. Why? What part doesn't convince you?" Teasing. Definitely.

Bodie shook his head. "Nah. I'd believe it. Think I'd believe anything that ends up with us together. But... It doesn't bother you? To be talking about..." A wave of the hand to

show he was picking one point out of many. “The big wedding party we never had. Everyone was too busy, all right: too busy throwing up in shock.”

“I -” Ray swallowed, and stopped stirring the vegetables to reach across the counter and put his hand over Bodie’s. Shaking his head: “I never thought of it like that. Of course, I wish I’d made things easier for you but... The Ray Vasmar who had that party, who had a normal betrothal... It’s going to take him years to realise just what a prize he has. But I got to learn that all in the first week.”

Bodie grinned, and turned his hand to give Ray’s fingers a quick squeeze. “And I got to see you at your worst?”

Ray pulled a face. “There might be a few people who’d disagree with you on that.” He went back to stirring for a few seconds, then turned the heat down a notch, picked up his beer, and nodded towards the balcony.

When Ray asked about the day’s lessons, Bodie answered entirely in Hass Embrun. Ray thought that watching the news like that was a great idea, and they should definitely get a desk for the spare bedroom. Maybe Bodie and West could go to Yata’s the next day to pick one out?

West arrived at eight. They ate almost immediately, out on the balcony, and carried on speaking mostly in Hass Embrun. Yes, they’d go to Yata’s after the morning lesson, and adjust the lesson schedule as necessary around the earliest delivery time. West had paid a visit to his building’s library, partly for himself, and partly to see what might be suitable for Bodie. He thought Bodie was at about the reading-level of a nine year old, and while the library did have a very wide range of children’s books, he was going to need a while to figure out how to make it bearable for Bodie to work with them.

When he learned that Bodie had gone for a run after the afternoon’s lesson, he said, ~Oh, I’d’ve -~ For a few seconds he pulled one of the same faces that Ray pulled, then shook his head. “There’s what I said, of not getting sick of each other.”

“Join us at the weekend, then. If you can cope with twelve miles, there’s a good run we do along the cliffs. If not, we’ll find something shorter.” Ray had spoken immediately, without even glancing at Bodie to check. Well, of course they should give West whatever company he wanted.

A different kind of face, much more uncomfortable. “What about your complicated sex thing? I don’t want to get in the way of that.” West was blushing, and Bodie though he probably was too.

Not Ray, of course. “That was just while we were on the ship. Now we’d love to have you join us. Wouldn’t we?”

“Course we would.” ~How far do you want to run?~ West would be happier with six or seven miles, and Ray would come up with some shorter routes.

West said no to a second beer, and left shortly after nine.

“He might have offered to help with the washing up!”

Ray nodded. “I bet he would have if Turon was around. Let’s leave it a week, then start dropping hints.”

Turon hadn't replied yet to Bodie's message. They must be busy settling in. Finding the ship's musicians. Making sure to set a good example in the communal kitchens. Bodie thought Turon would want to hear about their first day back at work but he'd leave it for a few days. He needed to get in touch with Malun, though, and arrange their next An Uraba dinner. He told Malun he couldn't make the next two weekends – they were giving a house-warming party, and then he and Ray had something planned for the weekend after Ray's birthday – but maybe the weekend after that? With the time-difference, Malun would probably want to come early – like five o'clock, or six? – and if he had time, they could show him a bit of the town before dinner.

They decided to have an early night, as they had booked the *gulshor* court for six. During the goodnight kiss, Ray said, "What does come closer to bothering me is telling people it's a *tolmin* marriage. The only way I could make myself believe that is if..." A shrug. "Imagining I'm Turon. That I never qualified. That all I'd notice about you is that you're great company. That I think better when I'm with you. Waste less time. Why wouldn't I marry you the only way I could? It would make so much sense."

Bodie nodded. "I'd marry Turon. He'd be a very safe bet. As a *nespa*."

"Yeah, he must've had offers. Plenty, before Sasha." A brief pause, then his voice turned richer. "But when I look at you as myself... Every cell in my body immediately starts whispering. 'My man.' 'Our man.' 'He's here.' Some of them, I feel them singing it. They have such... joy in you. No one should believe me when I say it's a *tolmin* marriage. They should be able to hear my cells singing."

Bodie swallowed, pulled him closer, and whispered, "I can hear it." At that moment, he would have sworn that he could. But then he would also have sworn that his own cells were thrumming almost to the point of glowing, and he was just an ordinary human in love.

* * * * *

During the morning's lesson on At Rahden, Bodie got an alert on his wristband, which meant that someone had sent a message to his fleet address. When he and West got back to his flat for lunch after buying a desk-sized table from Yata, he found that the message was from Malun. That An Uraba would suit Malun well, and he would arrive at five.

Bodie also got a reply from Turon on At Rahden, while he was on his afternoon run. Turon had used Bodie's citizen's address, not his fleet address, so he hadn't got an alert. It sounded like Turon had really appreciated getting his farewell message. He said no one else in the family had made that kind of effort. It was a good, chatty message, full of entertaining details about their cabin, the food, the main personalities on board (one of whom was Ward), and what he and Sasha were reading. Bodie wanted to reply at once, keep the conversation going, but decided he should get his studying done first.

Ray got back at quarter past seven. He was still catching up at work, but would start getting involved in cases from At Pontal. Maybe even the next day, if something came up. Nothing did come up on At Laura Var, but At Pontal had him fizzing with facts and ideas about his string of car thefts and his large-scale ticket fraud. So much so that it wasn't until breakfast the next morning that he thought to mention that he'd bumped into Shilda on the previous morning's ferry. They'd had an enjoyable talk and he'd

invited her over for drinks at West's flat. It would probably on At Mordez of the next week, if that worked for West. West said over dinner that evening that it did, and he'd put a note through her door to confirm.

By the end of the week Bodie had decided he wasn't jealous of Ray's work. Not at all. Of course he could see exactly why Ray liked it and why Ray was so good at it: Ray was so quick to see opportunities and connections, and any story you came up with, he'd take it on and take it over, and then before you'd realised, he'd've taken it apart. Bodie enjoyed hearing about it, and Ray did seem to take his suggestions seriously, but Bodie knew he didn't have the patience or the flexibility to get a tenth of the results that Ray did. And so much of it was dealing with regular people. Not proper villains. Not even optimistic amateurs. Just people who sometimes didn't even knew they had the information. Ray's talents worked for that, too, when Bodie would have been so bored and impatient. Ray had said he'd seen his share of action, but judging by the first week, Bodie couldn't see how. OK, it was only three days and god knows CI5 could give you boredom for weeks, but this obviously wasn't a boring week for Ray, this was exactly the job he'd been missing. And Bodie was simply happy for him, that he'd found something that used his time so well.

The three of them combined their conversation session on An Embrun with their first run. They got the nine o'clock bus to Antoness, walked and talked for the first half of the route, and then ran the rest. The conversation was about the next day's housewarming party, and they were going to skip the conversation session on An Udom Kol, because the party should more than make up for it.

They had to slow the run down for West, and they lied smoothly to him about how much. The forecast for the weekend was mostly sunny but with scattered showers. They got three of the showers while they were on the cliffs but none for more than ten minutes. If that was as bad as it was going to get, then it shouldn't affect the party.

Ray had bought most of the snacks, beer and wine in Dishna on At Oba Nyon, and West and Plassen were lending them glasses, so there wasn't much they needed to do on the day itself except clean. They decided to lay out a bunch of Bodie's novels to use as coasters; Bodie didn't mind if they got marks on the covers, and it would be something extra for people to talk about.

Around six, when they could hear that their neighbours on both sides were home, Ray went to introduce himself and warn them that he and his *nespa* were having a small party between eight and eleven. He gave them his number in case things got too loud. He said both couples seemed pleasant. They'd heard him and Bodie talking on the balcony and wondered what language they were speaking, and they promised they'd use the number soon to invite the two of them around for drinks one evening.

At half seven, with the cleaning done and Ray working on a list of party music, Bodie went into his bathroom for a piss and found that all of Ray's toiletries were there, laid out next to his own, and Ray's robe was with his on the back of the door. And back in the bedroom he now noticed that Ray's book and glass of water were on the second bedside table. Ray's bedroom looked like no one had ever slept there, and his bathroom only had soap and a hand-towel.

Of course everyone was going to expect to see the whole flat. Their married life had to look normal to everyone outside the family. For the first time, Bodie wondered who had

explained the situation to West and how, because West had seen how they actually lived and he'd never commented. Well, it would have been Turon, wouldn't it?

West and Plassen arrived within minutes of each other, and Buka and Gamlan about a quarter of an hour after that. For a party like this, apparently, the Hailin did have the custom of bringing along something to drink. Buka and Gamlan had brought along a gift for the flat, too: a little, bag-like thing for squeezing juice out of fruit for cooking, which Gamlan said he'd bought for himself a few months ago and found really useful.

The other six arrived before nine, in two groups of three. They brought drinks, but no gifts. The first group was an actual threesome, who had been together for over two years: Lull, Bicknor, and Arden. Lull and Bicknor lived together in An Uraba, and Arden lived on the floor above. They all worked in Dishna: Lull and Arden were lawyers, with different firms, and Bicknor had recently started as a management trainee at a large clothes store.

The second group were just friends – or, at least, not currently having the sort of sex with each other that anyone thought worth mentioning. Bodie was assuming that Ray and his friends had all had sex with each other, and with Gavio. Probably often, and recently. It was easier to assume that than to spend time on wondering, and he'd never seen a hint of a look or a dirty joke or anything, so nothing that he might have to deal with now. Pernal was a nurse at the hospital in Parass, Don taught science in Dishna, and Corlet was a plumber who worked all over the island and sometimes on the mainland. They lived in different places around Parass, but Bodie almost immediately forgot where.

Bodie mostly found himself talking to Plassen, Gamlan and Corlet the plumber. The others were friendly, and easy-enough to talk to with Ray, Buka or Plassen around, and he'd be glad to bump into any one of them around town, but they were all so bloody young. Just starting their working lives, when he'd had nearly twenty years out on his own. They had plenty of questions for him about Earth and meeting Ray and the move, and his answers seemed to be everything they'd hoped - but they also wanted to knock back beer and have a regular Saturday night of bullshitting with friends, and West was much more on their wavelength for that. Even after West had made it clear (and quite sharply) that he had no interest in being set up with any man, in Parass or anywhere else, they still found plenty to talk about.

It was a good party. The flat was admired, Ray's snacks all got eaten, the novels were examined with fascination, and everyone had to be urged towards the door at eleven and reminded that they were on the fourth floor, with a different kind of neighbour. It sounded as if most of them would be going to continue the party in An Uraba.

West stayed behind to clean up, though that was mostly a matter of collecting and rinsing bottles. Bodie washed the few glasses and plates, Ray wiped the novels and put them away, and then they decided to have a small glass of *tharva*, a smoky, nut-tasting liqueur that Ray liked, and put the latest "Police" album on low. The album was already out and on the floor, after Plassen had looked through all of Bodie's LPs. He'd been particularly fascinated by the album covers. Bodie had played the first side of "Tubular Bells" for him during the party, largely because it was the only one he could think of with a lot of percussion - and it did also have a good cover. Plassen was going to come back soon to listen to more.

God, it was a relief to be speaking English again, though he had less of a headache than he'd feared after three solid hours of speaking Hass Embrun, and sometimes with several people talking to him at once. Some people had been better than others at rephrasing things until he understood, but that was going to be true anywhere, wasn't it? Thank fuck there was no lesson tomorrow. He could do with getting lost for a couple of hours on the moorlands, not even allowed to speak because it would disturb the birds.

West had particularly enjoyed talking to Gamlan. Lamon had told him lots of good stories about animals while she was studying, and she had even better ones now she'd started working. It had been fun to compare, and to get some new ones to take back to her. She was the person he was really going to miss.

"But you just don't have women friends. Do you?" To Ray. Just on the edge of complaining. "If there'd been twice the number of people here. Three times. I bet they'd all have been men. Do you just not like women enough to make friends?"

Ray looked surprised, then shook his head and shrugged. "Of course I like them. You know how much I like Ferros. And Sasha and Iran and Sama. It's just..." He glanced at Bodie then gave a sharp sigh. "All my friends here are people I used to have sex with. Or -" A longer sigh, with a deep frown. "We all knew each other through sex, anyway. It was just how it worked when I was with Gavio. And before, I suppose. A woman wouldn't have fit in. Any more than a man none of us was attracted to."

West was nodding, grudgingly. "I want to meet women here. I want to invite Lamon."

"Good. You should. I don't know the best place to start, though. Of course, we've got the drink with Shilda on At Mordez but I'm guessing -" Smiling broadly. "Actually, she knows everything that's happening in town. She must be able to help. Are you looking to meet women, specifically? Or do you want to add the type of men who wouldn't have fit in here tonight?"

West grinned. "Anyone. Including men who might have fit." Then he turned very serious. His most intense. "I'm not - Having anything to do with sex. So it's not part of how I choose my friends. Or don't choose them."

Ray nodded. "We'll... Well, you can tell Shilda what you are and aren't looking for. And we'll look forward to the first party you throw. Won't we?"

Bodie agreed that they would. West asked if there was any more *tharva*, Ray topped the glasses up, and they listened to the rest of the album in a comfortable near-silence.

As soon as West left, Bodie went to his bathroom to gather up Ray's toiletries and robe and then move them back to Ray's bathroom. When he came out of Ray's bathroom he found Ray standing in the corridor looking perplexed. "I would have done that. Any second. As soon as you'd asked."

"Yeah. So it was either this or stand and watch you move out."

"Oh!" Ray blinked several times. "Do you want to get the things from the bedroom too?"

"Might as well."

Ray went into the bedroom to wait for him, and this time he found Ray perched on the edge of the bed. Well, slumped on it, really, with his head hanging very low.

Bodie put the book and glass down then knelt by the bed with one arm across Ray's thighs. "It'll get better, Ray. We'll make it get better. Starting next weekend."

Ray looked up and gave a weak smile. "Yeah." But the next smile was even shakier.

Bodie slid his hand up, to low on Ray's waist. "Ray." Almost a whisper. "How tough am I?"

A very long pause, with no expression on Ray's face. Finally, very slowly: "No. The question is: has there ever been anyone who can hurt you like I can?"

Bodie's turn to blink. To pause. Feeling the pulse thudding in his throat. "Whatever you think you'll need to say to me starting next weekend. How can you think for a second it could make me stop loving you?"

"I don't – I don't -" Harsh, almost despairing. "What do you think I know about this love of yours? We don't have it. I try to guess. To imagine. Based on... But I don't know what's behind it, what's inside you. How it works. What I can... do to it."

"But you've said – In Cam Chara you said you did know. You know it means I'll never leave you. Never. You'll never go into *gimana*. Isn't that enough? About how it works? Or were you just..." Saying what Bodie clearly wanted to hear. To go with the mood. Like he'd done with the forests of kelp.

"I don't..." His expression cleared slightly and he lifted his hand to Bodie's shoulder. "I remember feeling safe."

"You are safe. Whatever happens, I'll never let you go into *gimana*. Don't you believe that?"

Ray closed his eyes briefly. "I do. But there are other... Look, I can't – I want..." In the next moment he was pulling away and Bodie's heart clenched, but he was only hauling himself over to lie on the bed – and then to look up at Bodie expectantly.

Bodie smiled, but first knelt on the bed to unfasten Ray's shoes and slide them off, which made Ray chuckle. "No wonder my family likes you so much. That's proper respect for a fine product."

When Bodie lay down he drew Ray into a kiss, but Ray shook his head. "I'm sorry. Not now. I just want to be next to you."

Ray's cells weren't whispering or singing tonight. Shivering, more like. Maybe even trying not to whimper. He kept his hand still on Bodie's waist, but seemed happy with Bodie stroking his back, at least judging by the sigh as he closed his eyes.

Bodie kept his own eyes open – because he was on a protective duty here, wasn't he? – but he did his fair share of sighing. What were they going to say to West about next weekend? Why West should be planning to spend it all on his own because the two of them had something arranged for the whole weekend? Maybe there was some big *davanap* festival far away on the mainland that they could send him off to. Get rid of him that way. West probably thought they were having the best, most complicated sex right now. It'd be all the guys were talking about, at the follow-on party in An Uraba. Given what they knew about Ray Vasmar. Bodie was doubting that he knew anything. Except that Ray wanted to be next to him.

“So if you felt safe in Cam Chara. If you knew, then, what it meant that I love you. What’s gone wrong here?” Bodie thought about twenty minutes had gone by. It had just started raining. Sounded like it was going to be more than a shower.

“Nothing’s gone wrong.” An immediate reply. Almost too calm. Like Ray had already had this conversation more than once in his head. “It hasn’t. But each time I hurt you, it makes me more scared of the next time.”

Now that was something Bodie could imagine. Especially with the way the shocks could come out of nowhere. “Ray. I promise you I won’t break. It might look bad at the time but – I’ve been trained to take a lot. And I’m not scared of anything you might do to me.”

“No.” Ray swallowed. “I can see that.”

“But – You’re not convinced. Still.”

A long sigh, then slowly: “I need time.”

“OK.” Bodie nodded. “Let’s sleep on it. At the least.” He suddenly had an idea. “Look. Come to my bed. I’ll get in. Like this, with my clothes on. And you stay outside. In your clothes. You won’t do anything. You know you won’t. You can trust yourself. And you’re – Not right to be left alone tonight.”

After long seconds of frowning, Ray abruptly said, “Yes. I want to try that.”

As soon as Ray was settled against him, Bodie put the light out. They talked lazily for a while about the party and West, then over the course of a minute Bodie heard and felt Ray drift off to sleep. Surprising. He’d thought he would have been first by a wide margin. He wanted to lean forward and steal a kiss, but with Ray, how he was, it really would have been theft. But it’d all get better soon. Ray would see.

Bodie came awake during the night and Ray wasn’t there, though it took him a few seconds to realise why he was fully clothed, and remember how this night had been different. Maybe Ray had just gone to the bathroom. Maybe that was what had woken him.

But no, Ray’s quilt was gone too, all that side of the bed was cold. Bodie turned the light on and checked the time: around half three.

So. They’d tried that and it had worked for no more than three hours. Guess his body was more tempting than he and Ray had ever realised. Or more animal.

The next time he woke it was light, and there were sounds from the living-room and the smell of coffee. He used the bathroom then went through in his robe. Ray was putting away dishes, also in his robe.

“Hi.” A broad smile. “I was about to knock. See if I could bring you coffee.”

“Damn. Shouldn’t’ve got up. Cheated myself out of a treat.”

“Next time.”

Next time for what? A party? A difficult night? Or just a weekend morning? There’d be more of all of those, Bodie could be sure. He poured coffee for both of them, and was turning to open the fridge when Ray stopped him, taking a light hold of his waist over the belt of his robe.

“Thank you for last night.”

“But you left. In the night. You had to leave.”

“I was having too many strange thoughts. But it helped. Everything you did. It helped.”

“Good. Good.” Bodie took him by the shoulders, and then finally they were kissing again.

Chapter 18

As soon as Ray left for work on At Mordez, Bodie went to his desk to send a birthday message to Ward. With the transmission time, the message should arrive early the next day. As ever, he struggled to find anything to say to Ward, but after he'd got a few lines about the lessons, the dictionary, and West's painting, he decided that was enough padding to make it personal. Not so glaringly abrupt.

He wasn't going to mention the message to Ray. Ray would just blame it all on Turon's influence and he might have a point there: Bodie was positive that Ward would tell Turon about it. But it felt wrong to be planning celebrations for one twin and completely ignore the other.

And speaking of planning, Bodie still hadn't got Ray a present. Turon had suggested a plant and had listed a few he thought would fit in well, which was a good-enough idea but too obviously Turon's. The best idea he'd come up with on his own was a dazzlingly white shirt: something in a different style to the one he already had, but probably formal. But for that he'd have to go outside Parass. To Dishna or maybe Harding. And that would take longer than the three hours between lessons. He'd been hoping to have a quiet word with West during the party, but it hadn't happened.

As soon as he got to West's flat he explained the situation, all in Hass Embrun. West asked if he had his wallet with him and if he knew the size of shirt that Ray wore. Bodie did, and West suggested they get the half nine ferry. They could have the lesson on the ferry. At the party, Bicknor had explained to West how to find the clothing store where he worked, so that would be a good place to start. West was going to get Ray a bottle of *tharva*. If he'd had more time to think about it, he would have made him a scarf. No, not a winter scarf. Something very lightweight. He had a favourite pattern for that type of scarf, but he'd want to put real thought into choosing the yarns.

Bicknor's store was on three floors and seemed to cover every type of menswear. If he'd been on his own he might have looked at everything but that didn't seem fair on West, so he went straight for formalwear. He found four serious possibilities, and in the end went for the cleanest, plainest design, in a heavy, cold fabric with a slight, strange sheen. It was *bursa*, West told him. Another of Raina's discoveries, and even more expensive than *pasalur*. Ray would love it.

Bicknor had also told West to ask for him in the store, and he'd arrange a discount. He was surprised to see them so soon after the party, but when West explained about the present he said, ~Of course! We were talking over the weekend about Ray's birthday parties.~ He thought the shirt was a great choice, got them a sixth off, and promised he wouldn't mention to Ray that he'd seen them.

They grabbed an early lunch of grilled meat with flatbread from a group of food trucks in the port district. There was a choice of salads and sauces, and West made Bodie ask all of the questions about the ingredients.

They ate standing up, at one of the waist-high tables in the middle of the group of trucks. West was still not over the men-only party, and he had lots of questions for Bodie about parties on Earth. Bodie had to admit he'd been to plenty with only men, but that had been when he was a soldier, and there were only men around. That was just as strange to West: jobs that had only men.

~Is that why you chose to be a soldier? To meet more men?~

Bodie burst out laughing. “Fuck, no. It’s illegal to be queer in the British Army. They throw you out.”

“So how did you – You still joined.”

Bodie shrugged. “I’m not as queer as Ray. It wasn’t a problem for me. And I was always damn careful about the men I chose for sex. That they had the same reasons as me not to cause problems.”

West was frowning hard. ~But you chose Ray. What did Ray say to make you think he wouldn't cause problems?~

With a rueful lopsided smile: “Well, yeah. A couple of minutes talking to Ray, and my careful system was smashed to pieces. Took me a bit longer, mind you, to figure out how badly it was broken.”

West nodded. ~That does sound more like Ray. And I did know you’d had sex with at least one woman; Malun told me about that. I don’t think Ray’s ever done it. Were there a lot of other women?~ When he heard how many he was surprised again, though he said he knew he shouldn’t be: he was the one who usually got the raised eyebrows, about the fact that he’d only ever been attracted to women. Being odd like that was the main thing he’d felt he had in common with Ray. But he’d always had this image, probably from the little he knew about Gavio, of Ray getting married to another odd man.

~Yeah, Ray was surprised too. When he saw a picture of some women in my flat.~

~Is there a particular type of woman you’re attracted to?~

“Why the hell are you asking that?” A mild tone, by his standards, but still enough to make West give a small flinch. “I’m your brother’s *iskolpa*. You think I’m looking around at anyone else?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t -” ~I meant in the past.~

Bodie shook his head. ~Whatever you meant.~ “We’re not gonna talk about that.”

~No. I’m sorry.~ They finished their lunch in silence, and didn’t really get talking again until they’d taken their seats on the ferry and West brought out the sheets for the morning’s lesson.

* * * * *

The drinks with Shilda took place at nine, in West’s flat. Shilda turned out to be a wine drinker and Ray decided to join her, while the other two had beer.

They started by covering the usual questions about Bodie. She worked in a bank (a different one from Ray’s), and she was the first person who’d asked about the process of getting Bodie registered as a citizen. Ray said the business had helped a lot with that, and with everything else. They were even paying for West to be here teaching Bodie Hass Embrun; as linguistic experiments went, the business thought it was getting good value for money. Malun had taken an interest, too, despite everything else that was going on.

They made it sound as if West was a linguist. It was true that he'd been in the Linguistics Department at the base, but just doing the most routine cataloguing and filing. The work that had made Turon so frustrated for him, that "no one could find satisfying". They'd made it sound, too, as if Ray had applied for one of the rare placements with the fleet because of the things that West had been telling him about the next contact mission. And as if it was West who'd taught him the English he'd needed to start courting Bodie.

When she'd heard that West had been working at the base in Monor, Shilda had mentioned that she'd spent three years in Monor, working for the same bank. She'd moved from there to Dishna six years ago, and had only been back a few times since. A while later, after Ray had topped up their glasses, she said to West, ~Did you go to /?/ often when you were living in Monor?~

"To the palace." A quick, quiet explanation from Ray, and Bodie nodded.

West said he did, sometimes.

Shilda nodded. ~I used to go a lot. To every /?/. I was having some difficult /?/. And it helped, to /?/ the Mabein.~

~Yes. They do help. Seeing them /?/, especially.~ Ray got a special quiet tone when he talked about the Mabein. The same tone as when he talked about the lost Bakkels. Bodie guessed they were talking about going to look at the masks.

~I still /?/ for every /?/. Like yesterday. /?/.~ A sudden, fond smile. ~/?/ and /?/. Born /?/.~

Ray and West's smiles looked more rueful, and this must be about more than just admiring them in the cabinet. Bodie was wondering if he should be copying Ray's expression when Shilda turned to him and said, ~How much of the /?/ has West /?/ you so far? Do you find them /?/ to your Mabein?~

~I've /?/ Bodie more than West has. But not about /?/ yet.~ Quickly: "We're talking about the ceremony to mark the birth of Nandan and Sadani. They're the twins who started fighting in Embrun's womb. The ceremony's called Husmir and it took place yesterday, in the palace." Then shaking his head: ~Bodie's people have different /?/. Everything about the Mabein is new to him.~

A mixture of surprise and sympathy, then she said to West, ~Were any of your Monor friends at the palace yesterday? Do you have friends who /?/.~

West took a mouthful of beer. An unusually abrupt and large mouthful for him, but of course Shilda couldn't know that and her attachment to the topic only seemed to increase. ~My friend Croft does. We met at the palace, when we were both going to every /?/. She still goes. She doesn't call me after every one but... There's someone new wearing Udom Kol.~

You couldn't miss the sharp look the brothers gave each other but you might take it for anything, including intense interest. That they might be wondering which of their Monor friends to call first about this news (if it hadn't been nearly two in the morning there). That was obviously how Shilda took it, because she nodded slowly several times, like they'd just confirmed something for her, and she was disappointed but not surprised. ~The new man must have /?/ after the *Sivor Simalsa* got back, then, if you didn't see

him on the ship.~ Then shaking her head abruptly, sounding annoyed with herself: ~Not that I was going to ask you if you thought the /?/ man was qualified. I didn't ask Croft.~ A fractional, sad-looking shrug, and a drop in her voice to match. ~She said she couldn't tell. It's wrong, of course it's wrong, but how do you stop yourself wanting to know if we should hope about having them back in an *esmana* marriage?~

For a few seconds she seemed to take West's frozen expression and Ray's steadying hand on his brother's shoulder as an echo of her heartfelt plea. But then she realised this must be something else. She swallowed. ~I'm sorry. I didn't – I thought ~

~No, I'm sorry.~ Ray's arm was around West's back now, pulling him close. ~We can't talk about this. We're Bakkels.~

She clasped a hand to her mouth and took a step back, and Bodie leapt in to rescue the tilting glass from her other hand. Then he knew he should be reassuring her as she alternated streams of vivid swearing with agonised apology, but he had no idea what had just happened.

~No. No. It's not your fault.~ West had stepped forward, was holding out his hand. The wave of shock must only have lasted a few seconds, but it had seemed endless.

~It's our fault.~ Now Ray, with a brief touch to her upper arm. ~We didn't think you needed to know. We /?/ so you wouldn't guess.~ With a small, rueful, apologetic smile.

She looked back and forth between the two of them, gradually getting calmer, then after a quick glance at Bodie, she raised her eyebrows at Ray and said, ~You certainly did. Telling me that 'Malun took an interest' in you and Bodie. /?/ he did!~

Ray grimaced. ~I am so sorry. When I first moved here I didn't want anyone to know I'm a Bakkel. That's got more difficult now with West and Bodie here. But I didn't think you'd need to know.~

She nodded. ~Did Gavio know?~

A resigned sigh. ~Yes. And while I was away he told all of my friends here. But that's a very /?/ group – as West has already noticed – so I knew you wouldn't hear about it from any of them.~

~No. You're right. I didn't need to know. I'd probably prefer not to know. Except...~ She swallowed, painfully. ~I'm so sorry about your father.~

~Thank you.~ Quietly, almost in unison, with West sounding quite choked up.

They all nodded, gave weak smiles, and then she took a deep breath, turned to Bodie, and said, ~I think you have my drink.~

For a while they struggled to find a safe new topic of conversation, since she now couldn't ask anything about the contact mission, but when West mentioned that he was planning some lessons on reading a menu, that got them onto Bodie's experiences with Hailin food, and their experiences with Earth food, and the birthday dinner for the next night. There were a lot of food terms that Bodie didn't know, but the pauses for West or Ray to explain gave them more things to talk about rather than stopping things dead. And West was writing everything down for him, which Ray never thought of doing.

Around a quarter past ten she turned down a third glass and made moves to leave, but before she could stand up Ray said that West had a question for her about the town. West looked mildly annoyed with Ray, like he didn't think he'd needed help getting to his question, but then explained the problem he'd had with the housewarming party. Her first suggestion was the local *davanap* group because she'd noticed and taken an interest in his *davanap* projects, and that group met once a week, either in someone's flat or in the library. She wasn't sure of the date they currently met, but she gave him the name of the main organiser and said he could get all the details in the library. The library was the best place to find out about other groups, too. They could go through a list some time, if he liked, and she'd tell him what she knew about the groups and the people involved. She'd heard only good things about the *davanap* group.

On the walk home to At Laura Var above the deserted beach, Bodie said, "What was all that about the new Udom Kol? She was talking about Gereda Batche, right? I don't understand why she was making such a big deal over whether or not he's qualified. Or why it got to West like that. To be honest, I hardly caught anything she said about the palace or Udom Kol."

Ray gave a heavy sigh and shook his head. "You wouldn't have. There's so much about the Mabein that we've been assuming you wouldn't need to know, and certainly not so soon. When it comes to wondering if Gereda is qualified..." Another sigh, distinctly reluctant. "It's a big deal because she wants to know if there's a chance that he'll enter into an *esmana* marriage, so that his *iskolpa* or *iskolsko* can take over wearing Embrun, and Malun can move the masks in the palace so they're touching each other. It makes us all happier if we can see that and know they're together. They were together for thirty-four years while our parents were wearing them. And now they're separate and people do think about that a lot. That's what got to West. Having Shilda talking about... About the effects of our father's death."

"Damn. Yeah. Of course that would get to him. Poor little sod. And she sure as hell thinks about it a lot, if she's going around asking everyone if they think Gereda's qualified."

"No, she'd never ask outright. As she said, that would be wrong. And I think she only brought it up with us because she was hoping that we'd seen enough of Gereda on the ship to be sure, and that we'd be willing to tell her. I do know he's not qualified, but Shilda's friend was right that he's one of those people where it's not obvious. With Pierce, who wears Embrun, it was always obvious that she isn't qualified, so people have been very aware that the next hope of an *esmana* marriage lies with Udom Kol."

Bodie nodded slowly several times, then paused for a moment before saying, "I'm guessing it was pretty damn obvious he was qualified when you were wearing him. Shilda and the rest must have had their hopes up."

This time Ray's sigh was sharp. "Yeah. There was a lot hanging on me wearing Udom Kol. And now with Gereda it'll probably take a few more ceremonies before people know they have to give up. For now." A shrug. "It's not that people want to forget our parents. That they're impatient to move on. Everything about Shilda made it clear how much she was missing them. But you still wouldn't want to be caught discussing Udom Kol like that in front of a Bakkel."

“Christ, no. You did the right thing, telling her. And then getting her calmed down. You don’t think she guessed it used to be you wearing him?”

Ray pulled a face. “I would imagine she’s wondering. I’m the only Bakkel she knows of who’s qualified and I did go through an important change on the mission. But she probably doesn’t even want to be wondering, any more than she wants to know anything about Gereda except that one fact. She certainly won’t be comparing notes with her friend about my build or my hairstyle.”

“That’s good to hear. And West seemed to get over it quickly. But how are you doing? Did it get to you?”

“It – Yeah. Brought a lot of things back.”

“There anything I can do? To help?”

Ray stopped walking, put his arms around Bodie, and slowly pulled him into a kiss. Ray wasn’t at all hard at first but that soon changed, which always got Bodie in the same state.

“I want to ask you to put your hand between my legs.” A murmur. Thoughtful, like he was mulling something over.

Bodie kept both hands where they were, on Ray’s back. “You only want to, eh? Trouble getting up the nerve? Without your younger brother to teach you the right English sweet-talk?”

A grunt of amusement against his cheek. After another kiss: “No. Just thinking... Might safer to save it till we’re home.”

“Nah. There’s no one around.” And in the next second his right hand was down between their bodies, exploring, squeezing – while Ray clutched at him and groaned. “You trying to tell me this beach hasn’t seen any late-night groping before?”

“The beach?” A shaky laugh. “It’s seen everything. But – The ferry. It’ll be in soon.”

Bodie looked back over his shoulder to the ferry terminal. “No sign of it yet. So we’ve got at least ten minutes of this.” An extra squeeze, which made Ray gasp and buck against him.

“You – You – You’ll be lucky if it’s ten seconds.”

Ray was nowhere near that close. Not to coming, anyway. But maybe to pushing Bodie away. Bodie had no way to tell, so he eased off slightly. Whispered: “Then how about now?” Another easing of his grip. “Or now? What about this?” Scarcely doing more than cupping him. “How’s my luck looking now?”

“It’s looking...” Ray closed his eyes and rocked against Bodie’s hand, rhythm slightly slower than his pulse. He sighed. “It’s feeling...” He leaned forward for another kiss, his eyes still closed. Gradually his hips stopped moving, but the rhythm had been taken over by his hands as they roamed low over Bodie’s waist and the curves of his backside.

A muffled clanging sound. The ferry mustn’t just be in sight, but making the final turn. They both stiffened, then Ray sighed and drew back.

“I was going to have to make us go in anyway. Because I want this to end in bed. Might as well be now.”

Bodie nodded. He didn't follow Ray immediately, though, but found himself caught by the sight of the scattering of lights on the mainland, and the pale gleam of the beach, and the dark life of the water in-between, and the night's two moons, one high, one low. All of which had been there the whole time, of course.

“What is it?” Ray had turned back, was holding out his hand.

“Nothing. Just... A man's first late-night grope on another planet. He wants to remember the details, y'know.” Then he grinned and took Ray's hand, and they crossed the last few yards to their building.

* * * * *

Bodie had debated with himself how to handle the morning's *gulshor* match and had decided that there shouldn't be any hint of letting Ray win because it was his birthday. Because that would be an insult, not a present. So he fought his hardest and did particularly well at spotting Ray's tricks, and it was enough. Ray did protest that it was a terrible start to his birthday, especially after being told that he'd have to wait until the evening for his present, but Bodie just clapped him on the shoulder and promised he'd feel better about life once he'd had a shower.

The restaurant was booked for half eight, and West came around to their flat at half seven to do the presents and try a gin and tonic. Bodie was in his pink and Ray in his crisp white. Bodie saw West's eyes widen in realisation when he walked into the living-room and got his first sight of them, though to Ray it probably just looked like simple admiration.

West insisted on giving his present first, probably knowing it would be an anti-climax after the shirt. The *tharva* had been a good choice. Ray said he usually got through a couple of bottles a year, and it was obviously going to be more if West liked *tharva* too.

Bodie hadn't wrapped the box with the shirt, but he'd put it in a large and very plain bag. Ray looked intrigued as he reached into the bag and slowly drew out the box, then did a double-take when he saw the label on the box. West hadn't been able to help Bodie with deciding on an equivalent Earth brand, but both West and Bicknor had assured him that any Hailin would know it and be impressed. Ray put the box on the coffee table, carefully lifted the lid off, and then gave a long, indrawn whistle. He made to lift the shirt out, but then put the lid back on and stood up.

“Excuse me while I go and change.”

West and Bodie smiled and raised their eyebrows at each other, then Bodie asked West what he thought of the gin and tonic.

Bodie was explaining about quinine when he saw from West's expression that Ray was coming back. He stood up and turned around, and gave a whistle of his own. “Bloody hell. You look one hundred percent Bakkel. No, it's gotta be two hundred.”

West had also got to his feet, and was nodding over and over. “It's very smart.”

“Thank you.” Unsmiling. Like the compliment was his by right. Or maybe he was just too intent on Bodie. On closing the gap between them. For Bodie it was like being back in that pub, the whole world holding its breath as Ray ambled towards him. This time, though, he thought he knew what was at the end – and he was right, with his head seized and Ray’s mouth open and hot against his. Only for a few seconds, though, and then Ray was smiling and saying thank you, and in the next moment they were all sitting down and picking up their drinks, and laughing. In appreciation. That the secret was out.

“It’s wonderful... I mean, it’s perfect.” Ray kept holding out his arms to admire them, turning his hand back and forth to watch the fabric move. “But where? How did you get it?”

Bodie started the story of the expedition to Dishna in English, but West quoted the exact Hass Embrun that Bodie had used to explain his problem, and they kept with Hass Embrun after that, including during the walk to the restaurant, and for most of the meal.

It was an excellent meal, and they got slowly and pleasantly drunk. Ray had explained about Bodie’s food-reactions when he’d made the booking, and the restaurant had been extremely helpful. They’d arranged for him to speak to the head chef, who was also the owner and who had designed all of the day’s specials around Bodie and arranged adaptations of some of the regular items. He’d sounded happy to do it, saying that Ray had given him enough warning to make it simply an enjoyable challenge, and the attitude of all of the staff seemed to confirm it.

They had a particularly good table by the window, with a view of the lights of Dishna spreading out, and up into the hills. The population was about three quarters of a million, Ray said, and growing slowly but steadily. So about the size of his Liverpool, which really was good news for work.

~When do you think I’ll be ready to find a job? How are we going to decide I’m ready? When I can understand all of the news on my own? Or read as well as a twelve-year old? Or what?~ “OK, I can cope with a party better than I’d thought. With you two to help me out. And with the type of questions I get the first time people meet me.” ~But – How much more will I need for a job?~

They agreed that was a difficult question. Obviously it would depend on the type of job. There were some he could probably do now, but if he took one of those he’d have much less time for the lessons, and that would slow him down in finding a better job. Of course, he could learn a lot from the job itself, but only if people had the time and patience to help him.

In the end they decided that there wouldn’t be a day when it was suddenly obvious that Bodie was ready. So they weren’t going to just sit around and wait for that to happen, they were going to test things out. In a month’s time they’d look at the Dishna job listings, and if there were any that looked at all suitable, then he’d apply. And if there weren’t any, or if it turned out he wasn’t ready, or if he decided not to take it, then they’d look again in another month.

And there was another, much more difficult issue: that his employer would know he wasn’t Hailin – unless they found the one job in a century that wanted you to just grunt

and look dangerous – but the employer would get to see his marriage record and would know that he was in an *esmana* marriage. What the hell could they do about that? When Bodie raised the question, the brothers grimaced and shook their heads and shrugged, so Bodie shrugged too and changed the subject.

The two of them had discussed West and the next weekend over breakfast on An Uraba, so when West said that the forecast for An Embrun looked good enough for trying the full twelve-mile run along the cliffs, Ray didn't need to check with Bodie before shaking his head. "I'm sorry. We can't. We've got something planned that'll keep us busy all weekend. We won't be able to do anything with you. You can have my car for the weekend, though. I'll give you the spare key, and I'll park it in the space for your flat when I get back from work on An Oba Nyon."

West was surprised, but clearly pleased about the car. He grinned and said, "Wow. That must be a really complicated sex thing," and they managed to smile and nod.

After they'd finished eating, they were ushered back to the low-ceilinged intimacy of the lounge, where a pot of the best *kenit* and a bowl of tiny sweet things was waiting for them. They were on their second sampling of the list of spirits and liqueurs when the chef himself came out and started making his way around the room. Ray said he always did this towards the end of the evening, and he always did it so well: making everyone feel that they were his ideal customer, whether they were regulars or complete strangers.

He already knew who they were, though Ray was no regular. ~My /?!/ told me: the three handsome men in the pink, white and sea-green.~ He gave them at least twice as much time as he'd given everyone else, and they agreed as they made their way home that the restaurant could easily get away with charging even more than it did. Ray had refused to show them the bill, but said he felt he'd got a bargain.

Chapter 19

Ray grilled fish for dinner on At Oba Nyon, and they drank water with dinner and were done and standing by the couch with mugs of tea by eight.

“D’you think we should have the coffee-table between us? How rough’s it likely to get?”

Ray shrugged and shook his head. “I’ll risk the couch. If you will.”

“Yeah, OK.” They sat at the far ends, the space between them looking a mile wide to Bodie. “Look, just get in and tell me the worst. No point dragging it out. So for a start, I know you’ve not shifted an inch in thinking I’m an animal. Have you?”

“No.” He swallowed. “I haven’t.”

“And it’s the same things about me that... make your skin crawl? Seeing me get hard. Having anything to do with my come.” Ray flinched and looked away, and Bodie nodded. “But there’s more, isn’t there? That you didn’t tell me about back then.”

“I didn’t – It was just about me back then, about my reactions. I mean...” A sigh. “The difference is... the Mabein. They’re with me all the time now.” He raised a hand, made a vague gesture towards his forehead. “I can’t get away from what they think about us.” On a wince.

“And they despise me.” Flatly, because what else would a cabinet-full of gods think?

“No! Or...” He closed his eyes briefly then ran his hand over his mouth several times then down his throat. “They see all of your courage. Your loyalty. Your patience. Your humour. Your devotion to me. And how fine you are to look at. They understand why I would want you. Why any man would want you.”

Bodie raised an eyebrow, took a long mouthful of tea. “But.”

“But.” Again, he closed his eyes, this time for the space of a long shuddering breath. “But. They can’t ignore the fact that they also see that you have an animal’s heart. An animal’s blood. An animal’s skin. And an animal’s soul. Which means no soul. You’ll be buried as Malun’s son in the Vasmar family tomb but the ceremonies will be... empty. They – The Mabein. They couldn’t possibly attend.”

A long silence. Bodie lifted his mug but then didn’t feel like drinking and set it back with a thud. Finally: “Yeah. That’s worse than getting squeamish about my come. Now I’m a loyal pet who’ll get buried in some shoebox.”

Quickly: “You’re my husband. They want you to be treated with all the respect that’s due to you.” Then much more slowly: “But... Yes, I am squeamish. You know I am. But there’s another reason I can’t – I can’t... couple with you. And it’s...” He swallowed. “Much more fundamental.”

Couple? One of the few terms for sex he’d never heard from Ray before. “That’d be fundamentally worse, then?”

A fractional shrug. “I – Probably. It’s about Udom Kol. And Embrun. You see they’re both there. Always. During any coupling in an *esmana* marriage. When we -” A nod, to correct himself. “We Hailin. When we join together. When we give everything. And take

everything. They're with us. Living it again through us. Those acts between them that created us."

Which sounded... Well, probably not romantic, really. Serious. A Catholic level of serious. "You're talking about any *esmana* marriage, right? Even with two men. Or two women."

A brief nod. "The *mana*. What it does to us. That's more important than anything else about our bodies. And this means that..." A deep breath. "If I coupled with you, it wouldn't just be me committing bestiality. I'd be -"

Bodie interrupted. "Having them do it too."

"Udom Kol. In my case. Here. There's only Udom Kol. So I – Where he should be joining again with Embrun. Losing himself in the overwhelming fact of their pairing. I'd be bringing him to a... meaningless, selfish, destructive -"

"Yeah, I get the picture." They looked at one another, both breathing audibly. Ray's expression was so bleak. Bodie guessed his own was about the same. "Is that it? That was the worst?" Ray gave a small nod, which Bodie immediately answered with a much larger one. "You had it right, Ray. We've really got problems."

Ray's whole body cringed. "Do you – Do you – You must want to hurt me now. No one should -" He swallowed hard and looked away.

Bodie took a few seconds to reply. "What I want, is to offer you a hug. Because you look like you need it right now. Even more than I do. But I don't – Doesn't feel safe. With what you've said. How can I – Get to touch you at all?"

Ray was shaking his head. "I don't think it is safe. Not this weekend. But..." A slight twitch of one side of his mouth, maybe too small to be called a smile. "Thank you. For the idea of the offer."

Bodie nodded, with a mouth-twitch of his own. "Y'know I could do with a drink. Something strong and nasty. I know you lot. Bet you've got six bottles stashed away in there that make *kenit* look like lemonade." A nod back towards the kitchen. "Give me something I'll never wanna drink again."

An actual grin. "I had five. But I left them for West. Knew you wouldn't touch them." He stood up. "I'll go to the store. Get something disgusting."

"Thanks. Y'know I trust you to know what I'll hate."

While Ray was gone Bodie made fresh teas, though Ray hadn't touched the last one. Bodie assumed they'd both be glad of something to wash away the taste of whatever Ray brought.

The stuff was called *brosha*. It was pale yellow, and came in a bottle with a black and gold label. Ray poured them both an inch in the tumblers he'd brought from the old flat – not the ones they used for gin and tonics.

"Jesus! It's like... they bottled a sick dog's farts. After it'd been eating glue and pig-shit and hospital soap for a week. Fucking incredible."

"You're welcome." They laughed.

“You actually like this?”

“Not to drink this early in the evening. But late at night. When you’re already pretty drunk.” A shrug. “It’s a nice jolt.”

“Jesus.” Shaking his head, and they laughed again.

“But seriously, Ray... With everything they’ve been saying to you about me. How d’you get to touch me at all? How do we get to do... even what we’ve been doing?”

“I – They know you’ve got needs. Natural needs for what you are. And they’re the first to say that I’ve got a responsibility to keep you happy. I mean, to try to, because obviously I’m not – Well, they did manage to decide that if we stay dressed, and there’s no chance of us trying to turn it into a coupling, then they can accept that. They don’t like it at all, but they can accept it.”

“And you? Coming in your pants while you’re humping an animal. That’s OK with them too? Having me take care of your needs?”

It’s – Most of them wish I could – But it’s Udom Kol and Embrun who understand. What happens to me whenever I see you. What happens in my body whenever I’m near you. And I have to spend time near you so... They accept that as the thing I can’t control.”

Bodie nodded slowly several times, then took a large swig of the drink, shuddered more violently and noisily than ever, and rapidly emptied his mug of tea. “Then which of them persuaded the others about what we got up to in the hold?”

Ray looked faintly surprised, then shrugged and shook his head. “They didn’t need persuading. But they were impressed that you didn’t either. That sort of generosity and flexibility... It doesn’t come easily to all of us.”

“Flexibility? I – Wouldn’t have said we needed much when it was all done standing up.” Ray laughed appreciatively, like that was the best joke he’d heard all week. Bodie hadn’t meant it as a joke, but he chuckled. “I did try to figure out how we could get a mattress down there. Give us more options. Couldn’t make it work out.” He was shaking his head. “Not in the dark. Not without us talking.”

A slow, affectionate smile. “You are so generous. You were thinking of the three of us as ‘us’. Of course I was, too, but when it was all so new to you, I never imagined.”

“What d’you mean, ‘the three of us’?” His head had jerked back slightly with the force of his puzzlement.

Ray’s eyebrows shot up. “You thought there was more than one stowaway? Well, I suppose, back then, when you still couldn’t understand much Hass Embrun -”

Bodie interrupted him again. “There wasn’t any stowaway. It was just you and me. Fucking. Coupling. Whatever you wanna call it. As many times a day as we could manage.”

“That – That was you? Every time?” Ray looked stunned.

“Course it was me. Who else was it gonna be?”

“But – You knew I thought it was a stowaway. I – Why did you – Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because we were getting to fuck, of course. You made it crystal clear how you’d set it up. What you needed so you could pretend.”

“No! I -” He stared hard at Bodie, mouth still open, frowning. Finally: “It really seemed like that to you?”

“Oh, come on, Ray. A queer stowaway? In those holds? In the exact same place every time we go in? And I’m just fine about you fucking him when – It’s killing me you won’t even let us sleep together?”

Very slowly, with a catch in his voice: “In my head, I called him Gallesh. That was... the most single-minded one in the old films. So handsome but running such risks in his search for justice that he knew he mustn’t qualify.”

Bodie rolled his eyes. “Yeah, big disappointment. I know. Just your ordinary, frustrated husband.”

“I didn’t – It was – But you knew how I felt about your semen. About exposing myself to it. And you thought I’d just...” He swallowed jerkily, then closed his eyes for a second.

Bodie tossed back the rest of his drink, remembering just too late that he’d finished his tea. Fuck it. Ray’s tea was still sitting there. Even a husband as bad as Ray wouldn’t begrudge him that. “Seeing it, you’d said. Seeing me naked. As long as you didn’t see...” A shrug. “Only thing to hold us back was the cold.” He dropped his voice very low. “Ray. You know how good it was. You’ve got all these stories you tell. I’ve seen it. Seen how you believe them at the time. But I’ve gotta believe that you knew. In these... corners that you’ve got in your mind. The things you said, about how good it had been.” He was watching Ray very carefully, braced for Ray to shudder. Maybe even go into convulsions. Or attack him. It was worth the risk. It had to be. “Doesn’t it show you can accept me? What I am. If you – If you just tell yourself the right things?”

No hint of any shudder. Instead Ray was shaking his head, looking sad. “Oh, Bodie. What it shows is... The Mabein can’t see in the dark. They thought the same thing that I did. That you were supporting me in... enjoying that opportunity. With a Hailin man.”

“I -” He took a deep breath, held it for five or six seconds, then let it out in a rush. “Can’t imagine how I’d ever be OK with that. I’m not – I don’t feel generous. About you.”

Ray was nodding. “I knew. From your expression when I was telling you about the sex I’d had with the couples. I knew that it wasn’t natural to you. I guessed that the dark made it easier for you. Made it possible. Like a game. But once we were home...” Now he did shudder, but in a different way, not for himself. “It would be too much for you. Without the dark so you’d be seeing what I was doing. And for it to be with a man we’d both know.” A pause, then a shrug. “If we could even do it at all here without having the other man realise that there’s something very wrong with our marriage.”

Bodie closed his eyes and turned his head away from Ray. He’d thought they’d got past the worst. Ray had said that part was done. Them having problems, he could deal with that. Deal with knowing the problems were big. But Ray saying the marriage was just plain wrong. That shoved a spike in his gut like nothing else had.

At the light touch to the back of his hand, he jerked it immediately off the sofa and up to his chest. Instinctual. His nerves too scoured and exposed for any contact. But in the

next instant, before he'd even registered the shock in Ray's gasp, he'd opened his eyes and was turning and reaching out. "Ray, God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean -" Not just shock in Ray's eyes but fear. Ray was rearing back against the arm of the couch, his arms still in the air, about a foot above his knee. "Ray, I'm sorry. I just – I just wasn't expecting it. Here." He opened out his fingers in invitation, and almost laughed in relief when, after just a second's pause, he found his hand gripped tight between both of Ray's.

For long seconds they reassured each other with small shiftings of pressure back and forth. Bodie wasn't ready to find the right type of smile, guessed Ray wasn't either.

"Think we're done for this evening. Don't you?"

Ray nodded. "Yeah. D'you wanna watch a film? Or we could listen to music. Read." A shrug and he started to loosen his grip. "Go for a walk."

"No, a film. Let's find a bunch of blokes with much worse problems than ours."

They watched "The Towering Inferno", which Ray hasn't seen before and which did a good job of taking their minds off the rest of the evening. Ray didn't curl up against Bodie, but they didn't hesitate to nudge or swat at each other, and it felt like a good, relaxed few hours with a mate.

When it was over, they agreed they'd have breakfast around eight and it was Bodie's turn to get the pastries. They said goodnight, with a squeeze of the shoulder but no kiss, and then Ray took the long way around to his bedroom, along the corridor.

Bodie didn't sleep well. He felt the Mabein crowded around him, all night long. Just behind him, out of sight. They didn't speak to him – what would they have to say to an animal? – but there was breathing and shifting and murmuring.

It was a sunny day, just a light scattering of cloud, and they had breakfast on the balcony. After he'd finished his pastry Bodie dusted off his hands and said, "We gonna do more talking today?"

"Think we have to."

"Yeah." A large gulp of coffee. "D'you think we can make our marriage right?"

"Yes, I do." No hesitation.

"Why? Why d'you think that? When you're saying that everything about it's so wrong?"

"Not everything. I didn't say 'everything', did I?" Frowning. Trying to remember.

"No, I – 'Very wrong', you said. That's wrong enough for me."

Ray's eyes widened slightly, and he took a while to respond, looking very thoughtful.

"There's only a part of it that's wrong. A small part." He held his hand up, thumb and index finger an inch apart. "Everything else..." A gesture that took in Bodie, the balcony, the flat. "You know I wouldn't trade with anyone."

Bodie nodded. "But it's the most important part. Isn't it?"

A sharp sigh. "That's how I've always seen it. Yes."

"So why d'you think we can make it right? When you've got all your gods against us."

“Because you deserve it. You can’t do what you’ve done for nothing. There has to be some way through.”

Bodie blinked several times, touched by Ray’s certainty, but jolted by the idea that what he had now was nothing. Of course Ray hadn’t meant that, but it was hard to shrug off that word. “D’you think we’re ready to start talking today? About what we can do... find a way through?”

“Yeah, but – Let’s get out of the flat for a while first. I need some air. Last night was...”

“It was rough. D’you wanna go for a run?”

“Just a walk. Maybe run tomorrow.”

They agreed that they’d have lunch somewhere in town, and get back to talking after lunch.

It was one of those walks where they stopped regularly to sit and admire the view. They sat with their arms and thighs touching, but there was no holding. Maybe they’d be up to kissing by the end of the weekend. Bodie wouldn’t lay a bet on anything.

Again, they sat down on the couch with mugs of tea, and again, Bodie was the one who got things moving. “Well, the ideas I’ve got so far are to do with... How many Hailin have the Mabein talking to them like you do? And are there any Hailin who wouldn’t think I’m an animal? Actually, I know there’s at least one. There’s Turon. Malun told me that Turon said he was totally comfortable with the idea of any Hailin having any type of sex with any human. It was during our last dinner on the ship. He said it took Turon a couple of weeks to get to that point but – Turon doesn’t think it’s bestiality so the first thing you should do is talk to him.”

“I -” Ray was shaking his head. “He wouldn’t have said any Hailin. He wouldn’t talk about a qualified man taking the chance. He wouldn’t forget about that for a second.”

Bodie squinted up at the ceiling as he tried to remember the exact words. “No. OK. You’re right. Any unqualified man. That’s what Malun said. But it still comes to the same thing. He doesn’t think it’s bestiality, and I need you to talk to him about it. Or to Malun. I’m damn sure he thinks it’s OK too. From the way he was talking about Turon.”

“It’s a – It might be a place to start but – Bodie, you’ve got to remember that Turon didn’t qualify. Neither did Malun. I don’t believe either of them can really imagine what I’m dealing with. What it means to know that Udom Kol is there. To feel everything he’s expecting.”

Bodie nodded slowly. “How much has Turon tried to ask you what we do? Or Malun.”

Ray pulled a face. “It felt like a lot. But I always -”

“Flat-out told them it was private.”

“Yeah.”

A long sigh. “I wondered, when Turon was here... With him seeing the separate beds. If he’d manage to have a proper talk with you during the night.”

“He – We did somehow discuss the fact that it’s always been your bed that we’ve had sex in. Though we just wandered into that, I think, so it wasn’t because he was trying to ask. Mostly he wanted to talk about what we could all do to keep you happy.”

“Well... If he asked me today I’d know to say, ‘You can find a qualified member of the family who’s figured out it isn’t bestiality.’” He quirked his eyebrows and Ray laughed, and for the first time that weekend Bodie truly believed they would figure all this out. “D’you think Turon’s discussed us with Ferros? What he thinks about us.”

“Definitely. They’re very close.”

“So why don’t you talk to her?”

Ray bit his lip. Hard, it looked like. “You’re assuming she thinks the same as him.”

“Oh. Yeah. Guess you’ll have to ask her to find out.”

Now Ray winced. “I – What if she says something to make things worse? Something I hadn’t thought of before. Or – If she starts out thinking like Turon but the more I explain about the Mabein. About our problems. Then – She sees you that way too and -” He briefly covered his eyes with his hand, and shook his head. “I don’t ever want to make anyone else think less of you. I couldn’t bear it.” A real tremor in his voice.

“Couldn’t you find a way to ask that doesn’t give too much away? You’re bloody good at that. Not saying things.” Letting people assume. About being with the Foreign Office, for a start.

“I’ll try. Might take me five or six attempts to write my first message to her, though.”

“When d’you think you’ll start?”

“Not this weekend. Please? Give us a chance to get back to normal. I think – After our dinner with Malun. I don’t want to have to ask her not to tell him and... I’d like an easy dinner.”

“Makes sense. You do think it might help? Talking to her.”

“It might. There’s a chance.”

Bodie slapped his hands together. “We’ve got a plan! And it’s only 2.32. We are good at this. We should’ve known. Not given West the car.”

Ray’s smile was half-hearted. “I only said there’s a chance.”

“Yeah, but – Before we had no ideas. So there was no chance. And we know we can talk about all this without -” A shrug. “Me bursting into tears.”

A genuine laugh, and Ray was shaking his head. “It had you wanting to drink dog farts. Insisting on it. That’s a whole new way of being tough. Can’t see it catching on.”

Bodie shrugged and raised one hand, like he was waving away a compliment. “What’re we gonna do with the rest of the weekend? How much plan do we want for that?”

Ray frowned and sighed for a while, then said slowly: “I’m thinking that it might be an idea to spend some time apart. Maybe the rest of today? Course it was easier than -” A

very deep sigh. “But I’m still on edge. About you. I can’t -” He swallowed. “I don’t know when I’ll be in the mood again even to *tassuram*. There’s nothing wrong, I just...”

“Need even more air. I get it.” Bodie was nodding. “We’ve spent nearly every spare minute with each other for over three months. It’d be time to try a break even if you weren’t on edge. Y’know, I think I’ll get the bus to Harding. Go and see a film. When’s the last bus home?”

“It’s at eleven but – D’you want me to check what’s on? What the times are? Or you could find yourself -” He pulled a face. “Not understanding a word.”

“I’ll risk it. I’ll make a guess from the posters. And I’ll come up with my own idea of the full plot, and tell it all to you so you can have a good laugh when we go and see it together.”

Ray would look forward to that. He wrote Bodie directions to the two cinemas, and also to good cafes, restaurants and bars nearby, and a couple of decent hotels in case he missed the bus or decided to stay the night.

Ray was going to go in the other direction: to Dishna. There were some friends there he’d like to catch up with, assuming they were around. If not, there’d be plenty of other things to do in Dishna.

They agreed that they’d send the other a message around eleven if they did decide to spend the night away, and that they’d be back before noon the next day, no matter what happened. They walked to the ferry terminal to catch the three o’clock bus and boat. Ray would call around his friends once he was in Dishna.

At the top of the stairs down to the bus stop, Bodie said, “What’re the chances you’ll be in the mood for a *tassuram* by tomorrow night? Or by An Uraba?”

“By An Uraba... I must be. By tomorrow night...” A sudden grin. “I dunno. It’ll probably depend on what you’re wearing.”

Bodie raised an eyebrow. “You’re saying it’s up to me to get you in the mood? You want me to... court you?” A struggle to say that with a straight face. Better than “woo”, though, which had been the first word to come to his mind.

“Yes.” Very drawn-out, like he was needing a while for the idea to sink in. “I’d really like to see that.”

“Well. Then. That’ll be your entertainment for tomorrow night. God knows it is my turn. You’re always doing things like calling me a sunken ship. Saying stuff to make me feel good. You should get to hear much more back.

“I should. I should.” Nodding slowly, with the gleam in his eyes showing how hard he was suppressing a smile. “Now that you mention it. Go on.” A nod towards the steps. “To do me justice, you’ll need to spend at least the first bus ride deciding what to wear.”

The bus got into Harding at about ten minutes to four. The cinema nearest the bus station had three screens, showing ~My !?! Friend~ (six teenage boys and girls, running through a city, all looking identically happy), ~!?!~ (three words) (two desperate-looking people in a small sailing boat, in a ferocious storm), and ~Only the !?!~ (serious people in formal suits, obviously making speeches).

The sailing-boat thing looked like his best bet, and a good enough bet that he wouldn't bother looking at the other cinema. It was on at five, and he passed the time with a beer in the nearest bar. He got his book out and had it open on the table but he hardly read anything; partly he was watching the people in the bar, suddenly finding himself curious about who was qualified and how easily another Hailin could tell, but mostly he was thinking about how he should handle the next night. From the way Ray had reacted at the ferry terminal, getting him in the mood wasn't going to be difficult, but Bodie did want to make it memorable.

He'd decided during the bus ride that the pink shirt was too obvious. So was taking him out for any kind of romantic meal, when it was less than a week since they'd had the best meal you could get in town. Some special kind of meal at home, then.

Were there types of food that the Hailin found romantic? The right thing to have with champagne. Or at least with the best *toroquil*. And who would he ask, since Turon was too far away now to get back to him in time? Though Turon would probably tell him not to bother thinking like that with Ray. The main reason that Bodie knew the Hailin did have the idea of romance was from Ray taking the piss out of Buka. Everyone knew that Ray was all about sex. About seeing no point in waiting when it came to sex. Except... he'd said he liked having to wait, where Bodie was concerned. It made it special.

OK. He definitely shouldn't waste time wondering what a normal, romantic Hailin man might like. He'd forget food until he was home with the recipe books. But he did want to surprise Ray, didn't he? Did he have any clothes Ray hadn't seen him in? Or that Ray would never expect?

His uniform. Did Ray even know he'd brought it? He'd never hung it up in the wardrobe, had kept it packed away. He started getting hard at the idea of wearing it for Ray. Stepping out of the bedroom, maybe, and saying, "Ray Bakkel? I'm Sergeant Bodie. I've been assigned to protect you." Would it be better in Hass Embrun? But he didn't know "sergeant" or "assigned". ~Sent~ might do.

No. No. It was too much of a risk to spring it on Ray, especially this weekend. The uniform might not make Ray happily horny. It might bring back very bad memories of that Tuesday, which had started with sex in the shower and which he'd been assuming would end with Bodie in – and then out - of his uniform. And instead, just a few hours in, he'd learned that he was married to a *glarus*. No, Ray should get to decide whether he wanted to see the uniform or not.

Did that also rule out the suit that he'd been wearing during the negotiations? But he had put that in the wardrobe. He'd seen Ray stroking it a couple of times. OK, not smiling, looking very serious. But not unhappy. Maybe if he wore it with a Hailin shirt, that would take any sting out of it. Be the right kind of surprise.

He did like the idea of doing it all in Hass Embrun. Maybe in very basic Hass Embrun, as if he'd only just got West (or some other helpful Hailin) to teach him enough to make a first move. Ray would get a kick out of that, wouldn't he? It wouldn't upset him. It was something they'd already joked about, the other way around. And it would make some kind of sense of him wearing his CI5 suit with a Hailin shirt.

So the question was: how to start it off so that Ray would pick up on the game straight away? And how to keep it fun and make it sexy. And where did food fit in? Should he try

to work it around dinner? Or leave it all until after they'd eaten? He wanted to be the one taking care of everything. What if he played it arrogant and dangerous instead? Not so much the keen and clueless foreigner. Normally a very safe bet with Ray but...No, for this stage of this weekend he should at least pretend that all he was hoping for was a *tassuram*.

So what was he looking at? Four hours of planning, in total? Six hours? All so he could safely flirt with his own husband. Ridiculous. And more ridiculous just how excited he was about it. Ray would be feeling the same. Sitting having a pot of *kenit* or a drink with his friends, and smiling to himself at the thought of Bodie working all-out to win him.

There weren't any adverts before the film but there were trailers. There was a film set in a car factory, which seemed to be about a big change in engine design. Something technical, anyway. And a family drama that seemed to be about a lot of things, including a very unhappy *esmana* marriage. That was going to happen sometimes, obviously, but he hadn't realised they made films about it.

His sailing-boat film was about a couple who were sailing home after some sailing event on the other side of their archipelago, and fell in with a younger couple. After they'd been travelling together for several days, they hit thick fog and the younger couple ran aground and holed their boat. The older couple managed to rescue them but the attitude of the younger couple turned strange and suspicious, and got stranger still when the fog gave way to a bad storm, and they refused to let the older couple make for the nearest safe harbour. It must be that they were smuggling something or had stolen something, and there were people in the harbour who would recognise them.

The fight for control of the boat went back and forth – all in the middle of the storm in a complicated stretch of water – and in the end the older couple really had no choice except to throw the others overboard. The film ended with them safely out of the storm, but unable to make for a harbour while they were still arguing about whether or not to report what had happened.

Bodie enjoyed it. Especially with the noise of the storm and the distortion of all the yelling, there were long stretches he didn't catch, and when the rest of the audience laughed at a line, he never had any idea why. But, as he'd guessed from the poster, it wasn't a story that depended on you understanding every word.

By the time he came out he was definitely ready for dinner. Still, he decided not just to go to the nearest place on Ray's list, but to take a look at all of them. The one he chose was five blocks away from the cinema. It looked dark and cosy, and a comfortable place to have a steak on your own while you read a book. He did read more this time. He'd decided that he wouldn't spend the night in Harding: he'd go home and try on his Hailin shirts with his suit, and maybe the look of it would show him how the rest of the game could work.

While he was eating dessert, he heard a surprised voice call his name. It was Gamlan, who had clearly just arrived and was with two women. His group was just about to be seated and he gestured them to go ahead and came over to Bodie's table.

~How nice to see you. Ray isn't here?~ The book did make it immediately obvious that Bodie was on his own.

Bodie shook his head. ~He went into Dishna. I came here to see a film.~

~What film?~

Bodie admitted he hadn't been able to read the title. ~It was about a ship in a storm. And two couples fighting.~

~Oh! /?/. Buka wants to see that. Was it good?~

~It was exciting. I suppose I understood about a third of what people were saying. It's probably even better when you understand it all.~

Gamlan smiled and nodded. ~We'll go tomorrow /?/. He's not working then. Thanks.~ He gestured with his head in the direction his friends had gone. ~I should /?/. Enjoy the rest of your dessert.~

~Thanks.~ Bodie felt he should be saying something about meeting for another drink in Parass. But that would need Ray to do the coordination, and by the time he'd figured out how to phrase the suggestion, Gamlan had gone.

He just caught the nine o'clock bus, and was home shortly after ten. The flat was empty. That felt strange. He put on some "Stranglers", made a mug of tea, then started the search for the right shirt.

The pale blue was definitely the best colour with the suit, but the curving V of the collar looked odd, in a way it didn't with a Hailin suit. That was the point, though. To look exotic. Puzzling.

So why is this strange man ringing Ray's doorbell at half six on An Udom Kol, speaking just a few weeks' worth of Hass Embrun? Who taught him? Not West. The man hadn't been in Parass during those weeks, he'd never met West. Turon, then. On his space station or on some ship. And the man needed help and Turon had sent him to Ray. But what sort of help would you send someone to Ray for? Because Turon knew perfectly well that Ray was not naturally trusting or helpful. Tricky, that. And it needed to be the kind of help that would take time to arrange, so he'd have to stay, and there'd be dinner and he could start his courting. Turon wouldn't flat-out ask Ray to put a stranger up. Ray would just refuse, and show him the door. So a smaller kind of help, that would leave Ray willing to invite him to dinner.

He'd probably have to sleep on it, though he'd rather have it decided before Ray came back. He changed out of his suit, made more tea, and settled on the couch with his book.

At a few minutes past eleven his wristband beeped, and by the time Bodie looked up from it at the TV, his message light had started blinking. So he knew Ray was staying the night in Dishna, but he should see if the message said anything more than that.

It said he was staying with friends, and it gave their names and phone number. They were all about to go out to a party and wouldn't be back until very late, but he would catch the ten o'clock ferry the next day, whatever happened.

It was the first time Bodie had received a message in Hass Embrun. Of course, the system at Ray's friends' place wouldn't be set up for English. It was slow reading, but he got there without having to bring the portable computer through and use the dictionary. It was smart of Ray, probably, to send the message to his fleet address so he would get

the alert on his wristband even if he was out-and-about in Harding. Would have been awkward, though, if he'd been watching a film at the time.

Bodie went to bed shortly after he got the message. He read a couple of pages more, then turned off the light and lay thinking partly about the next day's courtship, and partly about Ray over at a party in Dishna. With a crowd of friends who of course he'd had sex with. Maybe the party was at one of the clubs where he used to go with Gavio. Would Gavio be there, even?

Well, there was no need to be jealous of anyone, least of all Gavio. No matter who was there, no matter how hard or long they'd made Ray come in the past, they couldn't even raise a twitch from him now. Wouldn't anyone there guess that the secret wasn't mind-blowing alien sex, but a Hailin's worst nightmare?

It wasn't that he wanted to be jealous. And he'd trust Ray, anyway, even without the *mana*. Did he wish his cock was as soft now as Ray's must be? He should. He knew he should. But – He was still very much a man, no matter how quickly he'd adjusted to being just another queer. He felt so possessive of Ray. A surge of triumph that the sexiest man you could ever imagine was only for him. And he felt a great, twisting guilt. That he'd turned Ray into a freak. Such a freak that he needed the full-time attention of all of his gods. That thought should be enough to kill his erection but it wasn't, not even close. He came thinking about their last time in the hold.

He slept well, then got up early and went for a run on the short version of the route through the moorland. As he was reaching the cove with the first of the little huts he started to get a new idea for the courtship, and by the time he reached the turn-off towards the garden centre, he was satisfied that he had all the necessary details worked out. The rest he could trust to luck, and to Ray.

He took his coffee and toast into the spare room, and then let both grow cold in his concentration on the task of forging a hand-written letter in Hass Embrun from Turon to Ray. He was finished by ten, and when Ray got home he was out on the balcony debating whether or not it had turned cold enough to need a jacket.

Bodie's guess had been right and the party had been in one of the clubs. It had still been in full swing when Ray and his friends had left around two. Ray'd stuck to beer and was feeling fine. Well, not fantastic, maybe, but good enough to fancy a long run along the cliffs. He thought they'd get the half two bus to Antoness.

That sounded fine to Bodie. "Was Gavio there?"

"Yeah." Several degrees more casual than Bodie had managed. "Heddon called him in plenty of time to warn him. There were people making sure we got kept apart. It wasn't a problem." A slight pause. "They say he's doing better."

Bodie nodded. "That's good."

"They all want to know when they can meet you, of course. Very disappointed it was just me."

"Did they think we were having a row or something?"

A shrug. "Don't think so. I said you were just in the mood to go off and see a film. Who doesn't get that mood sometimes? So what did you see?"

Ray had heard of the film. The title meant something like “Out of Necessity” and in fact the film was based on a well-known incident from about fifteen years earlier. The couple had decided to tell in the end, but for months and months nothing could be found to confirm that the younger couple had even existed, and there were hundreds of theories flying around about why the older couple might have made the story up. Eventually someone came forward to say he’d seen all four having a friendly drink one evening in a restaurant overlooking a small harbour. But no one ever reported a couple with any resemblance to the younger couple missing and many people, including Ray, had serious doubts about almost all of the story.

It had been in a much smaller archipelago, about two thousand miles to the north. Ray didn’t think the local police had botched the investigation, but he had spent quite a lot of time thinking about how he would have handled the interviews with the older couple.

“Good thing the film dodges all that. Or I’d never persuade you to go and see it with me.”

Ray laughed and agreed, and suggested they go and see it in Dishna some evening next week. West might want to come too.

Ray wasn’t as surprised as Bodie had expected about Gamlan being in the same restaurant. Gamlan had been the person who had introduced Ray to the place, and he always said it was his favourite place in town. Definitely they should arrange another drink. Ray would check with Buka about his work schedule.

They agreed that they’d make a fish pie for dinner, and eat around eight. At half past six Bodie put his book down on the coffee table and went into the bedroom closing the door behind him. He changed into his suit, made his way very quietly along the corridor to the front door, then let himself out, closed the door, and immediately rang the doorbell.

He heard Ray pause in front of the door. Ray hadn’t thought to show him where the peephole was on these doors, how it worked, but there must be one. When Ray opened the door, there was nothing in his expression apart from mild suspicion.

In a rush, like he’d been practising for this all day: ~Hello, sir. You are Mister Ray Vasmar?~

Slowly: ~Yes. And who are you?~

~My name is William Bodie. Your brother. Mister Turon. He said you might help me.~

~Did he, indeed? Where did you meet Turon?~

Bodie looked upwards. ~In space. I had just... escaped. The man I worked for, he thought I had done a bad thing. I had to go. Very quickly.~

~What did he think you’d done?~

~He thought I was having sex with his son. I wasn’t. Never. The son is twenty. That is too young. And he is boring and too rich. I talked to him for my work but... Nothing else. But someone made trouble. I think a friend of the son. Not the son, at first. And the man did not believe me. I hid on a ship. And Turon, he believed me. He helped me.~

A raised eyebrow. ~He would. He’s very !/!. So how does he want me to help you?~

~He thought, because you are a policeman, you might know how I can find work. My work is to keep people safe. Rich people. Or important people. If there are people who want to hurt them.~

~You're a bodyguard.~

~*Bodyguard*. Yes. Turon taught me the word. But it's difficult for me. Often I forget. Do policemen know? When someone here wants a bodyguard?~

Ray was frowning. A thoughtful frown, mostly. ~Sometimes, yes, but... The best I can probably do is give you the names of other people to talk to. And since you don't -- A pause then a shrug. ~Well, you could do worse than saying Turon Bakkel sent you. If they believe you.~

~I have a letter!~ Hurrying to pull the twice-folded sheet from his inside pocket. ~He wrote a letter to you. I do not know what he wrote. He taught me the numbers. He taught me 'Dishna' and 'Parass' and 'Exit'. It is short but – Does it say good things? Will the other people believe me if they read that?~

Ray slowly unfolded it, and looked very serious as he read the two paragraphs. Then he was shaking his head. ~I'm sorry. It wouldn't help. It's just from one brother to another. But look – You might as well come in. Have a cup of *kenit* while I write down those names for you. Though – How are you going to read them?~

~I will ask for help. And I will write down the sound of the names in my language. Thank you, Mister Ray.~

Ray shrugged, then stood aside to let him come in, and shut the door. Bodie stood just behind the couch making a big show of admiring the room, while Ray went to put the kettle on.

~Do your people drink *kenit*.~

~No. But Turon said I must learn to drink it. It is important here. I have not learned well yet. I think it is very strong.~

~I'll make it weak, then. How long have you been here? On Pen Embrun.~

~Ten days.~

~And in Parass?~

~An hour? I arrived on the boat now. To see you.~

~Well, in Dishna, then?~

~Four days. The names that Turon gave me for people in Monor, they did not want me. The money he gave me, it was enough to come here.~ Quickly: ~I will give it back. He knows I will give it back.~

~Where are you staying?~

~I pay for a room where the ships go in Dishna. It is very cheap. And with ships there are people and things, there is work. It is cheap work, very bad. But if I work every day, it pays for my room. And my food. I do not need to use more of Turon's money.~

~You had to leave everything behind when you escaped?~

~A bag. I had time to... make a bag. But it was not a good bag. Most of it, I cannot sell here.~ He shrugged, pulled the packet of M&S coffee out of the pocket of his jacket, and held it out to Ray. ~It is to thank you for helping me. It is called 'coffee'. It makes a hot drink. Turon liked it. More than I like *kenit*. I thought you might like it too.~

Ray took the packet, and studied it front and back like he'd never seen one before. Finally he put it down on the counter. ~Thank you.~ Next, he studied Bodie with the same intensity, and Bodie clenched his jaw to stop himself grinning, because he knew exactly what was coming next. ~Are you hungry?~

~Yes.~ Immediate. Definite. Bless Ray. And Bless fake-Turon for writing to his brother that if he couldn't help this puzzling-but-probably-not-actively-dangerous stranger find a job, could he at least make sure the man got a proper meal?

~Then the more help you give me making this fish pie, the more quickly we'll be able to eat.~

Bodie nodded, shrugged out of his jacket, and placed it carefully over the back of the nearest dining-chair. ~What is 'fish pie'?~ He went over to join Ray in the kitchen, rolling up his sleeves with the same care.

Ray showed him the picture in the cookbook and explained ~fish~ with sinuous hand gestures, pointing outside at ~the sea~, and then, finally, getting the package of fillets out of the fridge. Ray started Bodie on cutting the root vegetables for the topping into chunks, and then he set the fish to poach in milk. When the chunks were in to boil, Bodie was assigned another vegetable, to slice paper-thin, while Ray, next to him, chopped herbs with his usual impatient efficiency.

~Is that your only suit?~ A nod towards the dining-chair.

~Yes. I must protect it. To look for work.~

Ray grunted, and then changed the conversation to coffee. How did people drink it? How often? At what time of day? Were there rituals involved? Dealing with the last question took a lot of gestures on both sides.

When the fish was done Ray rinsed it off, then dumped it on the chopping board they kept for fish and told Bodie to flake it, miming the action with his fingertips rather than demonstrating directly. Bodie concentrated hard on looking for bones, while Ray moved behind him to the sink and drained the root vegetables. Ray was taking the mashing for himself, then. Typical. He knew how much Bodie enjoyed getting stuck in with the masher.

A light touch to his right forearm. Bodie looked up, startled. He'd been concentrating so hard that he hadn't realised that Ray had moved back beside him. Ray was looking down at Bodie's rolled-up shirt-sleeve. At his own hands as the thumbs slid slowly under the fabric, and then worked with the fingers to roll the sleeve up – so evenly and so carefully – by another inch and a half. Then the hands trailed down, smoothing, the brushing against the underside of his forearm, oh, so purely innocent and accidental.

Bodie couldn't remember the last time he'd got this hard this fast. No, he could. Of course he could. That night on his couch in London, with Ray locking their fingers

together. The short gasp that came out of his throat was almost a whimper, but Ray didn't look up, just slid his thumbs under again and did another turn, just the same, except the smoothing at the end took his fingers nearly down to Bodie's wrists.

Now he looked up, catching Bodie's eyelids still in their helpless fluttering. ~It's a good shirt. The colour /?/ you very well. We must protect it.~

Bodie nodded weakly, and as Ray moved around to his left side, he held his arm out to give Ray more room, an easier grip. This time Ray didn't look down; his hands knew enough of Bodie now to do this by feel alone. His expression as he gazed at Bodie showed little more than casual interest, but his breathing was as ragged as Bodie's.

If things were different... Hell, if things were as they appeared, with Turon's obedient brother and the hungry bodyguard, their trousers would be down on the tiles in the next second, and they'd be locked together so hard and fast it would make the walls shake. He wanted to close his eyes, but no, he had to keep up with Ray, match him in the game.

~There.~ A pat on his shoulder. ~You can get back to work now.~ And Ray was opening the fridge, and then clattering in a drawer, and then noisily attacking the root vegetables.

Bodie did close his eyes, for the space of three breaths, and then he refused to acknowledge any nerves except the ones in the tips of his fingers. With each bone he found, he felt a step closer to control. By the time he finished, with Ray already busy with the sauce, his voice was only slightly, understandably strained when he said, ~It is a good shirt. But I... got it in a wrong way. I took it and I did not pay.~

~You stole it?~ Ray sounded impressed. ~Where from?~

~A large shop in Monor. I do not know the name. I thought...~ He shrugged. ~I needed a good shirt more than they did.~

~I'm sure you're right. But you know, Turon would be shocked.~

~What is 'shocked'?~

Ray gave an acting out worthy of a silent film, in three versions, and they both sniggered.

~Will you tell him?~

~Never. You needed to have that shirt.~

Ray assembled the pie, put it in the oven, and set the timer. ~It'll be three quarters of an hour. What about beer? Did Turon teach you to drink our beer?~

Bodie grinned. ~He did.~

Ray nodded, satisfied, got two bottles from the fridge, and headed across the living-room. ~Let's see how cold it is outside.~ Once he was out on the balcony, he set the beers down on the table, put his hands on his hips, did a survey from the ferry terminal to the far end of the beach, and then turned back to Bodie, who was waiting on the other side of the balcony doors. ~We'll need our jackets, but it's still the best place for a beer. Mine's over there.~ Pointing at the back of the couch. Bodie passed it over, then rolled his sleeves down, fastened the cuffs, put his jacket back on, and went to join Ray. It was

definitely one of the coldest evenings since he'd arrived here, but a jacket took all the edge off it.

Ray handed him his beer, and they stood for a while looking at the sea and talking, mostly about Bodie's experience of the sea and ships, and then they turned and looked into the flat, and at their reflections in the windows and doors.

~This is a good place.~ Gesturing with his bottle along the length of the balcony, then towards the living-room. ~Turon told me it was good.~

~Yes. I'm very happy here.~ Then a sharp look, though his tone remained mild. ~I hope you're not looking for something you can steal. I know you need it but... I would have to tell Turon. Ask him never to send a man to me again. No matter how hungry he must be.~

Bodie was shaking his head, over and over. ~I would not. I would not. I would never steal from you. You are helping me. I need but I am not...~ He wanted to say ~desperate~ but why would Turon teach the bodyguard that? ~I am not lost.~

~No. No. I'm sorry.~ Ray put his beer down on top of the parapet and took a tight grip on Bodie's shoulder. ~I can see. I wouldn't have blamed you. But I would have learned something bad.~

~I would never steal anything from you.~ He put his beer next to Ray's, swallowed, then dropped his voice almost to a whisper. ~Except your breath.~ He pulled Ray close, and Ray met him with a sigh of relief and welcome. Yes, yes, ~breath~ was cheating, even more than ~desperate~ would have been. But dammit he'd earned it.

They didn't break the kiss for a long, long time. At first their hands were restless, exploring every inch within reach, either over or under the jackets. But then Bodie's hands settled on waist and hip, and Ray's on waist and shoulder-blade, all under the jackets, and it became the *tassuram* that Ray had demanded that Bodie get him in the mood for.

When Ray pulled away he stepped all the way back, out of reach, and stared at Bodie for a time that seemed even longer than the kiss. Finally: ~Yes. It's stolen. I'll never find that again.~ He shook his head sharply, blinked several times, then said, ~Your hair is standing up. Smooth it.~ Bodie reached up with both hands, then ran them down lightly, twice. ~That's better. Now the lines of your jacket.~ Bodie saw to the left side first, then the right. ~Your shirt. Straighten the neck of your shirt.~ Bodie loosened and then tugged, and after a few seconds with his eyebrows raised, he got a grudging nod. ~You have to take care. But now. I can see. You need... Wait here.~

And he was heading for the bedroom door and gone. Through the trellis, Bodie saw the light come on in the spare bedroom. Ray must be picking out a good shirt to give to him. That would be nice. Ray wouldn't be able to wear it again, it would be contaminated for him, but... That would be nice.

The light went off again after just a couple of minutes, and when Ray came back into the living-room Bodie guessed he'd simply changed his mind, because he wasn't carrying anything. But he did have that same air of purpose. He came to stand just in front of Bodie, a few inches away, and he reached around Bodie's neck, and Bodie felt something cold slide against his skin, over his collarbone.

A chain. Wow. Ray was giving the bodyguard jewellery. Bodie had got it so wrong. He was married to a hopeless romantic. He smiled at him, but Ray was too intent to notice.

Once the clasp was fastened, Ray took some moments to settle and centre his gift under the collar of the shirt, and then stepped back to assess the effect. Bodie looked down, and jerked slightly in reaction. Not a chain. An actual necklace. Of squarish chunks of slate-grey stones in a pattern of different sizes. This was...

Well, this was the plan for the night, wasn't it? The courting. Which apparently came with being courted himself, Hailin style.

~Yes.~ Ray was nodding. ~Now you look complete. You look rich. People will give you more attention now when you look for work.~ A sudden grin. ~Of course, they would give you too much attention at your room in Dishna. You must hide it there.~

Bodie frowned, shaking his head. ~You should not give this to me. You do not know me.~

~Yes, I should. Come. Look.~ He took Bodie's hand, led him into the bedroom, and stood him in front of the wardrobe mirror. ~See? It never made me look this important. It needs to be with you. And if you ever find you need to sell it, I would understand. I can give you names of people who would give you a fair price. It is yours.~

The stones had a glow to them, that seemed to come from a distance far too deep for their size. Against that glow and the black of the suit, he would have to say that his skin looked like marble, and the bones and muscles underneath had never looked stronger. The neckline of the shirt didn't look odd any more. Ray must have seen that too. It wasn't just about looking rich, it was about looking complete.

~Yes, it is good for me. Thank you. I hope I will never sell it.~

~Well...~ A slow smile, and Ray was turning him away from the mirror with a light pressure on his shoulders. ~It's also good for me. You are exciting to look at.~

~You know... I am excited when you look at me. And when you touch me I cannot think.~

Slowly: ~I steal your mind. Then we're even.~ And they were kissing again. Bodie would have said that two men would never come just from kissing. But if it could happen, if it could... Then it would be between the two of them, that night.

The smell of the fish pie suddenly seemed to have got stronger. It must only have been half an hour, though, if that. But still, the timer would be going off soon enough. And they did need to eat. And they had the whole night ahead of them.~

~I will not sleep in that room tonight. I will sleep here.~ A brief nod of the head towards the bed.

~Of course you will. But -~ Ray's broad smile had faded quickly and he was frowning. ~I should tell you now. So you don't think it's because of anything you've done... My man and I. After we've... After we've brought each other pleasure here, you will sleep here. But I'll go to another room. I don't sleep with my man. I can't.~

Bodie nodded. ~I, too, with a man, I have -~ He swallowed. ~My people, they think that if two men are together with no clothes, if they touch... with everything, then it is dangerous. A bad thing will happen. The ground will move. Buildings can fall down.~

Ray's eyes could surely not open wider. ~They think it causes earthquakes?~

~I do not know 'earthquakes'. But it is bad. So we are careful. We wear our clothes. And there is a man with a special job, who visits men who want to touch and does the words to make them safe. So the 'earthquakes' will not happen. But - Often it is a long time before the man can visit and we have learned to find pleasure in the time we must wait. When we must wear our clothes.~

Now Ray was just looking fascinated. ~And we're not safe?~ Bodie shook his head, and Ray gave a lopsided smile. ~No, I can understand that. From what I can see of your skin. What I've felt. You. Me. We're an earthquake waiting to happen. Of course we have to wear our clothes tonight. I'll enjoy that. But have you -~ A pause of several seconds, then an abrupt shake of the head. ~No. I'll ask you later about the visit and the words and how it makes you safe. Now I have enough, with looking forward to drinking more beer with you, and eating with you, and trying your 'coffee', and then... bringing you back here.~

* * * * *

Bodie was woken by the sound of Ray singing in the shower. It wasn't a great sound, in itself, but wow, Ray was in a fantastic mood. Bodie rolled onto his back, clasped his hands behind his head, and waited to see what the mood would do next.

A knock on the door to the corridor. Ray leaned in to the room, kept upright only by his grip on the doorframe. "Can I please bring you coffee in bed?"

"Course you can. Glass of *tegal* juice would be good, too. And while you're feeling helpful..." He was sitting up, reaching back to plump the pillows. "D'you mind opening the doors to the balcony? Let in some air. It's sunny enough, right?"

"Just about. Better than yesterday, anyway."

Bodie wondered if he should go to the bathroom and get into his robe. But with Ray bustling around in the living-room like that, he'd have a good chance of getting a clear view of Bodie getting out of bed, and that would defeat the purpose. Anyway, if the T-shirt Ray had given him to sleep in last night was respectable enough for a record-breaking goodnight kiss, it should be good enough for coffee in bed.

Ray put the tray on the bedside table, then clambered over Bodie to sit leaning against him.

"Y'know, I must have spent half the night dreaming about writing the message that I obviously needed to send to Turon. Thanking him for sending me the man with the sexiest, most solid forearms in the universe. Who I was going to marry as soon as I possibly could. It took me at least five minutes after I'd woken up to be sure I hadn't actually sent it." A rueful shake of the head, then a long, happy sigh. "Ah, Bodie. I shouldn't say that was the most fun I've ever had with my clothes on, because you'd already raised the bar way out of sight but... Damn, that was such a surprise. I always thought you didn't have much imagination. Hell, you told me you didn't."

With a smirk: "I've picked up some tricks from you."

"Not the earthquakes, you didn't. Where the hell did that come from?"

Bodie shrugged. "From our news, to be honest. On Earth. Whenever there's a natural disaster – not just earthquakes, but floods, diseases, anything – you'll always find someone to say it's God's judgement on... y'know, whatever bee they've got in their bonnet. Women wearing trousers. Children answering back to parents. A lot of the time it is queers they blame. Don't you have that here? People sure they know who to blame?"

Ray was nodding slowly, in recognition. "Of course. We don't get much of that, not anymore. But we used to." He pulled a face. "That's depressing. The way you put it, last night, it just sounded so definite. So organised. With the visits, and everything."

"Yeah, well, I wanted to give the poor sods a break. There's only so long they have to control themselves, because eventually the priest will turn up. And he'll say some words and sprinkle something around and somehow..." Another shrug. "God's perfectly happy."

"It was a priest. I guessed it must be, but that would be the last word Turon would teach anyone. Right down there with 'stolen'."

Bodie grunted. "Now you've got me feeling guilty. And it's gonna take me more than five minutes to get over this nagging..." He rapped his knuckles twice on his forehead. "That I've got to pay him back a fuckload of money."

They laughed, and then drank their coffee, and wondered about the weather, and their chances of booking a *gulshor* court for some time that day, and of finding Plassen or some of the others free for a drink.

When Ray said he'd make more coffee, Bodie shook his head. "Time I got up. If you'll shut the door on your way out?"

"Course." He got off the bed the same way he'd got on, but then stood looking down at Bodie. After maybe five seconds, Bodie raised an eyebrow and gave a fractional tilt of the head.

"I was just... If I wasn't already married to you, you'd have made me want to marry you a hundred times over. Thank you."

Bodie grinned, and reached out to give Ray's arm a very brief squeeze. "I will stop worrying, then, that I never said even half the things to you that I planned. Can see you just need a nice pack of coffee. And a shirt to roll up. To feel you've been properly courted."

Chapter 20

West was going to buy a car. Nothing fancy. Malun wasn't paying him enough for anything fancy. He'd wait, though, until Bodie had passed the driving test. Partly, he didn't want Bodie to feel left out, but mostly he wanted to give them both an extra incentive to get Bodie ready for the test. It would be a reward for himself, once he'd proved that he'd managed to teach Bodie something truly useful.

Bodie frowned in confusion. "How's that an incentive for me?"

"Well..." Looking nearly as confused as Bodie. "Don't you want your cousin to get his reward?"

"Oh, yeah." Bodie nodded. "You're right." A twitch of the eyebrows towards Ray. "I'm the one in this marriage who's nice."

Ray gave the smallest shrug of concession. "Nicer, yes. Maybe even more than ten percent nice."

Near the end of the lesson on At Pontal, while they were agreeing that Bodie was entirely ready now to take a driving lesson in Hass Embrun, there was a soft thud from out in the hallway that made West's eyes light up. ~Lamon!~ He hurried out to the hallway and came back with a box about the same size as a video tape.

~Lamon and I send things to each other.~ He waved the box at Bodie, looking so pleased and almost proud, then put it on the dining table and went to the kitchen. The box had West's name printed on it, and a multi-line address that even included the name of the planet. Not like the boxes with deliveries, which just had your name, the number of the flat, and the name of the building.

West had got a small knife from the kitchen. He turned the box over, and Bodie realised that the address had been printed on a large label, that covered the front of the box and had four flaps that wrapped around each side and then overlapped on the back. West worked the top of the knife under the edge of one of the flaps and sliced across. It turned out he'd made the cut just below a narrow flap that sealed the mailing box, and he worked that flap loose with his fingernail, then ripped the box open, slid his hand inside, and drew out a small plastic bag that contained a folded sheet of writing paper, and several small, angular shapes in different colours.

~It's travelled from Clover? The long way, I mean. Through Dishna airport. Or would she have used a shuttle?~ That was his life now. When the most exotic thing a member of his family could do was send something without using a transporter.

West shook his head, not looking at Bodie. ~No. We always use the normal /?/. It's part of the fun. Choosing something we can send each other in a /?/.~

"In a letter, you mean? Through the regular post?"

Now West did look at him. ~That's right. Ray hasn't explained to you about...~ He picked up the mailing box and held it out to Bodie, address-side up. ~How to send a /?/?~

Bodie shook his head. ~What would I be sending? Who to? Everyone I know lives here in Parass. Except for Malun, but he owns everything already.~ He had received a letter, now he thought about it: when the bank had sent the paperwork and cards, addressed to

both him and Ray. Ray had opened the packet, but the things he'd explained had been about the bank and his wages, not about the Pen Embrun postal system.

~Of course. I should show you, though. In case you want to send Malun a birthday present.~ A sudden grin. ~Or me. Once you've got a great job and I'm back at the base in Monor.~

Bodie returned the grin. ~So what's Lamon sent you?~

~It's a...~ West shook the sheet of paper, which was a handwritten letter with a small drawing near the bottom. "She sends me scenes." ~I don't know yet what this one is.~ Bodie nodded at him to go back to reading the letter, and took a closer look at the shapes in the bag.

Now he knew they somehow made a scene, they looked like... what was the word? Origami? That thing where you made birds and frogs by doing special folds in paper. Murphy, it had been, who'd started every shift on a stakeout by making a hawk out of whatever newspaper or magazine the previous pair had left behind, and then placing it with a view of the window. That was the only thing he'd known how to make: hawks. Bodie had no idea what Lamon's shapes were, but they weren't all the same.

After just a few seconds West burst out laughing. He looked at Bodie, about to explain, then shook his head, lifted his free hand like he was telling Bodie to wait, and read through to the end of the letter, chuckling and shaking his head some more.

~What is it, then?~ Bodie smiled and raised an eyebrow.

~It's us. The three of us.~ West was shaking the shapes out of the bag with tiny jerks. ~In the restaurant on Ray's birthday. Look.~ He picked out a white shape, flicked it a couple of times with a fingernail to plump it up, and then placed it on the table. It was a four-legged animal with a large head that was turned at an angle. Fierce-looking. ~That's Ray. She almost always does Ray as a *magneb*. That's a type of wild animal.~ "Like a lion, I suppose." ~And this is you.~ A pink shape. Another four-legged animal, but sleeker. Powerful and watchful, rather than fierce. ~She says it's a *lermot*. That's another type of wild animal. Similar to Ray's type. To the *magneb*.~ "But very rare. Hardly ever seen."

A panther, maybe. Which would make this a pink panther. Bodie snorted in amusement. ~What about you?~ A nod at the green shape. It was almost exactly the sea-green of the shirt West had worn to the restaurant. Well, Lamon had probably seen West in that shirt plenty of times.

~I'm almost always an *artox*.~ Squat and broad, with a triangular head. "Like a lizard. It burrows." He made a vibrating downward movement with his hand.

Bodie laughed. ~Does she have an animal for everyone in the family? What about herself?~

~She used to be a different animal in each month of the year. She'd spend days deciding what animal she should be next month. But for the last couple of years she's been a *cambon*.~ He shrugged. "An otter, maybe?" She's over here.~ West was heading over to the shelves to the left of the couch, pointing at a group of ornaments on the second shelf down. Bodie thought he recognised the group from West's quarters on the ship – the

combination of colours, anyway. The same as with the bags of *davanap*, he'd always thought of the ornaments as just clutter, and had never looked at them closely. Now – and he glanced along the shelves at the other groups – he could see that they were all origami. Presumably all scenes that Lamon had posted to West.

“Oh, yeah, that does look like an otter. A *cambon*, did you say? Who's everybody else, then? What's going on?”

This scene didn't involve anyone else in the family. It was from her studies to be a vet. The otter was trying to get a *soragon* to open its mouth (one of the dog-like animals that lived on the moors), and in this scene the *soragon* actually represented a *soragon*, while her classmates looked on giggling (seven rodent-things in a range of bright colours), and the professor glared at her (a rust-brown bird, with a cruel, curved beak).

~Does she ever do people?~

An immediate no. ~She says you can't really do anything with people. I think she tried in the beginning. But she never showed them to me.~

Bodie nodded. Right now, Lamon was hands-down his favourite Bakkel. So what if she saw him as an animal? She saw all of them as animals. “What's the rest of our scene?” ~That's the three of us. But there's more in the bag.~

There was a table, that unfolded into something like an hourglass shape. It was made of patterned paper covered with fruit and nuts and little cakes. And with flowers and leaves too, and without any sign of the meat or fish the restaurant did so well – but still obviously a table full of good food. West said the paper was wrapping-paper that he'd bought for Lamon in Paris.

There was a waiter – a tall, glossy-black bird – and there was also Dishna: interlocking towers of different heights in three metallic papers with small geometric patterns. There was a silver paper, and a copper one, and a dark-green one. Definitely Dishna.

West had sent Lamon pictures of the flat, and she had built the details of the flat into her scene. West had orders to put Dishna on the leftmost edge of the shelves under the TV, and the restaurant was for the top of the shelves along the inner wall. So it was about a foot higher than Dishna, and looking across at the glittering city over a three-foot gap. West arranged the three of them so that Bodie was nearest the cliff, Ray was behind Bodie with their flanks touching, his fierce look on Bodie as much as on Dishna, and he himself was on the opposite side of the table.

~This is great. Now I wish we weren't going to the cinema tonight, because Ray needs to rush home and see this. So when's Lamon coming to visit?~

West laughed, and pointed an accusatory finger at Bodie. ~Not until I've bought my car.~

~Right. OK, then. So I'll do the rushing home. And I'll call the driving school and book the earliest lesson I can.~

That turned out to be for half eleven on the next At Rahden. Bodie explained that he'd grown up off-world and had years of experience of driving there. He wanted lessons that would prepare him for taking the test. And he might need to correct some bad habits from his off-world driving. He didn't know yet.

Malun arrived in the living-room just before five, and they took him out immediately to see the town and the view across to Dishna. Malun got recognised a lot, but the attention was limited to double-takes and excited or puzzled whispers. Malun was benignly oblivious, and they took their cue from him.

Malun had heard about the birthday meal from both West and Bodie, and he was looking forward to taking them all to the restaurant, maybe in a few months' time. For the next month, he was wondering if Bodie would like to come to his house outside Monor for a late lunch, which for Malun would be an early dinner. The week after that he would be heading out to spend a couple of months with the fleet, so the restaurant could be the next dinner in Parass, when he got back.

They ended their walk at West's flat, where they'd arranged to have a drink before going to the other flat for dinner. West held out for nearly five minutes before pointing out Lamon's restaurant scene, and the scene made Ray laugh hard enough to blow the waiter over. He'd known about Lamon's origami, obviously – she'd started it several years before he'd left home – but he'd had no idea that she made all these scenes for West.

“Do you – I guess you knit things for her?”

West nodded. “Whenever I make something, I knit her a square out of the yarn, including as much as I can of the pattern.” He held up his hands to show the size: about six inches. “She's been sewing the squares together to make a blanket, and it's reached quite a useful size by now. I make animals for her, too, especially if my main project is going slowly. The *cambon* is a good shape for us. It fits easily in a mailing box even when it's fully stuffed.”

Bodie asked what he was going to send her next, and when. It would be a square based on the shawl with the wave design. Probably in a couple of weeks. Joining the *davanap* group had helped him pick up the pace. That was mostly from wanting to have something to show at the weekly meetings on At Kamaran, but now he knew the cafés and the corner of the park where the knitters were most likely to go, so he was able to combine his *davanap* with meeting more people.

They mainly talked about the family over dinner. It turned out that Bodie was the one who'd heard most recently from Ward. Not that he had any news, except about the layout of Ward's quarters in his current ship, and the arrangement of his pictures as of six days earlier. He'd sent Bodie a photo of the wall with the three small pictures, and also a photo of some sketches he'd done of the entire quarters. When he'd sent a photo of his previous quarters a few days after his birthday, Bodie guessed it was a kind of joke. Maybe it still was, but it didn't seem to matter that Bodie obviously didn't get it. Bodie hadn't mentioned to anyone that he and Ward had been writing, but he'd been right in guessing that Malun had known, via Turon. And he was also right about how Ray would react: sighing in exasperation and shaking his head.

Malun didn't have any fresh news of Lamon, though he was having dinner at Clover on At Laura Var so would be able to tell her in person how beautifully the birthday scene worked in the flat. That reminded West of the idea of showing Bodie how to post a letter. He was going to get Bodie to post the next knitted square to Lamon, because Bodie had seemed interested in the whole process. And he'd be happy to show him again, if necessary, when Bodie had something he wanted to post on his own behalf.

“You could post me a book.” Malun shrugged. “You might as well learn my address. I’d be interested to have one you’ve finished and that you think I might enjoy reading. If you send it next week, I’ll be able to read it before you come to dinner. Or to lunch, rather.”

“Yeah. OK.” Bodie liked the idea. Of course, he could just hand Malun a book off the shelves right now, but there was something special about choosing a surprise for a friend, and then posting it. “What sort of books d’you enjoy?”

“Ah. Well. Really, only ones that will help the business. I don’t read fiction for pleasure. But I can usually find enough points of interest when I do read it. So maybe just aim to surprise me: a type of book you think I won’t have read before.”

Ray was grinning. “I know what we’ll send you.”

“We? I’m doing the surprising here.” Bodie tapped his own chest. “But yeah. I bet we’ve got the same idea.” That L.A. cop novel by the homicide detective. It should fit OK in a mailing box. He might put a note in with the book, explaining that it was the first book of his that Ray had read, and it made humans look very bad indeed. He and Ray had both found it funny and shocking and smart, and he’d never read anything like it, so Malun probably hadn’t either. Yeah, it was only right to warn Malun what to expect.

Ray and Malun said goodbye with a nod – though a warmer one than when they’d last seen each other in Monor – but the others hugged. They offered West another drink after Malun had left as it was still early, but West needed to get home and do some ironing.

Bodie said, “D’you remember the name of the book that ‘we’re’ gonna send?” Ray nodded. “On the count of three, then, let’s say it.” Yes, he’d been right. Ray’d been thinking of “The Glitter Dome” too. They grinned at each other. “What ’d’you think he’ll make of it?”

Ray pulled a face. “Probably set up a whole new team in Anthropology to study it. Wish I could be at your lunch. To see his face when he’s talking about it. What he asks you and how.”

Bodie pulled a face. “Didn’t sound like I could get you invited. What’s his place like? I guess it’s practically on the base.”

No, it was about fifty miles away, on the coast to the north. Malun and Raina had bought it together, a few years before Raina had met Savas. It was pretty. Malun had a housekeeper, who took excellent care of everything, and was a very good cook. It was the greatest honour in the business, to be invited to Malun’s house for any reason, even just for a pot of *kenit*.

“What about family? How often do Ferros and the others go? Or what about when you were a kid?”

“We went three or four times a year, I guess. I dunno about Ferros and Homa. Last time I was there was during our father’s funeral. Malun hosted the gathering on several of the days. So I -” A small sigh. “I do have some good memories of the place, but they’re not recent.”

For a few seconds Bodie tried to think of something to say, but he had nothing so he put his arms around Ray instead and pulled him close. From Ray's sigh and the way he returned the pressure, that had been the right thing to do.

After a while they pulled apart enough to pick up their beers, though they kept hold with the other arm. "I was gonna ask when you'd be ready to start your message to Ferros. But now doesn't feel like the right time." They hadn't talked about it since they decided on the plan. Hadn't talked about any of the difficult parts of the previous weekend.

"I'm ready now."

"Yeah? I'd thought I'd need to remind you a couple of times." Nag him.

Ray shook his head. "I'd decided by At Kamaran what I was going to say. Not every word but what I wanted her to think."

"Is it something you can tell me? Now, I mean. Without us having to book a whole weekend for it."

Ray gave a small shrug. "I think you'll be OK with it. I'm gonna let her think we're having normal sex. Like any couple. But say that sometimes I get these ideas. About what the Mabein might think and... Sometimes I do let it bother me so... 'What does she think?'"

Bodie thought about it. It was better than the truth, that was for sure. "But what about the separate bedrooms? Where does that come in if we're a normal couple?"

"Most of the time we do sleep together. But when I do get these thoughts about the Mabein, it's during the night when I'm in bed with you. And if I can leave quietly, without waking you up, and spend the rest of the night on my own, then the thoughts... They don't get too bad. I found that worked for me on the ship, and I didn't want to make any changes once we got home."

Bodie nodded, slowly. "Yeah, that does all sound like you. But the bathrooms? I bet Turon told her we don't share there at all."

"It's just convenient. Something else we got used to on the ship."

"Yeah. OK, yeah. We sound almost normal. You gonna send it tomorrow?"

"I could send it now. OK if I use your computer? Easier than typing on the couch."

"Sure. And I'll write a note to Malun to put in with the book."

The note just took a few minutes, but Ray's message took over half an hour. At the look on Ray's face as he came back into the living-room, Bodie put his book down and got to his feet. "Looks like that was rough. What can I get you?"

After some frowning: "Get yourself a glass of *tharva*. And take it out to the balcony. And let me taste it from your mouth."

With the glass nearly empty, Bodie said, "How rough was it? Sending the message."

A long, ragged sigh against his face. "I had to say those things about you. I hope – I hope – That in a month's time all she'll remember is the other half of the message. With my

news. All of which comes down to how she wouldn't recognise my life in Parass since she visited. No one, no one in the family has any reason to be worried about me any more."

"Yeah. Wonder how long Malun will keep up the dinners. After it's obvious we've both surprised him."

A brisk shake of the head. "It's a treat for him, to have dinner with his son. You know it is. Here. Finish it." He was holding out the glass.

Bodie did as he was told. When his mouth was free again, he said, "D'you notice, this time, that you're being commanding?"

Ray raised an eyebrow. "I notice from the particular smug smile you get as you instantly obey."

Bodie laughed. "Well, so far it's always been something I wanna do." His turn to raise an eyebrow. "Time for bed?"

"How about out here? Save bed for the goodnight kiss."

They'd never had sex on the balcony before. Bodie liked the idea, but... "Make it quiet? I don't wanna have the neighbours banging on the walls. Throwing buckets of water over." The children were long in bed, but the neighbours on both sides and above had been wandering in and out all evening.

Ray looked at him for a few seconds, with a slight frown like he had some questions. But then he said, "OK. I can do that." He laid two fingers over Bodie's lips, then with his other hand he took Bodie's wrist, and pressed Bodie's hand to his groin.

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West took Bodie to post the book immediately after the morning lesson on At Mordez, which was just a matter of going down to the supermarket. All of the supermarkets in town had a postal machine. Bodie had seen the machines and seen people using them, but never thought to ask.

The machine took care of everything - as long as you could read and type enough Hass Embrun to deal with the options on the screen. First you gave it your payment card, and then it asked if you needed a mailing box or if you'd brought your own. West did have a couple in the flat, but he'd decided he should show Bodie every aspect of the process. So Bodie selected the option that made a sheet of punched plastic slide out of a thin slot, and he folded it along the pre-formed lines and activated the adhesive areas to make it into a box, and he slid the book in and sealed the box.

The next step was to place the package in the larger slot a few inches below the thin one. The machine told him the weight and then asked for the address, starting with whether it was staying on Pen Embrun or going to a Hailin station or base somewhere off-world. The system had a complete list of addresses for Pen Embrun, and you found yours by narrowing it down from archipelago to island to region to town to street to building to flat-number, always selecting from the options on the screen rather than typing it yourself. Except at the end, when you typed the person's name. They'd covered the address system during the lesson, and now Bodie had the details for Malun, for Clover, for West, and for himself and Ray.

The machine then told you the price, and after you'd paid, it printed out a label with the address and confirmation of payment. You stuck the label on the package, put the package back in the slot for the machine to confirm that it was the same package, with the same weight, and then there was a soft clatter as it was pushed off the scales and fell into the underground mail-collection system. Malun should get it on At Pontal.

So Bodie now knew the system for small packages. For anything larger you had to go to the post office, which was near the ferry terminal, and get someone to process it for you. They had a few of the machines there, of course, but most people used the ones in shops.

A message arrived for Ray while Bodie was having lunch. Was it Ferros? Already? And was a quick reply likely to mean good or bad news?

When Ray got home he said he already knew about the message – it had been one of the days at work that let him keep an eye on his messages – and, yes, the message was from Ferros, but he'd decided not to read it at work. "Should I -" A deep breath, released sharply. "No, I know what you'll say. Read it now. Before dinner. Get it over with."

"Yeah. Does sound like me. Up to you, though."

Ray grunted, shook his head several times then gave another sharp sigh. "I'll do it in the spare room."

He was back in just a few minutes, looking more resigned than anything, Bodie thought. "She was only... She wanted to warn me she's going to need some time to think about it. Before the end of the week, she hopes. But I shouldn't worry if it turns out to be longer. She won't say a word to anyone about what I told her. Not Homa. Or Turon." A shrug. "We were right about Turon. That the two of them would've talked about us like that."

Bodie nodded. "It's good that she warned us."

"They've always been good like that, her and Turon. Oh, and she sends you her regards. So I sent yours back, and to Homa."

"Yeah. Thanks. So when we do hear back, do we...? D'you think we should reckon on having another weekend?"

Ray took a few seconds to reply. "Probably. I might need some time to myself. To think through what she said before I can tell you."

Bodie blinked, then nodded. "I won't ask, then, the next time I see you've got a message. You'll tell me when you're ready."

* * * * *

Bodie had thought the driving instructor would have a thousand questions about Earth, and the cars there and the roads and learning to drive. He and West had included a lot of that in their lessons. But instead all Hazon Barbas wanted to know was what side of the road they drove on in Bodie's archipelago, and how much opportunity Bodie had had to observe how traffic was controlled on Pen Embrun. The man showed not a flicker of interest in the *nespa* with whom Bodie had seen many of the roads on the island and some on the mainland. Not in how they'd met, how long Bodie had been learning Hass Embrun. Nothing.

That was just odd, wasn't it? And the man had no sense of humour. Bodie cracked a couple of jokes in the first quarter of an hour, when they were still in the flat's parking-space in the underground car-park, and all he got in return was raised eyebrows.

It was so different from what he'd come to expect of the Hailin that he felt really quite let down, and that distracted him enough that he got confused with the controls a few times, especially with the gear change. Each time Barbas just reminded him blandly – or was there a hint of those raised eyebrows? – and Bodie had to bite down on the urge to say that he'd been going everything just fine at the weekend, when he'd been practising with Ray.

They didn't get outside Parass for that first lesson, but Barbas had made several comments about Bodie's obvious experience at observing and anticipating, and at the end he said that they'd take the road to Budjard in the next lesson, which would be at the same time on At Kamaran.

So it could have been worse and the guy did seem a good, steady teacher, but it took an effort at the afternoon lesson to meet West's stream of excited questions with a grin, and with a casual shrug that suggested that everything they'd prepared for had gone exactly as planned.

When Ray asked that evening, Bodie did admit to his problems with the controls, and they went down for more practice over the next three evenings, with Ray working hard to distract Bodie with complicated questions in Hass Embrun about Earth, because Bodie was still not in the mood to admit to everything about the lesson.

The second lesson went much more smoothly, as Bodie knew what to expect of Barbas and he was seeing the benefits of the extra practice. On the way back from Budjard, Barbas started talking about the details of the local driving test, and what Bodie could do to prepare for it, including the aspects where his *nespa* could help.

* * * * *

When Bodie got back from the conversation session with West and Shilda on An Embrun, he thought at first that Ray was out. Gone to the supermarket, maybe. But it turned out he'd been in the spare room, because Ferros had sent a proper reply.

"There anything you can tell me?" From Ray's expression it hadn't been great news, but hard to guess just how bad.

"Well..." A long pause. "Nothing I'd said made her think less of you. Otherwise... I need to get back to her with some more questions. See if I can get her to be actually helpful." So Ray was annoyed with Ferros, but still fairly hopeful that she could help.

"How long'll you need for that? Do we cancel our plans for the weekend?"

Ray was shaking his head. "I'll have it done by this evening. Or – This time tomorrow, at the latest."

Ray spent a lot of the day muttering to himself under his breath in Hass Embrun. At first he apologised to Bodie and shook himself back to normal conversation, but by the time of their run he'd accepted that Bodie really did not mind. He wrote his reply before dinner, but then decided to leave it overnight and make any changes while Bodie was at

his conversation session. He seemed to be fairly confident in his reply, though, judging by the fact that they spent the evening without any further muttering from Ray.

They watched a Hailin film by a popular director, in preparation for going to see his latest film in Harding the next evening, on a double-date with Buka and Gamlan. It was a low-key drama, not quite in the style of a documentary, about a year in the lives of a group of competitive weightlifters in a small city. There was no big final triumph, there were no heroes or villains, just a set of people going through phases of taking their hobby more or less seriously, and influencing each other in different ways, and dealing with work and family and sex. One of the group had a failed betrothal during the year – the first time Bodie had seen the plain betrothal masks – and there was a lot of discussion of hopes and fears about becoming qualified. It was exactly the type of conversation you'd get, Ray said, among any group of Hailin approaching their mid-twenties.

The film probably had more dialogue than any other Hailin film Bodie had watched, but as practice for the cinema they'd agreed that they wouldn't pause it. When Bodie got badly lost he nudged Ray, and Ray whispered a few words to get him on to the right theme. He didn't let himself nudge when he was only lost enough to be confused, because there was a limit to what you could expect other cinema-goers to put up with.

Even with the stretches of confusion he wasn't bored, and the competition scenes were exciting enough to leave him wondering if Parass had that kind of weightlifting group. Ray said that the new film was in the same style – almost everything was, from this director – but the new film was based around a restaurant. Buka thought the film might annoy him, but he still really wanted to see it.

They had invited West, but West had already arranged to help a woman from the *davanap* group to babysit her older sister's four young children. He was really looking forward to it, and Ray, Buka and Gamlan clearly didn't see anything odd in it at all, as a way for a twenty-one-year-old boy to spend a Saturday evening. So Bodie kept his mouth shut. It'd be that biology of theirs, of course. It got into everything.

Buka and Gamlan got tickets for them all for the 6.12 showing of the film, so the five o'clock bus got them into Harding in good time, and then they ate in the same restaurant afterwards, and talked about the film and the director and restaurants and weightlifting.

They all got the eleven o'clock bus. Buka and Gamlan usually got a taxi to Gamlan's house when Gamlan wanted to drink and not drive, but this time, they said, they'd prefer the half-mile walk from the bus-stop. On a clear night like that night, it apparently got Buka in a particularly horny mood. They were so matter-of-fact about it. None of the leering that Bodie would have expected. Or would probably have used himself.

They waved at the pair as the bus pulled away, then Bodie said, "I've had enough of Hass Embrun for today."

Ray looked briefly concerned, but a glance seemed to reassure him. "OK. You been saving things up? That you need English for?"

Bodie thought about it, then shook his head. “Don’t think so. Not got anything to say, really. But I wanna be quiet in English.”

Ray raised an eyebrow, gave a lopsided smile, then slid his hand into Bodie’s. “Yeah, let’s do that.”

It was a comfortable silence, Bodie thought. It lasted for about half the journey, until they were a couple of stops past Budjard, when Ray mentioned that he was close to finishing his current English book (a good, short detective novel, written by a woman), and said that for his next book he was thinking of either trying one of the science-fiction books, or deliberately looking for the next book to baffle Malun with. Bodie thought Ray would be better waiting to see first what Malun had to say about “The Glitter Dome”, and so they talked about science-fiction for the rest of the journey, though about films more than about books.

The night really was very clear. Bright, too, as the moons were almost full. About half of the people from the bus seemed to be heading back to the buildings with them, but they had the path almost to themselves by the time they reached At Oba Nyon.

“D’you think Buka and Gamlan are already fast asleep by now?”

Ray laughed. “Probably. Unless their thing is to make the walk last an hour.”

Bodie grunted. “Didn’t sound like that to me.”

A shrug. “Buka’s hard to predict. Gamlan seems to like that, though.”

Said from experience, of course. OK, it was the sort of thing you might know about a friend just from conversation. If you were Bodie or West. But this was Ray. Bodie left a pause of about five seconds, then said, “The last time I was in that restaurant, I spent half the time thinking about what to wear. To court you.”

“Oh.” Ray’s voice had turned deep with appreciation, and he took a tight grip on Bodie’s arm, just above the elbow. “They should put a sign up by the table. Next time, you’ve got to point it out to me.”

Bodie nodded. He knew Ray was expecting him to grin, at the least, but all he could manage was a raised eyebrow. “For a while, I was thinking about wearing my army uniform. I did bring it, you know. It’s in a box in the main cupboard. But I didn’t know – If you’d want that reminder.”

Ray was frowning. He’d released his hold on Bodie’s arm. “What reminder? I’ve never seen you in it.”

“Yeah, that’s – We had our plans for that evening. The Tuesday. That we made before you found out... what I’d done to you.”

Slowly: “A reminder of the day I found out. We found out. Is that what you’re saying?”

Bodie shrugged. “It could be. I thought. We’ve never talked about any of that. So I decided not to risk it. Go with the suit, instead.”

“So we’re talking about it now?” Very thoughtful, but then a sudden broad smile, and his hand was on Bodie’s arm again, though with a looser grip. “For the next time I command you to court me?”

Now Bodie did grin. "Would be useful to know."

"I'd love to see you in it. You don't have to wait for anything as official as a letter of introduction from Turon." They laughed, and then they were kissing. They broke the kiss only when the people off the midnight ferry started walking past them, close on both sides. They resumed the walk themselves, slowly, with their hands lightly clasped.

"So the uniform's the main thing you think about? For that Tuesday? The plans we had?"

"Yeah, I – Well, you know what happens when you look at me."

"I do know." Almost a whisper. He nodded slowly, several times. "What I think about is... I didn't get to tell Malun that I wanted to marry you. I didn't get to ask you. I didn't get to tell you the truth. Instead I – I didn't do any part of it right."

"When were you gonna ask me?"

"As soon as I could after I'd told Malun. After I'd agreed with him how I could tell you. I imagined, maybe, during the reception. When I was wearing Udom Kol. Asking you to come with me and then taking the mask off."

Bodie nodded and gave a brief, harsh sigh. "At first, with Malun – When I realised who the two of you were. I thought you'd asked him to tell me that it was over. Of course we couldn't be together. You'd come to your senses. So after that, anything was good news."

Ray's eyes had gone wide. "Malun never told me that."

Bodie shook his head. "I didn't say anything to him. I hadn't a clue what was going on. Except that he knew we'd had sex. So I was bluffing for all I was worth."

"You're worth -" Ray turned and put a hand on Bodie's chest, to stop them both in their tracks. Then an impatient sigh as he glanced over Bodie's shoulder, and he pulled Bodie several feet over, onto the grass between the buildings, clear of the path. "You're worth so much better. For your first day as a married man."

Bodie raised an eyebrow. "It was... Y'know, it wasn't that bad. I got to meet Turon."

A moment of what looked like genuine outrage, then Ray was shaking his head. "Who's your first choice as a *nespa*. I know." With a narrowing of the eyes: "Don't fool yourself, Bodie Vasmar. You couldn't cope with him."

Bodie gave a bark of laughter, then remembered the mostly-sleeping buildings and dropped his voice very low. "What, the constant lack of sexual demands? Or the hours of music every day?"

"He expects the best of everyone. It's relentless. Merciless. Within a week you'd be sneaking off every night. To go the kitchens and swap people's cupboards around. Use up the last slice of this. And the last spoonful of that. You know you would."

"I'd be tempted, yeah. But I'd never do it. I'd wanna be a good *nespa* to such a lovely man. If I did sneak off, it'd be to make sure the useless sods were all doing their washing-up."

Three long, rasping breaths, then: "I'm a lovely man."

"You're a gorgeous man. Totally different thing."

The rasping turned into a growl. “Bed. To bed. Now.” He stepped away, gesturing with his head for Bodie to hurry up. Bodie took a few seconds, thinking he ought to be making at least some protest, but Ray chose his moments so well.

* * * * *

Some way into the goodnight kiss Bodie said, “You’re not really jealous of Turon. Are you?”

Ray laughed. “No, I – Not like that. He is a lovely man. It’s great that you’re friends.”

“Yeah. We should lay off him. At least for a while.”

“Sure. For as long as you want.”

“What would he think? If he knew about stuff like me forging that letter from him?”

A sigh and a shrug. “With me, he’s never expected the best. You could confess to everything about the letter, and he’d still blame me. You wished Ward a happy birthday, for fuck’s sake. He’s never gonna believe anything bad of you for the rest of our lives.”

Bodie smirked. “I call that a result for one short message. Never tried that before.”

“See? That’s Turon. If you’d had another four days with him... If he hadn’t made such a good case for going down to the Kew pub. Hadn’t told me the exact time and the directions. I bet he’d’ve got you up to Liverpool looking for your family. And thinking it was all your own idea.”

Bodie laughed. “Nah. We’re both fucking awful sons and brothers. It’s bone-deep. Hell, wasn’t it the first thing we found we had in common?”

A grunt of recognition. Slowly: “Almost the first. Apart from how much we...” He swallowed and half-closed his eyes, and Bodie felt a strong nudge against his hip. That would be a first: having sex in their robes after the shower. Of course, he loved seeing Ray like this, he was just as hard, but... What if their robes came open? What would that do to Ray? Would it stop them having the goodnight kiss? He didn’t want to take that risk.

“Both like gin-and-tonic?” He pulled away fractionally, and Ray blinked, frowned briefly, then did the same.

“Yeah, that’s right. And we know how to wait.”

* * * * *

After Bodie had seen Ray off to work on At Mordez, he went down to the gym for a session with the weights. He needed more exercise. Could do with more variety. Like a martial art. He missed karate. He missed fighting. In fact, if they told him they could transport one person from Earth – to keep him company for, say, an hour a day – then right now he’d choose Macklin.

Of course the *gulshor* was always a great fight, but it just wasn’t the same type of challenge as hand-to-hand combat. Contact sports. There was no substitute, that he’d found. The main Hailin martial art was called *gordrem*. West used to do it at school, he’d talked about it in an early lesson. There’d been a couple of *gordrem* groups on the ship, but if there were any in Parass, they didn’t use the gym at the same time as Bodie

and Ray. It was an evening thing, probably, or at the weekends. He could easily find out at the library, but he wouldn't. Because any contact with any man would be too much, when he was getting so little with Ray. So that would be another thing to look forward to, for when Ray got the Mabein to leave him the fuck alone.

Bodie had decided that the evening of At Laura Var would be a good time for the uniform, as long as Ray hadn't got distracted by an unhelpful message from Ferros. But Ferros was obviously also taking her time to think about Ray's second set of questions, and when nothing had arrived by half-nine, Bodie put down his book and went into the bedroom, where everything was waiting at the bottom of the wardrobe.

Of course, he looked best of all in service dress, but he didn't have that, and from everything he knew of Ray, Ray would choose the combat fatigues any day. After he'd laced up the boots, he tugged and straightened the trousers and tunic, adjusted the beret that last fraction of an inch, tightened his jaw, then raised an eyebrow in tribute to the man in the mirror. Yeah, even without a weapon, this man would be lethal.

He took the corridor, to make more of an entrance, though this time he wasn't going to go as far as letting himself out and ringing the doorbell; the sight of him like this would worry the neighbours too much.

"Ray Bakkel? I'm Sergeant Bodie of the SAS. We've received word of a -" Ray had leapt to his feet after just one glance, his book clattering against the side of the coffee table and then to the floor. He looked genuinely startled and even panicked. Bodie stepped forward, up to the couch, his arm outstretched. "There's no need to be alarmed. Everything's under control. I'm just here as a -"

"Stay back! Please!" Ray had retreated halfway towards the windows. "Don't come any closer."

Bodie heard the words. Of course he did. But here was Ray in front of him, with something scaring him, and all Bodie knew was he had to get to him, to reassure him. "Ray. Ray, it's OK. I'm not going to -"

Ray's back thudded against the glass. ~Get that /?/ body away from me!~ A shout, and Bodie did stop dead, and then edged slowly back.

"Ray, I'm not going to – You said you were OK with this. You said you wanted to see me in it."

"I didn't know. I didn't know what it would look like." Now Ray was scarcely even looking at him, just taking brief glances then jerking his head to the side.

Bodie swallowed hard, took a look down at himself, then stepped back rapidly until he was two feet past the couch.

"I'm sorry. I thought – I thought you had a good idea what to expect. Is it – that Tuesday? What is it?" Maybe... some hellish film Ray had forgotten watching? Had a contact mission ever gone so badly that the Bakkels had ended up murdered?

"It's... It's..." His head was turned far to the side. His eyes were closed tight. "I'm desperate to have you fuck me. With you like that." At the thought, Bodie found himself immediately, painfully hard, even with the sight of Ray cringing away from him. He

forced himself to take another step back. Ray was scarcely hard at all, though, so he must already have moved back far enough that Ray wasn't getting his *mana*.

"Right. I'll change. Then what d'you want me to do afterwards? Will you be OK if I just... stay in my room? Or should I check into a hotel?" Parass had a couple of small hotels, most of them on the path up to the cliffs. Of course there was always West's couch, but Bodie would sleep rough for a week before he'd give West any hint of this.

A wave of tension passed all the way up Ray's body, ending with a violent shake of the head and an almost-strangled grunt. "I don't know. Could you give me half an hour? I want to... I want to try to make things better now. Tonight. But I don't know when I'll have enough control."

"OK. Can I -" His book was on the coffee table. Four feet closer to Ray. "No, it's OK. I'll get a book from the shelves."

"Thank you." Low. Shaky. "Bodie, I'm sorry."

"I know." He'd pulled something from the crime books, choosing only by the state of the spine, the fact that neither of them had read it.

The door to the bedroom was closed and he decided to leave it that way and take the corridor, and then he closed that door too. He threw the book down on the bed, then went into the bathroom and banged his head five times against the tiles to the left of the sink. A pause for two deep breaths, three more bangs, and then he stripped naked in record time, throwing each item hard towards the corner nearest to the living-room. That was also the corner with the laundry-basket, but he didn't see himself washing any of this. Didn't see himself doing anything except chucking it straight out. As soon as he could bring himself to touch it again.

He could just manage to look in the mirror. He was still partially erect, but he could kill that in short order, he was sure, just by looking into his own eyes a couple more times.

An animal's body. That had to be kept far away. Kept out of sight. Lethal, alright. To a Hailin's soul.

He'd already put the day's clothes in the basket and he wasn't going to fish them out, so he went into the bedroom and put on a fresh outfit. Something obviously respectable including a jacket, in case the hotel was inclined to be wary of someone turning up so late at night. He'd placed his wallet on the bedside table when he'd changed into his uniform, so he put it ready in the jacket. And he went back into the bathroom for his toothbrush and toothpaste, and placed them on the table on top of the book. He wasn't going to do any reading right now. Not a chance.

He sat on the side of the bed for about a minute, his eyes on the floor, then suddenly slumped backwards to lie looking up at the ceiling. No sounds at all from next door. It wouldn't surprise him if Ray was still pinned against the windows, not wanting to see even the place where Bodie had stood.

He should be thinking of it as a compliment. Shouldn't he? Any other bloke would. To be told, to see, that you were so devastatingly sexy.

Sure, sure, if you could manage to think that without noticing that your husband hated himself for wanting you. That you were everything out of his deepest nightmares.

Did it make it worse, even, that he knew that all Ray's other nightmares were about hurting him? It might not be love that got Ray through the days, but it felt close enough to satisfy anyone, most of the time. To fool anyone? No. No. He didn't know.

Why did Turon have to work in fucking outer space? If he was here... Like, just got into orbit and decided to surprise them by beaming down onto the balcony. Right outside the window, at that very moment. Bodie would tell him everything. Absolutely everything. To hell with privacy. With Ray's ideas about how to handle this mess. He wouldn't expect Turon to have any answers. He just wanted there to be someone who really knew. And knew right now. Not after the four days that any message he sent would take to get to Turon.

A knock on the door. Had it been half an hour? 10.09. Yes, it had.

"Bodie, please don't open the door. Not yet. Can you hear me?"

"Yeah. I can hear you."

"Please stay. But keep the door closed until the morning. I'm – I'm going to sleep on the couch. And I've cancelled our *gulshor* court for tomorrow. But I hope you'll have breakfast with me."

"Course I will."

"Thank you. I'm so sorry."

"I know. G'night, Ray."

After a couple of seconds: "Good night."

Well, if he was stuck here for the rest of the night, he might as well go to bed. He undressed again, folded his clothes, and put them on a shelf in the wardrobe, ready for the next day. When he'd finished in the bathroom, he did the same with his uniform, though he stowed it in a drawer out of sight. His army training ran even deeper than he'd known; he had to take care of his kit, no matter what.

He tried to concentrate on the book, but now he could hear Ray moving around just a few feet away from the head of the bed: using his bathroom, and then in his bedroom, presumably gathering up his bedding. Then a few minutes later there was a droning, clattering sound that Bodie had never heard before, from just outside the windows. He got up and opened the blinds fully, and found the view of the sea was entirely cut off by white slats that were moving downwards just an inch past the windows. The storm-shutters. Ray had pointed them out, said they might use them six or seven times a year, most likely in the weeks after midwinter. The winter storms wouldn't start for months yet. So this must be Ray blocking the balcony doors. Saving himself from the terrible temptation to sneak out and catch a glimpse of his husband sleeping.

Sleeping. Not gonna be much of that tonight, for either of them. Maybe he should have gone to a hotel.

No. It was good that Ray wanted him to stay. Even if it meant seeing Ray take all his fucked-up precautions. They'd have breakfast together, and then dinner together, and maybe it would take a few days but they'd get past this.

* * * * *

The first sign that Ray was awake was the storm-shutters going up shortly before half-six. Then, like the evening in reverse, Ray was in his bedroom, and then in his bathroom. At the sound of the shower, Bodie put the book down and went to take a shower himself.

By the time he was dressed, he thought he could smell coffee. “Ray? Are you there? Can I open the door?”

“Bodie, yes. I’m ready.”

Ray was in the kitchen, slicing bread. “D’you need me to keep my distance?”

“No. I don’t think so. Just a normal distance for a weekday breakfast on the balcony.”

When they might touch each other’s hands or arms lightly when they were making a point, but wouldn’t do anything that could even count as a *tassuram*. “OK. What sort of juice do you fancy today?”

They were wary of each other at first, but that soon wore off once Ray started talking about his team’s current case, and the new style of training they were going to start in the next month. It was Sten’s birthday next At Kamaran, too, and Ray was planning to go to the drinks, which meant he’d be a couple of hours late. He’d get dinner somewhere in Dishna.

They usually hugged at the door, but today Bodie just reached out and squeezed Ray’s arm, and Ray briefly covered Bodie’s hand with his own.

Quickly, before Ray could turn to open the door, Bodie said, “I’ll throw the uniform out as soon as you’ve gone. You won’t have to worry about coming across it in a cupboard.”

Just as quickly, Ray shook his head. “No, don’t do that. It’s important. To both of us. I will find a way to get us what we want.”

“OK.” Bodie nodded and managed to smile. “You can’t get Ferros to think any quicker?”

“I can try. Been thinking about how. I’ll think some more on the ferry.”

* * * * *

Bodie wanted a run, but changing his clothes again, taking another morning shower would be ridiculous. So he made it a brisk walk instead, around the coast and across the moors, and he went straight to West’s flat at the end of the walk. They’d been concentrating on reading and writing since they’d finished with cars and driving, and at least one of the examples every day would be about work. Next week, on At Mordez, they were going to look at the Dishna job listings for the first time. So just next week he might be calling a stranger in Dishna and trying to persuade them that he was worth taking the time to interview. He’d told West that he felt ready, but really it was no more than a quarter ready. But it had been like that for any number of things that he had ended up doing. Next week was a good time to start. It meant he’d be able to tell Malun about it at their lunch.

The phone rang shortly before one. Bodie thought at first it might be Barbas, the driving instructor, calling to reschedule the next day’s lesson, but it was Ray. He said he was calling from the car. “I know it’s not nearly enough but I want to do something special for you for dinner tonight. What can I cook for you? Or where would you like to go? Anything you want.”

Bodie didn't want to go out. Right then, it would feel like they were avoiding their home. A drink out after dinner, maybe. That would be OK. "Let's have a curry. You can get us some really good beer. And that thick yoghurt. And a fancy dessert. I can get everything else downstairs."

Ray laughed, sounding slightly exasperated. "You're not going to let me do everything? You know that's supposed to be the point."

"I don't wanna be stuck out on the balcony. Doing nothing." Like he'd been stuck in the bedroom. He wanted to be elbow-to-elbow with Ray. Working as a team.

"OK. Well. I'll do all the worst parts. Like all the peeling."

"Obviously." Ray laughed, and Bodie felt properly warm for the first time that day. He wanted to ask Ray if he'd got any ideas about Ferros, but it could wait until the evening.

* * * * *

Ray bought three types of beer, all new to Bodie, and two types of dessert. They had the lightest beer while they were cooking and with the meal, and then switched to the darkest when they moved to the couch. They sat at opposite ends, but after Ray got back from turning the record over, he leaned forward with his fingers reaching for the fastening of his right shoe, and the toe of the left shoe holding down the heel while he flexed his right foot. "Can I?" Sliding his gaze towards the space beside Bodie where he normally curled up. In answer, Bodie simply raised his right arm, ready to draw Ray close. They gave identical sighs, sharp and exhausted, and then were very quiet for several minutes.

Shortly after the next track had started, Bodie said, "How'd it go on the ferry with ideas for hurrying Ferros?"

A fractional shrug. "I decided to phone her. So I did that after I talked to you."

Bodie was surprised. "Wha'd she say? What did you say?"

"I said it'd been good to know, after my first message, how long she was likely to need. So did she know for the second one if it was going to be a week, or two weeks? Or what? But the fact that I was calling. And during the week, while I was at work..."

"She figured something was wrong."

A nod. "She asked. I said I'd had a bad night. Probably my worst yet. With vivid images. And I hadn't been able to protect you from my reaction. We were both very shaken. We thought that knowing something definite about her reply would help us get back to normal more quickly."

"So is she close to writing it? Could she say?"

"This weekend, she thinks."

"Is it gonna be more helpful? She give any clues?"

A sigh then a shake of the head. "No, not really. She couldn't talk for long. She said to give you a hug from her."

Bodie grunted, and briefly tightened his grip on Ray's shoulder. "D'you think I'll get that before this weekend? How shaken are you? You gonna be sleeping on the couch again?"

"No. I hope not. I want to lie down with you. For a goodnight *tassuram*. If you're willing to take the risk."

Bodie had to think about it. "It's good that you want to. It's good that you're here." Another squeeze of Ray's shoulder. "But if you think there's a risk..." Shaking his head. "I couldn't take that two nights in a row."

"Well... a *tassuram* shouldn't be able to take me by surprise but... Last night was so bad." A ragged sigh. "I think... I can't be trusted. Not completely. Not yet. I'll just give you the hug from Ferros. At the door. Before we go to bed."

"OK."

For the next couple of tracks, they just drank their beer and made the odd comment on the music. Bodie could feel Ray getting restless, though, and wasn't surprised when his tone suddenly turned thoughtful and determined. "All the time today when I wasn't thinking of ideas for Ferros, I was trying to think of something I could do to show you how sorry I was. But dinner was all I could think of. I can't buy you a book here. Anything to wear..." He shuddered. "That would be so wrong. As an apology for behaving like that. It would be an insult. A picture? But that could take weeks to find. I should know what would mean something to you. And I don't."

"It did mean something. You calling about dinner. And you got something done about Ferros. That's worth more than..." He shrugged. "A case of red wine."

After the record finished they decided to see what was on TV, and ended up watching nearly an hour of sports. When it was time for bed they went through the main bedroom to the far doorway, and they stopped there, and turned, and put their arms around each other.

Their breathing was deep and slow, and the only other sound was the rasp of their stubble as they rubbed their cheeks together. Every now and again, one would turn his head far enough to press his lips to the other's cheek, and then they'd both sigh.

"Malun told me once that Ferros liked to hug. But I never imagined anything as thorough as this."

Ray chuckled. "Just the first few seconds were from her. Then I forgot about time."

"Yeah. Me too. So d'you think we've got time for a kiss as well?" He'd spent at least the last three minutes trying to figure out how to ask. He had no idea how ready Ray might be.

After a brief frown: "As long as we make it a – A *tolmin* kiss?" Bodie nodded.

He'd wondered if Ray's idea of a *tolmin* kiss would be closed-mouthed, like Turon's at the end of his visit, but it was more a very shallow version of their normal goodnight kiss.

"Ray." Holding the backs of his fingers to Ray's cheek. "I think you were born knowing how to make me feel good." And with a talent for making him feel terrible, too, but that was never deliberate.

A lopsided smile. “We’re the best *iskolpas* I’ve ever heard of.”

Chapter 21

By the next evening they were able to have their goodnight kiss lying down, and on At Oba Nyon they did keep their *gulshor* booking and they had sex in Bodie's cubicle afterwards. It was tense, almost silent sex, a lot like their first time in a cubicle. But with something they'd done so often, Bodie trusted Ray to know when the risk was really gone. That evening they took West for dinner in Buka's restaurant, and that night they were truly back to normal.

Shilda had become the regular extra person for the conversation sessions on An Embrun. The main topic for that morning was her work, and particularly how her bank handled the recruitment process for different types of position. About half an hour in, the phone rang. West looked mildly annoyed as he got up to answer it. ~I'm sorry. I'll tell them to call back later.~

As soon as he heard who it was, though, his frown changed to one of obvious temptation and disappointment. ~I really wish I could, Polmas, but I'm in the middle of one of my lessons. If it had been an hour later...~

~What is it?~ Shilda sounded almost urgent, like she had to get involved before West could hang up.

~It's Polmas at the library. About the children's /?/. Carrow's had to /?/. And since I've been helping out, they know I'm ready to do it, but -~

~I think you should go. Don't you, Bodie?~

~Yeah. You'll enjoy it.~ Whatever it was.

~I – When would we do the rest, though?~

Shilda shook her head briefly. ~Next week would be /?/. I've got plans for the rest of the day. I think Bodie's got enough now, that he could /?/ with Ray.~

West was nodding, decided, and he gave Polmas the good news, and the three of them left the flat together.

When Bodie walked into the living-room, he found Ray sitting near the far end of the couch, with the television on. Ray jerked his head around with a horrified gasp, and in the next few, frozen seconds, Bodie took in the fact that Ray had tears running down his face. While the shirt that Bodie had been wearing when they'd had sex the night before was bunched up in his right hand and held just over his nose, and his left hand was wrapped around his rock-hard, seeping cock, and the TV screen was showing two young Hailin men side-by-side on their backs on a kitchen table, having the time of their lives being fucked by two older and obviously qualified men.

One split-second look back from the TV at Ray's tear-streaked face, and Bodie turned and ran out of the flat. He made straight for the east corner and took the stairs down, wanting to come out close to the cover of the town, and not wanting Ray to catch up with him while he was waiting for the lift. He probably had a couple of minutes' head start, though. What with Ray having to haul his trousers up, and wait for his erection to go down.

He couldn't go to any of the Parass hotels. Ray would find him almost immediately. What about Dishna? But the Dishna police would have a system for checking the hotels, and while there would obviously be ways around that, Bodie didn't know them. And it was over twenty minutes until the next ferry, and Ray could easily catch him waiting to board. Maybe Ray was calling the terminal right now, saying it was police business, telling them to look out for him, stop him boarding. Same problems with getting the bus to Budjard or Harding. Go along the cliffs to Antoness? There was a hotel there.

No. Even if Ray couldn't use the police angle outside Dishna, they were both using the same bank account. He had to assume that Ray would have a way of seeing it immediately if he paid for anything with his bank card.

He did have some credit left, though, on the cash cards that Malun had given him. Though probably not enough for a couple of nights in a hotel, and food and drink for a whole weekend.

Yeah, he did need the whole weekend of a safe distance from Ray. Longer, really, he'd bet, but he couldn't let Ray go back to work on At Mordez not knowing where his *iskolpa* was. That would be too much. It might even get Ray into serious trouble.

So he needed to let Ray know that he would be back some time during the evening of An Uraba. Once he'd figured out where to go. And how to get there. Then he'd... Well, not phone him. He didn't want any kind of conversation with Ray right now. But he could send Ray a letter. He had a stylus with him, and the sheet with his notes from the day's session. It would probably take a few hours to get to him, maybe even a day, and that was fine. Letting Ray stew for a day wouldn't be too much. It would be just about right.

Once he was out of the building he carried on east, into At Rahden. He'd never been in the building before, and guessed Ray hadn't either. Unless there was some man who lived there that he and Gavio had used to fuck. Just seconds after he'd had that thought his wristband beeped. "Oh, fuck off, Ray." Weary, rather than angry. Though it did mean that Ray must still be in the flat. He'd post the wristband to Ray, too. Make it clear to him that nothing in this weekend was going to happen on his terms.

Now if he was West, there'd probably be a dozen people in town he could go and stay with this weekend. People Ray didn't know, where he'd never think to look. That'd be perfect. Assuming he could handle their questions about what had happened without breaking down in tears himself.

Jesus, at this rate he'd end up spending the time living rough out on the moors.

Actually...

That wasn't a terrible idea.

How had Malun put it? "You've been trained to live off the land for weeks." He bloody well had. And trained bloody well, at that. OK, he didn't have any of his kit with him, but he was Sergeant Bodie of the SAS. He could improvise.

First he needed a backpack. For just a couple of days, on a summer weekend with a clear forecast, then a pack like the one they used for groceries would be enough. The At Rahden supermarket should have that. It should have a cheap saucepan, too, and plastic plates and cups, and water and biscuits and dried meat and dried fruit, and matches,

and toilet paper and toothpaste and toothbrushes. And of course it would have a postal machine.

He dealt with posting the package first. He said he needed a couple of days on his own but he'd be back before the end of An Uraba, and could Ray please not try to find him? The wrist band beeped again as Bodie was sticking the label on the box, and this time Bodie waited until the box was falling down the chute before telling Ray to seriously fuck off.

The supermarket did have everything he'd hoped, but he was still going to need a sharp knife, and some twine for fishing and trapping, and a waterproof groundsheet of some sort, and a blanket. He tried every shop in At Rahden and At Mordez, looking out carefully for Ray every time he stepped back into the corridor. He did find a cheap, lightweight blanket in a bedding shop in At Mordez, and just a few doors down was a craft shop where he found strange curved needles that might work as fish-hooks, very strong thread, and wire and wire-cutters for jewellery-making. There were knives in a kitchen-ware shop in At Rahden but the blades weren't a good shape and might not be strong enough, and they were too expensive to take a gamble on.

He had to stay clear of their own building and the other buildings to the west. If Ray had left the flat by now, that's where he would be. So Bodie headed south from At Mordez into the old town, and he'd barely gone half a block when he thought of the garden centre. He'd never done a full tour of it, just gone straight for the plants and the furniture with Ray, but they'd definitely have twine, and tarpaulin, and a wide range of strong, sharp blades. They did have all that, and also bundles of sticks in useful lengths, rolls of netting, water-proof boots, and a wide-brimmed canvas hat which he'd appreciate being out of doors for that length of time.

He put the hat on and changed into the boots as soon as he was out of sight of town on the path to the moors, and so he was able to cross the stream as soon as he reached it, and didn't have to look for a section that was narrow enough for him to jump over. Never good to get wet feet, but especially not at the start of a mission like this, when he didn't even have a spare pair of socks.

A mission. His mission. To somehow put his heart back together after he'd found out how his husband really felt about being married to him. Ray was such a staggeringly good liar. "We're the best *iskolpas* I've ever heard of." He must have believed it at the time. That was how he worked. "I don't pity myself." "I'd marry you a hundred times over." He believed it, presumably, until Bodie was safely out of sight. What really went on in his mind at night? Did he have the Mabein weeping with him, about all that he'd lost?

There were no paths on this side of the stream that Bodie could see. But Ray had been right: the hillocks in every direction made it difficult to get any idea of what you might find in the area. And they meant you had to keep changing direction. So he'd have to choose his campsite carefully, look for landmarks that would let him find it again whenever he'd gone out for food, fuel or water. He'd find his way home surely enough, though. He'd have enough time to sit and think and watch the sun track from west to east, and he'd set off north on An Uraba when he still had several hours of light in hand.

Could he still call it home, though, with what he knew now?

Well, he had to. Because Ray needed him. Because he'd made a promise. And it wasn't Ray's fault, what had just happened. Ray had never meant him to know. In fact, he understood now just how much Ray had been doing to protect him. How huge the lies were that Ray had managed to believe to try to make him happy.

Ray had probably done better than any other Hailin would have managed. So, no, it wouldn't make any sense to punish Ray for still being a Hailin. Wanting the normal Hailin life he should have had. But they had to stop calling it a marriage. He wasn't built like Ray, he wouldn't be able to forget what he knew. They had to find out how to stay together as friends. He had to stop thinking that it mattered that he was in love with Ray. They had to take care of each other, even more than before. They wouldn't end up hating each other. That was another promise, that he was making to both of them right now.

He walked for over an hour. Or he thought it was over an hour, because his watch was in the post, on the way to Ray. He'd crossed several smaller streams, and seen outcroppings of rocks, and ponds, and many groups of small trees. There were tiny flowers everywhere in the calf-high grass, and each hollow seemed to have a different type of larger flower, mostly in clusters on the eastern side. There were birds everywhere, too, and things scurrying through the grass, and heads popping up for a moment's glance. The scurrying things sounded too small for dinner, but he had hopes of the heads.

He'd seen about ten people in total, all in the first half of his walk. Two couples, and the rest alone. They were none of them trying to cover ground, not like him. Instead, they were staying very still and watching something in the air or on the ground. He tried to avoid them but the terrain did make that difficult: he didn't see one couple until he strode into their hollow, and they looked annoyed enough that he grunted an apology, backed out, and took a route around to the west. He hoped they were going to stay on that side of the moors all weekend. Ray had never mentioned anything about people camping on the moors overnight, and Bodie had a strong suspicion that you weren't supposed to kill the rabbits (or whatever those heads were called), or build a fire. He'd keep an eye out, and be ready to move his camp at short notice.

It was good that there were some people around, though, since it meant that the pack of dog-things must be safe at the moment. What would he have done if he hadn't seen anyone? Head for the coast, maybe, to set up in a cove, or in the dunes. But almost every cove he'd seen had its hut, and on a lovely weekend like this, the huts might not be empty.

He could work around that sort of density of civilians, he didn't doubt that. But this wasn't a military mission, it wasn't just about getting in position and remaining undetected. It was about time he needed on his own, to get himself ready to face Ray again. For all he knew, getting himself ready might involve a lot of swearing or even screaming, and he'd be able to do that in the depths of the moors without thinking twice.

He stopped when he got to another stream even larger than the first one. This would be fine. The stream itself would help for navigation, and there was a tree by the stream that was one of the tallest that Bodie had seen during his walk, with a distinctive pattern of lighter-green leaves at the top.

He found a hollow about ten yards to the west of the tree that had steep-enough sides to provide good shelter, while the broad, flat floor was ideal for setting up a fire. And he'd do that first, so he'd be ready as soon as he did catch something to eat. He'd been collecting dried branches as he came across them on the way, but he was going to need more.

First, he got flat rocks from the stream-bed to form a base, and then he emptied out the main compartment of his pack, wrapped everything in the tarpaulin, weighed it down with more rocks, and then went out to fill the pack with more branches, and with lighter stuff along the lines of bracken or dried moss. He kept a lookout, too, for burrows and tracks, and other signs of useful-sized life. Some of the burrows were near suitable trees, and he used his twine, the thread and shaped twigs to set up eight trigger snares.

By the time he got back to his camp he was hungry. He ate leaning back against his landmark tree, watching the stream for fish. They were on the small side but there were plenty of them, so the next thing was to build a trap. With the help of just one stick, the jewellery wire was stiff enough to hold the funnel open, and the curved needle and thick thread made quick work of sewing the netting together. He put a piece of his dried meat on a thread, bashed it a couple of times between two rocks to help release the juices, then tied it to the mouth of the funnel as bait. Within about ten minutes he had his first fish. So he wouldn't go hungry tonight. Well, he was never really going to go hungry. His supermarket food would get him through the weekend comfortably enough. The trap and the snares were about the challenge. About getting to use some of his more-specialised skills. No help for getting any kind of job on Pen Embrun. But very handy if you happened to be married to Ray Bakkel.

He'd said he wouldn't call it that any more. So what would it be, then? "Tied to"? "Committed to"? Too stark. True, but no help for getting through the days. "Still fascinated by and trying to be friends with"? Much easier to live with. And for that matter, he could just say "living with".

Had Ray been doing that every time Bodie went out? Every time he went out and left Ray with easy, undetected access to his laundry basket. It could have been happening even on the ship. And did Ray cry like that every time?

If he did, it was incredible that he managed to treat Bodie so well. Bodie was assuming that the *mana* did a lot of the work. Making Ray's cells sing. Making Ray feel genuinely grateful towards the source. And horny. Horny very definitely for him. Because there were limits to what a man could do to fake that, weren't there? Ray surely hadn't been thinking of Gavio – or his favourite foursome – every single time? Ray really did want him. But now he'd seen for himself how bitterly Ray hated himself for wanting him.

Three fish now. He'd go and set some more snares, farther out west this time, and gather more fuel.

By the time he got back he had ten fish. Enough for dinner, he thought, and he lifted the funnel out of the water. It was still only mid-afternoon, though, and he wanted to keep busy, so he made a box trap out of more netting and wire and sticks, set it up by a bend in the stream that he'd seen was popular with birds, baited it with a crumbled biscuit and a cube of dried fruit, and lay on the other side of the nearest hummock to wait.

About half an hour later he had a bird a bit larger than a pigeon. OK, so he knew the trap was good enough and that was all he needed for now. He let the bird go, left the trap down covering the bait, and went to check on his first set of snares. Nothing yet and now he couldn't think of anything else to do, so he went back to his camp, spread his tarpaulin and blanket out on the nearest sunny slope, and lay on his back with his hands behind his head and his hat over his eyes.

Really, he'd rather not be thinking of Ray, but what else was there? It wasn't as if he could improvise himself a good, meaty book. Now he was remembering some of the times – and there were so many – when Ray made him feel good. When it took such an effort to remember that Ray didn't understand love. When his eyes prickled he blinked rapidly and shook his head hard. That was his other challenge for the weekend: getting through it without giving way. He wouldn't let Ray do that to him. He just wouldn't.

He thought it was around six when he started getting hungry again. Before he hauled the trap out of the stream he collected a couple of dozen small rocks and heaped them near the fire-site so he had something to throw at the dog-things in case the smell of cooking brought them running. He hadn't seen them yet. The moors felt large when you were threading your way through them, but they probably didn't support more than a few packs.

He gutted the fish on a rock in the stream, piled the meat on a plate, and threw the remains in the trap to store as bait for the next day. He got the fire going fairly easily and fried the fish in two batches. He nearly hadn't bought the oil and the salt because the smallest containers in the supermarket were far larger than he needed, but they'd been worth the space. If Turon were here, he'd know how to spot any herbs growing wild, and know which went well with fish. Maybe Ray would too, to be fair, but Turon was the only bearable company Bodie could imagine.

There were patches of sand by the banks of the stream that he could use to scour the pan and plates. It was a fine sunset and he sat on top of a hillock to catch the best of it. After that it became chilly enough that he was glad to have the blanket to drape over his shoulders as he tended the fire.

With the tarpaulin around him to keep the heat in, he really couldn't complain about his sleeping conditions. Even the need to keep alert for dogs was a welcome distraction from thoughts and dreams of Ray.

He got up at dawn, had some fruit and biscuits, and cursed the lack of coffee. He needed a hot drink in the morning. Even *kenit* would be better than nothing. In his mind's eye, he could see the supermarket aisle with all the packs of *kenit*. Next time...

After breakfast he did the rounds of all of his snares and found two dangling mud-brown bodies. One had strangled in the noose but the other was still squirming, until he wrung its neck. He'd been imaging something pear-shaped, but these were long and thin, but with square heads that looked far too large. He reset the snares on different burrows.

Back at the camp he wrapped the bodies up thoroughly in the tarpaulin to keep out scavengers, and wedged the bundle in the branches of the tree. They should make for a good lunch.

He easily had enough fuel for lunch but time spent laying in stores was never time wasted. He decided to follow the stream to the coast. That way he might find some good chunks of driftwood, too. And if there were huts, there would certainly be *kenit* in there. He wouldn't break a window or anything. Nothing that would cause the people trouble. But he might be able to use the wire to pick a lock on a door.

There was driftwood and there were huts, but the locks were Hailin locks with no way in that he could see. Two of the huts had couples outside in deckchairs having breakfast. They nodded and waved and he did the same. Now that would be a way to get *kenit*: just asking. But they'd probably want to talk and they'd ask about his accent, and then maybe they'd go to Buka's restaurant for lunch and Buka would overhear them talking about the *kenit* and it would get straight back to Ray. OK, not very likely, no, but for Bodie, Ray was everywhere.

After lunch he threw the remains into a clear patch of land across the stream, and then sat against his tree to see if any scavengers appeared. A large black-and-grey bird came down, then two more, and then finally he got to see the local dogs. Lamon's origami version was really very good, but of course it didn't capture the aspect of them that was least like a dog to Bodie: the way they seemed to walk on the tips of their toes, like a fox. They were a deep mahogany brown all over, and handsome animals, but fierce. The birds might have been able to see one off, but obviously not five. Bodie would stock up on more stones for the night. And take some in his pockets the next time he went looking for fuel.

It wasn't until after the dog-things had trotted away and Bodie looked up to check the position of the sun – probably around two o'clock – that he suddenly realised that he'd missed the morning's conversation session with West and Plassen. He'd completely forgotten about that. So the two of them must know now that he was missing. How the hell would Ray have handled that? Well, it was Ray. He'd have his stories ready to smooth his way out of any situation. If he'd already got the letter before the session was due to start, then he'd find it much easier to choose the most suitable story.

Bodie had fish for dinner again that evening, and in the morning found that three of his snares had been sprung: with another mud-brown creature, a plump quail-like bird, and a thrashing jet-black thing like the ugliest, angriest rat imaginable. If he'd had good, thick gloves – and nothing else to eat – he'd have been happy about getting close enough to those teeth to wring its neck, but instead he had his wire-cutters and the thing got to piss down Bodie's leg and then run away.

He'd decided during the night that he wouldn't have dinner on the moors. He needed to clear away all traces of his camp, and if he had to wait until after dinner, it would take him too close to sunset. So he dismantled all of the snares after he'd checked them, and then the box trap. The fish trap he'd leave until the afternoon.

He definitely didn't need any more fuel but he enjoyed the search, and he didn't have a problem with leaving a stack of wood in his hollow. Or maybe under his tree. That wouldn't count as leaving "traces of a camp". This time he followed the stream west, where it gradually climbed up into the hills. His view of the moors and the coast got steadily better, and then suddenly he could see the tops of four of the pyramids, including theirs, and his heart and gut clenched painfully. He was missing Ray. That was possibly the real reason he was going to head back before dinner. He was dreading

what was going to have to happen between them, but even with the gratifying project of showing he still had his skills, he'd been so bored out here. So lonely. And Ray was the best company he'd ever known. Last week had been bad and the weeks to come were going to make that look like a tropical honeymoon, but he was still ready to go home.

After lunch he hauled the fish-trap out of the stream and hung it up in his tree to dry off in the sun. He threw the remains of lunch over the stream again, but the pack must have been too far away and this time the birds got it all.

What was he going to say when he got back? What did he need to get settled right away?

"Ray, I'm not going to let you lie to me any more about how you feel about me. I'll never let you go into *gimana*, that hasn't changed. But there's no point in making me think that you want what I want. When there's really no hope."

Something like that.

Ray would be relieved, wouldn't he? Once he was over the embarrassment of being found out.

They'd have to figure out what to do about sex. They couldn't bring other people back to the flat, that would be hell. And what story would they use when the word got out that Ray Vasmar was back in circulation? God, it was going to be miserable. But not as bad as laying himself open to heartbreak by living in hope.

He put the traps and snares near the top of the backpack, just under his shoes. If he didn't pass a bin in the street once he got back to town, then he'd put them down one of their building's rubbish chutes. He'd decided to get to the first stream the long way around, along the coast. An extra mile or so was better than having to zig-zag his way around the hummocks. He'd briefly considered following the coast all the way, but then he thought of the noisy, happy crowds at the beach. No. The most he could cope with was a handful of bird-watchers.

There was a large dumpster around the side of the garden centre, and a low wall a few feet away where he sat to change back into his shoes. He had appreciated having the hat, but he didn't want anyone except bird-watchers to see him in it so he stuffed it in the pack after the boots. No one was looking at him strangely, but being back in town, walking past shops like the good bakery, he started really feeling the itch in his scalp and armpits, and the mixture of stiffness and stickiness in all his clothes.

He'd imagined that Ray would be on the balcony, possibly surrounded by beer-bottles, but instead he was at the dining-table, with Malun sitting next to him at the head of the table, and with a pot of *kenit* between them.

"Bodie!" Ray had leapt to his feet, but then taken just one step. "You came back." Quiet. Staring. He must be relieved, but he looked like he didn't know yet.

"Yeah. Earlier than expected, to be honest. You got my letter?"

"A letter?" He shook his head, looking confused. Still staring. "No. When – How did you send it?"

Bodie shrugged. "I sent it about twenty minutes after I left, I guess. Used the machine in At Rahden." He gestured with his head in the direction of the building. "Said I'd be

back today. In the evening. Didn't want you to worry too much. I thought you'd get it yesterday morning. Maybe sooner."

A small grunt then Ray took two more steps forward. "They don't collect the post from the machines at the weekend."

"Shit!" Bodie slapped his hand against his forehead. "I'm sorry, I – I thought I had that taken care of. If – Well, if you called Malun you must have been really worried."

"I wasn't worried." Flat. More quiet than ever. "I was terrified." And then his face twisted and he slowly held out his hands. Not like he was reaching out, expecting anything. More like he wanted to show Bodie something. Something important. But he was just now realising that he didn't have it with him. And he had no idea what to do.

Bodie guessed he wanted to reach out but was too unsure of how Bodie would react. As he fucking should be but Bodie found himself walking forward and holding out his own hands. He had to, he simply had to when Ray was looking so lost. And then the look of relief on Ray's face was so naked, it made Bodie melt and shiver at the same time.

Bodie suddenly stopped, though, when they were about two feet apart. At the flash of alarm on Ray's face, he immediately took Ray's hands and gave a tight squeeze, then shook his head and aimed for a rueful smile. "Sorry, but I'm gonna have to go and change first. I'm covered in rat's piss."

Ray blinked, jerked his head forward with a sniff, and looked fascinated as much as anything.

"What kind of hotel were you staying in?" Malun's incredulous tone was more like a mother's than a father's. They both turned to look at him, and in the process Bodie let go of Ray's left hand, but kept hold of his right.

"No, you see, I'd been planning on eating it."

A pause of a couple of seconds, then a twitch of the eyebrows. "My question remains the same."

They burst out laughing, looked at one another, then laughed so hard their hands fell apart, and Bodie staggered back to lean against the back of the couch, while Ray was clutching the back of his dining-chair. Malun's unimpressed expression just made things worse.

Eventually Bodie got himself under control. "I'll tell you all about it. Just give me ten minutes. Maybe fifteen."

Ray grinned and nodded and gestured him away, and less than a minute later Bodie was under the shower.

OK. So he hadn't stuck to any of his plan. Maybe he'd have done better if Malun hadn't been there. Made it clear right away how much had to change. Or maybe he'd been kidding himself. If anything was going to change, it had to start with him. Figuring out how to keep any sort of distance from Ray. Even knowing Ray just wanted his *mana*, he felt the pull, the need to be close, with almost everything that Ray did.

When he got back to the living-room he found that the pot of *kenit* had been replaced by three beer-bottles. Ray had moved over, leaving the chair next to Malun for Bodie.

“What time is it?”

Malun checked his wristband. “6.27”. He glanced at Bodie’s bare wrist. “I’d ask if yours got stolen by a rat, but I suspect the answer wouldn’t make any sense to me. I trust you’ll include that part, though, when you tell us everything.”

Bodie shrugged. “I can pretty-much start with that. I posted it to Ray with the letter. I needed a couple of days on my own. I wanted him to know there wasn’t any point in sending me any more messages.”

Malun nodded. “So if that was the start... Where did you go next?”

Bodie sighed, glanced at Ray, then took a mouthful of beer. “Well, by the time I got down into At Rahden, I’d decided I couldn’t go to one of the hotels. Because Ray would find me straight away. Couldn’t get the ferry or a bus, either, because he’d catch me while I was waiting for it. And I had to assume I couldn’t use my bank card anywhere. He’d see where I was like that.” A snap of the fingers, then he looked at Ray again. Ray was just nodding slowly, in what looked like recognition. Maybe agreement, even. “Like I said, I really needed some time to myself.”

“You would.” Ray’s sigh was long and sounded very tired. “You would.”

“Yeah.” Another mouthful of beer. “But I had some cash with me. And I reckoned it was enough to buy the supplies for living rough for the weekend on the moors.”

“What sort of supplies?” In unison.

Bodie put his hands on the edge of the table, ready to get up. “I can show you.” An immediate yes, from both of them, so he went to get his backpack from where he’d dumped it just inside the front door.

He emptied it out bit by bit at the other end of the dining-table, though the first thing out was the boots, and those he put on the balcony. Malun and Ray stood one on each side, and were even more impressed than he’d expected as he explained where he’d found each item and what he’d used it for – which added up, really, to explaining exactly how he’d spent his weekend, including his run-in with the rat-thing.

“So you haven’t eaten since the bird and the *garvinch* for lunch?” Bodie shook his head. “What do you fancy?”

Bodie pulled a face. “No fish.”

“What about pasta? Something a bit spicy?”

“Sounds great.”

To Malun: “Is that OK with you?” It was. Ray said he’d do all the cooking, but the others should come over to the counter and keep him company.

“Did you check the hotels? And the bank card and everything?”

“Yeah, I – I thought you must have got the next ferry. Because I didn’t get there in time for that. So I checked the bank card. A thousand times, it must have been, on An Embrun. I don’t know what I was going to – A whole warehouse of red wine wouldn’t be enough for what had happened, but I had to know where you were. Even if you did what you should and stayed away for a month, I had to know where you were.” Suddenly,

gesturing at Malun with his head while still looking at Bodie: “I told Malun everything. Not just about this weekend. Everything.”

Bodie’s mouth was tight as he turned to look at Malun. Expecting some horrible mixture of curiosity and pity. But Malun’s nod was his usual: brisk and practical. “I’ve told Ray he has to get professional counselling. This is more than anyone in the family can help with.”

“So ‘everything’ included asking Ferros?”

They both nodded, then Ray said, “She actually gave me her answer on the phone on At Pontal.” A sigh and he shook his head. “It wasn’t any more helpful. And I – Well, I did need a couple of days to think about it on my own. I was planning to tell you that I got her answer during your conversation session. And then we’d have the whole weekend to deal with it.”

Bodie couldn’t really complain about how Ray had handled that. He had given Bodie fair warning, after all, that he was likely to lie for a few days about any reply from Ferros. “So when d’you call Malun?”

“Actually, I called Ray. Early this morning.”

“Because of West? I guess he told you I was missing?”

“No. He thinks you and Ray had an ordinary row yesterday morning. That you just stormed off for a few hours. I called Ray because I sent you a message on An Embrun saying there’d been a change of plan and I’d be leaving this coming At Kamaran. So could you come to dinner this An Uraba instead? And when I hadn’t heard from you by lunchtime today, I decided to call.”

“And I couldn’t bluff. Not by that point. Not with Malun. Not that I told him much of the truth then but...”

“He worried me enough that I turned up a couple of hours later. And eventually he did tell me everything, and it sounded as if you had reason to be gone for at least a month. So thank you for coming back.”

Bodie shrugged. “I got bored. And I promised. I’ll never let Ray go into *gimana*.”

Again in unison (or close to it), the two Hailin closed their eyes, and let their heads sag forward with a sigh. Malun was the first to look up again, after about three seconds. “We told ourselves that about a hundred times today. But we also agreed that you must have your limits. I don’t understand how you haven’t reached them. But I hope you’ll let me send you some cases of red wine.”

Bodie grinned. “That’d be great.”

“And will you come to dinner on At Rahden? I think I should talk to you on your own before I go away.”

From Ray’s expression, that was something he and Malun hadn’t talked about. Well, they hadn’t really thought he’d come back. Not before Malun went on his trip, anyway. “Yeah. Makes sense.”

“Are the two of you comfortable with being left alone together?”

They looked at one another, both serious and assessing, then Bodie swallowed and said, “We’re gonna have to start right in with... what you were doing when I walked in on you. The state I could see you were in. What it showed me about how you really feel about -” Swallowing again. “There’s things I’ve gotta make clear about us. So you know we can’t slide back into the same...” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“I’m ready.”

They carried on looking at each other, but determined now, the assessment over. After a few seconds Malun said, “In that case, I’ll leave as soon as we’ve had dinner. Now, let’s talk about something else.”

Bodie asked him if he’d read the cop novel. He had, in one sitting the weekend after he’d received it. That kept them busy until dinner was nearly ready, and then they moved on to other books and films, and to how the Hailin learned languages.

After they’d finished eating, they took a few minutes to finish their beers, and then they stood up, said their goodbyes with unusually tight hugs, and Malun was gone.

“Another beer?”

Bodie shook his head. “I’d rather have a coffee. I missed that nearly as much as I missed you.”

Ray laughed and started to make a pot. “How about a liqueur?”

“Sound good but let’s wait until we get started. Then I’ll know if I want something disgusting. Or not.”

“OK. Guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

They sat on the couch. Bodie took a slow drink of his coffee, then set the mug back on the table. “So... being married to me. It’s bad enough to make you cry. That’s how much you want to be with a Hailin man.”

Ray gave a sharp grunt that sounded like confirmation, but then was shaking his head. “I’d guessed that was how you’d seen it. But it wasn’t about wanting any of them. It was about everything I want to do with you. It was about...” Rapping his knuckles against his forehead. “How much I hate what’s going on in my mind. The idea of being married to a Hailin man would make me cry with boredom. Every day... Almost every day. You do something that makes me want to marry you all over again. The way you made your fish trap, just for a start.”

It could be true. Bodie wanted to believe him. And Ray would know, of course, how much Bodie wanted to believe. Twice, he breathed in deeply, letting the breath out sharply through his nose, and then said, “The thing is, Ray, you lie all the time. You pretend. It’s second-nature to you. You need my *mana*. You need to keep me happy. I don’t think you’re pretending about how much you like me. But about what’s really going on in our marriage... About what you’re really hoping for...” He swallowed hard and shrugged. “I dunno what to think. I can cope if we need to stop calling it a marriage. We’ll be fine living together. Being friends. But I have to know now. I don’t want to pretend any more.”

Ray had winced several times, and swallowed as hard as Bodie, but not made any move to interrupt. When Bodie had finished he nodded slowly, over and over, then said, “That’s what you were thinking about while you were on the moors. What you needed to get clear right away.”

“Yeah. Before we make any move to go to bed.”

A long sigh. “I can see why you’d think that. Especially with all the types of lies I’ve told people about you. It’s true that I can lie about most things. To most people. But...” He frowned, shook his head, dragged a hand back through his hair. Slowly: “Bodie, I couldn’t do it for months. All the time. To the most important person in my life.” He shook his head again. Then suddenly, quickly: “And my cock... it couldn’t lie for a second.” Slowly again, with another sigh: “I don’t know why you’d believe me. Except... I told Malun everything. And I’ll tell the counsellor everything. And you know how I feel about telling the truth.” He quirked an eyebrow and Bodie couldn’t help but grin. “I’m going to be a proper *iskolpa* to you. Whatever it involves. I will. But...” A jerky swallow. “I don’t know.... Is that enough for you?”

Bodie closed his eyes hard for the space of three breaths, then said, “I’ll have a glass of the dog-fart stuff. A small glass.”

Ray nodded, looking very apprehensive, then went to pour glasses for both of them. Bodie downed his in one, shuddered in protest from his head to his toes, and then did his best to wash away the taste with the rest of his coffee.

“No, I’m not sure about you. Dunno how to get sure. But I will take a chance on your cock.”

Ray’s turn to close his eyes. He sagged forward with a huge, uneven sigh, and covered his face with his right hand. His breathing was so choked Bodie thought he might be crying, but when he eventually raised his head his eyes were dry.

“When you came in the door, I wanted to run and drop to my knees in front of you. Grab you so tight. If Malun hadn’t been there... If I’d been surer that you wouldn’t throw me straight off...” Another ragged sigh, then he shook his head, leaned forward to get both drinks, and then tossed them back in the same way as Bodie, but without the shuddering.

“I’d’ve given you maybe a minute, I think. Then prised you off. To have the talk.”

“Thank you.” Very serious. Then, eyes still fixed on Bodie’s face, he slid his hand across the seat of the couch, palm upwards. Bodie immediately reached out to take it, and then after a moment’s pause they were smiling at each other.

“We go to bed now, don’t we?”

Ray nodded once, emphatically. “There’s nothing else to do. Not now.”

Bodie was barely feeling turned on when they went into the bedroom – he’d been too focussed on following the plan he’d made on the moors – but that changed the moment Ray’s weight settled on him, before they’d even kissed. It was quick, easily the quickest sex they’d ever had, and it was wordless, and fierce enough to verge on painful. Not what you’d call satisfying, not the stuff of any fantasy, but it did feel necessary.

“I thought I’d be going into work tomorrow and telling them that I was two or three days away from going into *gimana*. But now... It feels more like I might be falling asleep during an interview. Because we’ve got a record number of showers and changes of clothing to go, haven’t we, before we get to our goodnight kiss?” Teasing. Affectionate and hopeful.

Bodie grinned. “Yeah. At least we’ve started early this time, not like that night at my flat.” Mind you, they’d only have to dry-hump twice in one night to set a record. He didn’t feel they had anything to prove, but it’d be fun to see if Ray felt differently.

Ray nodded, and started getting off the bed. “We’ll need to think about hydration. I’ll get us some beers after I’ve changed.”

Bodie chose cords and a T-shirt, and didn’t bother with socks. He sat up on the bed with his legs spread wide and his right knee raised, and when Ray came in with the beers – dressed in jeans and a T-shirt – Bodie patted the space between his legs.

This was new, as well. Ray’s weight and warmth against the inside of his thigh. Ray close enough to circle with both arms, close enough to kiss. But they could ease off, too, for as long as they wanted, like they were on the couch. Just drink and talk.

Ray asked about Bodie’s survival kit, where he’d learned all of that, how often he’d got to use it before. Bodie had hardly got started when Ray said, “I remember now. You and Turon talked about hunting your first time at Kew. And you told him you’d done it when you needed to eat.”

Bodie grunted, surprised at himself for still being surprised at how much Turon would tell people. “I’d forgotten that.”

“When the message arrived for you. Just after you’d run out. I thought it must be from Turon. It gave me the idea of sending something to your fleet address.”

“So what d’you say?”

A sigh. “That it was the first time I’d ever done that. With the porn. And that you probably thought I was crying because I wanted a Hailin man. But I don’t, I don’t, I’d been crying because of how much I want to have you. And I said that even if you didn’t want to see me, could you write sometimes? Even if it was just to swear at me.”

“Was it really the first time with the porn?”

“Yeah, it was. I – Last week messed me up. With seeing you in the uniform. And with Ferros turning out to be no fucking help at all. The way she’d refused to even notice the point. Of course watching the porn wasn’t gonna help me either but I – I’d been thinking about it so much in the last few days. About being naked with you, I mean. I just – The idea of getting to see and touch bare skin, of feeling that excitement...” He shook his head hard. “I shouldn’t blame my body, but it had had enough of the thinking.”

Bodie squeezed him tight, in sympathy for his bad luck in getting caught, and kissed his cheek. “What did Ferros say that pissed you off so much?”

“Well... That maybe the reason I was having these problems with the Mabein was because I’d been such a disgrace as Udom Kol.”

“Oof.” Bodie’s head rocked back with the blow.

“Yeah. And OK, I was, but I can’t undo it, I can’t try again, so what am I supposed to do with that? And about Udom Kol and Embrun and coupling...” He frowned, twisting his mouth, then shook his head sharply. “She said that a year ago, she would probably have seen the idea of us coupling as a... degradation of Udom Kol and Embrun in the same way that I do. But now she’s had children she’s not so sure that being in an *esmana* marriage is enough on its own to make Udom Kol and Embrun part of every coupling. Now she thinks there has to be the possibility of children, that children are the important thing for them. And I can’t do anything with that, either, because she’s wrong. She’s so wrong. Every cell in my body knows the great responsibility it’s taken on.”

That could have been the way out for him and Ray. Deciding that it didn’t count, after all, between queers. Sounded fine to Bodie. But coming from Ferros, Ray’s favourite member of the family, that probably made it a worse insult to Ray. Too wrong to consider for even a second. Well, maybe the counsellor would find a better way to put it.

“I can see why you put off telling me about that. We’ve got our new plan, now, anyway. Thanks to Malun. D’you know how you’ll do it? Find a counsellor?”

A shrug. “There are lists at work. I’ll ask around.”

“Was that the first thing Malun said? Once you’d told him the truth. How’d he take it when you told him?”

A brief grin. “I had to explain dry-humping to him. Almost everything he knows about the workings of sex, he knows from our mother. And it sounded like...” Shaking his head, and grinning more broadly. “It wasn’t something she did.” Then serious again. “He and Turon never got close to guessing what was going on.”

“You reckon he’s gonna tell Turon?”

Ray pulled a face and sighed. “Probably. He told me he wouldn’t tell anyone but I’m sure he’ll think Turon deserves to know. Would you mind? You can tell him on At Rahden, if you would.”

“It’s fine. I just wonder who’ll be the first to mention it when we write. How long it’ll take. I think I’ll just ask Malun to let me know when he’s told Turon. I’ll ask him about getting us some gin and some tonic, too, now that you mention hydration.”

“Always, with you.” And Ray pulled himself around, and they kissed for a long time.

“I’ve gotta ask... Why did you choose something with a foursome? If it was about wanting me. Because you know I’m not gonna change my mind about that.”

A relaxed shake of the head. “Yeah, I know. It was just the first thing in the list. And that scene still always works for me. Not because it’s a foursome. Because...” A shrug. “You can feel what they already know about each other, what they’re learning.” Another shrug. “It’s good porn.”

“You got any porn with dry-humping?”

From the way Ray laughed, that was obviously a no, even before he’d recovered enough to shake his head. “There’s no market for it that I know of. And everyone would think it was faked. Why? D’you want to watch some?”

Bodie pulled a face. “Don’t think so. Just wondering. Well, maybe wondering if we could’ve learned some new tricks. But why would we need it, with you? When you’re so full of tricks.”

Ray grinned, leaned across to put his beer-bottle on Bodie’s bedside table, and then took hold of Bodie’s bottle by the neck. “I’m hydrated now. How about you?”

* * * * *

They got under the covers for their goodnight kiss, which they reached about the same time as on a normal night.

“I slept in here while you were away. The idea of this bed being empty made me feel so cold.”

“Was there enough *mana* that you could... do anything?” Have a wank. For fuck’s sake. What was stopping him from saying it?

“Probably but -” A small shudder. “I’ve never felt less in the mood. Have you been doing it? Did you at the weekend?”

“A couple of times. Not at the weekend. For the same reason you didn’t. But, yeah, a couple of times since we’ve been married. When I’d no idea when you’d be wanting sex again. But most of the time I do know. That you’ll want it when I want it. D’you mind? The idea of me wanking?”

A frown and a sharp sigh. “Yeah. I do. Of course, I shouldn’t. It’s not fair to you. Especially after I went and stole your *mana*. But I can’t help thinking how differently things work for you.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured. I’ll – I’ll try not to do it. Or I’ll only do it when I’ve borrowed one of your shirts.”

A lopsided smile. “That’d be better.”

“You know...” Bodie paused, moistened his lips. “I’m sorry I thought the worst. When I walked in on you. I never wondered, all weekend, if it might’ve been about something else.”

“What else would you think? After I’d let you down so badly about the uniform. I didn’t deserve the benefit of any doubt.” Then he drew back a few inches, and raised himself up slightly on an elbow. “To be honest, Malun was rather disappointed in you, that you didn’t run away earlier.”

For about two seconds Bodie believed him, but the regretful expression was just too fixed, too steady. Bodie burst out laughing and Ray immediately joined in, and it ended up with a lot of rolling around and kissing.

“Ah, Ray. I love the way your mind works. I’m never gonna be bored. If that means spending a fair bit of every month not sure if you’re lying...” He shrugged. “Then I guess that’s the bargain I’ve got.”

A grunt almost of pain. “It’s been an unfair part of every month. But that’s gonna change. The counsellor’s gonna get you a deal as good as the one that I’ve got.”

The kisses that followed were long, without any rolling around. After maybe five minutes, though, the weekend caught up with Bodie and he started to yawn. Ray teased him, pretending to be insulted, but then was interrupted by his own yawns. They parted happy, and Bodie was sound asleep within minutes.

Chapter 22

~I'm sorry I missed the session on An Udom Kol. I was so angry with Ray I completely forgot about it.~

West gave a small, dismissive shake of the head, then grinned. ~I was worried at first that you were angry with me for leaving the session on An Embrun. Plassen guessed immediately it was something to do with Ray. /?/ happen, when you live with Ray. How long did it take you to /?/?~

~I was away all weekend. Until dinner on An Uraba.~

~Wow! That was a bad /?/, even for Ray. Where did you go?~

Bodie shrugged. ~Somewhere Ray wouldn't find me. I'm not going to tell you where. Or what the problem was.~ He and Ray had agreed over breakfast that they wouldn't try to hide the size of the problem from West. No more new lies, if they could find any way to avoid it. Not the whole truth, either, but definitely no more lies.

~I wasn't going to ask. But – Do you think it will happen again? Should we arrange the conversation sessions differently? So that we don't /?/ Plassen or Shilda or anyone else?~

A definite shake of the head. ~It won't happen again. Not like that.~ Whatever happened in the future, Ray knew that Bodie would come back within two or three days. Bodie could go to a hotel and pay with his bank card, knowing that Ray was going to leave him alone. ~And Ray's going to get help. He'd going to find a counsellor in Dishna. So there'll be some evenings when he isn't home for dinner.~

West had blinked in surprise. ~I can't imagine Ray seeing a counsellor. It must be – I thought –~ He swallowed. ~You've always seemed very good together.~

~We are but -~ A deep sigh and a shrug. "It's not a normal marriage. Is it?" ~Ray needs help to deal with that.~ More than he'd planned to say. But probably better than leaving West to guess.

~Oh!~ West took a small step back and studied Bodie intently for several second, including a quick glance down to his feet and back. ~I think I'd almost forgotten about that. Is he -~ "Does he want to blame you? Is that why you were so angry?"

"No, it's nothing like that." ~But that's all I'm going to tell you.~

A brief nod of acceptance. "OK." ~Well, I'm glad he's going to get help. Now... do you still want to look at the Dishna job listings today?~

Bodie certainly did, and they spent the rest of the lesson on reading the listings, which were full of abbreviations, and covering vocabulary for the different types of work and the different patterns of working hours. Most of the unskilled jobs in the listings were in the docks, in factories and in warehouses, and nearly half of those were for shiftwork, which would mean he'd hardly see Ray during the week. Casual work like construction was handled through agencies – and judging by the size of the adverts in the listings, there were four main agencies in town. The hours would generally be better with construction work, and he could use any gaps between jobs to work on his Hass Embrun. West was planning to stay in Parass for at least the first couple of months after Bodie got a job, and he'd find a way to help Bodie study even after he'd left.

They both thought that Bodie's Hass Embrun was good enough for any of this work, and it was work that would earn him enough to live on if he was on his own (and if he was careful and lucky). So that was good to know, but the listings also suggested that he could do a lot better, once he'd learned the Hass Embrun to pick up the right skills, or just to get proof of ones like driving that he already had. They did also both agree that they couldn't yet see what the right skills for him might be, but they thought Ray would have some ideas.

Ray announced over dinner that evening that he'd found a counsellor, and had booked his first session for seven on At Pontal. So he'd be home several hours late on the evenings when he saw the counsellor.

Bodie was impressed at how quickly Ray had arranged everything. "I thought you'd be looking for days."

Ray shrugged. "There wasn't that much choice. Dishna's list of counsellors in *esmana* marriages only has fifteen men. So it didn't take too many calls to find out which ones were married to men. And out of those five, I chose the only one who could give me an evening appointment this week. He's called Garva Delnass. He's been married for twelve years. But, yeah, I thought it would take longer, too. I'm... I dunno if I'm dreading it or looking forward to it."

Bodie grunted. "I know that feeling." The night before his first parachute jump, for a start. Before any number of assignments. "You'll feel great once it's over." Bodie always had, as long as the right people had all come through alive. OK, not the best comparison, but even with something that couldn't kill you, wasn't it always good to be done with waiting?

Ray looked like he wanted to believe that. "How much do you want to hear about what happens?"

Bodie shook his head. "Whatever you wanna tell me. Look, let's make it that I won't ask. It'll be like it was with Ferros. You'll need time to think."

"Thanks, I – I promise I'll tell you something every weekend about how it went during the week. Even if it's just the number of ideas we looked at that didn't work for me."

* * * * *

Malun had made a booking for Bodie for five o'clock at the Parass transporter station, which was next to the post office. Bodie arrived in the middle of a large, softly-lit living-room.

When Bodie arrived, Malun had been sitting in an armchair half-facing the windows, with another man across from him on a couch. They got to their feet as soon as Bodie arrived.

~Bodie, I'd like you to meet Lenneva. He looks after my house and cooks for me.~
Lenneva was small and wiry. He could have been a jockey, if the Hailin had horse-racing and if he'd been twenty years younger.

~I should have gone home an hour ago. But I /?/ on staying to meet Malun's son.~

~I'm very pleased to meet you. Ray told me you're a very good cook.~

~I am. And I have learned all of the things you cannot eat. My food will always be safe for you.~

~Thank you. How far away do you live?~

~Half an hour by car. Towards Monor.~ A gesture of the head towards the left-hand end of the wall opposite the windows. ~And now I've met you, I will go home. I hope you enjoy the dinner.~ He nodded a goodbye to both of them, and within a minute the sound of his car had faded below the sound of the sea.

“That was quick. I'd've thought you'd serve us *kenit*. Or something.”

Malun shook his head. “He just wanted to say hello so it would be less awkward if you come here while I'm away. Because I want you to know that you can come here at any time, whether I'm here or not. If there's ever another time when you need to get away from Ray for a few days, and you're not in the mood to wrestle with rats. I've set aside one of the bedrooms for you, and opened an account in your name at the transporter station.”

“Thank you. I – Well, I hope I don't need to use it. Obviously.”

“Obviously. So I'll show you around, as much as makes sense at this time of night, and then we'll have a drink before dinner.”

The house was like a larger version of the shell-houses on the steps up to the cliffs. It was on a small cove, with another shell-house on the other side of the cove. There were several bedrooms upstairs, and a study at the very top. Malun had given Bodie the bedroom furthest from his own, and filled the top shelf of the bookcase with books in English, including “The Glitter Dome”.

They had their pre-dinner beers in the conservatory that ran in a curve around the front of the house. After Malun had commented on the fact that Bodie was wearing the wristband again (“Yeah, it arrived on At Rahden.”), he asked how far Ray had got in finding a counsellor, and was clearly not expecting to hear that the first session would take place before his own departure.

“How are things between you? Did you get clear everything you needed to?”

“Yeah. Everything's fine. Well – Better than when I ran away, anyway.”

Malun nodded several times. “Was Ray right about what made you run away? The things you were thinking about him?”

“Yeah. But he did a quick job of convincing me that he hadn't been pretending about how glad he is to be married to me.”

“Good. None of us have doubted it, since we first got to see you together. You know... Has he told you that his terror at the weekend was only partly about going into *gimana*? It was mostly about the thought that he'd driven you to that point.”

Bodie winced. “Damn, I wish I'd known about the post. I'd've... I dunno. Stopped some kid in the street. Paid him to take the letter to Ray. He deserved a shock but not that bad.”

“From my point of view, that was no more than he needed. Without that level of shock, he wouldn’t have told me the truth. And I think it’s a truth I needed to know.”

Bodie gave a head-tilt of concession then a small shrug. “It’s OK with us, y’know, if you tell Turon everything. We figured you’d want to. But no one else. Not Sasha. No one.” Bodie was looking out for any twitch that might mean Malun had already told Turon, but Malun looked simply pleased.

“Of course. Thank you. I’ll write to him once I’ve set off. I’ll have the time then.”

For the rest of Bodie’s visit, they mainly talked about the job listings and Bodie’s skills, and Malun got more and more decided that there must be a way for Bodie to earn money from his survival skills – though doing it legally and in Dishna would be a challenge. The two of them would continue the conversation through messages while Malun was away. Bodie was home by seven, with two containers of leftovers for Ray.

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The counsellor had spent well over half the session thinking that Ray was delusional. About the Mabein telling him that they thought his *iskolpa* was an animal, obviously, but also about being a Bakkel and going on the contact missions, and maybe about having an *iskolpa* at all. He’d been subtle about it, not challenged Ray in any way, but it gradually became clear to Ray that the questions Garva was asking were much more about him and his background than about the details of a marriage that would surely grab the attention of any Hailin. So Ray did the challenging, and was then impressed with the way Garva admitted to his doubts and explained some of his professional reasons for them. Ray proved he was a Bakkel by granting Garva extensive access to his personal records, which gave the names of his parents and the fact that he’d been seconded to the fleet during the full duration of the most-recent contact missions, and that he’d entered into an *esmana* marriage right in the middle of it, to a man who had been born off-world and had a name that didn’t exist on Pen Embrun. He couldn’t grant access to the parts of Bodie’s records that would show definitely that he wasn’t Hailin, but Garva said he was convinced and they started again.

Ray thought it was funny, and something he really should have expected, especially from his own work experiences with a wide cross-section of the general public. It was so much more likely that the next man through the door would have a bizarre delusion based around the Bakkels than that he’d actually be a Bakkel, and one with a unique problem in his marriage. They had two sessions booked for the following week: for At Mordez, and At Pontal, and Ray definitely was looking forward to the next one.

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Almost as soon as he’d arrived for dinner on At Oba Nyon, West announced that he was going to buy a car that weekend.

“What about waiting until Bodie’s passed the test?”

West shrugged. “He’s obviously going to pass it. I don’t want to wait another three weeks, till it’s almost autumn. If I get it this weekend, Lamon can visit next weekend and see the area when everything’s still in summer season.”

“It’ll be great to see her so soon. What sort of car are you going to get?”

Something small and second-hand. Ray told him the best places in Dishna and asked if he wanted them to come along. West dithered, until Bodie said it could be an interesting language lesson, and that decided it. They'd go on An Embrun, immediately after the conversation session. Most of West's plans for Lamon's visit definitely didn't include them, but of course they'd have dinner together at least once, and probably a breakfast or lunch. West was going to cancel both conversation sessions; Lamon didn't speak English, so that would make up for it.

They had all been thinking during the week about Bodie's skills. There were jobs for bodyguards in Dishna, but the most interesting and varied were all with the police, and of course Bodie couldn't join the force; the word about Ray Vasmar and the alien *glarus* would be all around town in a matter of hours. The private work was mostly for people in controversial (or illegal) lines of business, or those wealthy enough to be permanently worried about kidnapping. But they were all people who tended to travel and might need their bodyguard to be away for weeks, so they couldn't employ anyone in an *esmana* marriage. There were plenty of buildings in Dishna that had security teams, though. Events needed them too, which would probably be more interesting. There was the big athletic competition in a month's time, for example. Ray could ask around the police liaising with the event, and see if there was someone on the private security side who Bodie might be able to talk to. He'd say he was asking for a friend.

West had been thinking about sports, too, but about whether Bodie would be interested in teaching them. Bodie couldn't see himself working with kids, but when he'd done instructing – generally for firearms – he'd done a pretty good job, and enjoyed it. Yeah, he could see himself working in a sports club. He'd have to learn all the main Hailin sports, would probably need a safety qualification, at the least, but none of that sounded like a chore.

Bodie's idea was car repair. He'd always done well with emergency repairs, and his weekend on the moors had reminded him of the fun of getting things to work. Not that he knew much about how Hailin cars worked, but he could learn. If there were part-time courses, that would be perfect: he'd still be able to have regular lessons with West.

They all liked all of the options. Ray had his plan for finding out more about event security, and Bodie and West together would follow up with the other two. Be good to know, also, what sort of money he could expect in each one.

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Garva wanted to hear all the details of how they'd met, and what Ray had been thinking and feeling in all the stages from planning a *tolmin* marriage, through believing it was a proper *esmana* marriage, learning the terrible truth about humans, and then managing, somehow, to accept the marriage with genuine pleasure. Or to accept most aspects of it, anyway.

Garva admitted that he would never have believed that someone could adjust to being married to a *glarus*. So quickly, too, and with his family all seeming to adjust just as quickly. He'd never met anyone before who was married to a *glarus*, but he rarely had a month go by without one client or other raising the idea.

A lot of the session on At Pontal was spent on the process of telling Raina. At the end of the session, Garva said that he thought it might be helpful if he saw some of this footage.

Ray had agreed, but said he'd need to check with Bodie first. They decided that Ray should send the *gulshor* and the breakfast in the garden since those only involved the two of them, so there were no worries about whether they should also be checking with Turon and Sasha. Ray sent the footage that evening, immediately after they'd decided.

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They'd invited Lamon and West over for dinner on At Oba Nyon, but West had said it would be too late for Lamon, she would already have eaten. She might not even want a drink. He was going to take Lamon for a drive and some walking, since walking was her favourite way of staying awake. They'd meet for breakfast at West's flat, instead.

At breakfast, Lamon did better at starting conversations with Bodie than Sasha ever had, when they couldn't have exchanged more than ten words in Clover. Bodie guessed she was making the effort for West's sake, whereas that presumably wasn't sufficient motivation between Sasha and Turon. She asked about the sports and the sports-based films that he'd been watching with Ray and discussing with West during the past week. Her main sport was swimming and especially diving, which would tie in with the otter thing.

Bodie asked about her work. She'd had a lot of farm visits during the week. Mostly routine, but a couple of illnesses and a bad injury. She'd had to put one of the ill animals down. She made a paper version of each animal as a way of describing them to Bodie, and was keen to know if there was an Earth equivalent.

She seemed very straightforward, maybe even a bit boring with it. Not obviously kind, like Turon, but then Turon had his rants, too, when everyone annoyed him, and his sly smiles, and it was hard to imagine Lamon making a sharp-edged joke about anyone. He was glad that they wouldn't be spending the weekend showing her the sights, but one meal a day would be fine.

The next day the meal was dinner, which they had in Dishna in the traditional restaurant with the courtyard that Ray had suggested for lunch after the visit to the furniture store. Ray had warned the restaurant about the things that Bodie couldn't eat, and while they hadn't planned the whole menu around him, they'd made sure he had a choice.

West and Lamon had been all over the island, and Lamon was wondering how many jobs for vets there were on the island. Or, at least, jobs that had a decent amount of agricultural work along with the pets. Not that she was thinking of moving to the area. She had to be close to Clover, to help take care of Raina. But she would like to get experience of different places. It was a shame the business had absolutely no need for a vet, because she'd love to spend a couple of years with the fleet.

When West dropped them off underneath their building, Lamon thanked them for the offer of a drink, but the time-difference was catching up with her. And they wouldn't see her for breakfast or lunch the next day, because one of the families that West babysat for was taking the two of them out on their boats. She'd go home immediately after lunch because she needed a few hours to get organised for the week ahead. So they said their goodbyes in the car park and told her that next time she should come to dinner, so they could give her some other curries to compare with Turon's kedgerree.

“Has West always been this good at making friends?”

“Not that I noticed. He did less than me on the ship. Here he’s got friends with boats, even. Boats large enough for a whole family to have lunch on.” Shaking his head. “I didn’t know he was such a social climber. Lunch with us not good enough any more.”

Bodie grunted in agreement. “Yeah, it’s tough. When all you had growing up was a waterfall.”

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Ray was very subdued when he got home on At Mordez, in a way Bodie hadn’t seen before. He’d spent the session talking about what had happened since they’d got back to Parass, which meant explaining the lies he’d been telling people, and the problems they’d had when he’d taken his shirt off in front of Bodie, and after the housewarming. And the voices of the Mabein in his mind getting steadily stronger and more persistent. He’d got as far as the weekend after his birthday, which meant that with the next session, Garva would have the full story. Ray thought that Garva had found it a difficult session, too. The man had seemed stern. Disappointed in him. For taking Bodie so much for granted. For being so thoughtless. For Malun, he had long been the very definition of selfishness, Malun had just sighed at all this and shaken his head – so seeing someone new, someone normal taking it in with so much frowning... He couldn’t be the worst *iskolpa* the man had had in the room, could he? But maybe the most unappreciative.

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On At Pontal Ray didn’t get home until after half past ten. The expression on his face must have cleared a space ten yards wide for him on the ferry. “I walked out. I’m drunk. Don’t ask.”

Bodie nodded, but then said, “Pot of *kenit*? Pint of water?”

Ray took a few seconds to think about it. “Yeah, need some water. I’ll get it.” He went to the kitchen. Bodie sat down again and leaned forward to mute the TV. Ray drained the glass at the tap, then filled it again. “I’m gonna go to bed. I should’ve called to say I’d be late. I’m sorry.”

Bodie shrugged. “Things come up. I knew you had to be OK.” He had been getting worried, but after all Ray was only an hour late. That was nothing compared with some of the unplanned drinking sessions he taken part in himself, back in the day. He wouldn’t be surprised if he fell into a few again, if he ended up working in a garage with that type of crowd.

Ray gave a brief, humourless laugh, then some twitches of one corner of his mouth, like he was genuinely trying to smile. “Yeah. Yeah. Look, I’ll have to get an earlier ferry tomorrow. I left the car outside that fucker’s house. I’ll need to go and fetch it before work.”

“OK. D’you wanna get up earlier?”

Again, a few moments to think about it but then he was shaking his head. “I’ll only have a coffee for breakfast. Leave it till the ferry to get something to eat. And I’m sorry but don’t ask tomorrow, either. Some time at the weekend. I promise.”

“I know. Hope you get some sleep.”

“You too.” He nodded at the TV screen as he headed for the corridor. “You should get back to the match.”

Bodie did watch the rest of the match, though he couldn't have said at the end who had won. He went to bed immediately, taking a large glass of water to be sharing at least that one thing with Ray.

Well... Ray hadn't insisted on lowering the storm-shutters this time. So it could probably have been worse.

He should try not to wonder. It wasn't like he'd ever manage to guess. Hailin religion. Hailin biology. When there were plenty of types of Christians who made no sense to him. Like those seaside evangelists from every day-trip his family took to North Wales. And then there were really camp queers. He'd never understand that. Never. And he'd grown up Christian and turned out pretty damn queer. He had no hope where the Hailin were concerned. Ray would explain it all at the weekend. He just had to be patient and wait for the weekend. Brace himself, because obviously it wasn't going to be good.

Well, if he wasn't going to sleep, he should turn the light back on and sit up and read. Be glad he didn't have to work tomorrow. Not like poor Ray.

He fell asleep over his book, and then woke up around three, turned the light off, shrugged the book away somewhere, and went back to sleep.

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“You gonna be home at the regular time tonight?” Ray would. “What d'you fancy for dinner?”

“Mmm... A steak.”

“OK. I'll go to the butcher's.”

Ray asked if the library had managed to get him the full information about the car mechanic's courses the day before. They had, and the next part-time course – three days a week – started in Harding in the first week of the next year. So more than three months away, but that was probably about right for West to get him ready for the course. The course lasted a year, starting with several months at the college, and after that it was a mixture of time at a local garage and time back in college. There were six weeks of holiday included, all at fixed times based around the college schedule, with the first two weeks of holiday breaking up that first long stint at the college. Ray also got six weeks' holiday, and as soon as Bodie had got signed up for the course, he would book those same weeks off work. They'd go away somewhere for those first two weeks, but obviously there was no hurry to decide where.

There were grants and special loans Bodie could apply for to help pay for the course, and if they'd only had Ray's salary to draw on, they would have needed them. But Malun Vasmar's son had no business applying for any kind of help. Not when Malun could have bought the entire college, and got it to set up a class called “Car repair for Bodie Vasmar, with the exact timetable to suit him and everyone in his life”.

When Bodie was filling up their mugs with the last inch of the coffee, Ray suddenly said, “Don’t go to the butcher’s. Let’s go to the roof.” He pointed upwards, then after a moment’s pause and a frown, he changed the angle to about 45 degrees, towards the ferry terminal. “In At Oba Nyon.”

“Yeah, OK. With West or – No, it’s At Kamaran. He’ll be living it up with the *davanap* group.”

“Plassen? It’s been a while. I could send him a message from work.”

“Sounds good.”

Bodie walked Ray to the door, expecting just to wave him off, but instead found himself pulled into a deep kiss. He returned the pressure in full. Nothing was going to happen, of course, but that was no reason to hold back when Ray needed something.

Ray pulled away with a sigh, looked intently at Bodie for several moments, then said quietly, ~I’m a lucky man.~

Bodie smiled, then reached out behind Ray to open the door. ~You’re a lucky man with a ferry to catch.~

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One of Plassen’s groups was playing in a bar in Budjard on An Embrun. They’d had a rough summer, for various reasons, but now Plassen thought they were worth listening to again. Bodie and Ray were keen to go, and thought West would be too.

Plassen had seen Gavio the previous weekend, and said he was steadily getting back to normal. A room had come free a few weeks earlier in a large, famously-sociable shared house, which turned out to be just the right timing for Gavio, and for the friends he’d been staying with. Gavio had asked about them, and Plassen had just said that he hadn’t seen them together in over a month. He certainly hadn’t mentioned the row. And he wasn’t going to ask them about the row, now. If either of them had wanted to complain to him, he was assuming they would have done it at the time.

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West had been planning to go to a beach party on the evening of An Embrun – maybe the last of the season – but he was far more interested in seeing Plassen’s group, and he insisted on being the one to drive them to Budjard.

It was fun, and Bodie would definitely do it again. There were six in the group – two men and four women – and a lot of the music reminded Bodie of the dance music from the parties on the ship. Some people did dance, in groups of four just in front of the small, low stage, though Bodie would have said there wasn’t room. The threesome from the housewarming party were there. They persuaded West to join them in a dance, and afterwards the six of them went back for a drink to the flat in An Uraba where two of the three lived.

Bodie and Ray only stayed for one drink, but West looked settled in for the evening, probably with more dancing.

Ray had been in a relaxed, cheerful mood all day, but the moment they were in bed he turned hungry and determined. He grabbed Bodie’s hand and kept it pressed hard

between his legs, and he used his teeth a lot, and not gently, and he muttered and snarled in Hass Embrun. Bodie guessed this was all something to do with the At Pontal counselling session, and at that moment he couldn't care now how much Ray decided to tell him or when, because this was going to make him come so hard.

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As soon as they'd sat down for breakfast Ray said, "D'you still want to get the bus to Antoness this afternoon for the run along the cliffs?"

"Yeah. You?"

A brief nod. "I'll tell you after the run why I had to walk out. Tell you well before dinner, anyway."

"Well before dinner? Is it gonna wreck my appetite?" He'd been joking, but Ray's answering expression was all too grim. "Well... OK. You know I like to have a plan."

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As soon as they were showered and changed, they took their places on the couch with mugs of tea. This was starting to feel very familiar: a gut-wrenching talk at the weekend. First time they'd had it on An Udom Kol. And if only he could hope it was the last.

"He – Well, he -" Ray was having trouble meeting Bodie's eyes. A painful, audible swallow, then he was forcing himself to keep his head turned to Bodie's. "He more-or-less said we should get ourselves castrated."

Bodie was too stunned even to open his mouth to swear. Instead he shivered, and his head jerked back. Ray was shaking his head, and looking like he was shivering even more violently than Bodie. Finally, Bodie managed to say, "No."

"Yes. More or less. Get something done to stop us being tempted. So we'd just – See each other as friends. The Mabein would be... Happy with that."

"The Mabein can go fuck themselves." Ray closed his eyes in a flinch, and Bodie gave a deep, exasperated sigh. "Look, forget I said that, OK? I – I guess he'd see that as proving his point. I'm an animal. Nothing to be done with me except get me fixed. So after everything you told him, that's all he heard?"

"No, he didn't say that. Not exactly, he – He didn't say anything about... what you might be. But he asked if I'd considered getting a *dumut* fitted. It's a -" He brought his hand to his crotch, not cupping, but with his fingertips spread out over the base of his cock. "It's a medical device. That gets put through your cock, and depending how it's set it'll stop you getting hard. It's not – Final like castration. A doctor can take it out. But it – Yeah, it cuts off all the urges."

"So that's what you do these days to handle a *glarus*? Since you can't stone him to death."

Ray looked surprised. "No, it's not for that." With a tone that said it should really be obvious. "It's to make sure you don't qualify. If you don't want any risk of an *esmana* marriage. It's fairly common. I think West has one. I hope not but... Turon said he was talking about it."

“Jesus!” Bodie raised his arms, and then let them fall heavily. “When’ll I learn to stop telling Turon things? Y’know he kind of told me that about West. On the first day we met. When I’d asked him what this ‘qualified’ thing meant. He said he’d known people who’d ‘taken steps’ not to qualify. And West shouldn’t, West should have kids. What was Turon fucking thinking, telling me all that then?”

Ray laughed. “Well, he was thinking he could trust you and of course he could, but yeah, he’s a menace.”

“So that fucker in Dishna, was he talking about us having the things fitted just for... I dunno, a couple of months? To stop more problems like that night with my uniform while you’re sorting things out? Or did he mean forever? I’m saying fuck no to either but maybe it’s not just about us. Maybe it’s normal for a couple of months in his type of counselling.”

Ray frowned and pulled a face. “I think I’d’ve heard if it was normal. I dunno. When he said it, it sounded like he meant forever. So I called him a disgusting, clueless fucker. And I walked out.” A harsh sigh. “But now I suppose I have to go back on At Mordez. Tell him fuck no. Then ask if he meant it as part of a long-term plan.”

Bodie nodded. “And if he didn’t? If he is that much of a fucker?”

A shrug. “The other four’ve gotta be better. And now I know I need to start out by proving I’m a Bakkel. And tell him not to even think about suggesting the d word.”

“Yeah.” Bodie suddenly relaxed, and let his head sag back and his legs splay apart. He hadn’t been consciously aware of how tightly he’d been clenching them together. In the next second Ray did the same, and then they were grinning at one another. That time neither of them even touched the tea before Ray stood up and led the way into the bedroom.

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Bodie was curious to see what time Ray would get back on At Mordez. If Garva refused to let him in the door, he might get the half seven ferry. If the guy had yet another bright idea and Ray needed to get drunk again, then it could be very late indeed. In fact, it was the last time Bodie would have guessed: shortly after half nine, the normal time after a full session. Bodie couldn’t tell anything from his expression.

“Tea? Something to drink?”

Ray glanced at the bottle on the coffee table. “How much left in that?”

“About half.”

“Split it with me? Then have a *tharva*?”

“Sure.”

Ray got the glasses from the kitchen, and the bottle of liqueur. He poured his share of beer into the tumbler, then sank back with a sharp sigh. “So I’ll be looking for another counsellor tomorrow.”

“Oh, bugger. Did you see him or... He refused to see you?”

“I saw him. I called him this morning to check that we still had an appointment. He’s heard worse, but -” A shrug, and another sigh. “He did mean forever. He thinks it’ll be better for us if we don’t have any sex. If we forget about everything to do with that. So. No.” He tossed back the beer, and put the glass on the table with a thud. “Four weeks! I gave him four weeks and he hadn’t come up with even one scrap of an idea to get me past the problem that was the whole reason I was seeing him. And which I’d explained to him in the first five minutes!”

“D’you get your money back?”

“Hah!” Fat chance, clearly. Ray leaned forward to pour them both small glasses of the liqueur, and then sank back heavily. “Didn’t feel I could ask, after I’d sworn at him like that. To be fair, he did seem really sorry that he couldn’t help. He’d tried. He’d put in hours, looking through all the books. But we’re too different. You’re too different. He couldn’t find anywhere to start. We spent the last half of the session talking about what type of counsellor might do better but – He agrees that with someone who isn’t queer, isn’t in an *esmana* marriage, they might not really understand what the Mabein are doing to me. Course, the other four might all be like him, and understand too well.”

“Does he know them?”

Ray nodded. “Only slightly, for a couple. He said he thought Malla Tarbet was the most unconventional, with the best imagination. Which sounds like what we need. So I’ll call him tomorrow. Hope he can see me soon.”

Bodie nodded, and took a mouthful of beer. “You gonna tell Malun what happened? Not you walking out. Just that it’s gonna take more than one counsellor.”

“Wasn’t planning on it. I’m OK if you do, though. When you write tomorrow to tell him you’ve passed the driving test.”

Bodie grinned. “Maybe I’ll only write to Turon. The news’ll get to Malun just as fast.”

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Bodie’s test was at half ten in the morning. On the way to the test centre, Barbas said, “Obviously you’re going to pass. But if you can, please make it less obvious to the examiner that you know you’re going to pass. If you let it all come as a surprise to him, I might get to see a completely clean test sheet.”

Bodie laughed, and caught the tail-end of an impressively tiny smile. He followed the advice as well as he could, and while he couldn’t know if it made any difference, he did get that perfect result.

~Are you going to get a car of your own?~

~In two or three months, probably.~ He explained about this plan to take the course in Harding. Using the bus was OK once a month, for seeing a film at the weekend, but when it came to work, he’d need a car.

~It’s a good course. Some of the mechanics at the driving school did it. You’ll do well.~

~Thank you. That’s good to hear.~ Though maybe Barbas hadn’t meant it as a compliment. Maybe he was just saying anyone would do well on that course.

Barbas dropped him off at Buka's restaurant, where he was meeting West for lunch.

~Thank you. You helped me a lot.~

Finally, a normal-sized smile. ~I hope you'll be driving all over Pen Embrun. Now you can explore your new home.~

~I will. Thanks again.~ He stepped back, and they exchanged nods and Barbas drove off.

West was already in the restaurant, sitting inside by the window.

~I don't want to spoil your news, but that looked like two men who were planning never to meet again.~

Bodie managed to wince and shake his head. ~Nah, I'm his favourite pupil. He was kind of glad I failed.~

~No! You didn't. Surely?~

Bodie maintained the sheepish expression as he handed over the test sheet and sat down. ~See for yourself.~

West was frowning with concern, but after a few seconds he gave a grunt of surprise, looked sharply at Bodie, and then slid the sheet across the table with an exasperated sigh. ~You and my brother deserve each other. And congratulations, of course."

~Thanks.~ Bodie grinned, told West about Barbas's advice before the test, and West laughed and asked how surprised the examiner had seemed.

After lunch Bodie went home to send a message to Ray about the test, because he knew Ray would be wondering, and then for the afternoon lesson they watched a film: a classic film that was over a hundred years old, about a pair of working-class twins, and the adventures that they and their friends had with their first car. There was a lot of local slang and during the first half hour of the film Bodie thought it would take them three lessons to watch it. But things got easier and they finished it that afternoon, though the lesson over-ran by more than an hour.

Ray bought Bodie a shirt in a casual style with an almost-abstract pattern of cars in white and shades of grey against a deep-blue background. It could have looked gimmicky and jokey – and there was nothing wrong with that – but instead it looked confident and playful. Flirtatious. Ray had bought it a week earlier, and had been searching for several weeks before that. He hadn't bought it in Bicknor's store, but Bicknor had been the one who pointed him in the right direction.

"Have you told Turon and Malun about passing?"

"Not yet. I thought I'd see how you got on with setting up the new counsellor. If we don't have a date yet then..." A shrug. "I'll just tell them about the test."

"It'll be in a week. At five o'clock. The new one, Malla, he doesn't do evenings. Early mornings and weekends, but not evenings. My boss is OK with me leaving early a couple of days a week."

"What d'you tell your boss?"

A heavy sigh. "I did tell him it's counselling. For you being new to Pen Embrun. It's so different from what you grew up with. You're finding it hard to adjust. And we'd decided it was time to get help."

Bodie nodded several times. "Nice. Because it is about me not being from here. But you'll have kept your boss from thinking there's anything really wrong with our marriage."

A quirk of the eyebrows. "It's a talent. I can take over the curry, if you want to go and tell them now."

"Yeah, think I will." But at the door of the bedroom, he had a thought and turned back. "Let's send Turon a photo of the shirt. I'll tell him how long you spent looking."

"OK." Ray looked pleased, and went to get the camera.

They decided that leaning against the kitchen counter would show the shirt off best, and Bodie found he didn't feel awkward at all posing for Ray. Ray took four or five quick pictures, then lowered the camera and looked Bodie up and down. Then, slowly: "Would you mind...? I wanna see how it looks with that grey necklace."

"Sure." He looked in the bedroom mirror after he'd put it on, and again it made him look rich. Like he'd just stepped off his yacht. Still flirtatious, but scarcely able to imagine being turned down. About like Ray, then.

"Ah." A long sigh, then Ray started taking pictures again, before Bodie had reached the counter. "I thought it would match one of the greys, but maybe it's better that it doesn't."

"Like you said, you've got great taste."

"The best." He moved closer and put the camera on the counter by Bodie's elbow. "I wouldn't send Turon anything from the second set, if I were you. They've gotta have 'earthquake' written all over them. They've got me."

"I'll send him the first one you took. When you'd just got started with looking at me."

He wrote to Malun first, very briefly, just giving the good news about the test and what the instructor had said about the car repair course, and saying that the first counsellor had decided the day before that he wasn't going to be able to think of any ideas for helping Ray. But he'd recommended another counsellor, and Ray had his first session booked for At Rahden. With Turon, he filled in all the details about Barbas's advice, and the examiner's comments, and the trick he probably shouldn't have played on West, and the afternoon's film, and then Ray and the shirt. He did end up using the first photo, because, as they'd expected, their reactions to each other got more obvious with each photo.

Chapter 23

During the morning lesson the next day, West got Bodie to call the Admissions Department at the college, and explain that he was hoping to start the car repair course in the new year, but that he wasn't Hailin and didn't speak much Hass Embrun yet. His *nespa's* brother, West, was teaching him the language, but West didn't know much about car repair, so would it be possible for the two of them to come in and talk to someone about what vocabulary West would need to teach him so he didn't get lost in the classes?

Certainly it would be possible, and after a few minutes on hold, they got an appointment for three o'clock on At Oba Nyon with the woman in charge of the course.

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Ray was home an hour early on At Kamaran, shortly after half six. But he was looking remarkably calm considering he must have walked out of the session in the first five minutes. Looking resigned, at worst.

"Can I ask?"

A nod and a shrug. "We'd had sex. About four years ago. Before I met Gavio. We'd only known each other's first names. When I got to the house I thought it looked familiar. And then we both realised in the first couple of minutes. So... I'll be calling around again tomorrow."

Bodie had to laugh. "I guess the odds were high, with you. Was he married back then?"

"Yeah, it was a threesome. A *tomurat sempar*, really: his *iskolpa* was mainly interested in watching."

Bodie shook his head and sighed. "What're the odds that you had sex with all the others, too?"

A grimace then a shrug. "I think we're OK. I spent the ferry journey listing all of my *esmana* couples. And I remember the names for all except one, and they don't match any of the other three counsellors so we've still got options."

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The woman who ran the car repair course was called Annis Gallatin, and her office was full of parts of cars, models and pictures of cars, and books about cars. She looked to be in her 40s and was rather dumpy, but with beautiful clear brown eyes, and dressed in a combination of colours and textures Bodie hadn't seen before and guessed were carefully chosen. She wasn't what Bodie had expected, not in any way.

She said she'd been looking forward to meeting them, and in fact she seemed quite excited about it. Unlike Barbas, she did want to know about cars and driving and repairs on Bodie's planet, and also about how Bodie came to be living on Roslin with a Hailin *nespa*, and learning Hass Embrun from the *nespa's* brother.

The three of them had discussed over dinner on At Pontal whether or not they should tell the truth at the college about Ray and West being Bakkels. If they did, there was no telling how far the word would spread, and they'd quickly agreed that none of them was ready for that. So they'd just used the version that Ray had told Shilda, about West

being on the contact mission as part of the Linguistics Department, and persuading his policeman brother to apply for a placement with the fleet. The only danger that they could see was if Bodie made good-enough friends with someone on the course that they'd end up meeting West's friends or Ray's friends in Parass, and that danger should be easy to avoid.

Eventually, after they'd finished their second cup of *kenit*, Annis reminded herself that they'd come in because they had some questions of their own. There was definitely space for Bodie on the part-time course starting in Set Intas. He could enrol any time, for a deposit of 10%, with the balance due before the end of the second week of the class. As soon as he'd enrolled, she would arrange for them to have copies of all of the course materials, and to attend some classes for all of the different teachers, to see how well Bodie could understand each of them. Bodie told her that the business would be paying, as part of the same linguistics project that was funding West; he'd need to send them a copy of the enrolment form first, but he thought he'd be able to pay the deposit within two weeks, at the longest. Of course, the real reason for the delay wasn't the bureaucracy of the Monor base, but the fact that Malun was so far away that any message would take nearly three days to reach him.

During the drive home, West said, ~This should be fun. I wouldn't have said I wanted to learn more about cars, but I'm sure I'll find it useful. And it's great to have a big project. Something that'll keep us busy for months.~

Bodie nodded. "Yeah, it's gonna work." Then a snort of amusement and he said, ~Is there something you really don't want to learn more about? That you'd've paid me not to pick?~

West frowned as he thought about it. ~Well... To be honest... The security work. It's hard to see how I could have helped you. There wouldn't be anyone there offering to give us course material. Or let us sit in on a day's work.~

Bodie laughed. ~And I can't see how it'd be useful to you if you did learn it.~ West really liked to keep busy. He'd hate bodyguard work, not that he had the build to even consider it. ~Let's not say that to Ray, though. Everything else about his idea was just fine.~

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Ray's next counsellor was called Torrin Errabad. When Ray had called around he'd asked for two sessions a week for a time from five onwards, and Torrin had the options that suited him best. He was booked for six on At Rahden and five on At Kamaran. He'd tell his boss that there'd been a cancellation, and now he only needed to leave extra-early on one evening of the week instead of two.

That weekend was Bodie's first chance to drive over any distance. After the conversation session on An Embrun he drove them to the far end of the island for lunch, and on An Udom Kol they got the ferry and he drove into the mountains a couple of hours outside Dishna, where Ray had found a good, end-of-season price for a family suite in a hotel by a large lake. They ran and walked and rowed and swam, and argued about who should get the double bed. Bodie won in the end: since being at the hotel was about doing something different, he should get to see what it was like to leave after the goodnight kiss. It was surprisingly sad; for minutes afterwards he felt the pull all down the front of

his body, from his nipples to his cock, the force urging him to go back and slide under the covers, and trust that this would be the night when Ray would let it happen.

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Ray didn't tell Torrin that he'd seen another counsellor first, and Torrin didn't seem to remember Ray calling four weeks earlier to ask if he was married to a man and if he did evening appointments. This time, telling the story from the beginning, Ray felt he was rushing, explaining things badly. Garva had had questions, about Gavio and Turon and Bodie's job and English and any number of details, but Torrin was almost silent. When Ray offered to show him some of the footage they'd sent to Raina, he said he didn't think he needed to see it. Not when he'd already seen Ray's pictures of Bodie in the new shirt, and had observed the ways Ray smiled when he talked about Bodie.

Ray seemed much more relaxed about the sessions this time. Bodie guessed that the truth got easier to tell each time, and Torrin had promised from the start that he wouldn't suggest a *dumut*, or anything that would involve less sex than they were already having. So Ray shouldn't have to do any swearing.

On the day of the third session, though, Ray came home an hour earlier than he should have. He took a couple of steps into the living-room and then just stood looking at Bodie, a stunned expression on his face. Not furious, like when he'd walked out on the first counsellor, or exasperated, like with the second. Something else. That Ray would tell him about when he was ready.

He got up from the couch and approached Ray carefully. "Can I...? What can I...?" Ray's expression didn't change but he reached out, and Bodie immediately closed the gap, found himself crushed tight, and took a grip nearly as strong.

What the hell had the guy suggested? Some Hailin thing that was even worse than castration? Bodie just couldn't imagine.

After a few minutes Ray's grip became less desperate, though his breathing remained ragged. Bodie waited a few more minutes, then said, "D'you want to go and lie down?"

A pause then, ~Yes.~ Another pause. ~Please.~

OK. So definitely some new Hailin thing. Bodie led Ray through to the bedroom, sat him down, took off his shoes then kicked off his own, and then Ray was reaching for him again.

~You didn't want to get drunk this time?~ Bodie had let at least a quarter of an hour go by, he thought.

~That didn't help. You do help.~

~Good.~ He tightened his hold briefly, then took a deep breath, quietly so Ray wouldn't notice, and said, ~Do you still have an appointment with him for At Kamaran?~ A very slight shake of the head. So slight, so unlike Ray, that Bodie had a sudden terrible thought. "You didn't kill him. Did you?" It could happen with anyone, he thought. Everyone had something that could push them over.

But Ray burst out laughing, with simple amusement, like Bodie could only have been making a joke. "He's fine. Better than fine. Knowing he doesn't have to talk to me again."

Bodie frowned. "I thought – Sounded like it was going OK."

A long sigh, then Ray pulled away enough to roll heavily onto his back. "Yeah, I thought so too. But he – He said straight away today that he can't help us. And that's not..." Another sigh, sounding exhausted. "It's not that he just can't work out how. It's that he couldn't live with himself if he even tried. He can't make it possible for someone to commit bestiality. Especially not a Bakkel."

Bodie raised himself up on an elbow, needing to move, and needing a clearer view of Ray's face. "That – That's really how he said it?"

"Well, with stuff first about being sorry. And not thinking about anything else all weekend. And special meetings with his own counsellor. But – Yeah -" Suddenly Ray's voice broke and he was blinking furiously. "The idea of us ever having real, naked sex again... The Mabein would never forgive him."

Bodie's stomach clenched: at the sight of Ray so close to tears, at having it put into words, the thought of them never fucking again. Almost in a whisper: "What did you say?"

"I said..." The blinking was slowing, his voice was steadier. He reached out, slid his hand slowly up Bodie's chest and hooked his fingertips under Bodie's shirt-collar. "Maybe I should have reminded him about Turon. And all the other Bakkels. How quickly they decided it wasn't bestiality. How they thought we were having any kind of sex we wanted to. And were happy for us. But – Y'know how it is when someone's made up his mind. So I just said I thought I should get my money back. And he agreed and we sorted that out and I left. And on the ferry..." Shaking his head, over and over. "I've never known it so slow. And so full. So right now I don't ever wanna speak to another Hailin again. I don't ever wanna leave this bed." Pulling at the neck of Bodie's shirt, and lifting his head into the kiss.

It was a deep kiss, but somehow not hungry. So the staying in bed wasn't about sex, then. More like wanting to be home. Wanting to hide. Bodie couldn't remember the last time he'd had that feeling. Sure as hell couldn't think of a time when the idea of home came with a person who could be trusted to help. With no question about it. An absolute trust. Maybe most of that was the *mana*. But he still liked being part of it.

"Your boss seems a flexible sort of bloke. You wanna do your job from here? No problem. Couldn't be simpler."

That got exactly the chuckle Bodie had been hoping for. "We'll set up your computer in here. I can do it all with messages. No problem, like you said."

Once Bodie had stopped laughing, he briefly tightened his grip on Ray's waist then said, "Though d'you wanna call in sick tomorrow? I can do the same with West. Could be good, a day in bed."

Ray frowned and sucked air in through his teeth, clearly tempted, but in the end shook his head. "There's a case I really should be there for. But come into town for the evening. I'll find out what's on. We'll do something different."

"OK. Good idea."

Soon afterwards they agreed they were hungry. Bodie had been planning on making himself scrambled eggs on toast, with some leftover salad on the side, and that sounded just right to Ray. The sun had only just set by the time they'd eaten and cleaned up, and they decided not to go back to bed but instead to curl up on the couch and listen to music. Bodie suggested some of Turon's music but Ray wanted to start with "The Strangers".

Ray's next choice was "Ziggy Stardust". When Ray settled back against him after putting it on, Bodie waited until the second chorus before saying quietly, "Ray. What he said about me and fucking and the Mabein. Isn't that the same as you think?"

A small grunt from Ray, then a bob of the head that looked more like surprise than agreement. "It is, but -" A long pause. "My mind doesn't work like most people's. Like anyone's, really, that I've met."

Bodie's turn to grunt, mostly in amusement. "God knows, that's true." He lifted his hand briefly from Ray's shoulder to ruffle his curls.

"You're the only person who finds it easy to understand me. For most Hailin, including my family, it's difficult. And so -" He swallowed. "Thinking like that about you and sex... I was so sure that was just me. My mind. No one in the family thinks it matters what we do. Of course they did, at first. But they changed their minds so quickly. I thought..." A long sigh. "I thought any normal person would be the same. And a counsellor would be able to show me how to see it normally. Malun was sure it would be easy. Now I'm wondering if Garva Delnass thought exactly the same as this one. And just decided to give me an excuse." He started blinking rapidly again. "If the other two... That scares me as much as having you run away."

Bodie held him close, and leant in to place a kiss on his forehead. "He's probably just the one, out of the five. But sounds like you should take a break. Not call the others tomorrow."

Bodie felt the change in weight all along his side as Ray sagged in relief. "How long a break?"

"Long as you need."

A sigh, then a frown. "What if Malun asks?"

"We'll say you're finding it tough. It's gonna take longer than he thought."

"Yeah. At this rate it's easily gonna take another five weeks. Maybe into next year."

Bodie shrugged. "We've got time. We're still young."

Ray's laugh was a perfect mix of delighted and relieved. "And that's how your mind works." His smile quickly faded, though, and his expression as he stared at Bodie became hesitant, maybe even worried. He opened his mouth, paused for a couple of seconds, and then said, "I want to say I love you."

Bodie's heart seemed to turn inside out, and he blinked and swallowed and had to look away for a moment. "Last I heard, you didn't know what that meant."

"I don't know what the processes are inside you. I still can't imagine that. But the way you treat me, how that makes me feel... That's how I want to make you feel. I don't

know if that is your love, but I need a word for it. Every day, I find myself needing a word for it. So does it – Does it feel to you as if I love you? Can I say it?”

“I’d love you to say it.” A split-second later Bodie took in his own choice of words, and he grinned. “Can’t see how it’d be possible to feel more loved. You fucking adore me.”

Pure, blazing happiness. “I fucking do.”

Bodie nodded twice, emphatically. “Y’know, it is good to have that cleared up,” and then they were laughing and Ray was stretching out along the couch and pulling Bodie on top of him.

* * * * *

Bodie got to the subway station nearest to the police station shortly after quarter to six, and Ray arrived to pick him up about five minutes later. They had a booking a few miles to the north east for seven o’clock, but Ray wouldn’t tell him what it was for. Just that it could last two hours, and they’d stop for something quick to eat on the way.

“A few miles to the north east” was a mostly-industrial area near the river, full of tall fences and closed gates and security stations. A pair of open gates drew attention, and that was where Ray turned in. There was a security station next to the gate but it was empty. Bodie guessed that the large dilapidated buildings were warehouses rather than factories, or they used to be warehouses, anyway, because the huge, crisply-new signs surely couldn’t be announcing to the world that this place made or stored guns. Guns that people were going to fire at each other while crouching, and running, and even leaping, all while wearing light-grey overalls and helmets with visors – and wasn’t that great and exciting!

~*valigat nanatuscor pulsonranas*.~ Bodie could read the words, even with the jagged, amped-up typeface, but he had no idea what any part meant. “This is some kind of combat game, isn’t it? Good find!”

Ray was grinning, perfectly happy that Bodie had guessed it for himself. “It opened while I was away. The first *pulsonranas* arena in the whole archipelago, they were very keen to tell me. There was a big work event here one evening, pretty soon after it opened. The pictures are still up on the board in the break room but I just hadn’t noticed them. Until I started asking around about...” A shrug. “Different things to do. And tonight’s a ‘just turn up’ night. Well, they say it’s best to book, but you don’t have to come as a whole set of teams. They’ll assign us to teams, and make up the numbers themselves if they need to.”

Their team – the Blues – ended up as eight, with three middle-aged women and three teenage boys. The women and the boys had played together before, once on the same team and once on opposite teams, and they were all agreed that their leader should be Espen, the oldest and most-harmless looking of the women.

She tried to hide her dismay about having someone on the team who couldn’t be relied upon to understand every order. Ray could translate, of course, but that meant she had to keep them together. Bodie suggested she test him with all the most-likely commands and that did seem to reassure her. He and Ray had decided not to say anything about Bodie’s real combat experience; it would just worry people, whether they believed it or not.

The overalls were stiff, and made even Ray look shapeless and awkward. They were covered with some kind of mesh that would register a hit from one of the pellets and turn a very convincing deep red. If you were hit in the head or the centre of the chest you were out of the game for good, but for anywhere else your team had the option of getting someone to take you to the field hospital area, where you would recover in 12 to 24 minutes, depending on the location of the hit.

Their goal for that evening's game was to install a large, unwieldy flag in the Yellow Team's territory, while stopping the Yellows from doing the same. The terrain inside the warehouse included woodland, with hillocks and streams and fences and a couple of farms. None of it very realistic, but good enough for the game. There were several blocks of city streets, too, and apparently a two-deck spaceship beyond that, but that was all cordoned off.

The Blues won, thanks in large part to effective reconnaissance, Bodie's marksmanship and experience with using a landscape, and Espen's skill at devising and communicating plans, and assigning roles within the team. There were several good shots on the other team, too, and at one point the Blues were down two teenagers, a maths teacher, and Ray, but their defence was firm, their wounded had some productive discussions during their convalescence, and they gained ground rapidly once they were up to strength. Bodie had wondered if he'd feel the need to take over, but Espen was bloody good for an amateur, and she'd also got quicker and quicker at taking up his suggestions. It was one of the teenagers, though, who asked Bodie in the locker room what the equipment and rules were like in the games he'd played back home, and Bodie finally admitted that he'd been a soldier. That produced a flood of questions, and a redoubling of the suggestions that they should come for a drink. But Ray had to drive them home, and besides the sight of Ray emerging elated and flushed from his overalls had Bodie already cursing the hour of ferry journey that separated them from their bed. They did exchange numbers, though, and made sure they all had copies of the month's schedule for the arena. They were keen to see what they could do in the city or the spaceship, or with a larger team.

On the ferry they got a couple of bottles of the lightest beer, and took a booth at the back, where it was always quietest. After the first mouthful of beer, they sat back and looked at each other in silence for a long time without touching. It felt almost like the Kew pub, when Turon had gone to get the second round.

Eventually Bodie grinned. "You were right. That was even better than taking the day off work."

Several slow nods. "I was right. If I'd known how right I was gonna be, I might've booked us a hotel. Though..." He glanced briefly around the cabin then back at Bodie. "This is a different kind of 'slow' from last night." One of his most promising half-smiles.

After a few seconds Bodie took a glance, too. Almost all of the people in sight were couples, and at least half were kissing or cuddling. Ordinary Hailin. Going home to have one or other kind of ordinary Hailin sex. Fun, probably, but they wouldn't be remembering this journey. Not like he would be.

~It's our kind of slow. It's a... '*tolmin tassuram*'. If we want to give it a name.~

Ray's eyes widened. ~I think we have to. I think we invented it. It's such an advanced /?/. No one else could cope with it.~

Bodie narrowed his eyes. "The toughest test for two red-blooded men."

Ray grunted, and then abruptly tipped his head back and took a long, thirsty drink. There was just an inch left when he set the bottle down with a thud. ~Before I met you, mine was barely red. It was like this.~ A jerk of the bottle. ~It was water. Now...~

"You're lit-up like an engine-room." ~Bet I am too.~

~You should be in bed. You should be underneath me.~

~So stop looking at me. Go and sit over there if you have to.~ He'd gestured with his head towards the starboard side. "You know how far we are from our bed."

Ray stared at him for a couple of seconds, expression suddenly appraising. "Now you're commanding." Then he closed his eyes and let his head drop to his chest with a sigh. ~That's two hours with a gun in your hands.~ And a slow smirk that made Bodie have to close his eyes too.

For the rest of the ferry journey they didn't look at each other or speak. People must have wondered why they were still sitting together, when they were obviously in the middle of a bitter row.

* * * * *

Shortly after they started cooking dinner on At Oba Nyon, Ray announced that his new counsellor's name was Ullis Hanvert. He'd had a five o'clock session with Ullis that afternoon. "I booked it on At Pontal. The other one didn't have anything until next week."

"I'm guessing it went OK. If you're telling me about it now."

A slight shrug. "He promised no *dumut*. And he's not worried about whether or not the Mabein forgive him. He does think you're an animal but... Since no one could argue that you can't give proper consent to sex, he doesn't see how it could be anyone's else's business what we do. Including the Mabein."

Bodie's head rocked back slightly. "Wow."

"Yeah. He's different. He guessed I must have seen at least one other counsellor first, so I did tell him, without giving their names. But then, at the end of the session, when we were making the next booking, he asked if I'd called a few weeks ago wanting to know if he was married to a man. And I figured I had to say yes – because of needing to talk about Ferros – so that means he'll have a good idea who the others are."

"He sounds pretty sharp."

A definite nod. "He's older than the others. In his sixties, at least. Feels like he's had almost everything come through the door."

The sessions were booked for six on At Mordez and five on At Oba Nyon. In the first session they had got as far as the Wednesday night on Earth, after Malun had announced that the base would be in London. Ullis was asking a lot of questions, and Ray certainly didn't feel he was rushing this time. But he wished they could have got as far as the next night, when Turon had suggested that Ray come down to Kew. Because

he'd still been stupidly scared that Wednesday night. He'd been saying things to Turon that now made him cringe. And he was going to feel he was stuck there, in a way, until At Mordez. Bodie promised to do his best to keep Ray's mind off the past.

West confirmed over dinner that he'd cancelled both conversation sessions for the weekend. He wanted the whole weekend clear, so he could study the course materials they'd collected from the college on At Kamaran. He guessed they'd need to spend a couple of weeks working on vocabulary before they could think of sitting in on a class, and he hoped to have a plan for the vocabulary lessons by the end of the weekend. He didn't mind working over the weekend; he enjoyed studying a set of new information when he had one specific purpose in mind, and could take the time to concentrate properly. But if Bodie and Ray decided to do their part by speaking in Hass Embrun for all of An Uraba, say, then that would be great.

~Would I be allowed to read in English?~

West frowned hard as he thought about it. ~Yes, but for every hour that you read in English, you have to spend half an hour reading in Hass Embrun. And then discuss it with Ray.~

Maybe West had been joking, or inviting Bodie to argue, but Bodie immediately shrugged and nodded, and said, ~OK. Let's make it all weekend. And starting now.~ It was only fair, to match West's effort. With the bonus that it should help distract Ray from thoughts of that Wednesday night in orbit around Earth.

* * * * *

The second counselling session got as far as the sex they'd had in the holds. Ullis said it was the most preposterous fantasy he'd ever heard of, and surely the other counsellors had told him the same, and challenged him hard about it? But they hadn't. Yes, they'd both shown surprise, but not much more than a raised eyebrow, and Torrin hadn't even asked what he thought about it now, after Bodie had made him accept the truth. Ullis did his own eyebrow-raising at that – wondering about the other counsellors, Ray thought, rather than doubting his word – and then promised that they would be returning to this topic in later sessions.

For the next three sessions, though, he had Ray continue with the story. The story now included the earlier counsellors and how he and Bodie had dealt with those sessions, so it was longer than ever. Ullis asked a lot of questions about the other members of the family and their attitudes towards Bodie and the idea of sex with Bodie, about the various lies he'd been telling people about their marriage, and about the physical and psychological details of their sex life.

They reached the end of the story about halfway through the fifth session. Ullis had said during the previous session that he already had several ideas for approaches that they might try, but he wasn't going to discuss any of them until he knew everything. He wasn't going to tell Ray all of the ideas at once, either. He'd choose the idea that looked the most promising once they got to the end of the story, and if he was right, they wouldn't need to look at the other ideas.

The idea he chose wasn't the first he'd come up with, but he thought it was easily the most straightforward: that Ray should find a way to convince himself that it was

entirely a *tolmin* marriage, that he hasn't actually been through *russma*. Yes, there had been the blood tests, and he didn't get an erection without Bodie present, but they'd already talked at length about Ray's ability to concoct stories and then sincerely believe in them, and to Ullis this looked trivial compared with the stowaway in the holds.

For the blood tests... What if Ray had a new or rare mutation which meant that his intense excitement over Bodie had triggered reactions that looked like *russma* but actually weren't? So if he had the tests again now, they'd show him as a qualified but unmarried man.

And as for only getting an erection when Bodie was present, well, Ullis had never had a client more passionately delighted by any kind of husband or lover. He himself could easily believe that Ray's attraction to Bodie was so strong and specific that he would only get aroused if Bodie was looking at him with desire and he knew that they were going to have sex.

Ray had told him that he knew beyond any doubt that Bodie never let him go into *gimana*. So why not take that a step further and say that the possibility of *gimana* was irrelevant to them, because it was actually a *tolmin* marriage?

Ullis had given Ray orders for the weekend to think through the details he would need to convince himself it wasn't any kind of *esmana* marriage. And to try to imagine how the idea of naked sex with Bodie would look once he'd convinced himself.

Ray was so restless, his mind was racing so quickly, that he had no interest in cooking, or eating, or even drinking a beer. He paced back and forth in front of the TV, gesticulating energetically as he told Bodie what had happened in the day's session. This really could work! For him it was a trivial task, like Ullis had said. He had to wonder why he hadn't thought of it himself. He'd need to take himself off somewhere for An Embrun or maybe longer. Find somewhere to sit and do his thinking. Or to walk, if there were enough gaps in the forecast rain.

For now he really needed to burn off this nervous energy. But it was too dark for a run and the energy was all wrong for sex. *Gulshor* would be best, if they could only find a court free. There was nothing in their building until ten or in West's building, so they started to check the others and got lucky quickly, with a half eight booking in At Mordez. With the booking made, Ray was able to settle down enough to suggest a mug of tea while they waited, and to ask Bodie about his day.

Ray did put a lot of physical energy into the match, but his mental focus wavered, and Bodie had his clearest win yet, though still not one you'd call easy. Afterwards they found that both cubicles were occupied – presumably by a betrothed couple – and rather than wait, they decided to go home and have their post-*gulshor* sex in Ray's bathroom. Bodie's bathroom was too large, it just wouldn't feel right.

Finally, Ray was hungry. They made their version of pasta puttanesca and ate on the couch, with the news and weather forecast playing without sound. The rain did look like being pretty solid.

"Y'know, I think I'll get the ferry to Sotka tomorrow." Sotka was an island about a quarter the size of Roslin, four hours to the south east. It was one of the places that had one ferry a day from Parass. "Do my thinking staring out of the window while someone

else drives. It leaves around nine. Should get me back by six. I might stay the night there. Depending on how quickly I'm thinking."

Bodie nodded. "Sounds better than being sat in the car. Or in a café."

Ray leaned forward to get the TV controls, and checked the ferry times. He'd been right. Neither of them was really interested in the news, so he put some music on instead.

"I shouldn't say it, but..." Ray was turning the beer-bottle around and around as it rested on his knee. "The idea that I might come back tomorrow evening with it all worked out. Knowing that nothing we might do could ever really bother the Mabein. I shouldn't even think it, but... Where we might be, this time tomorrow."

"Yeah, I -" Bodie moistened his lips. "Feels like too much to think about."

With a nudge of his thigh against Bodie's, and a raised eyebrow: "Could be our last chance for a proper dry-hump. With a proper goodnight kiss."

Ray was sounding far too confident for comfort. But that was how Ray was made when it came to sex. And Bodie was made to lock eyes with him, and feel his blood leap and gasp, and forget all idea of caution.

* * * * *

It was drizzling when Bodie walked Ray to the ferry terminal. Ray had his backpack, with toiletries and a change of clothes, some snacks, and a stack of paper and a stylus, because making notes helped him sometimes, as a way to think things through. He'd call at half one.

The morning's conversation session with Shilda was about different types of friendship, and what one could and should expect of friendships, and the way in which friendships dissolved or went wrong. West assured them that he wasn't having problems with any of his friends in Parass; he's just come across an article that had made him think. As usual, as they were winding up the session they talked about plans for the rest of the day. Bodie just shrugged and said it would depend on Ray.

After the session Bodie took a walk through the moors to the coast and back. The rain had got heavier and he was the only person in sight. Yeah, why would anyone else in Parass want to feel like they were taking an hour-long cold shower?

Ray called on the dot of half one. He would be staying the night. The journey out had gone well, but there were a couple of things he still hadn't worked out how to fit in, and he had a feeling they'd need longer than the journey back. He was in a front room at a guest house in view of the jetty. He was about to go out and get lunch, then probably take a walk around the town before coming back for more staring out of the window. Bodie was going to take the car on the next boat to Dishna, and see if he could persuade a team to take him on for the next battle in the arena. With any luck, there'd be someone on duty who could at least vouch for him as a marksman. And if he couldn't get in, then he'd go and see a film.

The next battle was scheduled for four, and it was booked by a large company that had something to do with computers. There were twenty in each team, and the field of action included both the woodland and the town. No one had ever tried to gate-crash a private battle before and the initial reaction was not promising. The member of staff who

recognised him – Remeli – did say he was an excellent player, but also mentioned that she'd always seen him play next to his Hailin *nespa*, who could speak his language.

Bodie shrugged. ~Ray's out of town for his work. I've always understood everything important.~ Which was true enough, he thought.

The Yellow leader asked what his *nespa*'s job was, raised an eyebrow at the reply, then shrugged, sighed, and said, ~How much /?/ can he do? We'll take you, but if you get shot you're out. And you can't come to the party afterwards.~

~That's fair. Thanks.~

The objective was to find three heavy chests of top-secret supplies that had somehow been lost in the area, and get them all back to the team's command centre. At the one hour mark the Yellows were doing well, with two of the chests in their possession (though not yet at the centre), but then their leader got shot in the head, and for about ten minutes it looked as if they might be about to split into separate factions. Bodie tried to ignore it all and keep his sights on the Blues, because the Yellows sure-as-hell weren't going to listen to anything he suggested. But Bodie couldn't be everywhere and in the confusion the Blues seized one of the chests. The third chest was well-hidden and was still out in the field when the three hours were up. It was technically with the Yellows, but had been moved further towards the Blue centre than towards the Yellow centre, and that gave the Blues the victory. Everyone seemed happy with the results, so much so that the final Yellow leader said Bodie would be welcome to come to the party after all.

~That's really kind but I need to get back to Parass.~ It was kind, but away from the arena they'd all be talking about work. He'd get the next ferry, and eat somewhere in town.

When he came out of the changing-room, he found Remeli in the corridor, obviously waiting for him.

~Could you -~

~Come to see your boss?~ Quietly, like her.

~Yes, please.~

He waved a casual goodbye to the computer people, and followed her down the corridor.

~I got you into trouble.~

A quick grin. ~Not really, but he's going to ask you never to do that again. If other businesses hear that we allow /?/, it could really /?/ them.~

~Of course. I'm sorry.~ He quirked an eyebrow. ~It just seemed the perfect way to spend a rainy day. With my *nespa* away.~

The boss seemed to understand that just as easily as Remeli, and Bodie could see that Remeli really wasn't in serious trouble. There was a lot of apologising all around, and then the boss (Oksa) asked how their setup compared with others Bodie had used, and a short time later was saying he wished he could offer him a job.

Bodie decided not to try for the half seven ferry, and instead stopped for a grilled meat takeaway and a bottle of beer on the way to the port, which made for a very enjoyable dinner while he was in the queue of cars waiting for the boat.

Would Ray call again that evening? Should he call Ray? They hadn't arranged anything, except that Ray would definitely be back the next day. If Ray got those last problems figured out, would he be able to tell Bodie immediately? Or would he want to save it?

Ray did like surprises. But he was also pretty conscientious about breaking bad news. So if he hadn't cracked it by the time he had to leave the guest-house, he would call to say so. There was no point in guessing their chances. This was Ray's mind, off doing its aerobatics.

He needed to distract himself with a film, and the one that caught his eye was "The Great Escape". It was longer than he'd realised and didn't finished until gone midnight, which still wasn't nearly late enough for him to feel tired.

Having a wank. That should help with getting to sleep. This once, he thought Ray would forgive him.

Should he watch some of Ray's porn? Probably too risky. Who knows what he'd find? But he could imagine sitting on the couch watching something with Ray. Or not watching at all once they both had their cocks out. Nothing on the screen could be better than the sight of Ray's clever hands wrapped around that magnificent cock. Or of Ray's avid, near-desperate expression as he watched Bodie bring himself closer and closer.

* * * * *

The rain stopped during the night, but the ground was still soggy enough that Bodie opted for a walk before breakfast rather than a run. For the conversation session with Plassen they continued with the theme of "Things you know or care about if you live on Roslin", which would surely be useful for the course.

Bodie thought Ray might call any time before half one, and he went straight home after the session. Just after one Bodie's message light lit up on the TV. It was Ray, and the news was bad. Bodie could tell that immediately, from what he could read on his own on the TV, and then the dictionary on his computer filled in the details.

Ray hadn't made any real progress in the last 24 hours, and didn't expect to do better during the journey home. He hadn't given up hope: Ullis might see the answers straight away, at the start of the session on At Mordez. But he was so sorry to be disappointing Bodie.

Poor Ray. Sounded like he was a ball of pure misery. Too down – or choked up? – even to face a phone call. It's probably be best if he could just sleep through the ferry trip.

He wouldn't be in the mood to cook when he got home, or to eat out, either. So Bodie would get something ready. Something comforting. Like shepherd's pie, maybe. Police interrogator's pie, rather. Yeah, that would work. And it would help keep him busy, too, because it was going to be a long afternoon.

From half five onwards, Bodie made regular checks from the balcony of the view to the east, hoping to spot the ferry early in the approach to the terminal. It appeared shortly before quarter to, and he immediately got his jacket and went down to meet it.

Ray hadn't been expecting Bodie to be at the terminal, and for a split-second after he noticed him, he looked even more defeated and defenceless than before. But in the next moment he was smiling and waving and picking up the pace.

They hugged briefly, then walked home slowly with their arms around one another's waists. The journey back hadn't been great. There had been a noisy group, and though they'd got off after a couple of hours at another island, even then he just couldn't concentrate on his book. Police interrogator's pie would be perfect, though. Ray thought it was hilarious, Bodie talking his way onto the Yellow team, and being told off afterwards. They let go of one another so that Bodie could act out the battle, and the full account took them up to the flat, and onto the couch with mugs of tea. Yes, they should definitely do something about putting a larger team together; they'd call Espen and the others tomorrow, and see who'd be playing on At Laura Var.

"You wanna tell me what you got stuck on?" Bodie nodded towards the backpack, which Ray had left leaning against the shelves, in front of the LPs.

A brief sigh, with a nod in return. "That time I watched the porn. And how we got started in the holds, but mostly the porn. Because if sex only works for me now if we're both excited about sharing it together, then -" He swallowed, and dragged his hand down his face. "I did believe, in the holds, that the sex with the stowaway was something we were sharing together. Once I saw how eager you were to go back in. But with the porn, I need to convince myself that I really believed that it was about sharing something with you." A big shrug, with his hands lifted up and falling back. "And I can't. Every way I look at it, I see a man who can still get excited by all the same things. As long as he has his *iskolpa's* fresh *mana*." A shaking sigh, and his head fell back hard enough to rebound once off the couch cushion. Staring up at the ceiling: "I'm so sorry. I already wished I'd never watched that fucking porn. But now..."

Another, deeper sigh, and he slowly raised his head and looked at Bodie. "I had everything else working so well. Of course I've got some kind of mutation. It would explain why I didn't realise during that night that I was going into *russma*. And it makes much more sense that I was doing it to myself. You're not a Hailin. How could you possibly be producing our hormones? I'm sure I'm not a *glarus*, though." Shaking his head over and over. "That fake *russma* wouldn't have triggered *russma* in another Hailin. I'm not dangerous. So I'm still qualified and... I don't know if I would enter *russma* for real with a Hailin man but..." A shrug. "That's never going to happen because I adore you, I only need you. So I'm in this great, normal *tolmin* marriage for life. Except -"

Bodie interrupted. "For that fucking porn."

"That fucking porn."

They looked at one another. Ray's expression gradually shifted from exasperated to resigned, and Bodie guessed his was going much the same. Finally, they shrugged, almost in unison, gave lopsided smiles, then reached out and gripped each other's hand hard.

"You got me convinced. I bet that mutation's behind your brain, too. I mean, the weird way your mind works."

Ray's eyes widened. "Of course!" His grip tightened further and he started pulling Bodie close. Quietly: "I haven't given up hope. With you, Ullis and me working on it, there has to be an answer."

Was it strange that Bodie found he really could believe in Ray as this normal (nearly-normal) *nespa*, when Ray's story about the stowaway still stank to him of bullshit? Maybe it was because he stood to gain something from this new story. Or maybe it meant that, deep down, he'd given up on ever understanding Hailin biology or psychology. He didn't want to hope, or even think about hoping. For now it was enough to have Ray back, no worse than resigned.

They didn't talk about the counselling for the rest of the weekend, except to discuss how much to tell Malun after he got back on At Laura Var. A message arrived for Bodie while they were on a morning drive along all the roads around Harding, and when they got back after lunch and a film, they found that Malun was confirming that he would be joining them for breakfast next An Uraba, and dropping in on West afterwards. He'd take them all to the cliff-top restaurant soon, but first he needed to see for himself how they were looking, and ask enough truly uncomfortable questions to decide if there was any way he might be able to help.

Ray thought he might as well tell Malun everything, though the details of the sessions he'd rather tell in Hass Embrun, and probably without Bodie there. It wasn't that he was hiding anything from Bodie but... The sessions were in Hass Embrun, and it would make things easier to explain to another Hailin. That was fine with Bodie. Once had been quite enough for hearing Ray say "castrated".

* * * * *

Ray came home on At Mordez very quiet and thoughtful. He didn't want a beer. He was going to go to his room and lie down for an hour.

"It took that much out of you?"

A small shrug and a frown. "I've got too much to think about. I asked him to tell me all his other ideas. They're – They're all..." A long sigh. "I need to get them at least tidied away." A grunt, with a half-smile. "Maybe locked away. Before I'll be fit for normal conversation."

"So he didn't come straight back with an answer for the porn?"

Ray shook his head. "He'll think about it during the week." A slight pause. "Actually, is it OK if I use our room? I'll lock the door."

"OK." Of course it was OK, but why would Ray be locking the door?

"Thanks." And Ray immediately headed into the bedroom, closed the door, and then the light went on by the button. Bodie found he couldn't settle back to his book, so he turned the TV on and looked for some sports.

Ray came out shortly before ten, got two beers and curled up against Bodie on the couch. Bodie turned off the TV. They talked about the class on fuel systems that Bodie and West would be attending after lunch the next day. They'd chosen it as their first class because it was the topic that West understood best. Their second class was power transmission, for the morning of At Oba Nyon. He and West were both nervous and had

been spending quite a lot of time reassuring each other. They didn't want to look like idiots, and were hoping they'd be left alone to try to blend in. Bodie kept on telling himself that this lot wouldn't be on his course, it didn't matter if he got on with them or not – but they were still going to be mostly local teenagers, and wasn't one group of local teenage boys pretty-much like any other?

Ray suggested he assume they were going to be like the lads from *pulsonranas*, and that did help. The thing was, if he'd been going on his own, he wouldn't have thought twice about bluffing his way through. But somehow it didn't feel right to have West see him bullshitting.

"I wouldn't mind you seeing, you'd enjoy it, you'd play along with it. But West..."
Shaking his head.

"Oh, he can't bluff. He freezes. No, you're right. You've gotta keep him company in being nervous."

After Ray had leaned forward to put his empty bottle on the table, he shifted around so he was sitting on his haunches on the couch, looking at Bodie. He swallowed, "I can't – Can we have our goodnight kiss here? I'm still too confused by the ideas from today's session. And can I take our bed? Being there should help me think."

"Sure. Whatever you want." And he slid his hand up Ray's arm to his shoulder and pulled him into a kiss.

It definitely was a goodnight kiss. Ray at his most lazy and tender. Sweet, in itself, but strange. And Bodie guessed this was another of those times when he wasn't allowed to ask what was happening.

They went into the bedroom together, Ray waited while Bodie collected his toothbrush, *gulshor* kit, and clothes for the morning, then led the way into the other room and got clothes from the wardrobe while Bodie was setting his on the chair. Another gentle kiss just inside the doorway, then Ray stepped back into the corridor.

"Sleep well."

"You too. You gonna tell Malun about the ideas?"

Looked like Ray had been expecting some sort of question. "I don't know. I might not need to. It'll depend how the week goes."

"OK."

With a deep wince: "I know I should be promising to tell you first, but some of the ideas involve you in a way that's difficult. Telling you could change too many things. It might be a couple of weeks before I can tell you anything."

Bodie nodded and shrugged. "You know what you're doing. I trust you to pick your time. Just keep it from Turon. Obviously."

A laugh that was almost a groan. "He won't hear a word."

The only other time he'd slept in this bed was during Turon's visit, when both beds were new, hadn't even been slept in once. Now this bed was full of Ray's scent. And he was going to say just Ray's scent. Not Ray's *mana*, even if he could have picked that out.

Because it had to be their best shot: getting and keeping hold of the idea that it was a *tolmin* marriage, that Ray didn't produce *mana*. Maybe he had once, for a few days, seven hundred light-years away, but now what he produced was the clean, comforting scent of a happy man who loved being a *nespa*.

Chapter 24

The teacher for the afternoon's class was called Norra Storba. They'd arranged to meet him in his office about ten minutes before the start of the class. He was a large man, about Bodie's age, with shaggy light-brown hair and lots of scars on his hands. He asked Bodie some questions about his experience with cars and what he'd been making of the course material, seemed happy with the answers, and said he was going to make the first half of the lesson a revision of what they'd covered recently on common faults in fuel systems and how to diagnose them – which he was due to do, anyway, but it would be a really good test to have them explain things to Bodie. So much for keeping a low profile, but Norra was right: it would be helpful for everyone.

There were sixteen in the class, and only six were teenage boys. Five were teenage girls, and the other five were men and women up into their forties. Norra introduced them as ~Bodie, who's come seven hundred light-years to join the course next Set Intas, and West, who's only come from Monor, the same as his brother, Bodie's *nespa*, and who's been doing a great job of teaching Bodie Hass Embrun~.

Some of the students were better at explaining things than others, but none of them seemed to get frustrated when he didn't understand immediately. Instead, they helped each other look for different ways of explaining. At the end of the hour, Norra turned off the screen with the notes that the class had made during the revision, and asked Bodie if he could summarise what they'd covered. Bodie knew he was mangling a lot of the Hass Embrun, but they said he was clear enough, everything he said was correct, and he had all the important points.

For the second half of the lesson, Norra announced that he was going to give it almost as if Bodie and West weren't there. They could ask questions, but he might well tell them, for example, that the answer was back in Week 2 of the course, in the Suspension System Module. Since this was Week 7, they were both likely to get lost and he was sorry, but he couldn't think of another way to show them the style of a normal lesson.

If the lesson had been all speaking and notes on the board, Bodie might have ended up seriously worried, but there were diagrams too, and films, and a range of designs of all of the relevant parts laid out on the benches, including ones in different states of damage. And there were questions from the other students – some of whom might have been asking really basic questions for Bodie's benefit, but if they were, Norra was just going along with it. There were some points where Bodie did get lost, especially at the beginning, and he'd look to West for help, and West would either whisper a brief translation, or shrug and make notes for points to check later.

But for the main points of the lesson, Bodie thought he got it about as well as anyone else, and he asked questions that were not basic – about rates of damage and what was known about the factors – and he felt (and possibly looked) distinctly cocky at the confidence with which Norra asked him again if he could summarise what they'd covered.

The other students had another class immediately after, but for At Oba Nyon Bodie and West had already agreed to have lunch in the canteen after the Power Transmission class, so the questions were simply postponed.

They thanked Norra, who said he'd suggest to Gadmon Kalso that she take the same approach for her class on At Oba Nyon, and he looked forward to seeing Bodie in Set Intas.

West drove them back to Parass, and then they went straight up to the roof for a beer, because they'd earned it. After the beer, West went to follow up on their notes from the lesson and Bodie went to write to Turon.

West came around for dinner and stayed until nearly ten. While he and Ray were finishing the washing-up, Bodie said, "D'you know where you're gonna sleep tonight? You still confused?"

A brief nod. "Still pretty bad. I'm sorry. I – Can I take the bed again?"

"Of course. Where d'you want the goodnight kiss?"

Ray thought about it. "My bed?"

"We get to lie down?" Not that he was hoping it would turn into more, but that was so much better than the couch.

Ray blinked several times, and swallowed. "You let me get away with giving you so little."

"Yeah, well, what choice do I have? It's not like I can reach into your brain and rip out the Mabein, is it?"

Ray closed his eyes hard for several seconds. Bodie thought he was flinching, but when he opened his eyes, his expression was pure longing. "God, I wish you could." He laid his hand on top of Bodie's on the counter. "I'd trust you to do anything." A sudden snort of amusement. "And it'd be a fuck of a lot cheaper than all these counsellors."

Bodie laughed, pulled Ray close with his free hand, and soon they were heading for Ray's bed. They talked more than they kissed, and gradually talked less and less, until Ray regretfully announced that he was falling asleep and had to go.

When Bodie got back from the bathroom and turned out the light, he wondered how pathetic it was that he felt mostly content. In a week in which his husband was so "confused" he couldn't even bring himself to dry-hump. Or give any hint about why. How much was he letting Ray get away with? With the memory of when he'd had balls? But it had to be at least as bad for Ray. And somehow, in all these months, after such a crazy, impulsive start, they hadn't found it in either of them to make the situation worse. If he thought of eight more weeks of counselling, his heart sank, but it was easy right now not to think of that, with the memory so fresh of the expression on Ray's face as he'd watched the slow drift of his own fingertips through Bodie's hair.

* * * * *

The boys weren't at the arena that week, but twenty-one people turned up and that was apparently a good number for the spaceship. There was a group of four who'd played in the spaceship before. Ideally they would have been divided between the two teams but they didn't want to be split up, and they agreed that the other team could have a few more people to compensate. Bodie and Ray ended up on the team of twelve (the Blues), while the teachers and the space-veterans made up the Yellows.

The objective was to have control of the engine room and the bridge at the same time, and for long enough to go through a co-ordinated sequence of tasks. If neither side managed it – and they were warned that this was fairly common – then they would be awarded points according to how much time the team-members managed to spend uninjured in each place. For a fight in such a confined space, they were issued with low-powered hand-guns; injuries would heal more quickly, and much greater accuracy was needed for a fatal shot. They were reminded several times that grabbing hold of an opponent would get your team instantly disqualified.

Bodie and Ray were assigned to the group on the upper deck, defending the bridge, where they found themselves up against all four veterans. They both got hit, and in The Third Battle for the Bridge, Bodie ran out of ammunition and instantly, instinctively, started sizing up his options for tackling a Yellow, but Ray seized him around the waist and pulled him down just in time.

The fight was even more chaotic than usual, but fun. The Blues did best with the bridge, but the teachers did even better with the engine room and so the Yellows won. Bodie would love to know when a team had last achieved the objectives and how, but no one would tell him.

On the drive to the ferry, they discussed whether they would have done better against the teachers, because they knew more about how they worked. When they'd realised that the teachers had the lower deck, should they have insisted on going down? But they'd been making a difference on the upper deck, they were pretty sure of that. You could never know.

Once they were up in the cabin, Bodie started heading towards the bar, but a hand on his shoulder made him stop and turn around. "You go ahead. And sit in the back. I'll be somewhere over there." A tilt of the head towards the front.

Bodie took a quick glance around, then casually stepped clear of the path to the bar. Just as casually: "Something wrong?"

"Not with you. It's – The ideas. Even our usual *tolmin tassuram* is too much for me right now."

Bodie stared at him. He bit down on a comment about how fucked up the ideas must be, and finally said, "You saying it's getting worse?"

"I -" Then shaking his head: "We can't talk about it here."

"What about when we get home? And should I give up on the kiss, too?"

"Shh. Wait until we get home. Please."

"OK. I'll shush. Since you're asking nicely." Then he sighed heavily, and tried to iron all of the edge out of his voice before he said, "Sure you won't have a beer?"

"Thanks but it'd just make me more miserable."

"Cup of *kenit*?"

"Yeah. That'd be good."

They stood side-by-side at the bar while Bodie got the drinks, then agreed to meet down at the car and headed off in opposite directions.

Ray was right. This was miserable. But he was hot and sweaty, he needed something. And *kenit* would have been worse. He craned his head to see if anyone had left anything to read on a table or bench, briefly considered going to rummage in the nearest bin, and then grunted, slumped down, closed his eyes, and started mentally dismantling their car in Hass Embrun.

As soon as they were through the door Bodie said, "So are we gonna talk now? About you and these ideas."

"Yes."

"I'll make the tea, then."

"And I'll get the bottle of *brosha*."

Ray put the bottle and two glasses in the centre of the table, and then sat in the armchair by the window, furthest from Bodie's place on the couch.

"Jesus! It's that much worse?"

"It's difficult. In a way I don't think we've -" He swallowed, then fastened his teeth hard on his lower lip for several seconds. "You really need to be sitting down for this."

Bodie put his own tea down first, and had nudged Ray's coaster over by a couple of inches before Ray took the hint and moved it the rest of the way.

"So I'm sitting down. Let's do this."

Ray took a very deep breath, then said slowly, "I've been thinking a lot about you raping me." Bodie nearly dropped his mug, and only by luck got it settled safely on the arm of the couch. "I mean as a fantasy. It's... It's exciting."

"OK, I – I kind of know that that works." He'd had his share of birds (and some blokes) dropping heavy hints, but he'd never trusted himself to deliver what they were looking for. He'd been too close to the real thing. "I've gotta say I'd never thought about it. With you. But I'll always wanna know what gets you excited." Then he frowned, puzzled. "Is it that difficult a thing to admit here? Having that kind of fantasy? I guess I got a different idea from what you'd told me about all your porn."

"No, we know it's normal. As a way of side-stepping consequences. Responsibilities. I've had them and enjoyed them since I was a teenager. We know it's got nothing to do with the reality. What's difficult is..." He gave a ragged groan, dragged a hand over his face, and then said, "Ullis. After he'd accepted – or said he'd accepted – that I truly did not know it was you in the holds. He said he was really surprised that, with my imagination, I hadn't immediately come up with some other preposterous fantasy that would let me have sex with you without taking responsibility for it in front of the Mabein. In a matter of days, he'd have thought, once we were home and away from the holds."

"Yeah, I was thinking that too. For the first couple of weeks after we got home."

Ray stared at him, then hit his own forehead hard twice with the heel of his hand. “Why does it take me so long to wonder how things look to you? That’s what Ullis should be calling preposterous.”

Bodie had to laugh. “I’m simple, Ray, remember? Bet you’re always geared up for a criminal mastermind.” He had two large mouthfuls of tea, put the mug on the table, then turned very serious. “I’m guessing he had a few ideas, Ullis, about what your next crazy fantasy could be.”

“Well, the first thing he asked me was about rape fantasies. Because of the avoidance of responsibility. And if I had preoccupations about your uncontrollable animal nature, this could bring them into play. I said that was a useless idea, because it could only work once. After that, for the sake of the Mabein, I’d have to take steps to make sure it didn’t happen again. And it would only get you fucking me, wouldn’t help at all for the other way around. We argued for a while about rape fantasies in general, and then he said that he’d just given that as a first example and the point wasn’t for him and me to work out all the details, it was to get me thinking about where I might go with other fantasies. I’m supposed to have moved on, he wants me to come up with at least one new idea every week, but -” His tongue darted out to moisten his lips. “All I’ve been thinking about is where you’d decide to do it. How you’d decide to do it if you realised you’d only have one chance. And it’s all so good and so tempting.”

They were both getting hard, and both had been taking the glances to confirm it. Bodie said, “So you had to tell me you were too confused to have sex. In case you dropped some hint or provoked me or whatever you’ve been thinking.”

“Yes. And then tonight, on the ferry...” With an apologetic-looking wince: “The only reason I risked taking us to *pulsonranas* in the first place was that I’d seen the pictures on the board at work of everyone in the overalls looking...” A deep, shaking breath. “Nothing at all like you in your uniform. You still look as bad as everyone else when you’re standing still, but now we’ve been playing for weeks and I’ve got to see so much of the way you move, and it’s got so much more difficult not to think about your body. So tonight, with the fight being on the spaceship, I would still have been fighting off thoughts about you dragging me into a cabin even if my head hadn’t already been full of my hottest rape fantasies. Having to sit next to you for an hour on the ferry...” Shaking his head. “I would have exploded. Or got us arrested.”

Bodie shifted on the couch, trying to ease the pressure on his erection. He could have done with the rest of his tea, but that would have involved too much movement in the wrong direction. “And I guess the idea’s ruined now. Since you’ve told me about it. Can’t see any way I could surprise you enough to keep the Mabein happy. But you had to tell me, after I was so shirty with you on the boat.”

Ray grunted and briefly shook his head. “It would never have worked anyway. Having to tell you -” A shrug. “Maybe now I’ll manage to move on.”

“I shouldn’t ask how long it’s gonna take before you’re done with being confused.”

“Bodie. I’ve got no fucking idea. I’d like to say by the end of the week. But then God knows what he’ll have for me on At Oba Nyon.”

“The – The rape wasn’t the only thing from At Mordez. Was it?”

“No.” A deep sigh. “But it was the only exciting one.”

“Would it ruin them too, if you told me?”

Ray winced, and rubbed his forehead hard, several times, with a knuckle. “I dunno. Not in the same way, but they’ve gotta make you as uncomfortable as they make me.”

Bodie’s eyebrows shot up. “Are they good ideas?”

A fractional shrug. “I think all his ideas are good. There’s a chance they could work. Get me thinking properly. They’re strange but...”

“That’s probably what we need.”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me. Pour us a glass of that stuff, then tell me.”

Bodie tossed back the whole glass immediately and followed it with the lukewarm tea, then waited while Ray poured his own glass then sat back and took a first sip.

“OK, so there are two. The one that’s best defined is about Turon. Because he’s the one Hailin who we know is definitely comfortable with the thought of sex with you. Yes, Malun too but Turon’s the one who’s actually had sex. The one who knows enough of what he’s talking about. So the idea is...” He looked away from Bodie for the time it took to empty half the glass. “That I imagine I’m Turon having sex with you. Or – Or – That I imagine how Turon sees it, what lets him be comfortable. It ties in with making it a *tolmin* marriage, but it might add enough on its own even if we don’t get everything else to fit.”

Bodie’s cock had got noticeably less hard. He sucked his lips in between his teeth a couple of times then said, “Well. If there’s a chance it’ll work. What’s the other idea?”

“That I imagine if you were more obviously an animal. If you didn’t speak. Couldn’t really hold things. Had a breeding season and a territory and maybe a harem. A swarm of pups. Still looking the same, still so beautiful, but – How would I deal with wanting you then? And if I could think that through, live inside that story for, I dunno, a couple of weeks, maybe I’d feel differently about the type of animal that you actually are.”

“He wants me to go around on all fours for a couple of weeks?! He’s out of his fucking mind.”

“No! No. It wouldn’t affect you. Not like that. It would all be in my head.” He rapped his skull with his fingertips. “Except during those weeks, we couldn’t possibly have any kind of sex.” And he finished his drink with one gulp and slid the glass onto the table.

Bodie threw himself back and covered his face with both hands. His erection no longer felt like any kind of problem. He rocked his head from side to side three or four times, then pulled his hands away with an audible pop. “And we’ve got more ideas like that coming on At Oba Nyon?”

A flash in Ray’s eyes that looked like fear. Even pain. “I dunno. He might have figured out the porn. Or – I dunno.”

“Ray. Ray. Never mind about your balls nearly exploding on the ferry. Your brain must be about to burst.”

A weak smile. "I haven't been getting much sleep."

"Damn. Now I want to go over and give you a hug. And blow into those curls to try to cool your brain down." Ray laughed, and instantly looked a hundred times better. "But we've gotta keep a distance, haven't we? Christ knows, now I'm too bloody confused."

Ray looked hesitant for a few seconds, then patted the arm of his chair, eyebrows raised in a question. Bodie grinned, and immediately went over to sit where Ray had suggested. He rested one hand lightly just below Ray's shoulder, then bent his head to press his lips to Ray's forehead, and then to blow in a steady curve from the left temple over to the right, and then back again, while Ray chuckled, and then sighed, and murmured, ~Oh that is better.~

Ray sighed again when Bodie bent lower to brush their lips together, then grunted in protest when Bodie pulled away from his open, seeking mouth.

"I'll bet anything you still taste of *brosha*. I'm gonna see you drink all that tea before I'll let you even think about kissing me."

Ray leaned forward to get the mug with a very bad grace. "It's cold."

"Sooner you start, sooner it'll be over."

Ray acted as if it tasted worse than the *brosha*, and paused after each mouthful for an elaborate display of frowning. As he was raising the mug for the third mouthful he said balefully, "I've heard rumours about husbands who get accepted exactly as they are."

Bodie snorted in derision. "Now that's your most ridiculous fantasy yet. Hurry up, or it'll get even colder."

As soon as Ray sat back again they reached for each other, and then there was no more talking for several minutes.

"We're still not having sex tonight, are we?"

Ray shook his head. "I'll go back to my bed, though. I hoped being in ours would help me think. But it's different now I've told you."

"OK." Bodie pressed the back of his hand to Ray's cheek, then slowly stroked down to his chin. "Is this our goodnight kiss?"

A slight pause, then Ray nodded. "Yeah. I'm sorry. Everything's still churning. I don't have any feel for how long it'll take to get sorted out."

Bodie shook his head, meaning not to worry, and leaned in for another long kiss.

* * * * *

Bodie got home from the morning's lesson the next day to find that the delivery light was on. He was wary as he opened the cupboard since they hadn't bought anything that he knew of.

There were four of the fleet shipping cartons, each about a foot and a half on each side, and marked "Fragile". Could it be red wine? Gin and tonic? He carried the first one over to the dining table and it was definitely heavy enough to be a case of booze, and when he ripped it open and found an M&S box with a couple of printed labels saying "CLARET",

he did a brief, whole-body victory dance. Two of the other cases contained red wines from M&S too: one of Italian and one of Australian, while the fourth case was Schweppes tonic water, which suggested there might be some gin on the way. He took a bottle of each type of wine for the wine-rack, and put the cases and the cartons in their largest storage cupboard. Before he reset the delivery light, he turned on the TV and checked the delivery system, and there were another eight cases to come. So that was 144 bottles, which should keep them going for at least half a year. He thought he remembered Malun saying something about sending him a hundred cases, and maybe Malun hadn't been deliberately exaggerating at the time, but fortunately Malun did realise that they didn't have room to store that many.

He and Ray had been planning to cook a sort of chicken stew for dinner, but obviously it now had to be steak. He got the steak and fixings on the way back from the afternoon's lesson, and got home to find that the next four cases had been delivered. This four included a case of Gordon's gin, which meant that he could go to the study to thank Malun since he was now sure of how much he had to thank him for.

Ray was delighted about the wine, and several times went to the storage cupboard just for another look at all the stacked cases. They drank most of the first bottle before and during dinner, so opened a second bottle to take to the couch.

Just before he curled up against Bodie, Ray said, "I should tell you now. There's not going to be any sex tonight either."

Bodie nodded, not surprised, and pulled Ray into a loose hug. "Is it still the rape?"

"Mostly, but Turon too. That all got a lot more vivid today."

"D'you think Ullis will have more ideas on At Oba Nyon?"

The shrug lifted Bodie's arm too. "A couple. Knowing him."

Bodie took a large drink, then said, "He's got good ideas, I can see that. But any one of them would do my head in for a month. It's too much. Giving you three in a week – or sounds like it could even be five... It's too much."

"I did ask him to tell me all of them. Because I might see immediately that one of them was the answer. And I feel the same about whatever his next batch of ideas will be. Even though... Yeah, of course it's too much."

"You don't have to go on At Oba Nyon. With him, maybe it'd be better just once a week."

Ray thought it over for about ten seconds, then said slowly, "No, I will go. I should tell him exactly how it's been too much, the effect it's had on us. See if he can help me be more patient. Make things easier for you while I'm struggling. But then I'll cancel At Mordez."

They had their goodnight kiss on Ray's bed. Right now, anything to do with their bed was seething for Ray with images of raw sex.

* * * * *

The Power Transmission class was taught by Gadmon Kalso, a positively-chirpy woman in her thirties. They didn't meet in her office beforehand but went straight to the classroom. This time, the students had come prepared to bring Bodie up-to-date, and

they were less self-conscious about acting out power transmission problems, and many had brought along pictures.

In turn, over lunch, they asked if Bodie had any pictures of Ray. He had one of Turon's kitchen photos in his wallet, and it was noisily admired. Not that everyone in the class was actively interested in how he came to be living on Roslin, wanting to find a job. It was mainly the youngsters, but among them, the questions about their courtship came just as much from the boys as the girls. West said that the first English lessons he'd given Ray had centred on food, since Bodie clearly enjoyed the buffets, and it gave Ray a chance to talk about his job on the ship, and to invite Bodie to see the galley. Bodie spoke some English for them, and the ones who tried it out for themselves got the accent right almost immediately, and still remembered everything by the end of lunch. Obviously, it would have been so much easier and quicker just to have every single Hailin learn English. But then the tricky part would have been stopping them from asking awkward questions about human biology.

* * * * *

Ullis wasn't surprised that their usual way of having sex had become too dangerous and tempting to Ray. He thought it would probably have happened even if Ray had only been working on one idea. With the changes that Ray was trying to make, there would be stages when he'd feel he'd been thrown completely off-balance. Ullis had seen people find a new balance in a matter of weeks, but for others it could be many months. For them, all he would say was that they'd been coping very well, which was what he'd expected.

He had two new ideas: one about the porn, and the other for a type of fantasy. Ray had decided he did want to hear the one about the porn, which turned out to be about Bodie's salty human scent on the shirt. What if that was what had excited him, not watching the fucking? The fucking was just a vague reminder, on in the background.

It was a decent idea, but Ray said his hope had faded in just a few minutes, and he'd been left piecing together the reasons why he hadn't come up with the idea himself. Bodie's scent was special to him, of course it was. But when he'd lifted the shirt to his face, with the porn already running, it had been like floodgates opening. And then each new surge of excitement had come with images on the screen. His favourite images, that had always stoked his excitement in exactly that way. If Bodie's scent, on its own, could get him so insistently hard, then how were they able to *tassuram*? He couldn't claim, either, that he remembered any hint of the glow of relief and well-being that he got when he caught the scent on Bodie himself. More likely, if he had truly noticed the scent among the din of sensation, it had been part of the freezing wave of guilt and shame that had pushed him over into tears.

They'd agreed that Ullis would carry on thinking about the porn. Ideally, Ray wanted to be able to stop thinking about anything, but since that wasn't one of his talents, they decided instead that he should focus on Turon, and on the development of Turon's attitude towards Bodie. This time he didn't have to imagine anything personal and explicit – the Turon in his mind could be years away from imagining having sex with Bodie himself – but he should think about everything he knew about the time that Turon had spent with Bodie in the first four weeks, or maybe up to the point where Turon told Malun that he'd changed his mind about a Hailin having sex with Bodie. And

it didn't matter that Ray didn't know when or how Turon had told Malun that. He wouldn't rewrite history, that wasn't how his mind worked. He had to be consistent with the facts that he knew, but he could fill in the gaps in any way he liked. He would need to be careful about asking Bodie about his memories of time spent with Turon, because more facts to incorporate meant more chances to get stuck.

"You gonna go off on the ferry again tomorrow? So you can stare out of the window being Turon in the pub?"

Ray shook his head. "I don't think it's that kind of puzzle. A few hours a day should be enough. I'll go off on a couple of walks. Or sit and listen to Turon's music while you read one of the books he picked out for you."

"You could go and visit a garden. If there's anything open at this time of year."

Nodding slowly: "Yeah, that would work to get me in character." Suddenly he shuddered. "I've gotta imagine myself going to ask Ward for help with your computer. Don't see any way around it. How I – How he approaches the other members of the family. It'll affect the way I think."

"Yeah. I can see that."

They started with Turon's music after dinner. At first they were on the couch, at each end, like Turon and Bodie would sit during a conversation session in West's quarters. But they both found that listening to the music was reminding them too much of their first evening in Bodie's quarters. And other evenings, too, but especially that first one: the first evening for leaning against one another on the couch, drawing each other close. So they both moved to the armchairs and suddenly everything was different; they might just be good friends, or cousins. Bodie was able to settle to reading, and Ray closed his eyes and sat very still, more so than Bodie thought any human could have managed.

Ray kept his eyes closed even after the music stopped. Bodie waited for about five minutes before he said, very quietly, "Where are we with bed tonight?"

A long pause, then Ray opened his eyes on a deep breath. "Tonight... I think we part here with a hug." A gesture with his head, which seemed to be towards the door behind Bodie. "I don't belong in your bed tonight."

"A hug?" Not outraged or anything. Just checking. But as he opened his mouth for another mild remark, he felt his throat suddenly close up, and he swallowed and coughed, turned his head hard to the side, and swallowed and coughed some more. He heard Ray getting up and ordered him back down with a thrown-out hand, but Ray hurried past him to the kitchen, and then there was the sound of the tap. Bodie fought hard to control his reaction, to get his throat to relax, but he was still all-but gasping when Ray knelt beside him to guide the glass into his hands.

He nodded his thanks, closed his eyes to drink, and willed the muscles of his chest to behave. For a second he was winning, but then Ray's hand settled on his knee, and he was back where he'd started with the dragging and rasping breaths.

It had been the first promise Ray had made to him. The only one, really. That no matter what happened, they would always kiss goodnight. What the fuck did Ullis have against them, that he needed to stop even that?

Finally, with a couple of mouthfuls of water still left in the glass, he got his body to obey him again, and he opened his eyes and raised his head. This time, when he opened his mouth, he got out his mild remark, though he could hear that it sounded like he'd run a mile since he'd asked his simple, casual question. "Well, Turon is a great one for hugs."

Ray's concerned expression seemed to get deeper, though he removed his hand from Bodie's knee in order to take the glass. Slowly, his eyes fixed all the while on Bodie's face: "He is. They mean a lot to him. Which makes him more selective than you might expect."

Bodie gave the barest twitch of a shrug. "He's a Bakkel. Who knows what to expect?" A cheap shot, and aimed entirely at the Bakkel he was married to, not at his loyal friend Turon. Fuck Ullis Hanvert a thousand times over, for dragging Turon into this.

Now Ray was stroking his arm. Awkwardly, almost roughly. "An encyclopaedic knowledge of lost ships. That's about all we have in common. Apart from liking you."

Bodie nodded, found his head wanted to keep on doing it, like a wind-up toy. "Think I'll go to bed now." Normally he'd give some excuse. Like it being a long day. Or having drunk more than he'd realised. But he didn't care what it looked like. He just wanted the evening to be over.

"Of course. You look really tired." Ray reached behind himself to put the glass on the table, got to his feet, and held out his hands to pull Bodie up – and Bodie wasn't feeling cruel enough to refuse the offer.

They had the hug there by the armchair, and Bodie found that it was better than nothing, after all. At the start, he'd been thinking of reminding Ray that their last hugs with Turon had included a couple of kisses, too, but with each sigh, each small shift of pressure, he felt more surely that this was Ray's best attempt at being a good husband, and he gave up all idea of pushing things.

"I love you." Simultaneous. They laughed, but after a brief squeeze of Bodie's shoulder, Ray stepped back.

"Sleep well."

"You too."

Bodie dreamed mostly of sex – with some strange man, up against a tree, he thought – and he woke in the middle of the night to the evidence of it. His immediate impulse was to shower; it was just what he did now, when he felt the cooling trickle of his come against his skin. But he did that for Ray and of course Ray wasn't here, so in the end all he did was change his underwear and have a quick wipe with a flannel.

The next time he woke, it was to the sound of running water in Ray's bathroom. It was still dark outside, and when he checked the time he found it wasn't even a quarter to six. Still well over an hour before it got light, which was the earliest they'd get up at the weekend. But Ray didn't go back to bed, and instead moved to the living-room.

Bodie had to check. Given what Ray had been going through that week, he had to check. He shrugged into his robe and opened the door, and found Ray just turning off the TV.

“Hey! I was just about to see if you were awake. There’s a *gulshor* court free at six. Any chance you fancy a game?”

Bodie only had to think for a second to decide he no longer felt any pull to go back to bed. “Sure. Give me five minutes.”

Bodie won. Ray was less alert than usual, despite his eagerness for an early start. Back in the changing-room, Bodie did a double-take when he found that Ray was following him to the cubicle.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Turon was fine with this from the start. Hell, we even had him guarding the door.”

Bodie took that as a warning that they still wouldn’t be kissing, that it would be like Battersea, but Ray’s mouth was on his almost before they had the door locked. Of course, Turon didn’t know they hadn’t kissed that time in Battersea. Or it didn’t matter, he was thinking too much, and why was he wasting time with that when Ray was already so hard against him?

The western sky was just starting to lighten when they headed out to the bakery, setting a new standard in ambling, with their hands clasped and their kitbags swinging with each slow step.

“I think the court’s free at six tomorrow, too. If it’s free every day, d’you wanna book it? Save our breakfasts for the weekend?”

“That’d be great.” And they were grinning, and then dropping their kitbags, and blocking the pavement completely while they were locked in a long kiss.

Ray started frowning to himself once they were on the way home, though. Bodie was gearing up to ask but Ray got there first, stopping suddenly just before they reached the park behind their building.

“We’re still -” He swallowed. “I can’t make you any promises about bed. Not for tonight or... I don’t know how long.” Shaking his head. “Everything to do with being inside our flat is confusing right not, with Turon. Not just in our bed, but everything.” A deep sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK. I think I get it.” Bodie nodded. “You won’t see me complaining, now you’ve got us our mornings back.”

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The nearest large gardens were the ones on the peninsula that used to be a prison. They opened at ten at that time of the year, and Ray went on both An Embrun and An Udom Kol, while Bodie was in the conversation session. Ray didn’t say anything about what he was thinking or whereabouts he’d reached in those crucial weeks, but he was clearly happy enough with his progress. By the evening of An Udom Kol, they were still just hugging goodnight in the living-room, but when Bodie mentioned Turon kissing them, it was as a joke, with no idea of pushing Ray. And Ray laughed, and gave him a brief, closed-mouth kiss, exactly like Turon’s, and then Ray hugged him some more before they said goodnight.

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Malun arrived at eight on An Uraba, and as they'd arranged, he and Ray headed out for a walk almost immediately, after just half a cup of coffee and a discussion of whose jacket Malun should borrow, because Malun had not dressed for such a grey, blustery morning.

They were away for over an hour, and came back looking dishevelled and discouraged, but with pastries. While they ate and had more coffee, they talked about Malun's trip, the family at Clover, and Bodie's course. Malun admitted he wasn't eager to go out again, and in the end he and Bodie decided to go down and sit in the car.

As soon as the doors were closed, Malun turned, put his hand lightly on Bodie's forearm, and said, "I'm so sorry about the counselling. I should never have told him to get it. I knew he'd find some of it difficult but nothing like this."

Bodie nodded. "I can't say any of it's been any use to us yet. But of course it's what you'd tell him to do. We all thought it made sense. We had to try it."

A small grunt. "That's what Ray says. He likes the current one. Apparently he can really talk to him and he wants to carry on. What do you think?"

Bodie shrugged. "A few days ago I would have said, 'Christ, no!' Now... I guess it's OK." He gave a snort of amusement. "It might all have been worth it to find out this guy exists. There is a mind more twisted than Ray's. Has to make you hope."

Malun laughed. "I'd been seeing him as Ray thirty years older. You're my hope that by that age Ray is translatable."

Bodie raised an eyebrow. "I'll work on it."

"So how are you? Really."

Again, Bodie shrugged. "Most ways, better than the last time you asked. Really looking forward to the car course. The college's been great. West, too. And Ray told you about the *pulsonranas*?" Ray had. "That's a blast. As for the big problem..." He shook his head and sighed. "That varies from day to day. But we pretty-much always deal with the stuff together. And do OK."

"There's nothing I can do, is there?" Bodie shook his head, and Malun gave one of his familiar brisk nods. "Since I'll be in Monor for the next four months at least, would a meal every two weeks be too much? I feel I owe you at least one, and I do quite enjoy them."

Bodie grinned at the ringing endorsement of his company. "That'd be fine."

They agreed that they'd go to the cliff-top restaurant the weekend after next, on the An Udom Kol. Ray or Bodie would make the booking within a couple of days. Malun thought he might book a hotel for the night and see if Lamon would like to come too.

They hugged goodbye by the car, and then Malun went to see West, and Bodie went back upstairs.

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Over dinner on At Mordez, they discussed what they were going to do about *pulsonranas*, since Bodie wasn't going to manage to move like someone else, and they had to assume that by At Laura Var Ray still wouldn't be able to have sex in the flat. They didn't want to miss *pulsonranas*, though, because that felt like avoiding the issue and there'd surely be some people expecting them.

"You could go on your own. We know that works." Ray had suddenly spoken up, while they were in the middle of watching the late news. "It's better than missing out completely. I can drive you there, same as usual, and we'll eat on the way. And afterwards there's bound to be someone who'll drop you at the nearest subway."

Bodie nodded. "Yeah, OK. Thanks." After a brief frown: "I'll say you've got a work thing."

With a lopsided smile: "Which will be the ongoing work of trying to share my brother's taste in music." Then his smile instantly got broader. "And then your work, if you want to help me out, will be showering off in the gym before you come home. And filling me in properly on the battle, while downplaying the role of your own physical magnificence."

When they finally stopped laughing, Bodie said, "But that would make it sound like the battle was only five minutes long."

Ray shook his head dismissively. "You've got an hour on the ferry. You'll find a way to keep it a good story."

"And next week it'll be you who goes? And showers in the gym?"

Ray shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. We'll take it in turns until we've figured out something long-term for the two of us. I'll ask Ullis."

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One of the teachers took Bodie right to the ferry terminal. She admitted it was out of her way, but at that time of night it really wouldn't add much to her journey. As Ray had ordered, he spent the ferry journey deciding on the most entertaining way to tell the story, with maybe a couple of "accidental" references to his most showy manoeuvres, and it wasn't a miserable journey at all.

In the gym, he did attract some attention going into the cubicle, which he presumably wouldn't have got if he'd used the communal showers like everyone else. But if Ray couldn't see him naked, then no one would.

It probably wasn't a reward for his work on the story, but it did feel thoroughly earned, when the goodnight hug included some kissing. Shallow, but lingering. Not like Turon-the-cousin at all. Maybe next week, after Ray's turn for the battle, they'd have got as far as kissing like that in Ray's bed, or even their own. No point being impatient. He knew Ray was taking this as fast as he dared.

Chapter 25

Bodie was on the couch reading and listening to “Supertramp” when Ray got home on At Oba Nyon, and Ray immediately sat on the arm of the couch, took hold of Bodie’s head, and pressed him back in a proper deep kiss. An entirely happy, unconfused kiss, from everything Bodie had seen and could feel.

“So something went well. How high should I have my hopes? Or how many of them?”

“Oh...” Ray blinked and frowned for a few seconds, then gave a small sigh. “Maybe only about a fifth of them but... What d’you think if, when we get back from *pulsonranas*, you give me your shirt and then we go to our bathrooms and jerk off?”

Bodie needed a moment to take that in, then he grinned. “You’ve gotta give me your shirt, too. That’s the deal.” He raised an eyebrow, waited for Ray’s enthusiastic nod, then pulled him down for an even deeper kiss. It was much shorter, though, because the acceleration of their pulses meant that Bodie soon had to break away, close to panting. “Is it only good for after *pulsonranas*? Or can we start now?”

Ray swallowed audibly. “We only talked about after *pulsonranas*. Ullis and me. But God, yes, now.” And he was already straightening up and getting to his feet, and then holding out a hand for Bodie.

“Where do we – How do we hand over the shirts? Not here, right?”

No, definitely not in the living-room. “We thought you’d go to your bedroom. And have your robe on when you opened the door to the corridor.”

“OK. Robes it is. See you at the door in a minute.”

Ray took the route along the corridor, not through their bedroom, so that hadn’t changed. Ray (or Turon, or whatever) still firmly avoiding their bedroom.

Ray was already there when Bodie opened the door. He all-but snatched Bodie’s shirt, but then pressed his own shirt to Bodie’s chest, keeping the material gripped tight in his fist. “You’ll take care? Not to get -”

Bodie placed his hand over Ray’s, felt the tension in the knuckles. “It’ll stay well out of the line of fire. You don’t have to worry.” The tension eased immediately, and in the next moment Ray was pulling his hand out from under.

“Meet you back on the couch after?”

Bodie nodded. It was still pretty early in the evening, after all. “Stay in our robes?”

“Yeah. No sense in changing.”

Bodie stripped off and stepped into the shower. He could have just put the shirt aside, left it on top of the laundry hamper, but he did want Ray with him, he wanted them to be the same. So he folded it carefully into a ball, so nothing would work loose and trail down, and he held it to his face. He’d thought, in the early days, before they’d reached home, that Ray’s scent was something sharp and herbal. He’d imagined some dark, glossy leaf, freshly-plucked and crushed in his grasp. Now, every note in it was unmistakably from Pen Embrun: the grass along the cliffs, the strongest beer, the oil Ray used each month to polish all of their tables.

He closed his eyes, and thought of the shower they'd taken that morning in his London flat. And how obvious it now seemed, that the two of them were already married then.

After he'd had his shower and was back in his robe, he took the shirt to Ray's bedroom and laid it on the bed. He didn't want Ray to worry for a second that it might be in his laundry basket. Touching his underwear.

He could hear that Ray was still under the shower. He wanted a beer and guessed Ray would too; if not, it'd be no struggle to drink both. Again, Ray used the corridor. He was already radiating contentment when he walked in, but it deepened further when he saw the waiting beer, and when Bodie told him what he'd done with the shirt.

He didn't curl up on the couch, but still sank heavily against Bodie, with an almost-purring sigh. "Ullis is worth every damned penny. I thought it might be weeks of sending you off to *pulsonranas* on your own, but Ullis has kept it to just once."

Bodie laughed. "How'd he persuade you? Last time we talked about wanking, you were – Well, you weren't exactly keen. Especially for me."

Ray nodded, and took a long drink before he replied. "Back then I was so focussed on it being an *esmana* marriage. On the things that were different between us. Now I can see so much of it as a *tolmin* marriage. Even with the pieces that still don't fit, it's enough that..." He shrugged and shook his head. "It's the last thing I should be caring about."

"That's bloody good going, for an hour's work." A very brief pause. "You talk about much else?"

"Just the obvious. Where I've got to with Turon. How I'm still having this panic about our marriage bed. I haven't been able to even look at it since I told you about the rape fantasies and the other ideas. I don't trust myself, even when I'm doing so well at Turon I could name you ten sexy men who kind of remind me of Sasha." He shook his head in exasperation and took another drink.

Bodie gave a brief chuckle, not sorry that he'd asked. "It was just last week that you told me. Let Turon choose his own priorities."

"Yeah, that's more or less how Ullis put it." He rolled his head on the couch and pressed his lips to Bodie's cheek. "And next week I'll be able to tell him what a wonderful jerk-off partner you are."

Bodie smirked, then ruffled Ray's curls. "The words a man most wants to hear." Up there with "most rewarding fuck", but of course he couldn't say that. "D'you know what I was thinking about?"

Suddenly Ray had gone tense, and drawn away enough to be able to look Bodie in the face. "I can guess but – Don't tell me. I wish you could. I wish we could share that. But it's not safe. We're thinking of each other. That's enough for me."

Bodie thought that the London shower should be harmless, but of course Ray had a point. It wouldn't be smart to be comparing notes on things they couldn't do. He shook his head and stroked Ray's shoulder. "That's all I was gonna say. That I was thinking about you thinking about me." He wasn't expecting Ray to believe him, just hoping that Ray would be reassured. And yes, a matter of seconds and Ray was smiling and sighing and relaxing back against him.

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During the next week, they jerked off in their bathrooms every night, after an enjoyable lead-up either on (or near) the couch or on Ray's bed. For the goodnight kiss, they'd progressed to Ray's bed by the end of the weekend, but Ray's panic over the thought of their bedroom didn't change at all. The panic had Ray's version of Turon deciding that they must need separate bedrooms because they never had sex in a bed, and it was hard to see how Turon was going to help them while he was working with that theory.

During the goodnight kiss on At Kamaran, Ray admitted he was feeling badly stuck with the counselling, that his mind just seemed to be spinning in circles. At the next day's session, he and Ullis were going to have to talk about what he might possibly do to shake it out of the spin and get it moving on. The only idea he currently had for that was to see the one remaining counsellor on his list, who was called Evan Tarrel. Not that he was planning to give up on seeing Ullis, but he'd probably take a break from him for a few weeks while he was seeing Evan. Bodie did his best to sound simply encouraging, while wincing inside at the thought of handling Ray's reactions to yet another new counsellor.

Ray came home on At Oba Nyon looking quietly excited but also uncertain. He said immediately that he had a lot to tell Bodie and he wanted to tell him that evening, but it should wait until after dinner. He didn't think they'd need to get out the bottle of *brosha* this time.

They both sat on the couch with fresh beers, and Ray got started immediately on explaining what had happened during the session. He hadn't wasted any time on telling Ullis he was feeling stuck and that he was thinking of seeing Evan Tarrel, and the moment he mentioned the other counsellor's name, Ullis had looked appalled and also horribly undecided.

Bodie's eyebrows had shot up. "Sounds like this Evan bloke must be fucking useless at his job."

"Yeah, that's what I said too, but then Ullis couldn't reassure me fast enough that the man's an excellent choice. 'For most people.' And then he stopped dead with his mouth open, and spent what felt like a minute looking anywhere except at me, and then finally said that on balance he'd decided that he had to tell me. I guess Dishna's counsellors get together sometimes to compare notes. Maybe warn each other like cops do. However it happened, Ullis happens to know that Evan has already heard about me. About us. And Evan is very definite that he'd have to tell me in the first session that he couldn't help me. He sees things in the same way as the one before Ullis: he says he has to consider the Mabein, and they wouldn't want him to help us."

Ray admitted that he'd broken down in tears at that point, and had taken several minutes to recover. It wasn't so much at having no more counsellors he could try, at losing that last hope – because he still had a lot of hope for Ullis – but at the idea of finding that there was yet another apparently ordinary and decent Hailin who thought of their marriage like that. Who thought of Bodie like that.

After Ray had recovered from the bad news about Evan Tallis, Ullis had got, if anything, even more hesitant, and had suggested that one option, strictly as a temporary measure, to try to move things forward, might be to get *dumuts* fitted. Yes, he remembered very

well what he'd promised, but now Ray was having this panic about their marriage bed, and the *dumuts* might give a way for him to trust himself again. To relax about being in Bodie's bed. And once that was over, or if it hadn't worked after whatever time he wanted to set, then the *dumuts* would be gone.

Coming from Ullis, Ray had been prepared to consider the idea for himself, but asking Bodie to submit to the procedure was completely impossible. Bodie said he wouldn't consider it for either of them, but he was impressed with Ray for not walking out.

After that, Ullis had come out with his next new idea, and they'd spent all of the rest of the talking about it because it was a big one. Ullis hadn't been hesitant about introducing it, but he'd given plenty of warnings during the lead-up: it was a risky idea, no question, and the three of them would need to put a lot of discussion into how to manage the risks. The idea was – and Ray needed two long draughts of beer before he could come out with it – that if Ray felt he was truly stuck, then they could just go ahead and have normal naked sex, and see what happened.

“Holy crap! So – So what did you say?”

“Well – It took me a while to say anything. But then – It's terrifying. How much I might hurt you. What we might lose. But I've had nearly twenty sessions of counselling now and I'm not one step closer to knowing how to placate the Mabein. How to avoid them or distract them or whatever the hell it would take. So...” A deep shrug. “It's not impossible that if we just go ahead they'll realise that they were wrong. That none of those things really matter compared with what we are to each other. What we give each other. It might solve everything.” A faint, lopsided smile. “Overnight.”

“Bloody hell. Y'know, it might. So when we gonna do it?”

“Ullis thought... One At Oba Nyon. In a hotel in Dishna. And I'd book the next week off work so we'd have twelve days clear afterwards to fuck each other's brains out or -” A wince and a shrug. “Start to deal with the vengeance of the Mabein.”

“This time next week? We could be fucking this time next week? Though – I guess it's short notice to book a week off work.”

“And if we do it then, the week of work will be midwinter, and it's only five days long this year. But Ullis said, if we had to decide at short notice, he'd authorise it on medical grounds. He'd say we had to attend an intensive, week-long programme of marriage-counselling. I guess there could be one of those over mid-winter.” Suddenly Ray wasn't looking at Bodie, but at a point just past the coffee-table. His voice was slow, and very thoughtful. “So that would only be three days off work. Three normal days of weekend before them and then the two days of midwinter weekend after. And eight days clear isn't bad. Even without Turon to act as go-between, we can pull ourselves together in eight days.” Then he was looking at Bodie again. “Can we?”

“Yeah. Can you call him now? Tell him we've decided and we'll want that medical thing for the week after next.”

“He said I can call any time. But, Bodie – In the session we were talking in terms of it being a month away or more. If I'm still feeling stuck then. This is – He'll think you're -”

“Absolutely fucking desperate to get fucked! You explained that to him, right?”

Bodie had been fierce, not joking at all, but Ray laughed hard. “Maybe not as clearly as that. Or not recently. I’ll call.”

From what Bodie gathered, Ullis’s *iskolpa* answered, and Ullis arranged to take the call in his office. Ray very quickly explained what they’d decided and what they wanted, and Ullis said he wanted to see both of them before he’d give Ray the chit for medical leave. His six o’clock session on At Mordez was free as no one else had taken it since Ray had dropped it, and so they booked that. He ordered them to think more about the idea over the weekend, Ray assured him they’d be thinking of little else, then they said quick goodbyes and Ray hung up.

They sat looking at one another for what felt like a very long time. Ray was the one who broke the silence, and his voice was hushed when he said, “This time next week...”

Bodie nodded slowly. “Did you talk about which hotel? I guess it has to be a hotel because of your marriage bed thing?”

“He said he’d advise using a hotel even without that. In case it goes wrong. We should keep this ‘experiment’ separate from our home. He thought a fairly big hotel. Anonymous and easy for the car. That we’d never need to visit again or even pass by. Which means nothing central.”

“Sounds like... Dishna got a conference centre? What about the airport? Or near that new sports stadium?”

The conference centre was on the river, to the north of the port, but if there wasn’t a conference on, it might not feel that anonymous. The same went for the stadium. The airport, on the other hand, was always anonymous. So that was decided. Ray would compare prices and make them a booking.

“We gonna tell Malun?” Malun and Lamon were spending the night of An Udom Kol in the same small Parass hotel, arriving around six, with just time to settle in before the others collected them for dinner. The next morning they were all having breakfast at the hotel, then there would be a walk before Malun had to leave at ten. So really, their only chance for a private conversation with Malun would be if they hung back during the walk.

Ray pulled a face, gave a long, rasping exhalation, then settled very firmly on no. “He’d want to see Ullis, too. And make us discuss it for weeks. Even Ullis wouldn’t be able to stand up to him. I know it’s crazy to do it next week but – I can taste it. I’ve got to have you.”

Bodie nodded, and took a few moments to savour the rush of heat in his arse and his cock. “I’ll ask him to make it three weeks to the next lunch at his place. So we’ll still have the full eight days clear.”

In a week’s time they’d be having normal, naked sex. Just looking at each other and knowing they were both thinking about it made them hard. They jerked off twice in their bathrooms that evening, and it seemed clear that they’d be continuing at that rate all week. During the goodnight kiss on Ray’s bed, they discussed whether they could trust themselves in the cubicle after *gulshor*, or should be jerking off separately in the gym, too. They didn’t want to have to give the contact up, but they decided, to be safe,

that they should make it like Battersea: no talking, no kissing, maybe even no eye-contact.

* * * * *

Ray booked the airport hotel on An Embrun while Bodie was in the conversation session. He'd chosen the largest hotel, which was part of a small chain, and he'd booked them a small suite. He thought they'd enjoy being able to choose between sex in the living-room and sex in the bedroom. And the bathroom, and maybe there was even a separate vestibule.

In the afternoon they went to Harding to buy winter suits and shirts suitable for the restaurant. They weren't looking for anything as eye-catching as their shirts from the last time, but they wanted it to be obvious that they were together. After visiting three stores, they found more-or-less what they'd had in mind.

* * * * *

Bodie had made the restaurant booking in his own name, not Malun's. The restaurant had done a superb job again with the menu for him, and the staff were also impressive in the way they barely blinked at the presence of Malun. The other diners were less subtle, but Malun was confident that no one would go so far as to approach their table. Yes, it used to happen, but only when he was with Raina; on his own, it seemed he just wasn't that compelling.

Lamon had learned some English since her last visit. They spoke mostly in Hass Embrun during the meal, but they were in a period of English when she said that Ferros had told her a few days ago that Turon had just taught Hulsa to make kedgere.

Ray looked amused. "I bet he's been teaching everyone. Who's Hulsa, though?"

"His boyfriend." Said like she was reminding Ray of something he definitely already knew.

"Turon's got a boyfriend?" From Bodie and Ray simultaneously. "Since when?" From Ray on his own. West's expression said it was news to him, too.

"A month and a half ago, I think." Lamon had turned to Malun for confirmation.

"Yes, it would be six or seven weeks. I first heard about him from Sasha when I was on the *Amnes Verda*. Sasha likes him. He's very openly tender and affectionate with Turon. She says it's good to see."

Lamon asked about "tender" and "affectionate", and they switched to Hass Embrun.

Ray said, ~So what's he like? What's he do?~

He was in Logistics, and was near the beginning of a two-year assignment on Larsos. Turon and Sasha only had another three whole months on the station, so Turon and Hulsa were making the most of their time.

Hulsa wasn't Sasha's physical type at all. He was big. Quite hairy. Hairier than Ray, anyway. The nearest comparison she had was a film actor Bodie hadn't heard of, though Ray and West had immediately made sounds of surprise and speculation.

~Turon with a man?~ Ray's tone was only just the right side of friendly curiosity. ~I'm sorry, I – I can't imagine them doing anything more than *tassuram*.~

Malun and West frowned at Ray, but Lamon shrugged, like it was the obvious comment anyone would make. ~Ferros says it's not passionate by most people's standards. But Turon's spending about a third of his nights in Hulsa's quarters, so...~ Another shrug.

Ray's only response was a grunt. Then he looked at Bodie and raised his eyebrows, and Bodie did the same. The next obvious question was why they hadn't heard about Hulsa before. OK, to Malun it would be just gossip, but Turon had written to Bodie at least three times since it had started, and not a word.

Actually, no, of course Turon wasn't going to tell Bodie about Hulsa. When it started, Turon had already heard the full truth from Malun. He knew Ray and Bodie couldn't be naked together. As a good friend, of course he'd want to be tactful.

The owner remembered them from Ray's birthday, of course, and started by discussing the food, and asking for comments and comparisons. He included Malun and Lamon, but you could think Malun was just another new customer, until he smoothly switched his posture and tone, to ask, ~Is this your first time in Parass, Mister Vasmar?~

~It's my third.~ With a smile, and a gesture of the head at Bodie, West and Ray. ~I have a lot of family here now.~

Bodie was positive he caught a split-second of avid curiosity. How much practice had it taken the guy, to be able to treat an unexpected table of royalty with just a mild, friendly interest?

* * * * *

Ullis worked out of his home, which was a two-storey house in the suburbs out to the west. His office was on the ground floor, with its own entrance at the side, and looked out on a small, neat back garden.

Ullis's hair was pure white, but full, cut in something like a short page-boy style. His eyebrows were the same white, against a Mediterranean tan like Malun's, and his eyes were very dark. The lines of his face suggested a life dominated by amusement, though not necessarily innocent amusement. His clothes were casual, and much more colourful than the room as a whole. Bodie had been expecting a beard, and messy hair, and clothes in shades of brown.

~Ray, why don't you take your usual place on the couch? Bodie, I think that chair.~ The one furthest from Ray's end of the couch. ~I want you to be able to see each other's faces as well as you can see mine.~

The chair and the couch were angular, with broad wooden arms. The chair was comfortable, though, and Ray looked quite at home on the couch.

~Tell me, both of you, how you reached the decision to run such a big risk?~

Ray started, explaining briefly that he'd first told Bodie about the earlier portions of the session. Neither remembered the sequence of the discussion very clearly, though everything the other said sounded spot-on.

Bodie said, ~All I remember, once it had sunk in, was thinking, ‘How soon can we do it?’ Ray wasn’t like that, he was being cautious. He kept on warning me. But as soon as he said, ‘In a hotel on At Oba Nyon’...~ He shook his head hard. ~I wasn’t going to wait a second longer than I had to.~

Ray nodded, smiling. ~And after that he was very persuasive.~ And they grinned at each other.

Ullis did not smile. He looked back and forth between them several times, then said slowly, ~I /?!/ that you are not the most impulsive couple I’ve ever had in here. But you are the couple experiencing the most /?!/ and /?!/ consequences of a set of impulsive acts. Is it possible that you’re about to take a /?!/ step?~

Ray waved a hand impatiently. ~You say that as if there’s a less impulsive way we could have acted on Earth that would have /?!/ us the consequences. There isn’t. Apart from never having any kind of sex. I know you have to say that but – What I’ve learned with Bodie is that we make beautiful decisions when we’re impulsive. Not pretty and convenient. Not easy to live with. And /?!/ from some angles. So. I mean properly beautiful.~

~Bodie? What are your thoughts on impulsive acts?~

Bodie kept his eyes on Ray, who was just now turning to look at him. ~I hadn’t thought of it like that. Like Ray said. What I think... Is when I went with him that first time, I didn’t know he was going to be the best fuck in the universe. And this time I do.~

Ullis gave a sharp sigh. ~Well, as Ray said, I did have to say that. Since I now see how thoroughly you agree about this coming At Oba Nyon, can I have your full attention so we can talk about the possible consequences?~

Immediately Ray said, ~Yes,~ and Bodie said, ~Sorry.~

~Ray, what do you think is the worst thing that could happen?~

Ray swallowed, and took a deep, unsteady breath. ~I could be inside him. Or he could be inside me. And suddenly the Mabein would make me see him. And me. In – In the worst possible way. Make me see it as unforgiveable. And I’d scream and throw him off. Throw him out of bed. Out of the room. And never manage to be in the same room with him ever again.~

While Bodie was still giving a long, low whistle, Ullis said, ~You’d go into *gimana*?~

~Well, realistically, Malun would set something up so I could get Bodie’s *mana*. Get it regularly enough. But I can’t – I can’t -~ He pressed his hand to his forehead and jerked his head back and forth several times. ~I can’t imagine how we would live. How Bodie could bear to stay.~

~Bodie, can you imagine Ray reacting like that?~

Bodie took several long breaths before replying. ~Parts of it. Yes. I know that when Malun told him that I’m a *glarus* he went into -~ He raised an eyebrow at Ray. “Convulsions?”

~*Tarnamahang*.~

~*Tarnamahang*. Trying to escape his own body. Because of what it had done with mine. I didn't see that, of course, not in person. But I have seen him...~ He gave a violent shudder. ~I've seen him do that at the thought of having my semen touch his skin. So I can imagine him throwing me off. But four days after the *tarnamahang* we were having a drink together and laughing. And then managing to have sex. And Ray won't want to hear it because he secretly is jealous of Turon, but those four days were far harder on him than they were on me.~

~What do you think is the worst that could happen?~

~Ray might scream and throw me off. But for the same reasons that already make him...~ A minor shudder. ~I think he already knows the worst that the Mabein think about us. I don't think they've got any more to tell him. And if he throws me off we might need four days apart. Or eight without Turon.~

~Who, of course, I am not jealous of.~

~And for a while we might not even be able to hug. But we'll give each other our shirts and not ask questions about what we do in our bathrooms. And we'll drink together and laugh. And Ray will carry on coming here. And maybe in... I don't know, six months time?... Ray won't be stuck and we can try again.~

Ray's eyes were tight shut. He seemed to be holding his breath. ~Ray?~ A gentle, concerned tone. Now Bodie liked Ullis too. ~Ray, can you tell us what you're thinking?~

Ray opened his eyes, looked at Bodie then back at Ullis. ~Which version do you believe?~ Uncomfortably urgent.

~Well, the Mabein are the unknown /?/, of course. But Bodie's version does fit much more closely with everything you've told me about your history together.~

Ray gave a thin groan, rubbed both hands all over his face, then said, ~I'm going to lie down on the floor for a few minutes.~

~OK.~ Ullis didn't seem at all surprised. There was a broad space in front of the door, behind the other chair, and Ray stretched out there, flat on his back.

Ullis complimented Bodie on his Hass Embrun, and they talked quietly about accents and West's lessons and the car repair course, and being forced to start a new career.

When Ray got to his feet, he asked if he could have a glass of water. Ullis pointed him towards the glasses and tap, and suggested he get a glass for Bodie, too.

~Will you give me the medical /?/ for next week?~

~What would you do if I didn't?~

A shrug. ~Call in sick with /?/ or something on At Mordez. But I'd rather give them warning.~

A nod. ~Are we going to plan around Bodie's worst case?~

~Yes. Without Turon to help, or even Malun or Sasha, the eight days seems too short. But yes.~

~Are there any friends here who could give you the type of help your family gave you back then?~

~I don't see how. None of them know the truth about Bodie.~

~Do you think you'll go into *gimana*?~

~I don't know. It depends if... I might not want him to know where I am. Like he felt when he went to live on the moors.~ His tone suddenly turned practical. ~Which means I should make sure beforehand that I have enough cash.~ Then he grinned at Bodie. ~I'd be fine on the moors, obviously. I picked up all those /?/ from you. But it's the first place you'd look.~ Bodie grinned back.

~Have you chosen a hotel? For At Oba Nyon, I mean. Not for hiding in.~

Ray nodded. ~We've booked the Landenas at the airport.~

~Out at the airport? That's a good idea. As long as you /?/ any impulse to run away on the next flight.~

Ray laughed and shook his head. ~Even with my worst case, I wouldn't be /?/ enough to go into *gimana* in a strange city.~ To Bodie: "Masochistic." ~I'd choose a cheaper hotel to hide in, though.~

~But not so cheap that you can't make calls or send messages from your room. I want you to be able to contact me even if you reach the stage where you can't leave your room. I won't tell Bodie where you are. Unless you ask me to.~

Ray nodded. ~It'll need /?/, too.~

Bodie said, ~What's that?~

"Room service."

"Oh, yeah."

~Bodie, if Ray does go and hide, what would you want to do? Would you be comfortable going home?~

~I need to be home. For when Ray comes back.~ To Ray, urgently: ~Will you send me one message a day? So I know you're there, somewhere. I promise I won't reply. I won't write at all. Unless you say it's OK.~

Ray nodded. ~I'll send it every day at – At midday.~

~Send it to my fleet address. I'm sure I'll always be home by midday but – Getting the alert will make you feel closer.~

~Of course.~

~Do you think you'd tell Malun what had happened? Either of you. Does he know what you're planning?~

~We decided not to tell him. Because he'd interfere. Make us slow down. I don't know if I'd tell him if Ray had to run away.~ To Ray: ~It'd really upset him, wouldn't it? The idea of you going into *gimana*.~

~Yes, he'd be desperate to help. Because of my mother. And I don't see anything he could do.~

~Me neither.~

~In that case, I'd like to give Bodie my phone number too. Eight days is a long time to wait at home. He should have someone to call who knows what's happening. Ray, do you mind?~

~No. That would be good. Thank you.~

~I will give you the medical /?/. I'll write it now.~ He picked up a stylus and a stack of papers from the table by his side, and spent the next few minutes writing on several sheets. Then he stood up and handed several sheets to Ray, and then one to Bodie which turned out to have his phone number.

~Of course, I hope that this is all unnecessary, and that I won't hear from you in over a week because you're too busy fucking each other /?/.~

~What do you think our chances are?~ Ray had folded the sheets neatly and was putting them in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Ullis shook his head. ~I have no /?/ to estimate them. My experience is with couples who are struggling to like each other. I've seen myself get steadily better over the years at helping them, and now I'm well above average. But you don't fit that pattern in any way. Especially now that I've seen you together, I can imagine a great success much more easily than I can imagine difficulties. So why don't we say that I think your chances are excellent?~

They grinned at each other, a mixture of smug and relieved and amused by Ullis, and then Ray turned his hand as it lay on the couch, and beckoned Bodie with the barest twitch of his fingers. Bodie obeyed immediately, without conscious thought.

Ullis studied them thoughtfully, then said, ~Should I take this to mean that you want to stay to the end of the session, but that you don't expect to discuss anything at all difficult?~

Ray glanced briefly at Bodie then shrugged and nodded. ~We could talk about how Turon's got a boyfriend now. That's not difficult. Just incredibly weird.~

~Turon's got a boyfriend? Since when?~ They laughed and told Ullis they'd had exactly the same reaction when they'd heard the news two days earlier, and after they'd explained how they'd heard, the rest of the session was taken up with speculation about why they hadn't heard about it from either Turon or Malun, discussion of what Bodie might say in his next message to Turon, and then wide-ranging gossip about everyone even remotely involved, including Sasha, Ferros, Lamon, West and Hulsa.

At the door, after he'd wished them well, Ullis said, ~Oh, there's one aspect of planning we didn't talk about. Make sure to stock up on /?/.~

Ray laughed, sounding delighted. ~I'll take care of that.~

In the car, as he was pulling away from the house, Bodie said, "What's that you're going to take care of?"

“Getting in enough lubricant.” And Bodie laughed, too, feeling almost giddy at the thought of Ray’s fingers pushing into him again, at how often they’d be doing that starting in just five days’ time.

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Ray’s boss was concerned that Ray’s *iskolpa* was still having such problems adjusting to life on Pen Embrun, though Ray assured him that they’d been finding the counselling helpful, and that they had high hopes of next week’s intensive programme.

They decided to tell West that they were having some counselling together now, and they’d had to schedule their next appointment for the morning of An Embrun, so Bodie wouldn’t be able to make the conversation session. Whatever happened in the Landenas hotel, they had to assume that Bodie would not want to catch the half eight ferry and then try to make sensible conversation.

It felt like the longest, horniest week of Bodie’s life. They had to sit apart again on the ferry back from *pulsonranas*. Bodie kept on wanting to ask Ray if the Mabein had been talking to him about what he was planning to do. While they were cooking dinner on At Kamaran, he got as far as opening his mouth for the question, but then immediately snapped to his senses. It was better not to know. Obviously it was. Just asking Ray to talk about it could mess things up. And having an answer from Ray now – even the most cheerful and confident answer – wouldn’t make any difference to what actually happened in that hotel room. One way or another, Ray’s mind was bound to surprise them both.

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Ray took his backpack down with him when he left for work on At Oba Nyon. He’d packed for a week, he said. Bodie just needed his overnight stuff, but he put that in a backpack too.

Ray finished work at his standard time, and picked Bodie up at the subway station. The traffic out of town was heavy, and it was gone seven by the time they reached the hotel. They’d spent most of the drive talking about the other cars on the road, and about the five or six times that Ray had flown out of the airport.

The hotel was a black cube about nine stories high, looking across a busy road at one of the runways. Parking was underground, with an entrance around the back. The lobby was enormous, reaching up to roof-height and probably taking up about a third of the volume of the building. At the front of the lobby, hanging over your head as you walked in, there was a huge wire sculpture of a gliding bird. There was a café on the right-hand side, just inside the door, and a restaurant through an archway behind that. It was all bright and welcoming, and the smells from the restaurant were good. Bodie went to study the menu while Ray got them checked in.

Their suite was on the top floor at the back, with a view, in the gathering dusk, of low industrial buildings, a few streets of houses, and an expanse of fields scattered with lights. The décor was deep purple with two shades of mushroom brown.

Bodie drew the curtains while Ray turned off all except the table lights, and then they stood at the foot of the large bed, reached out to lightly clasp hands, and stared at one another for what felt like minutes, their breathing getting more and more audible.

Finally, Ray said slowly, ~Do you want to eat downstairs? Or order up?~

Ray wanted to do this in Hass Embrun? Probably a good idea. Put the Mabein off their guard. Bodie took a couple of seconds to think about the question. ~Downstairs. I don't want to deal with someone else coming in here. Let's be quick, though. Just one course.~

The restaurant was about a third full. It had some semi-circular booths along one wall and Ray asked for one of those. Ray ordered fish and a glass of wine, and Bodie had a traditional winter stew and one of the darker beers. They sat with their hands clasped on the table and talked about their best and worst hotels, including Malun's imagined hotel with the rat, which made them laugh nearly as much as the first time.

The food was good. Much better than it needed to be with a captive audience, and their middle-aged waitress seemed to genuinely enjoy her job. The place was a stain on the reputation of anonymous airport hotels everywhere.

~Where are you gentlemen flying to tomorrow?~

Ray quickly shook his head in mock-warning. ~He doesn't know. I'm surprising him. For our !?/.~

Bodie just nodded, aiming for a mixture of pleased and resigned.

~Oh, how nice! How long have you been married?~

~A year.~

She gave a fond sigh, then said, ~I can see you'll have a !?/ time, wherever you go.~

They didn't have dessert, but they did have a second round of drinks, and by the time they got back to their room it was nearly nine.

Again, they were standing at the foot of the bed and looking at each other, but this time not touching. Finally Bodie ran a hand through his hair and then said, ~I'm going to take off my shoes. It's time to start getting naked.~ He sat on the bed, and bent down to undo his shoes, and in the next second Ray was beside him doing the same. They took their socks off, too, then pushed it all out of the way.

Bodie put one hand on Ray's shoulder and the other on his chest, just below the open neck of his shirt. ~Take it in turns to open one button at a time?~ Ray grinned, turned to tuck one knee up on the bed so he was facing Bodie directly, and flexed his shoulders so the neck of his shirt opened wider in invitation.

Bodie tucked his knee onto the bed too, then used both hands to slowly undo the top button. When it was free, he ran his fingertips lightly up the edges of the shirt, opening it just a few degrees wider, and grazing the soft hair and then the ledge of the collarbone. Then he dropped his hands to his lap and waited.

Ray didn't pull Bodie's shirt further open, but instead slid his hand all the way in, and centred his palm on Bodie's nipple. Bodie shivered, clapped one hand over Ray's to keep it there, and opened Ray's next button one-handed.

He waited until he'd bared Ray's nipples before he touched them, teasing with his fingertips, whereas with each button Ray carried on sliding his hand down underneath Bodie's shirt, with changes of pressure and angle that kept Bodie shivering.

Bodie's shirt had one more button than Ray's, and when Ray was finished he immediately raised his hands to push the shirt back off Bodie's shoulders, and a few shrugs from Bodie and it was off and thrown somewhere further up the bed. Ray was even quicker out of his.

Bodie had his hands curved around Ray's biceps, his eyes fixed on Ray's chest, and then slowly he drew his hands downwards, getting steadily harder at the yielding and resistance and warmth and roughness under his fingers. A squeeze to Ray's wrists, then he swallowed and raised his head. ~Turns out I salivate at the sight of any part of you. Any part of you would turn any man impulsive.~

~I think I've got a claim on that saliva, then. So let me have it,~ and with a twist of his wrists he'd caught Bodie's hands, and was pulling Bodie close and down, while Bodie's mouth was opening and his tongue was hungering for Ray's right nipple.

Ray cradled his head as he circled and stroked, and lightly nipped and grazed with his teeth. When he started to move to the left nipple Ray grunted in protest, pulled Bodie's head back to the right, then brought his own fingertips to the other nipple, and the two of them rubbed and pinched and soothed together. They were breathing heavily, and Bodie could feel the hammering of Ray's heart in his chest.

Suddenly Ray grunted again and pulled away. ~Closer. I need to be closer.~ He pushed himself off the bed and dropped to his knees on the floor. ~Here.~ Pointing to the space just in front of his knees. ~Come here.~ Bodie did, and Ray's arms immediately wrapped tightly around him. He returned the pressure and more, as excited by having all of Ray's bare chest and stomach against his own as he was by the clash of their erections.

~You're so strong.~ Ray was gasping. ~Your back is so strong. Like this, I can feel your power like the moment before an earthquake.~

~You're – You're a huge thunderstorm. With hail like gunfire.~

~I am. I am. I'm going to drench you.~

It was Bodie who eventually broke the fierce kiss. ~I want to get into your pants now. Stand up so I can drop those trousers.~

Ray grinned, and started to lever himself up with a hand on the bed. ~Your trouble is you're far too subtle.~

But Bodie was too intent to respond. As soon as he was on his feet he reached out to unbuckle Ray's belt, and carefully ease the fastening down. And then he took a step to Ray's side, and slid his hand down inside Ray's briefs. Ray was so hot, and so hard. The throbbing was so insistent. But the skin was so tender.

In the end it was Ray who pushed the trousers and then the briefs down, just to mid-thigh, and for long minutes they alternated between watching Bodie's hand explore and test, staring at each other, and kissing.

~It's another life. The time when I thought my *jarupard* was ugly.~ Ray's eyelids were fluttering. He sounded almost drugged.

~Some part of me wrapped around it. That's what it needs.~

Ray gave a grunt of assent, which sounded more pained and tense than Bodie thought they could cope with at this stage. He released his grip, stepped back in front of Ray, and put his hands low on Ray's hips.

~But I still need to get you out of those trousers.~ Low. Nearly a murmur, and he was dropping to his knees again, and tugging the clothes all of the way down. Ray stepped out of them and Bodie pushed them away, and then stayed kneeling. He ran both hands slowly up Ray's left leg. His left hand, on the inner thigh, stopped just short of Ray's balls, but the right carried on up and back, to cup Ray's buttocks and tease his cleft.

~Even this morning, with you in the cubicle in your shorts... You look good in your shorts, but like this... How you feel.~ He leaned forward and rubbed his face against Ray's cock: across one cheek, then back and across with lips and nose, and then across the other cheek. ~And how you smell.~

~You feel...~ A small grunt, then he put two fingers in his mouth, drew them out glistening, then reached behind himself. The damp fingertips brushed past Bodie's, then flexed and twisted back and forth for a few seconds. Then the hand was on Bodie's shoulder. ~Go on.~ Hushed and intent.

Bodie tested with his middle finger, found there was just enough saliva. Ray gave a low groan, and his hips jerked, shaking his whole body. ~This is... Oh, Bodie. I'd swear this was the first time I'd ever had anyone do this.~

Bodie swallowed, remembering Gavio's photos and feeling the full weight of the compliment. ~Then you've got fantastic instincts. For what'll feel great for both of us.~

They grinned at each other, but then Ray suddenly turned serious, uncomfortable. His grip tightened several times on Bodie's shoulder, like a compulsive twitch. ~No, I – I should have – You're still in your trousers. You must be...~ He swallowed jerkily and shook his head. ~I want to but...~

~Ah.~ Bodie carefully withdrew his finger then sat back on his heels. Ray's hand fell from his shoulder. ~You're nervous about seeing my cock?~ The slightest nod in confirmation. ~Have to admit, it's ready to get out. So what do we...? Do we turn out the lights?~

A definite no. ~It's so selfish, I know, but – Seeing you when you touch me... It's better than breathing.~ Bodie smiled, and after a second Ray gave a lopsided smile back.

~Then... Look, wait a minute.~ Bodie went to the bathroom, picked the largest towel off the rack, and then put it on the bed just by Ray. ~To catch my come. So you don't have to worry about where it's got to. Now I want to be selfish. Say what I really want us to do.~

~Yes.~ Immediate. So eager.

Bodie nodded. ~So I'll suck you off. Like I did in my flat. You sit on the bed. I'll get between your thighs. I'll make myself come while I'm down there. You won't have to see a thing.~

In response Ray grabbed the towel, shook it open, draped it over the foot of the bed, then sat down on it and spread his legs wide.

Bodie knelt with his legs close together, and put one hand on Ray's knee, meaning reassurance, while the other hand went to his belt-buckle. ~I'm going to push them down. You'll want to look away now.~

Ray looked towards the window. Bodie worked quickly, got his trousers pushed down nearly to his knees, then braced himself with his left hand on Ray's thigh and leaned forward.

Ray came first, even more powerfully than Bodie had remembered it. Bodie stayed with the gradually-softening cock in his mouth, completely still at first, just sighing at the movement of Ray's hands on his neck and hair, and then he took hold of himself again, and was racing to join Ray.

He didn't pull away to release Ray's cock, but instead bent his head lower, to lay it as carefully as he could on Ray's balls.

~Lift up a bit? So I can get the towel. You should probably close your eyes, too.~ Again, Ray turned towards the window, but this time he closed his eyes too. Bodie bundled the towel up with the wet patch safely in the centre, then held it over his groin. ~I'll take it to the bathroom. I'll change into a robe.~ He'd brought his robe with him, but the hotel had robes, and they were newer and softer.

Ray nodded. ~I'll get into bed while you're gone.~

~Great.~ He got to his feet, shook and tugged his way out of his trousers and briefs, then picked them up and went into the bathroom. He wiped his cock off and dried it – one less thing that might bother Ray – and when he dropped the towel in the bath and looked in the mirror, he saw a very happy man. As sex went, that had been normal enough for him. He raised an eyebrow at himself, grinned, then reached for the nearest robe.

Ray had thrown their shirts on the floor by his trousers and folded the quilt down to near the foot of the bed, and was lying under the sheet on the side by the window. Bodie slid over next to him, and they held each other close and kissed for a long time.

~Did you notice a difference in how I tasted?~ A whisper.

Bodie frowned, thought about it, then shook his head. ~Both times, I was just thinking I'd been knocked flat by a force of nature.~

~A thunderstorm. I did drench you.~ A quick grin, then he turned serious. ~I think I notice a difference. In what I taste on you. I'm fertile now. It's alive. It tastes richer.~

Obscenely rich, Bodie would bet. What else, from a Bakkel? And that was a line he'd be keeping strictly to himself. ~It tasted habit-forming. Both times.~

Slowly, thoughtfully: ~Habit-forming.~ Then he pulled Bodie on top, and kissed him like he was searching for every last trace.

He eased off quite quickly, though, and soon Bodie rolled onto his back, and Ray shifted to curl around Bodie's side. For some minutes they were still, apart from Bodie's hand drifting in Ray's hair, and Ray's hand slowly clenching and smoothing the robe, just above Bodie's left hip.

~Bodie?~ Ray's hand had left Bodie's side, was flat now over his stomach, the sides of two fingers brushing against the cord of the robe. ~I'm ready to see you. I've realised I

was nervous before because you were erect. If we can take things slowly from here, I think I can cope...~

Bodie's heart leapt, but he clamped his hand hard over Ray's. ~You tell me immediately. If you even start to get nervous again.~

~Of course. You know I will.~

A couple of seconds, then Bodie nodded and removed his hand. ~Go on, then.~

Ray pushed himself up to kneeling, pulling the sheet far down in the process. Then he reached out for the cord, and Bodie raised his head to watch as the long fingers loosened it, then pulled the sides of the robe apart. And then he was in Ray's hand, and they were both laughing in relief and delight. After a while Bodie lay back again, and as the exploration continued of his cock and balls and thighs and hips, he gave most of his attention to the absorbed expression on Ray's face.

~You're mine. All of this is mine.~

~All of it.~

Bodie levered himself up, shrugged out of the robe, then reached for Ray. Ray pushed him down again, and they wrapped their arms around each other and entwined their legs, and were laughing again, and rolling back and forth.

~Well, if there's no earthquake by now, I think we must be safe. I guess the priest visited while we were out. Said the words through the letter-box.~

Ray grunted and shook his head. ~It was Ullis. That's the real reason he wanted to see us together. It was all the words he said. Maybe the glasses of water, too.~

~Ah. Yes.~ Bodie sighed in recognition. ~Even while he was yelling at us, everything felt so right.~

~It's not been easy. Waiting. It's been...~ A low, exhausted chuckle. ~Like the longest betrothal in history. But for this... It was worth every second.~

~And now we've got a whole week in bed. Apart from – You know, we should've given West the week off, too. He is due a holiday.~

Ray shrugged. ~He'll get that once you start your course. I guess he'll knit. Make friends all over the island who have boats and children. It'll be an interesting test next week. To see how well you can concentrate on the lesson when you're ~

~Sore.~

Ray's eyebrows shot up. ~Thinking of your *iskolpa* cold and alone in that big bed, is what I was going to say.~

They laughed and rolled around some more, and then there was more kissing, and more exploring, and they started to get hard again, and Ray's reaction was anything but nervous. He took Bodie in his mouth, though to bathe him and taste him thoroughly, with only the lightest pressure, and then he murmured fervent compliments right over the glistening cock, and as Bodie shivered and bucked at each cooling breath, Ray found more and more to admire.

Their part of the hotel seemed almost empty. There had been footsteps in the corridor from time to time, but no voices. If the suites were mostly business travellers, they'd probably already flown home for the weekend. But around eleven there was a large group, quite noisy. At least four women and two men. It sounded as if they'd all had a good dinner together, and not stopped at two rounds of drinks. There was a suggestion of more drinks, but eventually they decided to save it until the next night, and there were several rounds of goodbyes. Bodie counted four doors closing.

~Sounds like there's two couples.~

Ray tilted his head. ~Or one threesome.~

~Yeah, of course.~

They smiled at one another, listened for about ten more seconds, and then Ray said, ~How do you want me to fuck you?~

He could easily have come right then, just from the words. ~Ray! I – I -~ Like the first time. He wanted it like the first time. But that had to be asking for trouble. Trying to wipe out the last eight months. And he didn't want that. He'd learned to love Ray even more, through having to wait. ~From behind, but – Fuck me from behind, but have me on my back when you're getting me ready. I want to see your fingers about to go in, and your *jarupard* while you're getting it ready too.~

Ray stared down at him for several seconds. Then in a rush: ~That's what I want. I didn't know how much, but – That's what I want.~

Ray had put the stock of lubricant on the bottom shelf of the bedside table nearest the bathroom, and while he was leaning over to get a sachet, Bodie raised his knees.

As he had in the cabin, Ray spread the gel on himself first, and Bodie found himself panting. Then Ray's hand was just in front of him, not quite touching.

~Part of me wants to tease you, but -~

~Ray! Be nice.~

Frowning: ~You want me to go against my nature?~

Bodie opened his mouth to protest even more strongly, but the fingers were already pressing in, and again he forgot about watching, and his head fell back, and he closed his eyes, and this time he moaned.

~You're tight.~ Deep in now, and turning very slowly.

Bodie rolled his head to the side, opened his eyes just a fraction. ~It's been a while.~

~For me too. For me too. We'll reinvent fucking. Together.~ Then he pulled his fingers out, and was pushing at Bodie's left thigh to turn him over. Bodie went with Ray's urging, because it was exciting, but once he was on his hands and knees he moved a couple of feet over to the right, so he had the robe underneath him.

Completely done with teasing, Ray all-but slammed in, which Bodie loved, but soon they were gasping that they needed to slow down, and then somehow managing to do it.

For a while they were on their sides, and for a while kneeling up, but they ended with Bodie back on all fours, rocking under each slapping thrust, and slipping between English and Hass Embrun as he asked for more and harder. Ray gave it, and promised Bodie over and over in Hass Embrun that he'd give him all he'd ever need.

Afterwards, Bodie managed to bundle the robe up before they both collapsed, and once they'd rolled away onto the side near the window, he pushed the robe out of the bed and onto the floor.

~Set the alarm for six, right?~

Ray looked briefly confused, then shook his head. ~No. It's OK. It's the weekend. No one's expecting me anywhere. Let's open the curtains a bit, though. Have the light wake us up. Then go home for a huge pot of coffee.~

~Sounds perfect.~

Ray dealt with the curtains, opening them a foot, while Bodie pulled up the sheet and the quilt.

~Is this a goodnight kiss? Or will we even have them anymore?~ Bodie could hear the drowsiness in his own voice.

~I don't know.~ Ray sounded thoughtful. ~I suppose it'll be the last kiss before we fall asleep. So we won't know until the end which it's going to be.~

Bodie grunted. ~I won't say I'll miss them. Exactly. But you made it good.~

~We both did.~ And Ray was leaning in for another kiss, but just two kisses later Bodie was fast asleep.

When he came awake the room was almost completely dark, and for a split-second he didn't know where he was. Then he moved enough to rekindle the throbbing in his arse, and he beamed with satisfaction and reached out for Ray.

But Ray wasn't there, not on either side of the bed. Bodie turned on the lights and knelt up to look past the foot of the bed, where they'd left their clothes. Ray's were gone.

Well, he could have gone down to the bar. A place like this, it'd be open all night. So he checked the bathroom next, and Ray's stuff was gone. After that he knew what he'd find when he opened the wardrobe but he still had to look. Yes, Ray had taken his backpack.

Ray had left him.

Chapter 26

Bodie was sitting on the floor, his back against the wall opposite the wardrobe. He had no idea how he'd got there, or how long he'd been there. Well. His legs must just have given way.

He needed to get dressed. He had no business being naked right now. No, first he needed to shower.

He'd meant it to be a very quick shower, short enough that no one would call down to complain. But he found that he couldn't bear to touch himself, so he just had to stand under the water until he was positive that every last trace of come and saliva and sweat had been washed away.

He went through to the living-room to get dressed. He didn't want to spend a second more in the bedroom, absolutely wasn't going to sit on the foot of that bed to fasten his shoes. The clock to the left of the TV said 2:42.

Once he was dressed he threw his toiletries in his backpack. He had his hand raised to open the door when it occurred to him that Ray might have taken the car. They'd agreed that Bodie would have the car, because Ray wouldn't be able to drive anyway if he went into *gimana*, but now Bodie had no idea what to expect of Ray. If the car wasn't there, then he'd have to get the hotel to call him a cab, and the idea of talking to anyone right then made him feel sick. If the person on the desk asked him why he was checking out at three in the morning, then he might actually be sick. Or punch them. Or worse.

Be safer to wait until it was morning and the airport train started running. Around six, he thought that was. He could walk to the airport to get the train, not have to talk to anyone.

And besides, Ray might come to his senses. Want to sneak back into the room. So Bodie had to be there for that. To sit on him if necessary and keep him in his senses.

How was he going to pass the time till then, though? Go quietly back to sleep? Impossible. He didn't have a book. Well, there was the TV. There'd be something on, wouldn't there?

He had a choice of two channels, one with what looked like a film – some sort of family drama, anyway – and the other with a documentary or news report about some big engineering project. He'd put the sound down very low as soon as he'd turned the TV on, but there was just enough to let him catch the tone even though he couldn't make out any full sentence. He obviously had no chance of following the film – even with the sound up and in English he might not have got caught up with the story – but he thought he could keep himself occupied trying to figure out what this engineering project was.

After a few minutes he'd decided from the pacing that it must be a full documentary rather than a news report, and it also seemed to be something to do with the business – maybe some new design for the engines? – and then suddenly Malun and Iran were on the screen, being interviewed. He'd seen them both in news reports before, and it had got less weird each time, but now it was such a shock that he flinched, and had to turn over to the film almost immediately.

What was he going to tell Malun if Ray didn't snap back to his senses? When was he going to tell him? It would have to depend on when he heard from Ray. If he heard from him. Maybe Ray would even get in first with telling Malun. Though Bodie could only imagine that happening if they were dealing with Ray's worst case rather than his own, and so he wasn't going to imagine that. He turned the sound up one notch higher, and put all of his concentration into at least working out people's names. In the end it seemed to be a comedy, about two sets of twins whose parents had decided to give up their sensible office jobs and become actors. The film was followed by a programme that was very excited about a bunch of restaurants that Bodie guessed were all in the same city. The city was possibly called Harbak, and the programme felt like it had been produced by the local tourist board. Soon he decided he didn't need the sound, and then that he could watch it just as well lying down.

He didn't think he slept. He certainly didn't feel like he'd slept. If he'd had any dreams, then they'd been full of sideways scenes from at least one more tourist-style programme (there had been canoeing, and pottery-making, and large groups dancing), and a very, very long weather forecast. Always shapes and movements to track, that seemed to be enough to keep away any real, continuous thoughts about Ray, but the lake of splintered cold in his gut and chest seemed to shift and refreeze with every breath, and hugging his knees to his chest calmed it only slightly.

He hadn't been checking the time, but when the familiar title sequence started for the news he reckoned it had to be morning now, and yes, it was seven.

His backpack was still by the door. He took his toiletries out and washed his face and brushed his teeth, and after he'd packed them again he wondered if Ray had taken the lubricant. Ray hadn't. Bodie didn't want to pick the sachets up; that crinkling was the most exciting sound he knew, and now also the most painful. But he wasn't going to leave them for the staff to find and snigger over. He held the backpack open just under the edge of the shelf and pushed the sachets into it with a card advertising the midwinter special deal in the restaurant. The robe was still on the floor, too, and he threw that in the bathroom on his way out.

At checkout he just had to deal with one question about whether everything had been alright with his room. He couldn't manage to smile when he said that yes, the room had been fine, and the clerk had looked slightly concerned, but then must have decided to leave him alone to complain in his own time.

Ray hadn't taken the car. That had to be a good sign, didn't it? Unless Ray had decided to walk to the airport and get the first flight out.

He caught the eight o'clock boat, which was nearly empty. He wanted a coffee. Well, he wanted a bottle of scotch, but he was deciding right now that he wouldn't allow himself more than a couple of beers with meals until all this was over. If "all this" ever could be over. OK, then until they'd talked together enough that he'd been able to make Ray laugh. Or until he knew when Ray would be coming home.

He made a large pot of coffee, but after just half a mug and a piece of toast he decided he had to get out of the flat. There were a few patches of blue among the light grey clouds, but the wind was cold and blustery. The route around the coast would remind him too much of Ray. Every route in town would. And would also have a risk of bumping into West. It'd be better to drive way out of town. Did they let people run around the prison

peninsula? There was a long path along the coast at the far end of the island, and he'd definitely seen people running there. But it was well over an hour's drive away, and he needed to be back for midday, in case Ray sent a message. So he'd just go down to the gym, then. See what machines were free.

He spent an hour with the weights and ran for an hour. For the last half hour, he was thinking almost entirely about where he was going to shower. Back in his bathroom? In the cubicle? Or was he going to go crazy and use the communal showers?

He decided in the end on the communal showers. Ray wasn't going to make him ashamed of his body, not even today. No Hailin was. Let them see him. And either not think twice about it, or think he was freakishly pale and hairless, or think he looked damn good. And then get on with the rest of their weekends, without hearing so much as a whisper from the Mabein about the state of their immortal souls.

He did get glances, from both men and women, and a few were lingering. But he was stony-faced, avoiding any possibility of eye-contact.

Afterwards, on the way up to the flat, he did let himself think about Ray. From now on, he was always going to use the communal showers when he went to the gym on his own, but he was never going to tell Ray about it.

As the time came up to twelve, he made himself a tea, then sat on the couch and stared at the bottom-left corner of the TV, willing his message-light to start blinking.

When the phone rang he gave a start of surprise, and then his stomach went into free-fall, down through the floor, it felt like. That had to be Ullis, calling to tell him about Ray. That even Ray's worst case hadn't been bad enough.

~Hello?~

"Bodie. Bodie. You are at home." It was Ray. Sounding rushed. Anxious and uncertain. Maybe unsure whether or not to be relieved.

"Yeah. I got back around nine."

"How – How are you?" Desperately needing to know.

I'm gutted. What do you think? "Yeah, well, I've felt tougher. Right now... More like an egg. An army egg, I guess. Not fresh from the farm. Better now that you've called, though. On the way to being hard-boiled."

A small, choked sound from Ray, that might have been a laugh. "I – I've spent all of this morning trying to work out what to write in my message. I wasn't happy with what I had, but when I sat down in this booth and started typing, it looked... On the screen it looked criminal." In a flat, almost sing-song voice: ~How are you? I'm so sorry.~ A short sigh. "And without an English keyboard I couldn't even say the most important thing. The thing I need to say most right now. How I love you. I love you. I love you. But I –" He swallowed audibly. "If it makes it worse for you to hear that, I –"

Bodie interrupted. "Couldn't ever make it worse. But what about you, how you are? You talked to Ullis? When you coming home?"

"When I've worked out... When we've worked out. How we cope with what the Mabein want now. Which is – I'm not allowed to help you come. Not in any way. I don't know

about kissing. I don't know about a *tassuram*. I don't know!" A panicked protest against the Mabein. "And, God, I want you more than ever after last night. So I don't know how to prepare myself to cope with seeing you again."

"But – It's still my worst case we're looking at? Not yours?"

"I will come home. I need to be with you."

"Oh, thank Christ. Thank Christ. I'll have a steak for dinner. And try that Australian wine."

"Um. That sounds good but... I'm not gonna be ready by tonight. I'm sorry but it's gonna be days."

Bodie laughed. "No, I figured that. It's for me. I promised myself I wouldn't let myself drink until I knew you'd be coming home. Until I heard your voice like this."

Ray laughed in return. "Yeah, I – I'm suddenly in the mood to care about where I eat lunch."

"Have you talked to Ullis?"

"Not yet. I'll be moving to the hotel in a couple of hours, and I think I'll call him after that."

"You gonna call me again tomorrow?"

"Not –" A slight pause. "Yeah, at the same time? Send me a message if you make plans and want a different time."

Bodie said midday the next day would be great, but then went on to mention that he'd been thinking of taking a long run elsewhere on the island, and in the end they decided to make the call at three, to give Bodie plenty of time to get back, including lunch out, if he was in the mood for any of the places Ray had recommended.

Ray said that all this talk of lunch had got him really hungry. "I couldn't face breakfast. Oh, Bodie, I'm so glad I called."

"Me too. And y'know I love you too? Last night was perfect. Apart from the obvious."

A snort of amusement. "Apart from that. God, I hope I'm home soon. It's the worst kind of hungry, thinking how much I'll miss you."

"It's gonna be soon. I've got that feeling. Look, you go and have lunch. And say hi to Ullis from me. Or swear at him hard. Whatever you think he deserves."

"Yeah, might be both. I'll tell you tomorrow. And you tell me about the Australian wine."

After he'd had lunch, Bodie still felt the urge to get out of the flat, but now it was to get up onto the cliffs and look out at Dishna, and know that Ray was there working to get home. To be sure of avoiding West, he took the path through the hills behind town. The wind was fierce up on the cliffs and he kept his distance from the edge. Ray would be somewhere warm. Still eating. Or in the subway. Or already in his hotel. Thinking about him. And smiling a lot despite the Mabein.

* * * * *

An Udom Kol was brighter and less windy, but still cold. Bodie set off to the other end of the island shortly after the sun came up, had a long run along the coast and back through woods and hills, and then had lunch in a village ten miles south of Harding, in a café that reminded him of the place near Clover.

Ray called at three on the dot. He was keen to hear what Bodie had been doing, if Bodie had gone on that run, but when Bodie asked about Ullis, Ray gave such a discouraged sigh that Bodie said, “Ray? What happened? Sounds like you might’ve walked out on him, too.”

“No. No, he’s being good. It’s just... I went to see him today. So it’s just a few hours since I was telling him about the decision the Mabein have come to. About how deep a threat our marriage is to – The whole Hailin species. The images they showed me of the two of us in –” A long pause, with harsh breathing. “Ullis thinks it was a dream. All of it was a dream. But my dreams don’t feel like that.” Pain in his voice, more than enough to have Bodie wincing.

“Next session’s gotta be easier, right? Now you’ve told him.”

“Yeah. Early tomorrow morning.” A sharp sigh. “I wonder what he’s told his *iskolpa* about us. All these calls, and appointments on the weekend.”

“Sounded like they’re both used to it. Y’know, I’m not gonna ask what the Mabein showed you. Not today, not ever. You don’t wanna tell me, I’ll know it’s for a good reason.”

A weak laugh. “God, how I don’t want to! Thank you. Of course. That’ll help.”

“What’s the hotel like? You tried out the room service yet?”

So far he’d eaten out, and the hotel he’d chosen, in the end, was one that had small kitchens and didn’t have room service. He’d stock up the kitchen on At Mordez. “The more I thought about it... I don’t want anyone to see me in *gimana*.”

“I get that. It’s a good idea.”

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The next day was solid rain all morning and for most of the afternoon. Bodie went down to the gym very early, and then read, browsed the TV, and wrote to Turon. After half an hour in front of a blank screen, he’d decided just to dive in and explain how they’d heard the news about Hulsa from Lamon. “It’s sounds like it’s going really well.” Then what the hell else could he say that wouldn’t be insulting to Sasha, or depressing for Turon because he’d be leaving the station so soon? So he asked if Sasha had any girlfriends at the moment, and then moved on to talk about Malun at the restaurant, and *pulsonranas*, and films and books, and the weather.

Ray called at three again, as they’d arranged, and this time the phone showed a blank for the number he was calling from. When Bodie commented, Ray said that he was in his room at the hotel, and he was using the option to hide the number. The other times he’d been in public booths, where the option wasn’t available.

Ray was in a very different mood today, very business-like. After explaining about the phone numbers he immediately said, “We need to talk about the idea of having sex with other people.”

“No, we fucking don’t.”

“I knew you’d say that, but we do. If we can’t have sex with each other, what are we gonna do? We’ve gotta talk about it before I can come home. So the first thing is... I’m OK – the Mabein are OK – if you want someone else. They think it should really be a human, but they’d accept an unqualified man – *nesanat*, like Turon, not *chamsan*, like West. Though we’d have to find a way of being honest with the man about what you are.”

“What I am. What I am. What I am is a married human man who happens to think that ‘married’ means something. I’d rather jerk off in the bathroom and think about you than – Anything I could do with another man. Or a woman. Or are you gonna tell me they won’t even let me jerk off now?”

“I can’t give you my shirt anymore. We mustn’t coordinate. Or excite each other by talking about it. But otherwise... They have no way of knowing what you do. They’re not part of you like they are with all of us.”

“No. Well, that’s good.” Meaning the permission to jerk off. But also, the more the thought about it, everything that came with it.

“But if you ever change your mind. About what it means to be married to me. You know you can tell me. We’ll work something out.”

“Yeah, OK.” Probably too dismissive. He knew this couldn’t be as easy for Ray as he was making it sound. “Would you be coming home today if I’d said, ‘Sure. Let’s go and pick me out a boyfriend.’?”

“I don’t – I don’t think so. It would help but I know I’m not ready. Ullis knows I’m not ready. And the other thing. That I have to tell you...” A deep breath. “The Mabein want me to work on having sex with Hailin men. Something like once a month. To try to – Make myself normal again.”

“How about you work on telling the Mabein to fuck off?”

“I am, Bodie. I know it never looks like that, but I am.”

“So they’re thinking I’ll give you my shirt and wave you off to your boyfriend? Like Sasha and Turon? How’s it gonna help me, you playing at being normal?”

“I don’t know yet. They don’t know. But I owe them. There wouldn’t be anything like a boyfriend, though. It’d never be the same man twice. The Mabein don’t want me to worry you. You could think of it like a doctor’s appointment.”

“Ray, I couldn’t. You know I couldn’t. I’d hate it. They wanna stop me worrying, they’ll let you jerk off at home, the same as me.”

A loud, exhausted sigh, maybe even exasperated. “Thank you.”

“Don’t be sarcastic, Ray. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Yeah, it’s the one thing Ferros cured me of. By the time I was twelve, I think.”

“You’re saying you meant it?” Bodie was frowning, hopelessly confused.

“I was about to. I can’t imagine. Not yet. How we’ll cope not being allowed to have any contact. Just – Taking ourselves off. Alone. I – There’s a part of me that wonders about being normal. What that would feel like now. But every part of me knows that I’m yours. I’ll tell the Mabein a respectful but firm no.”

They laughed, briefly, then Bodie said, “I’ve gotta admit, when I was on the moors after the porn, thinking we needed to stop calling it a marriage, just live together as friends, I knew that we’d have to work out what to do about other people. I hated the idea but – We’d have to.”

A thoughtful-sounding grunt, then a pause. “But we’re not even close to being friends like that. There’s far too much between us.”

“Yeah. And even more now than there was back then. So I dunno why I mentioned all that. Except – As a break from telling you and the Mabein to fuck off.” This time the laughter was much louder and longer, and afterwards they switched to catching one another up on their days and plans. Ray had Ullis’s first appointment on At Mordez, too. He’d call at midday, when Bodie was home for lunch.

* * * * *

~Are you going to be having more weekend sessions with the counsellor?~ West’s way of asking how the sessions had gone. Unless he was just wondering about his own weekends and the conversation sessions.

~This coming weekend, yes. After that, I don’t know.~ So far, he and Ray had only been talking about plans for a day ahead, but it had to be best to keep the weekend free.

~Is it helping?~

Bodie shrugged, impressed by his own casualness. But then he had been expecting West to have some sort of questions. ~I think so. It’s made a lot of things much clearer.~

~That’s good.~ A sudden grin. ~Is it hard for Ray to admit?~

Bodie shook his head, looking stern. ~Nearly impossible. Don’t ask him. It’s just not safe.~ Of course some boys would take that as a challenge, but West wasn’t one of them. Or not where Ray was concerned.

West didn’t ask anything more, because he was far more interested in his own news from the weekend: Yata the furniture-maker would be taking him on as a part-time assistant, starting in the new year. It was perfect. He’d work the first three days of the week while Bodie was doing his course, and also all day on An Embrun. So they’d only be having a conversation session on An Udom Kol, but that was enough for Bodie now. The pay was pretty good, West thought, considering how much he’d be learning at the same time.

Bodie agreed that it was perfect. ~Are you going to post Lamon a table or something? A couple of an inches at a time?~ West thought that idea was hilarious, and returned to it several times during the lesson as new thoughts occurred to him for how it might work.

Ray and Ullis had been talking again about Ray getting a *dumut* fitted. Somehow Bodie hadn’t expected that, and it hit him as hard as ever. “Ray. Ray. I’m begging you not to do

it. Your incredible cock, the idea of someone crippling it... It makes me feel sick to my stomach. And more sick every bloody time you talk about it. You have to promise me. Promise me now. Please.”

“But if – You can see that it would make it so much easier for me to come back?”

“Not like that. There has to be something better than that. Promise me Ullis hasn’t already made an appointment for you. I know where he lives. He’d never hear the end of it.”

“He – He was going to make some calls. See if it could be done this week. And let me know before the end of the day.”

“Then you call him straight after this and tell him I begged you. Ordered you. However you need to think of it. Will you?”

A small, choked sound that might have been a groan. “I will. I promise.”

“Thank you. Ray, it’s only been four days. You know that’s nothing for what we’re dealing with. Yeah, course we could do with Turon here and I miss you but – We’ve not got any reason to feel desperate.”

“No, I – No, you’re right. I’ll call Ullis now.”

And Ray had hung up, leaving Bodie staring at the phone. Well, he’d told Ray to call Ullis straight away. But he’d also been looking forward to telling him about West’s carpentry job.

* * * * *

The next day, Bodie got back from the morning lesson to find he had a message. It probably wasn’t from Turon because there hadn’t been enough time for him to reply to Bodie’s message, and it wasn’t from Malun because it hadn’t set his wristband off.

It was from Ray, saying he wouldn’t be calling any more because he’d gone into *gimana*, and he was finding it very difficult to speak and also to type. It had started during the night. Ullis was coming to see him that afternoon. Would it be OK with Bodie if Ullis called him to let him know what was happening? Ray would send more messages when he could, but he thought that meeting with Ullis was going to use up the rest of his strength for the day.

Bodie immediately replied to say that of course Ullis could call him. And that Ray should save his strength for whatever could help him get home.

Well, that would be a *dumut*, wouldn’t it? Or Bodie cheerfully agreeing to the two of them sleeping around. Was Ullis going to tell him this was all his fault? That he was being too stubborn, and if he could see Ray now he’d change his mind in a second about what was really important between them?

Yes, probably he would. And Ray knew that, didn’t he? That had to be one of the reasons Ray was making sure he couldn’t be found. To stop Bodie doing something stupid.

During the afternoon lessons they’d been watching a documentary series about the history of the car industry, and for that day’s episode, about the stages in the introduction of safety features, Bodie found it impossible to concentrate. He was taking

nothing in. He was imagining Ray curled up on a threadbare cover in a dingy room, gaze fixed on a stain on the carpet as he struggled to control his constant shivering.

About half an hour in, West stopped the programme and asked Bodie if something was wrong. ~You're almost like a different person this afternoon.~

Bodie shook his head hard to clear it, then dragged his hands down his face as he searched quickly for an excuse. ~I haven't been sleeping well the last few nights.~ "It must have caught up with me."

West was looking at him closely. "Yes, I can see that. You should go home and rest. Call me tomorrow morning if you still need more time."

Back home he tried to read, but that was hopeless too. He paced, rearranged records and books, paced some more, and then at three o'clock he gave in and called the number that Ullis had given him. The man was probably out visiting Ray, or in the middle of seeing another client, but Bodie just had to do something.

~Hello. This is Ullis Hanvert.~

~It's Bodie. Have you seen Ray yet? How is he?~

~Yes, I've just got back from seeing him. He's doing well, really, for his first day in *gimana*. He's managing to eat. He said you had a lesson until four. I was waiting until then to call you.~

~I couldn't concentrate. Because of Ray. West sent me home.~

~Ray doesn't want you to worry. I've seen a lot of people in *gimana*. I've been in *gimana* more than once. I can tell you he's doing well."

~So is he going to be able to think well enough to work out how to come back? Before the end of the week?"

~I couldn't promise you anything but he is thinking. More slowly than normal but that might be a good thing.~

~What can I do? Should I send him a message?~

~What would you say?~

~I – I don't know. That I'm thinking of him but he knows that.~

~Yes, he does. Look, one thing you could do is come to see me. Could you come at six this evening?~

~Is this so you can sell me on the *dumut*?~

~No, I won't mention it. I know it /?/ you. If we knew each other better, and I knew exactly how much Hass Embrun you understood, then we could /?/ the entire /?/ on the phone like this. But given the /?/ it needs to be in my office. Ray suggested it. He said I could tell you anything the two of us have discussed.~

Including the "dream" from the Mabein? Well, if Ray had said "anything", he would have meant it, including that. How much Bodie really wanted to know... Now that was a different question.

~Yes. OK. Six o'clock. Thank you. I remember the address.~

~Bodie.~ Sharply, to stop him hanging up. ~Don't think of leaving your shirt with me. It's a /?/ policy with all counsellors. We can't get involved with /?/ a /?/. It would never end.~

Bodie grunted. ~I hadn't thought of it.~ But he would have, given half a minute more.

* * * * *

Ullis pointed him to Ray's place on the couch, and offered him some *kenit*. ~I know you like it very weak, and with a lot of milk. Or I should say you can drink it like that. You still don't like it?~

Bodie shrugged. ~I'm getting used to it.~ Only barely true, but a man shouldn't turn down hospitality. ~Thank you. A cup would be good.~

As soon as Ullis had served the *kenit* and sat down, Bodie said, ~What's Ray's hotel like? How cheap is it?~

~Oh, it's nice. It's mainly aimed at families, so it's not very fashionable. But it's clean and /?/. I'd be happy to stay there.~

Bodie closed his eyes for a second in relief. ~I'd been imagining some of the places where I'd ended up sleeping.~

Ullis nodded then raised an eyebrow. ~He's a Bakkel, Bodie. There are some things he just couldn't consider.~

They both laughed, then Bodie said, ~Does he know I'm here right now?~

~Yes, I called him. He's very glad. He said again, several times, that I can tell you anything.~

Bodie frowned, took a quick mouthful of *kenit*, then paused for several seconds with his mouth open. ~Do you think I need to know what happened with the Mabein on At Oba Nyon?~

~I think you do. And it should be easier for everyone if I tell you.~

Bodie had to stop himself from looking around for a bottle of *brosha*. ~OK. I'm ready.~

~Ray thinks that the Mabein had decided that they also needed to see how they felt about the two of you having sex. That they could have been wondering if it was possible for them to consider these months, with the control you'd shown, as a special kind of betrothal. One that had been even more difficult for you than a normal betrothal, because you hadn't had /?/ -~ Masks, that must be, from the way Ullis raised his hands to his face. ~- or a /?/.~ A chaperone? ~So they might be willing to consider that night in the hotel as your wedding night. For a special kind of marriage, that the two of you had earned. And they left Ray alone while you were planning for the night and during the sex itself, because they were waiting to see how they felt.~

Bodie nodded. ~And it happened after I fell asleep. They got together and worked out how they felt.~

~Yes. I think Ray must have fallen asleep too, though he says he didn't. But suddenly, in his mind, he was in one of the pools where Udom Kol met Embrun. Where she lived before she became a woman, back when she was going to live forever. Ray was in the pool with you, fucking you, and some of Embrun's people were in the pool, too, and the *mana* that you were producing was making them all turn into women. So they were all married to you. And you came, and your semen in the pool immediately made them all pregnant, and within minutes they'd given birth to animals. He kept on fucking you, and you got hard again, and your *mana* was reaching people in neighbouring pools. And he knew that if he came inside you, you'd come so hard your *mana* would take over the entire planet. It would stop anyone from ever getting properly married. And it would be his fault, for making you come. He's Udom Kol, of course, in this. You are, and aren't, Embrun.~

"Christ." ~That's one bad dream. No wonder he had to leave. What time did this happen?~

~Around one o'clock. The hotel got him a taxi into town. He stayed in one of the better /?/ by the docks.~

Bodie nodded. ~I woke up around three. Wasn't good, to find he'd gone. But if he's been seeing me getting the whole world pregnant with animals...~ A deep sigh and a shrug. ~I just have to be grateful that he wants to come home.~ He let his head fall back heavily, and closed his eyes for the space of four long breaths. Then he sat up, gulped down the rest of his *kenit*, and said, ~You were right. I did need to know. So that's why we can't have any kind of sex. Why we've got to try to think we're just friends. But...~ Shaking his head. ~I don't know how.~

Ullis picked up his *kenit*, and then drank it very slowly, with long pauses between sips. When it was finished, he kept the cup balanced on his thigh.

~When you were on the moors, and you thought that Ray didn't "love" you, you still wanted to go home to him and be friends. How did you think you would manage that then?~

~I didn't really get far with thinking anything through. Except that I thought he'd stop pretending he wanted me. That everything would shut down on his side. And without that, I'd gradually give up. Things would get easier. But that's not going to work for us now. We'd need the opposite. We'd need to pretend that we'd never wanted each other. Didn't want each other now.~ A shrug. ~That we're just living together to help pay the bills. No one who's seen us would believe that.~

Ullis nodded. ~It is a challenge. Bodie, tell me about the rest of your week. What was the lesson that ended early?~

Bodie told him about all of the week's lessons, and about West finding a job, and then they talked about West's *davanap* and friends, and about Turon's worries about West, and Bodie's most recent letter to Turon, and the British royal family.

Bodie accepted a second round of *kenit*, and widened his eyes, impressed, at the first sip. ~You're really good at making it weak.~

~The secret is to use the cheapest /?/ of *kenit*. I buy it for /?/, but my husband won't let me have it in the kitchen.~

Bodie laughed. ~How long have you been married?~

~Nearly thirty-four years.~

Bodie raised an eyebrow. ~That's about as long as I've been alive. That does – Ray and I really are young. We really do have time.~

~Yes, you are young. Bodie, I've been thinking about the time you pretended to be a /?/ bodyguard with a letter from Turon.~

Bodie could feel himself blushing, and the skin on his forearms was remembering Ray at his shirtsleeves, and now he was getting hard. ~Ray told you about that.~

~A little. It sounded... /?/.~ A fond, almost-envious smile. ~What if the two of you hadn't agreed beforehand that you were doing it to /?/ him? What if you already had a decent job and Turon was sending you to Ray because he knew Ray needed help paying the bills? And you both had reasons for...~ A shrug. ~Not wanting to think about sex. Would that help you pretend that you'd never wanted each other?~

Bodie thought about it. ~It could, but... What decent job? What reasons for not wanting sex? And, you know, it's actually my flat, not Ray's.~

~That's right, it is. So that would mean that it's Ray needing somewhere to live. Arriving with a letter from Turon. That would affect the job and the reasons, wouldn't it?~

~Yes, but -~ Bodie pulled a face, scratched his head, then exhaled noisily. ~You're right, it's a challenge. It's like asking someone to write anti-porn. And Ray's the last person to give that job to.~

Ullis laughed. ~You'll need to go away and think about it. Possibly for the rest of the week. I'll call Ray. Give him the job anyway.~

Bodie finished his *kenit*. ~When are you going to see him tomorrow? You are going again tomorrow, aren't you?~

~Around lunchtime. I should be able to call you before your afternoon lesson.~

At the door, Bodie said, ~You didn't mention the *dumut*, even when we were talking about West.~

~You /?/ his body. He /?/ yours. Most men – Every other man I know who's had one fitted, has only had to consider himself. Ray is exactly the same about you. I didn't think you'd let him do it.~

Bodie smiled in relief. It wasn't his fault. Or not only his fault. ~When you call him, tell him...~

~You're thinking about him. Of course.~

He wasn't going to be in time for the seven o'clock ferry, and he decided to make a detour and get grilled meat and a beer at the place he'd been to after he'd gate-crashed the *pulsonranas*. Ray had been hiding away trying to think then, too. Thanks to Ullis Hanvert.

Was it that the man had the best-looking bad ideas? Or the most-dangerous good ideas? It was that calm voice. The white hair. It made you carry on trusting him, taking his advice. Even while his ideas were taking you from bad to worse. To nightmares.

“I got one girl pregnant! Once!” He slammed his hand on the steering-wheel hard enough to bruise, caught the movement of people in the other waiting cars turning to look. He dropped his voice slightly, and threw himself back in his seat. “Yeah, it’s a big deal, it’s always a big deal, but can’t we just fucking get over it?”

After all, he had. She had. And how was it anyone else’s business? He gave a huge, shaking sigh, closed his eyes, and tried to pretend he was home. With no one around, no one to see. In his flat in London, even. A year ago. Before the *Sivor Simalsa* had set off for Earth. When Ray didn’t speak a word of English. When they both thought they knew what they wanted. When neither knew the meaning of “love”.

* * * * *

Ullis called before half past one. Bodie had wondered if he would call from Ray’s room, but the phone showed the office number. Ullis said Ray had been awake half the night, which was typical in this stage of *gimana*, and he’d come up with some ideas he thought were ready for Ullis to run by Bodie.

He hadn’t been on the contact mission but Turon and all the others had. It had been another crewman that Bodie had met and fallen in love with. This crewman hadn’t qualified, so it was a *tolmin* marriage. On the journey home they’d made friends with Turon, and West had got involved in teaching Bodie Hass Embrun.

Bodie’s *nespa* already had the flat in Parass, and he left the business and quickly got a job in the area. But then something came up at a trading base and he was the only person who could deal with it, and taking Bodie with him to the base was out of the question, and he’d left a few weeks earlier and the signs were that he’d be away for at least half a year. And Bodie was missing him painfully, and needing more help with life on Pen Embrun than young West could really give – and then there were the bills to pay.

So Turon had written to Ray asking if he knew of anyone who might be interested in sharing a flat in Parass and who was willing to learn English in order to be better company for Bodie. As it happened, Ray himself needed somewhere to live, because he’d given his boyfriend a sexual disease, and his boyfriend had kicked him out.

~He did what? I didn’t know you had that kind of disease here. I thought you were too...?~ Advanced. Organised and safe and superior.

~We have several. Some more unpleasant and inconvenient than others. This part of Ray’s story is based on experience. From when he was in college. This one is a very /?!/ disease. It means he won’t be able to – or want to – have sex for months.~

Bodie laughed. ~Is he going to tell me – or Turon – the real reason he needs somewhere to live.~

~I wouldn’t think so. Certainly not at first.~

~No. He’ll say he had a fight with his boyfriend. And doesn’t want to talk about it.~

~That sounds like him. So you like the idea?~

~I do, but – Where does West fit in? Why would he do all this work if I'm not married to his brother? What do we do about *gulshor*? Or *pulsonranas*? Will we have to give them up? And how will Ray get enough of my *mana* if we're not even holding hands?~

~Cook together. Eat together. Sit on the couch and talk or watch TV. He'll get enough like that. I'll ask him about West and the *gulshor* and *pulsonranas*. In the meantime will you think of a name for your *nespa*? And anything else you need to be so busy missing him you don't even notice Ray. Except as an interesting person to live with and then a good friend.~

~Yes. I'll do that.~

Ullis said he would call again in the evening. By the end of the afternoon's lesson Bodie had a name and a face for his husband, taken from the safety engineer in the documentary who came closest to the type of man he'd gone for before Ray. He was Etto, and he was square-headed, with narrowed eyes. He could have been a dark-haired Norwegian sailor. In personality, he was going to be Turon. Always Bodie's first choice as a *nespa*, and he already had practice at cursing the fact that Turon worked out in the fleet. No, that didn't count as missing him painfully, like he really would miss a good, loving husband, but he could bring up that feeling in a moment, with full, gut-twisting force, just by thinking of that night on the couch at the airport hotel. He had no idea what the man's job was, where he was from. He'd tell Ray he didn't want to talk about him.

Ullis didn't call again until gone eight. Ray thought they would have to give up *gulshor*. *pulsonranas* might still be OK, especially if they could convince West or Plassen or someone to join them so they weren't left alone on the ferry ride back. And Ray thought that was the key. They didn't really need to fit West into the story. They just needed the story to be good enough to help them cope when they were alone together. Having someone else present would change the situation completely. Ray thought they would be able to slip smoothly enough between being just friends, and being a happy couple who'd now been married long enough that they could manage to spare their friends the sight of their flirting. Yes, Bodie could imagine that.

He told Ullis his *nespa*'s name, and said that he'd sorted out what he needed for himself, but had decided to tell Ray he didn't want to talk about the man or about any aspect of their marriage.

~That sounds sensible. Do you have any other worries about the story?~

~No. Ray's covered everything.~

~In that case, can I bring him over tomorrow afternoon? At around four? It's the earliest I can spare the time for the journey.~

~Tomorrow? Yes! I – I – What do I need to do? What does he need?~

~Move his clothes into your room. Clear his bedroom and strip the bed. Make it look like a spare bedroom that hasn't been used in several years. He'll steal his clothes back as he needs them. And of course you won't notice.~

~Of course.~

~I'll be using a wheelchair to bring him, because of the *gimana*. We'll say he's been very ill for a few days and it's left him weak, but we know he'll recover quickly.~

~Where do you fit in? If it matters here. Are you his doctor?~

~Um... No, I'm a friend. He's been staying with me and my *iskolpa* since the fight with his boyfriend. And being bad company, especially since he started spending every second learning English.~

Bodie laughed. ~You'll be so glad to get rid of him. Can I send him a message? Ask him what he likes to eat?~

An even longer hesitation, then, ~He asked me that, too: if he could write and introduce himself. I think it would be better to pretend he did that several weeks ago, after he'd first got the message from Turon. You already know what beer and food you both like. He's looking forward to trying coffee. You know he's been ill.~

~OK, I – I'll wait then. And get the flat ready.~

Chapter 27

Bodie would bet that the flat had never been so clean, except when it was brand new. The last family, when they'd get it ready to sell, would only have been thinking about money. Bodie needed it fit to hold his husband, who for too long he thought he might have lost.

From three o'clock onwards he was out on the balcony, huddled in his thickest jacket, watching for the first sight of the boat. It was on time. Even docked a few minutes early, so the wind was good for something.

He knew Ullis's car was a Namdal, though he didn't know the colour. Not that he'd see it, anyway, with the whole route underground, but Ray was in it so knowing was important.

He had everything ready for the coffee, so just had to turn the pot on. Should he wait out in the corridor? No, that would be too much for a new flatmate, wouldn't it? It would be creepy.

Finally, the buzz at the door. Christ, Ray looked awful. Bristling with stubble, his hair dull and limp, his eyes bruised with pain and exhaustion. But he was smiling, and holding out his hand. Bodie grasped it in both of his, felt his heart skip several beats at the tremors that were shaking Ray. But Ray was smiling, so of course he must too.

"I'm very glad to meet you at last, Bodie." The strain in his voice. Bodie wanted to snatch him up, and clutch him so tight, and never let go. "I'm sorry I have to arrive while I'm still ill. But I promise you it's something you can't catch."

Bodie knew it was time to straighten up now, let Ray's hand slip away. "English learner's flu?" Oh, that was weak, but Ray laughed, sounding delighted, and Bodie laughed even harder, near-giddy with relief. Then he stepped back into the living-room, and Ray said in Hass Embrun that he'd like to get out of the wheelchair onto the couch, if that was OK, and Bodie pushed back the coffee-table and Ullis steadied Ray as he hauled himself out of the chair, inched himself over with his weight full on the arm of the couch, and then sank down heavily, with a gasp of effort. He was at Bodie's end of the couch, hopefully still rich with Bodie's *mana* even though Bodie had been up cleaning all day.

"Are you cold? You're shivering. Can I give you my jacket?" It was already half-off, and then he was holding it out by the lapels, ready for Ray to slip into.

"Oh, thank you. Yes. That would help." Ray leaned forward and held out his nearest arm, Bodie rested a knee on the couch to drape the jacket around Ray's shoulders, and Ullis helped with the other arm. Ray smiled up at both of them. ~That is better.~

~I can offer you some "coffee", too.~ He nodded towards the kitchen. ~That's the warm smell.~ To Ullis: ~It's something my people drink. Did Ray mention it to you? Would you like to try some?~

~No, thank you. I have to get the next ferry back. My *iskolpa* and I have friends coming to dinner. And you will want to speak English.~ They grinned at each other and agreed that they did. ~I'll leave the wheelchair here. Ray can bring it back next week, when he's fully recovered.~ He slipped Ray's backpack off his back, put it on the seat of the wheelchair, and then Bodie saw him to the door.

~Thank you.~

~You're welcome. Of course, I hope your *nespa* comes back soon, but Ray is very interesting to get to know.~

Bodie gave a lopsided smile. ~I'm less bored already.~ After the door closed he stood looking at it for several seconds, then abruptly turned on his heel and went back to the living-room.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"I'd love some. Thank you."

Bodie pushed the coffee-table back into place then went into the kitchen and got down their favourite mugs. "Do you want to try it black? I take milk and sugar but my husband – Most Hailin seem to prefer it black."

"Black. I'll start with it black."

Bodie put the mugs down then went back to the kitchen to get biscuits. Ray leaned forward to pick up the mug, then hesitated with his hands still a few inches away from it, and turned around to look at Bodie with an awkward, apologetic expression. "I don't think I – I'd be safer with half that amount. This illness has been making my hands shake."

Bodie immediately took the mug and poured half back in the pot. After he'd put it back on the coaster he said, "I was gonna give you some biscuits because they go really well with coffee. But – How's your illness made you feel about food?"

"Not very interested, to be honest. But one biscuit would be good." Bodie put out half a dozen of Ray's favourites, which were small, crumbly, and made with the same nuts as Ray's favourite liqueur. Ray's face lit up when Bodie put the plate next to his mug. "*Fita tharmas!* I feel better already." But he had to steady the mug with both hands, and it still chattered against his teeth. Bodie knew he should be looking just mildly sympathetic, but his face felt frozen, he couldn't guess what it was doing.

Ray really liked the coffee. He breathed the smell in deeply, asked for a refill, and ended up having two biscuits. They talked about coffee and tea and *kenit*, and Bodie's supply of coffee. He said his husband's family had helped arrange it – most of them were with the business.

After he'd finished the last of the biscuits, Bodie said, "I'd been thinking of cooking a risotto tonight. That's rice with bits of meat and things stirred into it. But if you're not hungry, or you'd rather have something else, I can –"

"I'll be hungry in time for dinner. Thank you. I can feel I'm getting better."

"Would you like to see the flat? Unpack?"

"I – I'd still need the chair." A nod to where it stood by the side of the couch. "If I can stay here and rest for an hour, I should be ready."

"Sure. D'you want the TV on?"

"Actually, what would be – Do you have any English music?"

Bodie grinned and stood up. "It's all over here. I'll put on something restful." He chose a Genesis album that Ray had been known to hum along to. Ray asked what sort of music he liked, how interested he was in music, and that led to Turon and Sasha. Ray said he barely knew Sasha, though he gathered she suited Turon well, and Bodie told him his impressions of her. He was about to say how shocked he'd been when Turon had first told him about her girlfriends, but that would raise too many questions about human and Hailin marriages. That was probably something they did need to fit into the story, though; he'd ask Ullis to get Ray to work on it.

When Bodie went to turn the record over, Ray asked to see the album sleeve. He studied it carefully, then started listening more closely to the lyrics. He asked a few questions, about half of which Bodie could answer, and between questions he spent longer and longer closing his eyes to concentrate, and then shortly after the start of the fourth track the album sleeve slipped from his hands and slid to the floor. He was fast asleep, with his head turned towards Bodie.

Eight months of marriage, and it was the first time that Bodie had seen him like this. Had he realised he was falling asleep? From what Ullis had said, he hadn't slept in three nights.

Bodie didn't want to grip him tight any more – he didn't want to wake him up. He wanted... Not even a hug. Just to have his nerve-endings tell his heart that Ray was home and safe. Rest his hand on a shoulder. Trace one curl with his fingertips. Press his lips just for a second to the partly-open mouth.

But he couldn't, even if he'd been positive that Ray wouldn't wake up. To keep Ray here, like this, he had to treat him like nothing but an enjoyable flatmate. He had to try to think of him as nothing more than that.

So he bent to pick up the album sleeve, and read every word and listened hard to the music, and didn't look at Ray. When the record finished he got up and put it away, then made himself a tea and fetched his book.

Ray seemed to have a few dreams, short, and quite peaceful. He muttered, and gave a few small laughs, and shifted his head an inch or two. Bodie looked up from his book to watch him, but was careful to make it only a normal amount for a lonely married man with a new flatmate.

When Ray came awake, it was with a start. He took a quick glance around, rubbed a hand over his face, then swallowed and cleared his throat a couple of times. "How long was I asleep? I mean, was I bloody rude or just rude?"

Bodie laughed. "It's nearly six. You looked like you needed it. And you're not the first person to find Genesis that boring."

After Ray had stopped laughing – and it had been a full-throated laugh – he flexed his shoulders, rolled his head from side to side, and said, "You know, I'm really feeling a lot better." He stood up, took a couple of steps away from the couch, then turned to Bodie with a brisk nod. "I'm ready to see the flat now."

Bodie had already been getting to his feet. "We'll start with your room. Um..." He frowned and scratched his head. "The quickest way is through my room." He nodded

towards the open door. "But to be honest I'm not sure how I feel about having people wandering through there so – We'd better take the corridor."

"Sure." Ray had his backpack slung over one shoulder.

As he led the way, Bodie pointed out the various cupboards, and they stopped to look in Ray's bathroom. "This is all yours. I've got my own, off my bedroom." In the bedroom, he apologised for the size, and explained why he hadn't made the bed up. "I thought you might be bringing your own bedding."

Ray shrugged the shoulder with the pack. "Just clothes." He turned his head to look at the pack, then pulled a face and said, "Most of which are – Is it OK if I do a load of laundry?"

"Any time. We keep the bedding for this room in the cupboard out there on the left. There's towels for your bathroom, too." He shrugged. "We've only ever had one visitor stay over, so it's all pretty-much new."

"Thanks. I think I'll have a shower first. Then start the laundry. And then I'll make up the bed."

"And I'll put some more music on. See how long you can stay awake this time." He stepped out into the corridor, and Ray grinned, dropped the pack on the bed and started to open it. "Oh." Bodie pointed towards the spare room. "There's just one other room. We set up a desk and one of the fleet's computers. It's got a lot of stuff in English. The keyboard, options, things like that. So any time you want to write to Turon in English... It's all there."

"Thanks. I'll do that. Help keep Turon in practice."

Bodie went back along the corridor, put some Dire Straits on, then he figured out how to fold up the wheelchair, and put it away in the large cupboard. He could just hear the sound of Ray in the shower.

The clothes that Ray had arrived in were old, and creased, and stained around the collar. The ones he'd changed into were just as old, but obviously clean. He'd shaved, too, and his curls were springing up and starting to show their colours as they dried. He said he'd come across this type of washing machine before, so Bodie just directed him to the detergent and let him get on with it. When he came back to the living-room about ten minutes later he was carrying Bodie's jacket, and he draped it neatly over the back of the couch near Bodie's head.

"Thanks for that. For a while there I really was feeling the cold."

"Let's leave it there. In case you need it again." A brief frown. "Looked like you packed really light. You got more coming?"

Ray grunted, sounding annoyed, then sat down heavily at the end of the couch that now seemed to be his. "A few things I left at work. But the rest..." A harsh sigh. "Looks like I'm not gonna see again."

"That sort of fight, was it?"

Ray shook his head at least ten times. “I tell you, I’m off men. He can be the prettiest flirt in the room. He can be big and brooding and brave enough for a hundred space romances. He’s still never gonna be worth the aggravation.”

Bodie laughed. “That’s not the impression I got from Turon. Not that he told me anything against you. Or much at all, for that matter. But he did ask if you knew how small the room was. Warned me that you might spend half your nights out in Dishna.” He shrugged. “But after you’d worked so hard to learn English... And you were the only person I’d heard from.” Another shrug. “Had to be worth a try, wherever you spent your nights.”

A small, rueful smile, and a raised eyebrow. “I’ve learned my lesson. Believe me. But – Turon doesn’t need to know anything about the fight. We don’t really keep in touch at all. Just during family emergencies.”

“That’s what I figured. Could tell he likes you –”

“But then he likes everyone.” Near-simultaneous. They both took a moment to get over the surprise, and then they were laughing hard.

Bodie got to his feet. “I’m ready for a beer. What about you? And are you getting hungry now?”

“I’d love a beer. And yeah, definitely getting hungry.”

“I’ll start dinner straight after the beer, then.”

“Can I help? I’m a good cook.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Bodie handed the beer over and sat down. “So what did Turon say about me? Do I wanna know?”

“He said you were funny. Brave. Almost ridiculously devoted to your husband.” Bodie had to wince at that, and Ray winced too. Maybe in sympathy. Or just wishing he’d kept his mouth shut.

“Yeah.” On a heavy sigh. “Meeting him changed everything for me. But I don’t wanna talk about him. Not how we met. Not where he is now. Where we keep our spare towels – That’s as far as it goes.”

“Yeah, sure. Turon said it was your husband’s idea for you to get a flatmate. Though I guess that counts as talking about him.”

Bodie shrugged. “He was expecting a student. Or a teacher. Linguistics. Or Anthropology. Which makes sense but – Who wants to be studied? So a cop who’s secretly a Bakkel works much better for me. And now we’re done with talking about him.”

Ray nodded. “Same goes for my fight, too. So no mention of men, past or present.”

“It’s a deal.” And they clinked beer bottles and grinned, and then Bodie asked Ray about his work.

They shared the work of chopping, and then took it in turns to attend to the cooking. So that was the same as ever, and they did it without discussion. They ate at the dining-table, though, when they’d normally have risotto on the couch, especially at the weekend.

Bodie already had a bottle of red wine open and he asked Ray if he wanted to try it. Ray liked it even more than the coffee, and when it was time for the second bottle, Bodie took Ray to the cupboard to show him the cases and have him choose.

“You’re being very generous. Dunno what I could offer in return except... I’ll botch your interrogation if you ever get arrested.”

Bodie loved that. “Could have done with you in Cape Town. Or Rotterdam. Or Portsmouth for that matter.”

Ray’s eyebrows had shot up. “What the hell did you do? Or do I really wanna know?”

A dismissive shrug. “Got into fights. Never my fault. Or not really. Wasn’t much to the interrogation, to be honest. So could you make sure I just get a warning? Don’t even get kept in overnight?”

“Yeah, should be easy. You were a soldier. It’d be more worrying if you didn’t wanna get into fights.”

“‘Worrying’. I like the way you think.”

Ray’s load of laundry finished while they were having dessert. Bodie showed him the space next to the machine where they kept the collapsible basket, and stayed leaning on the counter while Ray was doing the unloading.

“That looks like a tracksuit. You keen on running?”

“The longer the better. Any kind of weather. You?”

“The same. You wanna go out tomorrow?”

“Sounds good.” They decided to go out early, as soon as it was light.

They watched “A Fistful of Dollars”, and then Ray put on some Hailin music that the film had reminded him of, but after about ten minutes he started yawning hard, and said he was going to bed.

“You got any plans for tomorrow, apart from the run?”

Ray shook his head. “Hadn’t thought beyond settling in here. Getting properly over my English learner’s flu.”

“A friend out of town’s invited me to go over. I’ll go before lunch. Probably be away for three or four hours.” He shrugged and waved a hand. “I say a friend. Actually it’s Malun.” He needed to give Ray a chance to get his clothes back. And new flatmates would spend time off doing their own thing, especially at the weekends. He’d explore the area around Malun’s house, and raid Malun’s fridge, and read for a while in Malun’s conservatory. And if Malun was there he’d tell him he’d just felt like a change of scene and everything was fine with Ray. Which he’d be able to say easily because it was the plain truth. It shouldn’t be, he should be so frustrated and miserable, but instead he was absorbed in working with Ray, making a thousand guesses about what Ray was going to do – and that turned out to be a recipe for keeping him alert and content.

“OK. I might go and buy some clothes for work. D’you want to cook dinner together again?”

“Yeah, why not? You can pick the menu. Though there’s some Hailin food I can’t eat. So we’ll have to —”

Ray interrupted him. “Don’t worry. Turon gave me the list.” He got to his feet. “I’ll see you in here tomorrow. Around seven?”

“Yeah, around then. Sleep well.”

“You too.”

Bodie kept Ray’s music on but turned it down low. Should he let Ullis know that everything had gone well? No, they might still be having their dinner party. And even if they weren’t, Ullis deserved a night off from them. His *iskolpa* did, too. He’d hint to Ray over breakfast about giving the guy a call.

* * * * *

Malun’s house was empty when Bodie arrived. Bodie helped himself to some bread and cheese, left a note on the kitchen table to let Malun know he was around, and then went out for a long walk. Malun’s house was on one of the few sandy coves in the area. On one side the cliffs were high and steep, and on the other the slope was gentler but the shore was very rocky. And the view from both sides was of endless sea, without even any islands to break it up. Maybe that had been the appeal for Malun and Raina: it was as blank and promising as space.

When he got back he had more bread and cheese, with some fruit. He’d brought his own pack of dirt-cheap *kenit* (which Ray refused even to look at), and he found a tin of home-made cake and decided on the conservatory for his hour of reading. At about half past two Parass time he heard the sound of the flyer, and he went to the front door to meet Malun.

“Oh, what’s he done now?” Exasperated and not remotely surprised.

Bodie laughed. “Nothing. We’re fine. I just fancied a change. A few hours of better weather.”

A couple of seconds of open assessment, then Malun nodded. “In that case, it’s very good to see you. When did you get here? Will you join me for my dinner?”

Bodie was going to stick with his plan of leaving around half three, so they had a pot of *kenit* instead. Malun had just come back from Clover. Afmad was starting to crawl, but Akula couldn’t yet see the point. They’d both been tired and grumpy that afternoon, particularly with each other, and he’d spent the first half of the visit assigned to Akula with Homa. It wasn’t until the girls had been put to bed that he’d got more than a few sentences with Ferros and Lamon.

“Lamon said you’d been to see Ray’s counsellor. Last weekend, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, he thought it was time he met me. I like him, too. And he’s really going all-out to help us.”

“Does that mean you’re close to —”

“No. No. It’s still a way off. But we’ve got really damn good at getting each other through when things turn rough. You don’t need to worry about either of us.”

When Bodie got home, he found Ray stretched out full-length on the couch, listening to Madness and reading one of the science-fiction novels.

“How was Malun?”

“Fine. I’ll be going again next An Uraba. Did you call your friend?”

Ray nodded. “He was glad to hear from me. I’ll take the wheelchair back to him on At Oba Nyon.”

They started cooking shortly after Bodie got back. Ray had decided on a casserole made with *soluga* thighs, and with rice and a type of bean, and two types of fruit. There was a lot of chopping and frying, and then over two hours of cooking.

As Ray was getting ready to put the pot in the oven, Bodie said, “There’s gonna be more than enough for three. D’you want to invite West over?”

Ray thought about it, though he obviously wasn’t keen. “I’m not in the mood for him. I just want to read and then watch another Western. Tomorrow would be better. I can call him, see if he’s free?”

West was free. He would come over at eight. They decided they’d cook him some simple type of pasta.

The casserole was delicious. One of the fruits was sweet and the other was sour, with an edible peel with a scattering of surprisingly-salty nodules inside it. Bodie was delighted at the idea of having the leftovers for lunch.

Towards the end of the meal, Bodie mentioned that he needed to buy a car. They’d had a car, but it had come with his husband’s job, so it had promptly got taken back. Could Ray recommend anywhere in the area?

Ray recommended the same two places in Dishna, of course. “D’you know if they’re open in the evenings? Though maybe I’d be better waiting till next weekend, not take the gamble of buying a used car in the dark.” A shrug and a regretful sigh. “I’ll be missing *pulsonranas* for another week. I should’ve asked you last night. Gone and bought it today.” Which was him talking shit, because they didn’t have that sort of money right now. He’d need to ask Malun for help. First thing tomorrow.

Ray nodded sympathetically, then said, “What’s that about *pulsonranas*?”

Bodie explained about the arena, that he and his husband used to play regularly on At Laura Var. They had friends there, who must be missing them. But getting to the arena without a car was a pain in the arse.

“Well – What if I take you this week? I missed out on playing when my work went there a few months ago. Been meaning to try it. I can pick you up any time after six. Wherever it suits you. And if you want company next weekend buying the car...” A shrug. “Just let me know.”

“Thanks. Yeah. Both’d be great.” Bodie grinned at him, nodding. The way things were going, they might even be good enough at this to cope with *pulsonranas* on their own. He’d leave it to Ray to raise the idea of including someone else.

They watched “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly”. As they were going to bed, they were talking as if they probably wouldn’t see each other in the morning, but of course Bodie would be joining Ray for breakfast, saying he’d already been awake when he’d heard Ray’s alarm go off, and by the end of the week they’d be taking it for granted. Should he wear his robe at breakfast? A man would, in his own home, and he didn’t really want to get dressed properly until he’d had a session with the weights in the gym and then showered. But the robe might be too much for Ray. Too much for him, as well. He’d wear it first thing, when he opened his door to check on Ray in the kitchen, and see how that went.

Ray had taken back all of his Hailin clothes, but left the jeans and the other Earth clothes. Well, of course, Ray the flatmate had never been on the contact mission. These clothes had nothing to do with him. Looking at them hanging there, Bodie felt a sharp twist of hurt and longing, and as he slammed the wardrobe shut he told himself it was the feeling of missing his husband Etto. Tough-looking Etto who could almost have been Norwegian. But not too tough to make a man feel loved. Some time in the next few days he’d find himself jerking off in the shower with the image of Etto fixed in his mind. But not tonight.

* * * * *

Ray was surprised when Bodie appeared so early the next morning, but he was obviously pleased, and not just at the offer of coffee. Bodie stayed in his robe, and was still in it, sitting at the head of the dining-table, when he casually waved Ray off.

Just past midday, with the casserole halfway through reheating, Ullis called.

~Hi! I’d been planning on calling you later. To thank you myself.~

~That’s thoughtful, but – I’m calling to ask you not to wear your robe again.~

~Oh. OK. Right. I won’t. I thought he was – But OK.~

~It didn’t bother him at the time. It’s what any flatmate would wear in the morning. But he’s been thinking about it far too much since then. And about how much he would be looking forward to seeing it again.~

~So I did read him right this morning. That’s something.~ A small shrug and a pause.
~Are you wishing you could’ve agreed to take him my shirts instead? It’d probably be less work for you.~

Ullis laughed. ~Yes. But also less interesting. Ray is paying my standard rate for calls like this. It will be on his bill for next At Oba Nyon. I might need to call you after our sessions, so can you make sure you’re home?~

~I won’t be going anywhere. Are you going to want me to come in again?~

~I don’t think so. Everything else I’ve heard is about how well you’re doing. Or do you think Ray’s being too optimistic?~

~No. He’s got it right. It’s almost fun.~

A grunt that was almost a chuckle. ~He said the same. Good. Well, if I call again before At Oba Nyon, I’ll try to make it at this time.~

Bodie got in quickly, because Ullis could hang up. ~I haven't been thinking about sex. Not yet. I guess Ray hasn't either. But when you see him will you ask him how he wants to get my shirts?~

~I will.~

So what was Ullis going to charge Ray for that phone call? Was it down to the minute? Or was it a flat rate? What a way to make a living. Had Ullis guessed, after his first session with Ray – nine weeks ago, was it? – just how “interesting” things were going to get? Where would they be in another nine weeks? Bodie couldn't guess. He wouldn't try. He was young. He was going to live – and enjoy – one day at a time.

* * * * *

Dinner with West was the same as any other. As soon as he stepped through the door they forgot about the idea that they'd only known each other a couple of days. Except when they moved to the living-room because West insisted that they had to watch an episode of “The Six Million Dollar Man”, and Ray took his new position on the couch. Bodie thought West really overdid his surprise, and that he was way out of line asking if the swapping of sides was because of the weekend of counselling, but Ray just gave an indifferent shrug. “It's part of it, yeah. Trying some changes just for the sake of it. Like deciding it was time to try to get you on our *pulsonranas* team.”

West was happy enough with that to decide to take a different armchair: the one by Ray. He got out his *davanap*, but then hardly got anything done because he was cackling so hard at the program. Bodie was a bit put out, because it could only have been eight years ago that he'd genuinely enjoyed watching this show. But, yes, at a distance of seven hundred light years, he could see West's point. They told West they'd be happy to watch more, if only to see his reactions, but one a month would probably be enough.

In bed, thinking about West's cheeky question about the counselling, it suddenly occurred to Bodie that Ray's boss must have had some awkward questions, too, on his first day back after that sudden medical leave. Maybe Ray had barely noticed West's question in comparison. Now Bodie really wanted to know about Ray and his boss, he really wanted to offer Ray support. But that was impossible with the rules they had now. He couldn't go and knock on Ray's door. He couldn't ask him about that part of their life. If he wanted to know, he'd have to go through Ullis.

* * * * *

West loved *pulsonranas*, and was a hit with both the teenagers and the teachers. He wasn't much of a shot, but he was fast, and sneaky, and observant, which got the team out of trouble more than once. They sat at the front on the ferry and West bought the first round of beers, and the journey flew by as they discussed everything about the battle. Bodie thought he could guess what Lamon's next origami scene was going to be.

* * * * *

Ullis called just after seven on At Oba Nyon. Ray hadn't been thinking about sex, either. Or hardly at all. But for when that changed, the plan was that he would say he was going down to get some beer – some different kind of beer that they didn't have in the flat, that he was suddenly in the mood for – and while he was away, Bodie should change his shirt and put the used one in Ray's bathroom. At the weekends, Ray might go

into Bodie's laundry basket while Bodie was at a conversation session, if that was OK with Bodie. He wouldn't do it this weekend, he would wait for Bodie's answer.

~That's fine with me. Did he say anything about his boss at work? If the guy asked any questions about us and the counselling?~

The boss had asked if the previous week had helped, if they were still going to need the weekly sessions. Out of concern for a friend, not any kind of impatience. No one could claim that the problems had affected the quality of Ray's work. Ray had told his boss that aspects of the week had been difficult, but they'd worked past them more easily than he would ever have expected. He'd said he hoped they would be able to stop the weekly sessions soon, but it might be weeks before he could say anything definite.

~Why did he say weeks? We all know it's going to be much longer than that.~

A sigh. ~Well, he was hoping to persuade me to arrange our appointments later in the evening, so he no longer has to leave work early. My *iskolpa* has always been opposed to the idea. /?/, not specifically for Ray. It's out of the question for At Oba Nyon, but I might be able to /?/ half past six on At Kamaran. I will discuss it with my *iskolpa* over the weekend, while you're getting to know your new car.~

Bodie laughed. ~That does sound more fun than your weekend. Is he still as optimistic as he was at the start of the week? Ray, I mean.~

~He is. He was more relaxed and positive than I've ever seen him.~

Bodie blinked hard and frowned. Yeah, OK, he felt the same, but what did it say about them, if they were happiest when they'd given up on having sex? No, it didn't mean anything. The other counsellors had already messed Ray up badly by the time he got to Ullis.

~That's good to hear. And in case Ray hasn't said it: thank you.~

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They got the first ferry into Dishna after the conversation session. Bodie had picked up quite a lot already from looking at the course materials, and knew which models were particularly reliable (Sasa and Hessda), and which were prone to problems in particular areas. He was half-tempted to get a dodgy car just for the practice it would give him, but he did also need it to get him to Harding and back in one piece. Ray said he'd chosen his Finsan partly on looks, partly on price, and partly because he'd never personally attended any traffic accidents involving that model. He knew they happened, but it counted for something with him that he hadn't seen them.

In the end, Bodie got a six-year old Hessda in a dark sea-green. Ray liked the look of it, thought it was good value, and the only Hessda accidents he'd seen had been minor ones.

Ray took a photo of him standing by and then sitting in the car, and then Bodie went for a drive on his own west along the coast, which Ray said would give him good views across to the west coast of Roslin, and end up at the longest beach in the area. He'd always imagined himself taking this first drive with Ray, but Ray had his own car with him, and it didn't make sense to ask a flatmate to leave his car in the middle of town, just to be driven around for a few hours. Ray said he'd call in on some friends, and be home by seven.

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Malun didn't have strong opinions about cars, but from what he understood, Bodie had got a very fair deal. He was glad to see the photos, and to hear that Bodie found it a smooth and responsive ride.

Dinner was a curry, really fresh-tasting and delicious, with a spinach-like side-dish. Lenneva had asked Malun about Earth food, had got people on the base to send him recipes, and had been experimenting on Malun for several weeks. This one was Malun's favourite. It made Bodie want to learn some new curries too. There were any number of recipes in his cookbook that he'd never looked at, and Malun said he was happy to be fed more experimental curries. Bodie was about to suggest that it might be easier for Malun to come to lunch rather than dinner so they wouldn't be keeping him out so late, when Malun said his next visit would have to be in three weeks' time, not two.

"I can't do anything on the last day of the year. It's a very busy day for me at the palace."

Bodie's eyes widened. "You have to wear the mask all day?"

"No, but at regular intervals throughout the day and the night. Ray didn't mention any of it to you? Or West? He's involved, too, early in the morning." Bodie shook his head and Malun shrugged. "Not surprising, for Ray. West enjoys it enough that I thought he might."

Bodie gave a small grunt of surprise. "Never thought about any of you going as far as enjoying wearing the masks."

Malun sighed. "Ray did try hard not to sulk during the mission to Earth. Or not to do it openly. I hoped he'd adjust but I never did see any sign of that."

Bodie nodded. So Ray might be in an odd mood that An Uraba, with West going to the palace. Useful to know.

Ray was unenthusiastic at first about trying the left-over curry – his family always made such a stupid big deal about alien foods – but then Bodie heated it up, and Ray changed his mind as soon as he got the scent. After they'd eaten, Bodie showed him the cookbook and pointed out a couple of his favourites, and then had his reading interrupted for the next hour with questions about ingredients and Turon's adaptations. Bodie hadn't even noticed there were recipes for pickles at the back of the book. The one for lime pickle took three weeks before it was ready to eat. But that was Earth weeks, so if they bought everything the next day and started it off in the evening, it should be ready to try out on Malun when he came for lunch. Bodie said the *mandal* was the closest fruit to a lime, but Ray decided they'd make batches with *felgran* and *risna*, too. No harm in experimenting.

"Good to see you so quick to invite yourself to lunch." With a twitch of the eyebrow. "And setting out shopping lists for the next three weeks. Dunno where Turon and Ullis Hanvert got the idea you'd be standoffish."

Ray acted indignant. "He's my uncle! OK, we're not close, he's never encouraged me to visit his house. But you're not gonna throw me out of the flat when he comes. Are you? He'll want to see me, too."

Bodie grinned. “Yeah. I’ve told him you’re bearable to live with, but he needs to see it for himself.”

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On At Laura Var, after they’d sealed all of the pickles away for their two weeks’ rest, Ray said he was in the mood for some *fesstet* beer, and was going down to get a pack. As soon as he’d left, Bodie went to change his shirt. He left the used one draped neatly across the top of Ray’s laundry basket. He hadn’t noticed Ray acting differently that evening. They’d just been joking around, talking about their days, same as ever. Maybe it was just time. Ray needed the release.

He shouldn’t think about what Ray was going to do with the shirt. Especially, he shouldn’t be thinking about it now. Later, after a couple of bottles of that beer and an episode of “The Six Million Dollar Man” (they could only take one a night, but it was so reliable as mindless entertainment). It was time for him, too. To keep only Etto in his mind all the while he was jerking off.

He didn’t imagine Etto touching him. He couldn’t manage that. But a tough, silent man across the room from him, trousers open and scarred hands working away... Yeah, that was easy.

Ullis hadn’t said what Ray would do with the shirt afterwards. Bodie could have called him to ask him to sort it out with Ray on At Kamaran, but he didn’t need the shirt back urgently, and it was more interesting to wait and see.

The shirt was on the top of his laundry basket when he came to do his laundry after lunch on An Embrun. It hadn’t been there when he’d changed after their run that morning. Ray must have put it back during the conversation session. So he hadn’t washed it. He still couldn’t bear the thought of their clothes touching like that. Well, of course he couldn’t. A human was safe if you just breathed him in. But you had to assume that anything else was wrong.

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The weather forecast for that weekend had been miserable, and An Udom Kol started out black and windy and got steadily worse. Just the short walk home from the conversation session made Bodie glad they had no plans to leave home for the rest of the day. Ray predicted that the ferries would have to stop running, and they took a bet on whether it would be before or after nightfall, with the loser to do all the tedious parts of cooking dinner. Ray had bet on before and he won, but only barely: the half-past four set off, but the next ship in to Parass arrived twenty minutes late, and still hadn’t left by five o’clock, with no other ship coming in after it.

Ray thought they should lower the storm-shutters. Things could end up flying around out there, and they didn’t want a broken window. It’d keep most of the noise out, too. He showed Bodie the switch for the shutters, on the wall to the right of the TV.

Bodie shook his head as he watched the shutters slowly descend. “My husband promised me better weather. Never had to do this in London.”

Ray grunted in agreement. “I’d noticed that about people who live in Parass. They honestly don’t remember there are days like this. Time to turn up the heating?”

“Yeah. And open a bottle of red wine.”

The shutters did keep out a lot of the noise, but as the wind rose further, there were gusts strong enough to make the slats shudder, and some of the volleys of rain were like being under fire. It was during a particularly long volley that Ray moved from his corner of the couch down onto the floor, to settle with his back against the couch just a couple of inches away from Bodie’s left thigh.

Bodie took a few minutes to recover from his surprise. He swallowed, then said, “Is this the first stage in you going to hide under the coffee table?”

Ray looked around at him, expression puzzled, and Bodie gestured with his head towards the windows.

Ray laughed. “Nah, I like nights like this. Even better with the wine.” He raised his glass, then shrugged. “It’s comfortable down here.” And he went back to watching “Dirty Harry”.

Bodie didn’t see how it could be, with Ray’s arse being so lean the floor must feel like concrete. This must be about getting more of his *mana*. It was a trade-off, to be comfortable in a different way. Without having to wait a couple of hours before he could be alone with Bodie’s shirt. Or go to buy a beer he wasn’t in the mood for after several glasses of wine.

Bodie reached out and briefly ruffled his curls, and got the flash of a grin. “Your legs’ll go numb before you know it. And I’ll have to pull you up.”

Ray was shaking his head, not looking at Bodie. “Let’s make a bet. Same stakes as before.”

“You’re on. But when you lose, I’m not gonna pull you up. You can topple over and get up in your own time.”

“OK. I’m properly warned.”

Again, Bodie lost. Ray really did seem to be comfortable just sitting on the carpet. He got up a few times – to get more wine, to have a piss, to make some coffee and get the *tharva* – and never showed any sign of stiffness. Maybe it was yet another Hailin thing. Bodie decided he liked having Ray there: he couldn’t see his face but he could nudge him with a knee to get his attention (and get nudged in his turn), and he found that Ray’s shoulders and the back of Ray’s neck were as expressive as his laughs and sighs.

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The shutters stopped shuddering some time during the night, and when Bodie raised them, they found that the sky had cleared to a sullen but unaggressive mid-grey. Good enough for one of their runs.

Bodie wanted to get even further out of the house and suggested a film in Harding, but Ray said he didn’t fancy anything that was on, and he was going to call around his Parass friends, instead, and see who wanted to go out for lunch. Bodie was clearly not invited, and he was in the mood for a film and for seeing more of the area around the college, so he set off anyway.

He got home around half four to find that Ray was still out, and that he had a message. It was from Turon. When had he written to Turon about his boyfriend? Over two weeks ago, when Ray was stuck in Dishna. Still lost. Two weeks was a long time for a reply from Turon. Maybe he didn't know what to say about his boyfriend either. Or he'd just been too damned busy with the guy. From the tone of the message, it was mostly being too busy. Not that Turon was gushing, but the message was almost all about Hulsa: where he was from, his family, all the stages of his career. And his boyfriend from his previous posting, and the girlfriend from the one before that, who would be passing through in a few weeks and who Turon and Sasha were keen to meet.

So was that how this guy operated? A girlfriend or boyfriend at each posting – and only one. It sounded too neat to Bodie, too deliberate. This thing with Turon, how much was it about him being a Bakkel?

No. He had no business thinking like that. He knew nothing about the guy. He was just baffled again by the Hailin. And jealous, of course, that Turon was getting to have a sex life. Turon wasn't stupid. He'd spent his whole life being a Bakkel, dealing with people knowing it. He wasn't going to get his heart broken; he'd surely picked up some tips from Sasha over the years. Yeah, Turon could handle a basic shipboard romance.

The rest of the message was about Bodie starting the course, and guessing that Bodie must have a car by now. He wanted to hear all about the car, and about the other students on his course, and how the course itself compared with all their expectations and preparations. He'd heard from West about the carpentry job, and thought it sounded ideal. He could imagine West with a workshop of his own somewhere, a couple of years down the line. Bodie could, too, with a corner full of shawls and sweaters and families of knitted animals. And he bet Turon also had in mind a steady stream of horny qualified women through the door of the workshop. Bodie was the last person who should be wishing an *esmana* marriage on anyone, but West did need to qualify. He did need to give himself a chance of having kids.

Ray came home just after six, when Bodie was kneading the dough for the pizza they'd decided on. Ray had spent all afternoon playing a game with his friends. Some sort of board game, it sounded like, and much more ruthless and competitive than *pulsonranas*. It was a good way to pass a winter afternoon, but it helped if everyone was either equally sober or equally drunk, and speaking as the one who'd switched to *kenit* after two beers, he was glad to be home.

After dinner they put on some of Turon's music. Bodie found he could understand almost all of the lyrics now, which would be something else to tell Turon in his reply. He told Ray about Turon's message, but all Ray wanted to know was what Turon had said about him.

"He didn't mention you."

"No warnings about my habits? Not even 'Say hi to Ray for me'?"

"Not a word."

"Unbelievable. See, that's another reason I'm off men. It makes you completely self-absorbed."

Bodie guffawed, and swatted the side of Ray's head, and laughed even harder at Ray's expression of puzzled innocence. "Why would he say hi to you? I'm the one who bothers to write to him. You want him to mention you, show some interest in Hulsa yourself."

A grunt said that was never going to happen, but he sounded sincere when he asked Bodie what he made of the boyfriend situation. Bodie admitted to feeling protective of Turon, and to arguing himself out of it. Ray said that all sounded right, though he found it hard to imagine Turon heartbroken, anyway.

Bodie thought about it. "Not from the way he writes, no. But I can from the way he sings."

"Ah." A very long pause. "I do remember his singing. I'd need to think about that." And he was still thinking several tracks later, when Bodie put a hand on his shoulder and announced that he was going to bed.

Chapter 28

All over Pen Embrun the new year started at midnight, Monor time, with Inoni Sarai, at the palace, appearing with Shesga (Death) and Takulin (Time) to announce that agreement had been reached and there would be another year. Inoni Sarai rang a spherical gong and the sound was broadcast around the planet, and everyone repeated his words – even Ray, even their neighbours' children – and then there was cheering and fireworks (or smokeworks, in the places where it was day), and some hard partying.

They were on the balcony for the moment itself, but then went down to the beach to join West and his friends about the main bonfire. All the friends knew that the next day was the start of Bodie's course and they were excited for him, exhaustingly so, in one case. Ray helped, doing more than his fair share of giving West's kind and tipsy friends the enthusiasm they expected. Yes, Bodie was excited, but he didn't need to talk about it that much. Plassen and Buka and a few other friends were further down the beach, most with flasks of a nostril-scorching hot toddy that tasted like rotting brick-dust.

They went home at half ten, when everyone they knew had got drawn into the dancing. West and Plassen had tried to explain the group dancing to Bodie, but had eventually had to accept that Bodie simply could not hear the cues in the music. Not that Bodie had ever wanted to join in – Ray wasn't interested in that type of dancing – but he'd hoped to be able to follow.

They lowered the shutters to muffle the noise from the beach. Ray said that in previous years he would have been in Dishna, partying most of the night. No one was expected to work at peak efficiency on the first day of the year. He'd have thought that he'd miss that, but he didn't. This was good: a mug of exotic, alien tea and a glass of *tharva*, and someone who really appreciated bad TV.

When it was time for bed, Bodie continued his habit of the last few days of giving Ray his hands to pull himself up. But this time Ray didn't let go immediately, and after a couple of seconds with a faint smile, he suddenly stepped forward and put his arms around Bodie. "Happy New Year, Bodie." A brief squeeze, and he stepped back, and the smile was broad and openly affectionate. "This time last year I didn't know how much I appreciate good company."

Bodie grinned and put his hand on Ray's arm, and stroked his thumb once over Ray's bicep. "Happy New Year. It looks like being a much better one than I'd expected a month ago." If he headed further back than that, then he couldn't keep track of what he'd expected. It could change so many times, in just one day. And he couldn't see how they could have done anything differently.

Another hug, longer but still just a normal hug between friends, and then they put their mugs and glasses in the sink and wished each other goodnight.

In bed, Bodie thought about Etto. What would he have been imagining, when he'd encouraged his husband to get a flatmate? And what would he think, if he had a spy in the living-room? He couldn't accuse them of flirting, there was nothing like that. They touched less than West with his friends. It was innocent. But still... Wouldn't Etto have to wonder if Bodie really wanted him back? Even if they only were, only would be flatmates, didn't it look like they were falling in love?

Well, so what? He could love his funny, surprising flatmate and still lie awake nights missing his husband. He couldn't guess what was going to happen. He loved Ray in a thousand ways. Leave it at that.

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Ray had bought him a fancy double-sided folder to hold his notepad and his new set of multi-coloured styluses. There was a compartment on each side for paper, and a small one for styluses on the left, and a larger one for everything else on the right. It was a coarse-grained mahogany leather, that Ray said would clean easily and look even better with wear. And it wasn't so fancy it would stand out, make people wonder how he'd got it.

"It's just a bit above average. Turon got me something like it when I started college." With a grimace: "I lost it almost immediately. Never told him."

"I'm not losing this." Very serious, then he grinned. "That's how they'll know me around college. I won't be 'the guy from another planet who doesn't speak properly'. I'll be 'the guy with an above-average folder that he never puts down'."

When Ray had finished laughing, he asked Bodie if he could say that in Hass Embrun, and when Bodie demonstrated that he could, Ray said, "I'm not going to waste a second today wondering how you're doing. You're more ready than I ever was."

Bodie saw Ray off at the door for a change, mainly so he could make a point of carrying the folder with him. Ray carried on waving until he went into the lift.

Bodie had decided to set off after eight, which meant he only had half an hour with the weights. He got parked at the college just before half eight, meeting hardly any traffic until the last five miles. On the way in he passed the entrance to the repair workshop where they were having their first class. The entrance had a shutter, like you'd find on any large garage, and although the shutter was closed, there was a door set in the bottom left corner of the shutter, and that was standing open. Would he be the first one there? Did he want to be? Better than being the last, anyway.

It was a large workshop, with bays for eight cars in two lines of four on each side. There were benches around the walls and down the middle, and a white screen or board took up most of the back wall.

As soon as he entered he heard scraping and clattering sounds coming from the right-hand wall, behind the line of cars. It was a guy in clean but thoroughly worn overalls, laying out tools on a bench with his back to Bodie.

~Good morning. Happy New Year.~

No, it was a woman. Early thirties. Tall. The overalls had the college's logo on a bright new patch high on her chest. ~Oh! Happy New Year. You must be Bodie. I'm Corda. I'm the technician here. I'm getting the equipment ready. You live in Parass, don't you? Were you up very late, with the party on the beach?~

Bodie explained about his problems with Hailin dancing, and asked how late she'd been up, and she got back to work while they chatted. The next student arrived just before quarter to: a wary-seeming man called Barrow, about Bodie's age, and he was closely

followed by two teenage girls, Salcha and Dot, who had strikingly similar plump-cheeked faces that made Bodie think of hamsters, and who did turn out to be twins.

None of them had been warned about Bodie, which was reassuring, really, but did make for extra work. They sat down at the line of benches along the middle of the room, taking the end closest to the board. As other people arrived, they took the next position at the bench, not leaving gaps for comfort as Bodie thought British people would. At six minutes to, with fourteen students at the bench, the door at the left end of the back wall opened and Annis Gallatin came in, dressed in almost-crisp looking overalls on which the college logo looked less out of place.

She wished them a happy new year, crossed to the other side of the room to put the stack of folders she was carrying down on a bench, then came over to talk to them. She greeted Bodie first, but then he was closest, and it soon turned out that she knew everyone's name.

At six minutes past, she announced that they would wait until quarter past for the last two to arrive. Normally she wouldn't, normally classes started promptly, but if you arranged a course to start at nine o'clock on the first day of the year, you did have to make some allowances.

They arrived together, out of breath, just as she was turning on the projector. Teenage boys. Probably not twins. Almost certainly mildly hung over. They were sorry. They'd missed the bus.

Annis was very glad they had arrived, because she could now explain that they were assigned to groups of four, according to how they'd sat down at the benches. In the workshop, they'd work on cars in their groups, and if anyone missed something in a class, the other members of the group should help them catch up, with notes or with anything else they needed. Bodie wondered if this was for his benefit, for when he couldn't understand the words – but with only eight cars they'd have to be teaming up sometimes, and it was probably easier to take all of the choice out of it.

Next, Annis said that they were starting in the workshop because the aim of the course was to get them to work effectively in a place like this. While they were based in the college, they would spend most of their time in the classrooms, because that was easier when you had to focus on ideas. But they wouldn't be looking at the ideas behind how cars worked and how they were manufactured just for fun – although it was fun – but because they needed to know this in order to be able to offer a full service to their customers, with value for money and peace of mind.

Then she brought up her first slide, which was a list of the twelve most common repairs that were performed on cars, in descending order of the number performed in their archipelago over a recent twelve-year period. She agreed with their murmurs that there were some surprises in the numbers and they would be talking about that later, but for now she was going to classify them according to how easy they were to diagnose, what sort of equipment was needed to do the repair, and how difficult the repair work was. She did that in the next few slides, and they saw that three of them were easy to diagnose reliably, required only basic equipment, and were easy to repair – and one of them was the second on the list. So for that week they'd be working on those three: they'd spend the mornings in the workshop and they'd all get to do the repair several times, on different makes of cars, and in the afternoon they'd go to the classrooms and

learn more about the part they'd repaired and the system that it fit into. By the time they finished this first twelve weeks in the college, they would have had practice at all but the two most difficult in the list (in positions 4 and 9), so they could see how useful they would already be when they started in the garage.

She handed out the folders, which had their timetable for the next twelve weeks of college, a copy of the slide with the analysis of the twelve types of repairs, the names of all of the students, and the names and contact details of the staff. They should get contact details for the other people in their group before the end of the day. She also handed out locker keys, and then led the way back through the doors, to the locker room, where two men in college overalls were sitting on a bench, clearly waiting for them. One was Norra, from the fuel class, and he smiled and nodded at Bodie, and the other introduced himself as Sona, the second workshop technician.

They were replacing a frayed cable, and Annis demonstrated it first on the car on the right nearest the screen. She put on glasses that had a small camera mounted above the bridge of the nose, so they could see what she was seeing and doing, projected large on the screen. She showed them where the cable ran, then the area where it was fraying – not obvious, even at a second or third glance – and then she had them get in the car and feel how the damage was interfering with the controls. Then she removed it and passed it around so they could see the connection points, got out a package with a new cable and installed it, checked the controls, made an adjustment, checked again, and then had them feel the difference.

It took about ten minutes, and then she worked much more quickly to take the new cable out and put the frayed one back in, so that Group 4 (with the two latecomers) could start their first practice.

Bodie's Group 1 was assigned to the third car back, with Sona. Their car was a ten-year old Loralesk, and the route and attachment points were different, and the damage easier to see. The installation was still a fiddly task though, and Bodie took nearly twice the time that Annis had. Watching while the others had their turn wasn't thrilling, but there were useful things in the advice that Sona gave them, and he told them about other makes that had a similar design, and how often the cables usually needed replacing, and what you could do to slow the damage.

The next two cars had different designs again, but they were learning what to expect in terms of fiddly tasks, and they all got a few minutes quicker with each car.

The one remaining car was obviously the worst, because the group on that had always been the last to finish. They went to find the nearest drinks machine while they were waiting. It was in the corridor outside the locker room, but Bodie took one sniff of Salcha's *kenit* and said he'd stick with water. The three Hailin agreed it was some of the worst *kenit* they'd ever had, but they still drank it.

~Is the *kenit* always really good where you come from?~ Dot had a surprisingly deep voice, especially when you were expecting a hamster squeak.

Bodie laughed, and explained how he could only drink *kenit* if it was the right kind of bad, which led to questions about whether his people drank hot drinks, and whether all Hailin food and drink tasted horrible to him. He promised to bring in flasks of tea and

coffee, and said they'd see in the canteen that he had a very healthy appetite for most Hailin food.

In the fourth car, the cable ran through some special clips, which apparently did help to protect it, but they each took half a minute to open and close. Only Barrow and Dot finished the repair before the end of the lesson.

All sixteen of them went to the canteen together, but had to split up to get seated. Bodie's group took a table, across the aisle from a group that was all teenagers: a boy who'd gone to the same school as the twins, a boy and girl from a different school in Harding, and a girl from a village near Budjard. They talked about the previous night's parties, and how many of the repairs on the slides they already knew how to do. Most had at least helped out with all of that week's three, but they'd liked the chance to practice on different models. The twins said they'd seen something of half of them, but then their family had a farm, and a shop with a couple of delivery vans, and they had three sets of older twins with a talent for buying badly-maintained cars. Bodie said that cars were different-enough on his planet that he couldn't really say he'd done any on the list. But there had been four or five repairs he'd needed to do several times, so they must be on his planet's list.

After lunch they had two two-hour lessons, with a quarter hour break in between. The first was a breakdown of the sub-systems in a modern car, highlighting their main parts and the effect that damage or malfunction could have on a car. By the end they had a good idea of what the different classes on their timetable would and wouldn't be covering, and Bodie had some more sheets to put in his folder. Everybody already knew a lot of this, but they all knew different things, and it was easily worth two hours to be sure they all knew the same things. The second lesson was about the power transmission system. The college had a rig with all of the parts set up in it, so they could handle them and see exactly how they were connected.

The second class finished on the dot of half five. The traffic to get out of town was about the same as in the morning. There was one particular junction where Bodie was clearly going to be spending far too much of his life. He'd leave home in the morning at a quarter past. Any later would probably be pushing it.

Once he was on the main road, with the signs counting down the miles to Parass and the ferry, he realised that he'd barely thought of Ray or West all day. He'd mentioned his *nespa* a couple of times, and his husband's brother who'd taught him Hass Embrun, but there had been fewer questions than he'd been expecting. With all the excitement and uncertainty of starting the course, he was probably low down in people's list of "things to get clear".

He hadn't given his *nespa*'s name, or the brother's. Two months ago he would have. But now it felt dangerous to say "my *nespa*, Ray". He'd have to say the name soon enough. Talking about what "Ray and I" had done at the weekend, for example. He'd already told them his husband was a Dishna policeman, was his teacher's brother. But as far as his heart was concerned, that was different from saying "my husband, Ray". In his mind, when he had to give his husband a name it was Etto, though the only person who'd heard the name was Ullis, and it would probably stay that way.

Even with the stretches of waiting around, and the fact that the amount that he genuinely hadn't known had been pretty small, it had still been an exciting day. It really

was a good course. He could tell. And damn it made a difference to be kept busy all day. He'd almost forgotten what that felt like.

He'd understood the lessons really well. When he'd had problems, it had been with the chatting between lessons, which wasn't a surprise. His usual thing of too many people talking at once, or too quickly, or about Hailin things he'd never come across. It had only happened a few times and he didn't think anyone had noticed, but today everyone had wanted to talk about the course, and that was going to change. He'd probably ask Barrow for help. Maybe next week. Not to give him a word-for-word translation, but to give him enough clues to jot down that West should be able to follow up on it later.

On the basis of today, he thought he could probably have coped with a full-time course, but they hadn't known that at the time, and he wasn't in a hurry.

They had dinner with West in Buka's restaurant. Bodie took his folder along so he could show them the list of repairs, and also how clear and useful the diagrams of the different systems were. Ray thought it was a great idea to ask Barrow for help when the conversation lost him. A lot of the time it might just be the latest teenage fad, and Barrow would judge better than the twins whether it was something an adult needed to be able to talk about. West was indignant on behalf of young people – the twins sounded more level-headed than a lot of adults he knew, including Ray – but he did think the twins might be more likely than Barrow to play jokes on Bodie and give him completely the wrong idea about the conversation. It's what Ray and Ward would have done, though they'd each have come up with different lies ("Yeah, mine would have been actually funny!").

West's first day had been good, too. He'd done a lot of sanding and a bit of varnishing, and sharpened tools and swept and dusted, and answered the phone and made *kenit*, and learned that the amount that Yata was talking back to the radio was no indication of whether or not he was ready to have someone interrupt him in his current task. Yata wasn't grumpy, or not in any way that bothered West, he just seemed to need to choose exactly when to talk. When he was ready, he was patient, and over *kenit* he was friendly and quite funny.

The only new thing that Ray had done that day was to go to a new place for lunch with his team, because their favourite place was closed all week for a winter holiday. The food was OK but they charged extra for *susin* sauce and that was annoying. Otherwise it had the usual aftermath of the New Year's parties: stupid accidents and fights, that no one involved wanted to talk about. They sympathised with him, and hoped that Dishna's intelligent criminals would be over their hangovers tomorrow.

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At lunchtime on At Laura Var, Bodie called Ullis and asked him to find out what Ray was planning to tell Malun on An Uraba about how the counselling was going and what sort of sex they were having, because Malun was likely to ask directly about the sex. Ullis asked Bodie about the course, and then asked if he could tell Ray how Bodie was dealing with saying his name. Bodie was fine with that, but didn't want to know how Ray reacted.

Ullis called back immediately after the end of the session on At Kamaran. Ray was going to say that he was keeping the counselling at a very quiet level: not actively

working on any new ideas, and mostly just talking about what had happened during the week. As for sex, they were doing even less than the last time Malun had asked, as part of the same quiet approach, and he was sure that Malun could see that he needn't worry about them.

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An Uraba was clear and crisply cold. On their way back from their run they dropped in on West to borrow the extra pan they needed to be able to cook their main dish, two vegetable dishes, and special rice. They'd persuaded West to do some experiments with desserts, and he was bringing a kind of milk pudding. The *felgran* pickle had turned out well, and had the right salty tang and the right slightly-chewy texture. The *mandal* stuck to the roof of your mouth and the *risna* was too soft and too blandly sweet, but they'd decided to keep them and see if they got better, or maybe it was a matter of experimenting further, to find the right curry for them.

This time it was Malun asking if he could have the leftovers, to show to Lenneva. He wanted a pot of the *felgran* pickle, too. They lingered at the dining-table over coffee and the dessert, then Malun announced that they were going to take a walk on the cliffs. ~And I'm going to stay at the back and talk to each of you alone starting with Ray.~

Bodie was the last to get the summons, but he knew the questions were going to be easy. Ray had come back relaxed and amused, shaking his head as he said, "You'd think I'd never paid my share of the bills in my life. Or done the washing up. 'I'm never going to make Turon believe it. How much effort you put into that lunch.' The family would never have guessed that I was just waiting for the right influence."

"What do you think Ray told me about the two of you?"

"That almost nothing's happening and we're fine with that. Which we are."

Malun nodded several times, then sighed. "You two are a useful reminder to me that I will never really understand sex. I have already put enough effort into trying." A shrug. "You'll tell me if the situation starts changing? If I need to assess Ray for myself?" Bodie nodded. "In that case, I'll only come here every six weeks. But I'd like to see you every three."

Bodie grinned. "I'll bring my toolbox. Check on your car." And they talked about Malun's car and his flyer, and what sort of problems he'd had with the two of them.

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Their first lesson on At Mordez was in the classroom, and again Bodie and Barrow were the first to arrive. Barrow was pleased to see him and asked about his weekend. Bodie said a friend had come to lunch and they'd cooked some Earth food for him, or the closest they could manage when they didn't have the proper ingredients.

~My *ikolsko* and I want to travel but I can't imagine being so far from everything you're used to. Do you speak your own language at home with your *nespa*?~ So Barrow was in an *esmana* marriage to a woman. He couldn't always have been that wary, then, if he'd managed to qualify.

~Mostly. Hass Embrun has got a lot easier for me, but -~ He explain about group conversations, and Barrow immediately asked if there was anything he could do to help.

They agreed on the special shrug that Bodie would give when he was lost and didn't think it was a conversation where he could interrupt and ask. Barrow always carried a small notebook with him, so it would be easy for him to jot down the main words.

~Thanks. I'd been hoping you'd be willing to help. But I wasn't sure how to ask. My *nespa* didn't think I should ask the twins.~ And he explained why, with his own doubts about the twins playing jokes. He was expecting Barrow to laugh, but instead the man took it very seriously and agreed that teenagers really could be cruel. Selfish, too. If there had been a course just for adults, he would have joined that. He agreed that so far their ten teenagers seemed alright, and with the twins they probably had the best of the lot. But he was going to need a few more weeks to be sure.

Bodie was torn between thinking, "Poor guy," and hoping that nothing happened to set the kids off, and thinking, "You'd've fucking hated me back then." Maybe hated Ray worse. You had to admire him, joining the course when he felt like that. But Bodie didn't think he'd be mentioning it to Ray; it'd be a secret between him and Barrow, that the guy was a bit strange.

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A storm hit around three in the morning on At Pontal, and it was still raging when the alarm went off. By the time Bodie entered the living-room, Ray had already checked on the TV whether the ferries were running. They weren't, and though the road to Harding was open, people were being advised not to travel if they could avoid it.

But there was nothing about the college being closed, and they were due to be in the workshop all afternoon and Bodie didn't want to miss that. He'd driven in worse weather, he knew how to handle it. He'd allow twice the time, if that would make Ray-the-cop happier. It would, just, if Bodie phoned from college to say he'd arrived.

The storm started to ease properly around four, but when Bodie was approaching the big roundabout before the main road, he found signs everywhere saying that the road was closed, and he went back to college and immediately called Ray with the news. Ray told him that a tree had come down on the road and a lorry had overturned. The road would be closed for several hours yet. Bodie should go to the cinema. Get something to eat. Ray would send a message to his fleet address when the road reopened.

The message arrived before eight, when there were still twenty crucial minutes to go to find out what had been on that missing page in the gardener's logbook and who had taken it. Bodie did want to know, but it could wait until some other evening. Maybe at the weekend, with Ray. He murmured apologies as he waded his way out of the row, but the apologies were obviously not good enough.

Bodie told Ray he'd only been halfway through the film - because it'd be weird, wouldn't it, to be in such a rush to get back to a flatmate? He thought he'd see the rest at the weekend. Did Ray want to come?

Ray did, and he also wanted to see if West was interested, and his friend Buka was often in Harding at the weekend, staying with his boyfriend Gamlan who Ray thought Bodie would like.

Bodie shrugged and said, “The more, the merrier.” It would be good to see Gamlan again. And Ray was probably right, that they’d be better with company if they were going to be sitting together in the dark.

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Ullis called on At Kamaran to say that being at home during the storm had made Ray think about the two weeks’ holiday they had coming up, in just seven weeks’ time. Ray still wanted them to go away somewhere, for Bodie to see more of Pen Embrun. But now they needed to find out as flatmates that they both had holiday scheduled at the same time. And decide to do something that flatmates might do. Something that didn’t involve any hotels, because Ray knew they weren’t ready for that.

Bodie shivered at the thought. He hadn’t forgotten about the holiday, exactly, but “weeks and weeks of the course” had loomed so much larger. ~No. He’s right. We can’t do anything like that. I’ll... We’ll start talking about it tonight.~

By the time Ray got home, Bodie had already decided how to raise the subject, and he did it almost as soon as they sat down to dinner. “You know the college closes down for a couple of weeks? The last week of Set Makara and the first of Set Racon. I don’t wanna stick around just for West’s lessons. He’s due for a break from me, anyway. I thought I’d fly off somewhere. Do something really different. What would you do? With two weeks at that time of the year?”

“I...” Ray frowned for several seconds then shook his head. “I dunno what the hell you’d do on your own. I’ve never —” A brief shrug. “There’s always been at least eight of us. We’d hire a house or a boat. Somewhere famous for its food. And its men. But since I’m off men...” Shaking his head again, and looking sad. “I’ve no bloody idea. Is that what you did on Earth? Go off on your own?”

“Only a couple of times. Toured Germany and Scotland on my bike. Mostly I’d go with a bird. Or a few mates, but not like you. I mean, we were friends. Nothing else going on.”

Ray was frowning. “I can’t imagine you on a bicycle. From what I’ve seen of them in the films, I’d think it couldn’t possibly hold you. It’d look like a toy.”

“Well, yeah, they are for kids, I meant a motorbike.”

“Oh! Like a *solward*. Yeah, I can imagine that. Never thought of riding a *solward*, myself.”

“It’s great. I wouldn’t do it in town, but when you’re out on the open road, with the air pushing right against you... It’s the closest thing to flying.”

“Now you’re making me want to take the test. Not that I can see myself buying a *solward*.”

“No, me neither. Unless I wanted to get into repairs for them, too. But I can’t imagine there’s much money there.”

Ray agreed. “You said you wanted to do something really different. What sort of different? A bigger city than Dishna? Or no towns in sight? Where you’d see more of our history? Or something brand new? More water? Or less?”

“Not a city.” Very definite, like Ray would have been expecting. A city would mean a hotel. No getting away from that. “I fancy getting all the way out of doors. Sleeping in a tent. You have tents, right? People do go off walking for longer than a day?”

It was even more popular than sailing. Ray’s family used to go out for the weekend three or four times every summer.

Bodie raised his eyebrows. “With you and Ward fighting every step of the way?”

“No worse than at home. We always had at least two tents. I enjoyed it. Not enough to buy my own tent once I got here, but enough to try a couple of times to suggest it instead of the house or the boat.” He shook his head. “That was never the sort of adventure they were looking for.”

“Was a weekend the longest you went for?”

“There was a week, once, travelling around the Kustatas group. A different island every day. It was great. Except that every day everyone was talking more and more about the fleet, about how this was a small taste of life in space. And I felt like I’d been set up.”

“So they didn’t try that again.”

“No. We had city holidays for the next couple of years.”

Bodie nodded a few times, then turned his attention to his dinner. With a couple of mouthfuls still left, he said, “Don’t suppose you’d want to come with me? Be better with company. I won’t say a word about the fleet.”

Ray made a big show of having to think about it. Finally: “Yeah, I would. Thanks. Shouldn’t be a problem getting that time off work. We could go to the library tomorrow; it’s good for travel information. I’ll start looking at tents. It’ll be late spring, so... It can be really nice here, but for two weeks out of doors, I’d want to look closer to the equator.”

Bodie grinned. “You’re the expert.” Ray taking charge. He hadn’t seen much of that recently.

By the end of the weekend they were about 70% decided that they’d spend one week walking in the mountains and the other week island-hopping. But which mountains, and which islands, and in what order? Ray thought they should decide in the next couple of weeks, to be sure of booking flights and any overnight ferries they might need.

Ray’s first news when he got home on At Mordez was that his boss had approved the two weeks’ holiday. Bodie thought that no one would guess, seeing their pleased reactions, that Ray had already come home with this news more than ten weeks earlier. They were good at this. The next day, it was Bodie who had news: he’d mentioned their holiday plans at college, and it turned out that Barrow and his *ikolsko* Manoko had done a lot of island hopping, though with a car, and he’d invited Bodie to dinner the next evening so they could give him all the details. They’d been talking about inviting Bodie and his *nespa* to dinner one weekend, anyway, and Barrow hasn’t needed to check with Manoko to know that they could cope with a guest the next evening.

Manoko was even smaller than Sasha, but there was nothing bird-like about her. More like a terrier. She was obviously glad to have him there, but she was abrupt by anyone’s standards, let alone for a youngish woman, and she had less small-talk even than Ward.

They lived in a small terraced house ten minutes' drive from college. They were the only people on the street in an *esmana* marriage. The only *esmana* couple they knew who were certain that they didn't want children. Manoko also worked close to home and got off work even earlier, and they ate at half six which was freakishly early by Bodie's standards. They weren't bad cooks, Bodie guessed. His only other experience of Hailin home cooking was at Malun's house, and that couldn't be a fair comparison. Maybe he could say that the weekend dinner should be in Parass. Ray would probably find that easier, for a first meeting with this pair.

They had almost no sense of humour. They did laugh, and fairly often, but it was about good experiences they'd had together, never about life or other people being ridiculous. But they were kind and welcoming, and almost too interested in what he had to say – once he'd stopped perplexing Manoko with jokes. And they really knew their way around those islands. They usually went twice a year, though this year they were just going once, in the summer, because money was tight with Barrow on the course.

In fact – and Bodie promised not to mention it to anyone on the course – the islands were the reason Barrow was doing the course. Three years earlier they'd had an island holiday ruined when their car broke down because of something they could have prevented if they'd had it serviced properly. So since then they'd always had it checked beforehand, but they were sure that most people didn't. Because there's never a obviously convenient time to drop your car off for several hours in an industrial area. But if your car's on the ferry, anyway, for an eight-hour journey to the islands, and there's a small team of mechanics on board who'll do all the checks for you, and clean things and replace things, then you might be very happy to pay for that service. They didn't know yet if they could make that sort of business work, and they thought it would take three or four years to do the research and make the contacts and put things in place, but to have any chance they needed to become confident mechanics, and Manoko's job paid better and she enjoyed it more, so they'd decided to put Barrow on the course. He'd make good use of the skill, anyway, even if they couldn't make a living from the ferries.

Bodie was impressed. Those were tiny plans, really, on a planet that had the fleet, but for them it was a big gamble, and they were so determined. Ray would want to meet them. They took a lot of encouragement from what he was doing, too; they both said so. People could make huge changes, step away from the things they knew, and the world wouldn't end. Of course they wouldn't find themselves landing exactly where they'd expected, maybe not even close. But there would always be something under their feet.

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Buka, Gamlan and West were all free that An Udom Kol to see the film with the missing page from the gardener's logbook. Bodie had decided it was time to get a good set of tools, and to get properly acquainted with all three of their cars, starting the next day. Ray and West weren't interested in keeping him company while he chose the set, so he drove into town on his own, Ray and West got the bus an hour later, and they all met at the restaurant. Buka and Gamlan wanted to hear about Bodie's course, and it turned out that Gamlan was one of the vets who dealt with the twins' farm. He knew the girls, and he liked the family: they weren't the quickest about paying their bills, but they were very far from being the slowest.

They enjoyed the film. Not a classic, but just what you wanted if you'd been stranded by a storm. Bodie had been right about who had taken the missing page, but completely wrong about why. Ray said he'd figured it out almost immediately, but got just as much entertainment from guessing what role the other characters would play in the misdirection. He admitted he'd had some surprises, but wouldn't give details.

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The next big storm broke around three o'clock on At Laura Var. As soon as he got home from the lesson, Bodie sent Ray a message to say that he and West wouldn't come over for *pulsonranas*, even if the half four ferry did run: the forecast didn't look good, and there was no point in all three getting stranded in Dishna.

The half four ferry did run, but shortly before five the long edge of the balcony door had started making a low, shuddering, moaning sound, and when Bodie checked the travel information on the TV he wasn't surprised to see all of the ferries cancelled, for the rest of the night. He lowered the shutters and the door went quiet, and a few minutes later he got a reply from Ray saying that he was planning to stay with friends, and probably wouldn't go to *pulsonranas*, either.

Bodie hadn't been expecting to hear from Ray once he'd got to his friends' place, but around half nine Ray did call. He was at Espen's flat, and they'd just got in from *pulsonranas*. He'd called her from work to let her know they wouldn't be playing, and instead she'd immediately offered him her spare room, and convinced him that he was needed at *pulsonranas*. Maybe they would have lost more badly if Ray hadn't been there, but now they were going to console themselves with a glass of *brosha*, and then maybe work their way up to something with a bit more punch.

Bodie had to pour himself another glass of wine to stop his taste buds imagining that. Ray getting drunk with Espen? Should give them both some stories to tell.

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By the end of dinner of An Embrun, they'd decided which islands (the Unga group), and that they'd go there in the second week to give themselves a week of rest after the hard work of the mountains. So that left them with two ranges of mountains within a day's travel of one or other of the ferries to the islands. Palana had a scattering of villages and a choice of places to start and end, whereas Atkadak had a famous trail that took a minimum of six days, with just twelve basic huts along the route. A challenge. And the ferry near Atkadak went into Osso, which had Barrow and Manoko's favourite waterside bar anywhere in the islands.

The villages and the meadows of Palana were more like Ray's idea of a holiday, but there were reasons the trail was famous, and all the descriptions said that no photos had ever done justice to the constantly shifting views of the group of three near-vertical peaks in the middle. Bodie really wanted them to earn the first drink in that bar in Osso, and Ray didn't need much persuading. They booked their flights and ferries after lunch on An Udom Kol: they were flying in to Nera and out of Tiksit.

Bodie told Malun about their plans over lunch/dinner the next day. Malun had been hearing about the holiday from Ferros and Lamon, but that was almost entirely about West's negotiations with Yata to rearrange his days in the second week and take the

middle An Embrun off, so he could spend a whole week at Clover. West had mentioned “mountains” and “island-hopping”, but no one in the family really wanted to think too much about Ray and island-hopping. It had been sixteen years, though. Of course he’d have changed, even without Bodie.

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At dinner on At Mordez, Bodie asked West about his week at Clover and whether Yata had been as obstructive as Malun had made it sound. Yata had been tougher than West had expected, but then he had taken on some orders for that month based on having assistance, especially with a large bed, and West hadn’t thought to mention the holiday when he’d taken the job.

Now West was dithering about how and when to suggest to Yata that they make a line of children’s toys: animals, maybe, or boats on wheels. He thought they’d sell well with summer visitors, and help bring people into the shop. He’d been hoping to make some prototypes to try out on Afmad and Akula at Clover, but Yata was bound to complain about it taking time away from their orders. Maybe Yata would let him use the workshop in the evenings. He’d probably leave it a week before doing anything.

That weekend, they tried out their tents and camping gear by spending the night of An Embrun in the hills above the moors. It was a chilly, drizzly night, but Ray said they shouldn’t leave it any later as the *soragons* would start to have their cubs any day now, and they didn’t want their tents shredded by paranoid *soragon* parents. Besides, bad weather was much better for this test, however much they were hoping for a holiday full of spring sunshine.

Bodie’s tent was a deep purple and Ray’s was a light blue, but otherwise they were identical. Each was just big enough for two people to sit up in, or to lie down in, and it was Bodie’s tent that they chose for sitting and watching the night fall over the moors. And also over the sea, but right now the sea was just blending in with the drizzle. Not a view worth walking even five minutes for, but they were warm, they were dry, they had a flask of tea and another of Scotch (thanks to Malun), and they never ran out of things to talk about. They were missing their evening episode of “The Six Million Dollar Man” so Ray invented one, in great detail, with Bodie asking questions to take it in ever-more ridiculous directions.

Bodie watched Ray’s hands gesticulating in the lamplight, easily managing to be all of the characters at once. Beautiful hands. Subtle. They would seize anyone’s imagination, even if he’d never noticed another man before. But not half as beautiful as the bow of Ray’s mouth, so it was good that the hands were so busy, making him laugh.

It wasn’t a daily struggle, but yes, he thought about it. Just one kiss, to know for sure what those unique curves would feel like against his lips. Ray would understand. It was just curiosity. It would never go any further. He could rely on Ray to laugh, and push him gently away, and say he was sorry, but there was no man exotic enough now to tempt him. Etto would probably understand too. Etto must have had friends where at least some part of their body fascinated him. But no. If Bodie ever did anything it would be after he got his husband back, so he could explain to him what it was like to look at Ray’s mouth, and he could ask for permission to kiss.

Chapter 29

At Mordez was the first day someone on the course had a birthday: Talna, one of the teenage girls, who had turned nineteen. Almost everyone went out for a quick drink after class, and it genuinely would be a quick drink, because Talna's parents were taking her and her twin brother out for a meal at seven, so she'd have to go home in time to change.

Bodie asked if the Hailin ever had parties on their birthdays, with friends as well as family. Yes, they often did, but the parties got less and less common after the age of twelve.

~So if someone had a party for their 34th birthday, that'd be weird?~

Everyone said that no, it'd be fun, and when was his birthday? The date that Malun had chosen for him was the 23rd of Set Racon, which was the second At Kamaran after they got back from holiday. But if he had a party – and the idea had only just come to him – then he'd have it the weekend after.

Ray and West both liked the idea when he raised it that evening over dinner, but was it just going to be his friends from college? His college friends knew he had friends in Parass, and they'd be puzzled and even offended if they didn't get to meet any of them, but who among their Parass friends could they trust not to let anything slip, even while drunk, about Ray and West being Bakkels? Plassen, yes, and Buka and Gamlan and Shilda, but they weren't sure about any of the others. Ray wanted to invite Espen and the other friends from *pulsonranas*, who'd been told the same version they'd used in college. It would be great if that group of friends could come too, and the flat was large enough.

Bodie was thinking that they'd have to use Ullis to discuss how they'd prepare the flat for visitors this time. With that many people they'd want to make both bathrooms available, but why would either of them, as flatmates, take the steps to make it look as if two people used the main bedroom? But that was over seven weeks away. They'd figure it out.

That week at *pulsonranas* Ray mentioned the idea of the party, and got an even better reaction than from the crowd at the college. A weekend visit to Parass would be great. They'd love to meet some more of Bodie's friends and see where they lived, which would also involve seeing some of Yata's furniture, wouldn't it?

As they were changing out of their overalls after their first ever dead tie, Espen said, ~On the subject of arranging things for a weekend... When are we going to do something about getting a large enough group together to book the arena for ourselves?~

The tone of the murmuring suggested that people definitely still wanted to do it, but that no one was ready to volunteer to organise it. Espen shrugged, unsurprised, and said they should find three days they could all make, and she would start looking for other players.

~Well... You know...~ Bodie was frowning, suspecting there were sixty ways this was a terrible idea. ~With everyone from college, that'd make a large group. If they were interested. I don't think they've ever played before so we probably wouldn't want the spaceship.~

They needed a few seconds to take that in. Ray said, ~And then we'd all go to our flat for the party?~

~I guess. Yes. Why not? It's not like we were planning a formal party. If we're all crumpled, who'll notice?~ He meant "sweaty", but there were times when that word felt too vivid in front of Ray.

Espen was nodding. ~It would give us all much more to talk about at the party. Yes, please ask your friends. And let's see what times this place has got available that weekend.~

Bodie took a handful of brochures for the arena, and on the ferry home they agreed that they should ask the Parass people, too, otherwise they could feel too left out at the party. Bodie had mentioned the college crowd earlier because it was quicker, and it was easier to imagine them all agreeing. All four of the Parass people knew about the *pulsonranas*, and while they hadn't leapt to join in, there'd been nothing to suggest that they'd been silently vowing to keep well away.

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At lunchtime on At Kamaran, Bodie called Ullis and asked him to discuss with Ray what they would tell people they met on their holiday about who they were, and what they were to each other. With the separate tents, they couldn't say they were married. So what was Bodie doing on Pen Embrun? If they were going to be telling people the story about Bodie's absent *nespa*, it would need some work to make it more convincing.

Ullis asked Bodie if he'd invented any more about this husband for himself.

~No. I don't have anything more than his name, really. I just know what he looks like. Does Ray need to know that?~

Ullis thought he might, so Bodie did his best with the description, explaining which TV program he'd seen him in. He thought Ullis might ask why he'd chosen that guy, and he really didn't want to talk about the type of sex he'd had with men on Earth, but there weren't any more questions. When Ullis called back the next evening, he said that Ray needed time to work out answers to questions they might get: what Etto's job was, how often Bodie heard from him, whether Ray had ever met him; but he'd have it all done by the next session.

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Over the weekend they had a chance to talk to Plassen, Shilda and Buka about *pulsonranas* and the party, and about not spreading the word about Ray and West being Bakkels. They were all definitely keen on the party. As for the *pulsonranas*, Plassen and Shilda thought they might come along one At Laura Var to see how they liked it, and Buka took a brochure to show Gamlan.

At the college, they liked the idea of *pulsonranas* just as much as the party. Barrow asked if he could bring Manoko along, and about half the teenagers wanted to bring twins. Yes, of course they could come, and to the party, too. A few people asked if they should invite the staff as well. Bodie didn't know. He liked the staff, but it might be weird. He'd think about it, and maybe have a word with Annis.

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On At Pontal, they had classroom in the morning, and then workshop all afternoon. During the second lesson in the morning, Bodie's throat was feeling dry, and his neck was stiff. At Pontal was usually his favourite day in the canteen because it was *usak* day, but going in, he didn't have his usual appetite, and at the sight of the hot dishes, his throat got suddenly worse, and a sharp pain shot all around his face, like a shrieking toothache that stabbed all the way up to his ears. They must be using some ingredient he and Ray hadn't tested. Something that had got to his throat even one floor down, in the classroom.

Could he risk eating anything today? His throat wanted something cold and soothing, but the throbbing bones in his face cringed at the thought of ice-cream. A pot of fruit jelly? It was there for the kids, really, but OK. And a large cup of water. He should get away from the canteen where the stuff was obviously thick in the air. He told the others that he was going down to the workshop and why. With any luck the smell of the engine oil would drown out this spice, or whatever it was. Everyone sniffed in the direction of the hot food, and they said that between them they'd have something of everything, and see if they could figure out what was different.

He'd definitely needed the water, and for the first ten minutes or so he thought he was getting better, but then the pain in his head spread up, through his nose and eye-sockets to his forehead, and the stiffness spread down to his shoulders. His scalp was prickling, and the skin around his mouth, and the jelly was sitting in his stomach like a lump of rock – a lump that might possibly have things burrowing inside it.

The stuff must have got in his clothes. Or his hair. It couldn't be in the jelly, that had been sealed. But what about the cup? Or the spoon? Could they have been washed in the same water as a pot from the day's cooking? He needed to talk to the kitchen, and today, while their memories were fresh. But they'd have to come down here. He shouldn't go back there.

And now his whole head was grinding and itching and when the bolts of pain arced from one random point to another, the flare filled his vision and then the fading had its own dragging ache. His chest was starting to tighten, too, and something was catching in his throat. Jesus. What grade of chemical weapon would you call this?

He took another drink of water but found himself gagging, and then coughing, and each jarring spasm felt closer and closer to jerking his head right off his neck. He was panting when he finally got the coughing under control. The panting got better over the next few seconds, but only slightly because his chest felt even tighter than before.

He should go home and lie down. But he couldn't think how to get there. He could barely think about anything. Except about keeping very, very still, to spare his head. He closed his eyes, and focussed on the feel of the rough leather of the folder against the heel of his left hand.

The pain did lose some of its violence, became more of a constant sickening whine. His head got heavier and heavier, and after two or three minutes – or maybe ten, he had no idea – he sank forward to rest it on the bench, as slowly and carefully as he could manage. His forehead slipped off the back of his hand. Sweat. He must be running with sweat. Like some people got when they ate chilies. Being bent over made breathing even more of an effort, but there was simply nothing else he could do.

Someone was saying his name. A man, sounding surprised and worried. Bodie raised his head, half-opened his eyes. A small squadron of people in brown overalls. All sizes. He hadn't heard them come in. Now everyone was saying his name, making shocked-sounding noises.

"Yeah, I need to go home." God, his voice was weak. Slurred. "Need to call..." West. Or Ray. No, Ray would know what to do. West would fuss. "Dishna police station? Can someone call my husband Ray?" There'd be somewhere he could lie down, while he waited for Ray.

But no one was moving, they were just staring at him, or they were whispering.

"Ray? Please. I need Ray."

"Ray?" A man. Maybe the first man who'd spoken. Sounding very uncertain. Like he'd never heard the word before, and Bodie suddenly wondered if he'd been speaking in English. He couldn't remember. He said it again, in Hass Embrun, and with each breath taking more effort.

~Your *iskolpa*?~ Surprised now, even more than puzzled. Must be thinking West would be better. But he wanted Ray and he didn't know Yata's number and why didn't the guy just go? ~Yes. Ray Bakkel. At Dishna police station. I'll wait... I think I'll wait in the car.~

He pushed himself up, but his legs immediately gave way, and as he fell back against the stool it tipped over, and he was going with it. Shouts, and hands grabbing for him, and then he was on his side on the concrete, smelling dust and oil, seeing knees and feet and hands, and his head was a huge, white-hot, rusty bell, deafening him with the endless reverberations, and spitting out flakes and splinters that were shredding his brain.

He had to close his eyes. ~Call Ray. Get Ray.~ Just a croak. Had anyone heard him? There was a rushing sound everywhere. Like the tide through a gap in the rocks. But he thought someone had gone. He thought he'd heard someone running.

He was being moved. He forced his eyes open to see if this meant that Ray had come, but it was just more overalls, though dark-green now. He asked them if Ray was on his way, but had to close his eyes again before he got the answer.

Something was chewing into his cock. He cried out, his hands instinctively leaping to protect it. But his arms didn't do more than jerk. They were held fast. By the Mabein. He was surrounded by the Mabein. All dressed in blinding white. All with smooth, shiny masks that he didn't recognise. One had hold of his cock, was doing that chewing, drilling thing. Another had his right hand in a tight double grip. And a third was leaning hard on his left arm. Their hands were cold and clammy. And there were others further back, all looking at him.

He tried again to free himself but it made no difference. He shouted at them to let him go, asked what they were doing. Or he tried to shout but the words dragged and scraped in his throat, and then were muffled almost to nothing, like he was underwater.

Not muffled. Muzzled. Now he saw they'd put a muzzle on him, they'd sealed off his nose and his mouth. And he started to scream and to thrash and fight in earnest, and to cry

out to Ray to help him, because the drilling at his cock must mean they were castrating him.

But he couldn't stop them, he couldn't stop them.

Would it be his hands after his cock? Turn them into paws to match the muzzle. So no Hailin would ever be fooled again? The grip on his right hand, that's how it would start? He couldn't stop them. He had no strength left to fight, needed it all now for the struggle of getting his ribs to move, to force in breath past his panicked gasping. But it wasn't enough and he could feel himself blacking out. He couldn't stop them. They were gods and they hated him.

He surfaced enough sometimes to realise that he was conscious, and when that happened he always flexed his fingers to see if he still had them, and yes, he did. Sometimes after that he had enough left to partly open his eyes, keep them open for maybe five or maybe ten seconds. The Mabein were taking his blood, feeding it through hundreds of snaking tubes. Doing something with his *mana*? Had one of them found a way to help Ray? He didn't see any of the Mabein again, though he thought he heard them moving about. All of his body had the droning headache now. Except for his chest which was a block of concrete. It felt nothing, just echoed the drone back to the nerves around it. He still had his fingers. Something had happened to change their minds.

The pain was gone. Or rather, he just felt bruised all over. Especially his ribs, but just look at the way they were moving in and out on their own. Without him having to bully them every second, or even really have to think about them. God, that was wonderful. There was warmth against his hand and arm, and a pressure against his hip. He opened his eyes – still an effort, he was still so tired – and the first thing he saw was a mass of curls. Ray was in a chair by the bed, slumped forward with his face buried in the mattress, and the top of his head pushing against Bodie's leg.

Bodie smiled. Of course he was feeling wonderful now. Of course everything was OK. "You're here. They did find you." On a murmur, as he sank back into sleep again.

The next time he woke, he knew immediately from the grip on his hand that Ray was still there. And still working wonders, because his mind felt so much clearer.

"Hi. When did you –" He stopped dead, blinking as he took in the sight of Ray's face. "That's not stubble, that's – Jesus, how long was I out?"

Ray swallowed. "Nearly two weeks. Today's At Rahden, of the first week of our holiday."

"Jesus!" At the shock he started to cough, and Ray leapt out of the chair and grabbed a cup of water from a cabinet by the bed, and pressed a switch somewhere that lifted the head of the bed up a couple of feet, and then he was helping Bodie to drink. It took a while for Bodie to get his breath back, and after that he was just plain thirsty. Finally, however, he was able to wave at Ray that he could put the cup down now. Ray went back to the chair, and Bodie held out his hand to meet the tight grip.

"Two weeks. I knew I wasn't doing great, but..." Another thought struck him, and he frowned. "If you haven't been shaving... Does that mean you were in *gimana*?"

Ray nodded, looking grim. “Until yesterday. And since then...” He raised his free hand and dragged it down his chin. “Shaving would take up time when I could be here with you.”

“Damn. I’m sorry. Did that stuff stop me producing *mana*? It was some serious fucking poison.”

Ray was shaking his head. “They had you in isolation. I went in once, in a suit.” He lifted his hand above the top of his head, then moved it past his face and his chest. “But you didn’t know me. It didn’t help you. So I... I was outside.” A gesture of the head backwards, to a wall about six feet away that was a window from waist-height up. There was a small, plain room on the other side, like a waiting-room.

“You’re saying... a sealed suit? Like for dealing with radiation? Was it white? Were there lots of people dressed in them?” At Ray’s nod, Bodie exhaled noisily. “I thought the Mabein had me. I thought that was the Mabein. I thought they were...” He swallowed. “Doing stuff to me that you’d do to a dangerous animal. Christ, I really was out of it.”

“You were –” Ray closed his eyes for the space of six uneven breaths. “It was terrifying to see you like that.” His voice was shaking badly. “You were so ill.”

“Did they figure out what it was? I guess a spice or a herb or something?”

An abrupt shake of the head, and Ray’s face was screwed up so he looked almost ugly. “It was an infection. For us it’s...” A hopeless-looking shrug. “For us it’s almost nothing, like a cold.”

“Fuck! So I was... I was like that for two weeks? Because of some poxy little cold?”

Again Ray closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, his expression made Bodie shiver. “We thought you were going to die.” Flat. Almost. “You stopped breathing during the first night. After that, for thirteen days, your blood had to go through a machine. You were getting all your oxygen from the machine. A week ago... Exactly a week ago, they told us it was a matter of hours before another major organ shut down. Judging from the levels of harmful products they were tracking in your blood. The machines could remove those too, but... With one of us, with that amount of damage, we don’t have any way to bring the person back.” Shaking his head. “We haven’t found any drugs that can do it. So the chances that, with just human technology... The chances that your people would have any way to help you...” He’d been gripping Bodie’s hand ever more tightly, while Bodie squeezed back, and now his control collapsed and he was blinking furiously as tears ran down his face.

Bodie lunged forward to put his arms around Ray, and found that his left arm was hooked up to some lines, and that such a sudden movement made him feel dizzy.

“Ray. Ray. Don’t. Don’t. God, don’t. Look, come here. Sit up here. So I can hold you.” He shifted over to the left and nodded at the space by his side, and in the next moment Ray’s arms were around him, and their bristles were clashing, because of course he had just as much of a beard as Ray. He cupped his hands around Ray’s head, and turned his head to kiss the tears from Ray’s cheek, and murmured soothing sounds, and told him that everything was OK.

The tears stopped fairly quickly, after maybe half a minute, but then Ray kept his eyes closed, and slowly rubbed his face against Bodie's, and gave long, deep sighs.

"I wouldn't do that to you. Would I?" Almost a whisper. "And you see we've got some tricks, my people. They got me through."

Ray pulled back, shaking his head. "No, that was all you. You fought it off. Just you." A small, lopsided smile. "Bare-handed."

Bodie raised an eyebrow. "The sort of moves that'd get me kicked out of *pulsonranas*?" A nod, and a full grin. "So what drugs did they give me?"

"Nothing. They couldn't. We had no idea what our drugs would do to you. All we could be sure of was that you needed oxygen. Needed the same basic nutrients." A gesture of the head towards the line in Bodie's arm. "And when we saw the products building up in your blood, we had to assume that they shouldn't be there, and have our machines take out what they could without putting anything of ours in. That's all we could do except wait for the ship with the drugs and the doctors to arrive from Earth."

"There was a ship coming?"

"There still is. It set off a week ago, a day after the base received the instructions from Malun. It'll be another two days before they even hear that you'd started to recover. That you're breathing again. They think it's hopeless. But they know that Malun has to try everything."

"Yeah. Yeah, he would." He ran the back of his fingers lightly across Ray's cheek, smearing out the tracks of the drying tears, and then he laid his palm along the line of Ray's jaw, following the coarse grain of the beard. Ray in *gimana* for weeks, maybe forever. Malun might well sell half the fleet to stop that. "Where is he? Where are we, come to that?"

"We're in Harding. Malun's in Monor, at work. But he'll be here in a couple of hours. He's rented a house a few blocks away. He's been living here. Lenneva came too. They've been getting me to eat. Shower sometimes. Sleep in a bed sometimes, not in the chair out there."

Bodie nodded, and dropped his hand to Ray's waist. "What about West?"

"He's at work. I should call to let him know you're awake. Or..." A frown, then he shook his head. "That would mean leaving you. Malun can do it. Malun can tell everyone. Then they'll all rush to see you. So say if they're tiring you out. We'll send them back to the house."

Bodie grinned. "Who's 'everyone'?"

"Well... Ferros and Lamon. Annis, Barrow and the twins from the college. Ullis. My boss. Espen. And Plassen, Shilda, Gamlan and Buka. They all came to see you. I thought Malun was going to punch Ullis the first time Ullis visited. He had him backed against the wall."

Bodie grunted. "Yeah, I can see that. 'I'm not a fan of my nephew's brain, but you'll answer to me for melting it.'"

Ray gave a weak groan. “No. It was more... ‘You fucking told them to just go and have sex? You watched the boy go into *gimana!*’”

“You told him.” Part of him was annoyed that Ray hadn’t discussed it with him first, which showed that his brain hadn’t even started to get caught up yet with what had happened.

Ray winced and nodded. “I won’t say I had to, but... You lying there. On the other side of the glass.” His voice was trembling more with each breath. “We were looking at you dead. Really. After the first day. The *chinarva* machines are only meant to be used to...” He shivered, and made a desperate-sounding gulping noise, but when Bodie started to gather him close with more murmurs of comfort, Ray pushed him away. “No, I – I have to. It was...” He swallowed, then took a huge, wavering breath. “Everyone knew it was over. That waiting the two months for the ship with the drugs was just...” He shook his head, over and over. “So watching you while you... It was the only thing to do. And Malun was here watching with me. Every moment he could spare. Watching for your sake, even more than for mine. I don’t remember deciding to tell him, but... The first An Embrun. That was the first time he was able to be here for the whole day. I told him everything. About how I’d... About all the ways I’d failed you.” And he was crying again, with jagged sounds you might almost take for laughter. Now he did let Bodie hold him, but his arms stayed by his sides and his body was tense. It stayed tense even after the sobbing juddered to a halt.

“Who says you failed me? Malun doesn’t know what he’s talking about. You know there’s nothing I’d swap. Almost nothing I’d change. I don’t see where you’re supposed to have done things differently. You’re – You’re the way you are.”

Ray abruptly pulled away. “Yeah, and that’s not been good enough. It’s been fucking pathetic. Malun wanted to punch all three of us, not just Ullis. He spent what felt like an hour, listing people he’d fired who’d done something only a tenth as stupid as we did. And as for me... He wondered if we hadn’t done it during midwinter, if we’d done it on a normal week, if we’d taken the time to plan and...” A shrug and a deep sigh. “Waited until now, for example, when we already had the holiday booked. Then I could have spent more time in *gimana*. He thought if I’d had more time in *gimana*, and hadn’t been so worried about getting back to work, about making sure no one there found out. Then maybe I would have faced up properly to everything.”

Bodie had to laugh. “And we were worried that it would upset him too much, hearing you’d been in *gimana*.”

Ray pulled a face. “He was upset at first. But you know Malun. Always moving forward.” He threw out his hand like a dart. “He was more upset about how good a liar I’d turned you into. How he’d seen you just the day after I came home as your flatmate and you fooled him completely.”

“Ah. He’ll be here in a couple of hours, you said?”

“Yeah. It’s nearly four in Monor. He’s been leaving at six.”

Bodie nodded. “Better brace myself to get punched, then.” They laughed, then Bodie said, “So it’s about lunchtime, then?” In reply, Ray unfastened the wristband he’d been wearing – Bodie’s wristband – and handed it over. The time was 11:63. Bodie put the

wristband on and took his first proper look beyond their few square feet of the bed. The room was full of cabinets and machines and sockets and tubes, and the door in the opposite wall looked like an airlock. In the room beyond that, there were more cabinets and machines, and a row of the white suits. No one in sight, either in or out of a suit.

“D’you get food in this hospital? Doesn’t anyone care I’m awake? I could be messed up and confused, for all they know. Not just...” He opened his mouth enough to run his tongue around it. “Mouth like the bottom of a hamster cage.”

Ray was grinning. “They know you’re awake. It’ll be showing on their monitors. I told them I’d call immediately if you showed any signs of being... messed up. So you’re hungry? D’you want to brush your teeth?”

“Yes. And yes. Not starving, but definitely like the idea of food.”

“Lenneva’s bringing me lunch at half twelve. Can you wait until then?”

“No problem. That’s gotta be better than hospital food.”

“Then...” Ray slid off the bed, and knelt to open a drawer in the cabinet by the bed. “West brought in your toiletries yesterday. I’ll get a bowl. And some warm water so I can shave you.” He put the case on the bed by Bodie’s thigh.

Bodie rubbed one cheek then the other. “It’s that bad?”

“I could get used to it. But I don’t want to.”

Bodie grinned, and handed the case back to him. “In that case, do yourself while you’re off getting the bowl.”

Ray straddled Bodie’s thighs to shave him. Bodie felt the urge to close his eyes and just enjoy the rasping, and the touch of Ray’s fingers steadying and coaxing, but Ray’s face in concentration was too beautiful to miss for even a second. They didn’t talk, their eyes didn’t meet, but the ebb and flow of their smirks surely looked identical. Getting an erection with a catheter in felt strange. Good strange, Bodie thought, at least at this stage, with the extra pressure inside, and the tug at the end as it pulled more and more against the tape.

Ray took his time, and after he’d patted Bodie’s face dry, he took a few seconds to inspect his flawless work, and then he leaned forward, his mouth opening, and it was the sweetest kiss of Bodie’s life.

“You don’t feel like someone who’s off men.” He could hear that he sounded slightly drunk. The sound of happiness. And only a fraction of what he was feeling. “Or am I just getting the full technique they teach in your barbers’ school?”

“You’re getting...” A long, deep sigh, with a pained frown. Bodie’s guts clenched, but no more than if he’d locked himself out of his car. So he’d learned properly, being in love with Ray, never to look for miracles. “You’re getting the happiest *iskolpa* in seven million light years. But still the most confused.” Then a wince and a small but very uncomfortable shrug. “And maybe the most talked-about one by now. I don’t know. Malun and West and Ullis say they’ve not picked up any sign but I don’t know.”

Bodie’s turn to frown. “Talked about how?”

Ray swallowed. “So many people know, now. Exactly what type of marriage we have.”

“Oh, fuck.” A moment to prepare himself. “How’d that happen?”

To his surprise, Ray gave a small chuckle. “Well, you started it. When you were going under at the college. You told them to get your *‘iskolpa’*. Said he was ‘Ray Bakkel’. So that got all of them thinking. Then when Annis called the station and asked for Ray Bakkel, of course they said there was no Ray Bakkel on the force. So she said that the man she needed to contact was in some kind of marriage to a human called Bodie Vasmar, and please what could she do to find him? And they went ‘Oh!’ ” A gasp of realisation. “My boss had the strangest expression when he came to get me. And when he came to visit two days later. When Malun was there. He didn’t say anything about it, but –”

“Jeez, I’m sorry. Course he wouldn’t say anything, not with Malun there. So it’s all over the station.”

Ray nodded. “And the hospital. And our friends in Parass. Some of them might have heard anyway, but once they saw me in *gimana...*” Now he was shaking his head.

“Fuck. So whadda we do? Am I gonna get spat at in the streets?”

Still shaking his head. “I just don’t know. Of course I’ll tell everyone... And I mean everyone, I’ll go on TV and tell people it’s a gift being married to you, if there’s even a chance that’ll help.”

Bodie gulped and felt himself flush to the tips of his ears. “Would I have to go on too?”

Ray laughed. “No, I know how you’d be. Worse than in the first photos Turon took of us. But could I use his kitchen photos? The footage from the ship?”

Bodie screwed up his face for a couple of seconds, then shrugged. “Yeah. Why not? We know the stuff works.”

“It might not come to that. We’ll have to wait and see. First big test will be me going back to work.”

Bodie grunted. “Me going back to college. I missed a week. Need to catch up. I’ll be out of here by then, right?”

“Shouldn’t be more than a couple of days. As soon as you’re strong enough to walk around the flat.”

“Right. Let’s get someone in to see how strong I am. Straight after lunch. You got more bad news for me? Or can we get back to that kiss?”

Ray frowned at a point above Bodie’s head for several seconds. Then a decisive shake of the head. “No bad news,” and an even more decisive start to the next kiss.

“Bodie! You’re better recovered even than I had imagined.” They’d pulled apart at the hiss of the door. So Lenneva spoke English now. Learned it to pass the time between trying to get Ray to eat, while waiting for Bodie to die. He was carrying a box like a small hamper.

Bodie grinned. “Well enough to steal half Ray’s lunch.”

Lenneva had brought a large bowl of a vegetable stew, a jug of fruit juice, and a flask of milky tea. There was a small table on wheels at the foot of the bed, and he brought it around to the side and laid everything out.

“Does Malun know Bodie’s awake?”

Ray explained that he hadn’t told anyone yet. “I suppose someone on the staff might have but... They know his schedule as well as anyone, they know he’ll be here soon. D’you want to tell him? You can tell anyone you want. It’s not that I’ve been saving it as a surprise.”

Lenneva said he would call around the family, and see how many of them could come for dinner. “What would you like for dinner, Bodie? You know I can do any kind of curry.”

But that idea made Bodie’s stomach feel nervous, even while he was eagerly alternating spoonfuls of stew with Ray. “Think I need to start off slow. Could you do something with fish?”

“Like your fish and chips?”

Now Bodie’s appetite had returned full-force. “Could you? That’d be perfect.”

Lenneva waited for them to finish eating so he could take the bowl. They talked about the weather, and Harding, and the mountains in which they were currently not on holiday.

As Lenneva was heading for the door, Ray said suddenly, “Oh, don’t tell Turon. Bodie should write to him. That would be worth the surprise. So when you talk to West, could you ask him to bring in Bodie’s computer?”

After he’d left they poured a cup of tea and shared it back and forth. “So Turon knows how bad it was?”

Ray nodded, his expression turned sombre. “He’s on his way here now. He’ll get here the weekend after next. He said he had to get here and see you while your heart was still beating. While your face still had colour and your skin was still warm. Which meant that he had to get here before the ship arrived with the doctors and the drugs, because if they said they couldn’t help you then we’d have to turn the machines off immediately. We don’t keep – We don’t keep biochemical processes going when there’s no hope. As soon as he heard what had happened, he said he had to get here and see you before the ship arrived. Even through the glass. The way you were.”

“Wow. That’s – Wow.”

“He really loves you.” Very serious.

“What? Turon? You reckon? Or you mean he said it?”

An abrupt shake of the head. “He wouldn’t say it. But in his own way...” He frowned, then sighed. “And I shouldn’t have said that. Look, forget it. I had too much time to think. You know how that works out.”

“But you don’t mean he fancies me?”

“No. No. I can’t see that. But you’re...” A shrug. “Special to him. Important to him. I think maybe more than anyone else except Sasha. I mean...” He raised his eyebrows. “She said it, how much he likes spending time with you.”

Bodie tilted his head in concession. “He’s important to me, too. I miss him. A lot, sometimes. Wouldn’t have said I love him but he’s more than a friend. OK, so we lay off the jokes. For good.”

“Yeah. We have to.”

“He knows I’m recovering, right?”

“He won’t have got the message yet that you’re out of isolation, but he knows you’re breathing. When he gets the message from you...” Shaking his head. “He’ll be so happy they could probably power the ship off him. And get up to lightspeed.”

They both laughed affectionately, then Bodie said, “Shame he’s arriving just before we go back to work.” A sudden grin. “Maybe West’ll let me skip a few classes, so we can catch up on some drinking. How long’s he gonna stay?”

“Until your doctors are settled in. Malun’s put him in charge of that. So he’ll mostly be working in Monor, but I guess we’ll see him...” A shrug. “Almost every day.”

“You’re saying the doctors are still coming? On the ship? But I’m better. They can turn back.” Other humans on Pen Embrun. He did not fancy that.

Ray shook his head almost violently. “We need the drugs. We need them to finish training our doctors. In case –” He looked away for several seconds, then flinched and swallowed. “In case...”

“In case I catch something else.”

“Yes. And you probably will. If we stay here.”

“‘Here’? Not... ‘here in the hospital’?”

Another abrupt shake of the head. “We could go back to Earth. You’d be safer on Earth.”

“Yeah, but then you wouldn’t. You could get our cold. And you’d fucking hate it there. You know what we’d be up against there. I’d go on TV here with you every day before I’d – I don’t wanna be safe like that. We’d never be happy there. We’d never –” A pause and he dropped his voice almost to a whisper. “Be able to do this.” He pulled Ray close, and the kiss was hungry, almost rough. He’d meant to be tender, persuasive, but the thought of being back on Earth, having to live as a real queer... It made him too scared. And of course he was scared, too, of the next Hailin bug. Of putting Ray through that again, even more than for himself. But it wouldn’t be nearly as bad next time, not with him having his own damn hospital in Monor. Ray seemed just as hungry. Probably from being just as scared.

Suddenly, though, the pressures from his catheter turned from an enjoyable all-over throbbing to a too-specific twisting, and he pulled back. “I’ll be careful, Ray, I promise. First sign of a dry throat, I’ll press the alarm, the docs’ll be all over me in a second.”

A long pause, then a sharp sigh. “OK. And we’ll talk to them. Find out what else we can do to prepare. What we should avoid.”

“I’m tough.”

Another sigh, deeper. “I know. I think that was the main thing we saw about you. In the way you coped with everything about moving here. About dealing with us.” Shaking his head. “We never even thought that anything we had might be able hurt you. We were so stupid.”

Bodie gave a lopsided smile. “Well... we all had a lot on our minds already at the time. Felt more like you were putting too much effort into arranging stuff for me. Turon learning to cook for me, going to buy anchovies at Sainsbury’s. West figuring out how to teach me. Malun adopting me, for fuck’s sake. I could see you were falling over yourselves to make me feel at home. And my God, it worked. I am at home.”

“Yeah, I’m –” Ray put his hands on Bodie’s shoulders very lightly, barely touching. “I know I’m gonna be nervous around you at first. So protective it’ll – So you’ll have to make allowances. Be patient.”

Bodie raised an eyebrow. “You’re still gonna help me get out of here, right?” With enough of a smile that Ray should know he was teasing. “Now we’ve had lunch, you said you’d fetch someone to see how strong I am.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Mild, the same level of teasing. He tightened his grip on Bodie’s shoulders, darted in for a moment’s kiss, and then was getting out of bed.

Ray came back with three doctors: a middle-aged woman, and two younger men. They asked him how he was feeling and how various parts of his body were feeling, prodded and tapped and listened and read numbers off screens, then said that the signs were good in Hailin terms, but they wanted to be careful. They were going to monitor him constantly during any exertion, until they were sure that he was stable.

They got him sitting on the side of the bed, and then had him stand, at first for just a few seconds at a time, but then gradually for longer and longer. He really was weak, and being fully upright came as a shock to his system. He needed the rest after each effort, but he did recover well during each rest and was ready for more.

After he’d stood for a minute without any trembling, they set up a pair of handrails at right-angles to the bed, and tried him on walking forward, and then backwards to rest. He was shaky and he needed the support, but the doctors didn’t argue when he said he wanted to carry on. After half an hour the older doctor left, followed shortly by one of the younger ones.

Somehow, Bodie, Ray and the remaining doctor (Lugas) got onto the subject of “The Six Million Dollar Man”. Bodie was keen to demonstrate the slow-motion sequences but that turned out to require more strength and control than he currently had, and it was while they were agreeing that they’d make slow-motion running the real test of when Bodie was ready to go home that Malun walked in. Bodie went back to the side of the bed, Lugas and Ray put the handrails away, and then Malun was able to move in for a hug. Lugas told Bodie to call or send Ray when he was ready for more exercise, and then he left.

Malun had brought more tea, and also some biscuits and a small selection of books in English. Malun took the chair while Bodie and Ray sat back against the pillows, and

they started by telling Malun that they were staying on Pen Embrun. Malun didn't seem surprised.

"Who are these human doctors? Am I gonna have to meet them? What do they know about me?"

There were three of them: a woman who was a specialist in contagious diseases, a man who taught physiology, and another man who taught bio-chemistry. Yes, he'd have to meet them, together with the Hailin team they were training. Probably many times. They'd been told that he had joined an important family, and they had his full medical files, which the base had got through CI5.

"Through CI5? So Cowley knows I'm alive? Jesus. How'd he take that?"

"He was relieved. And puzzled. And worried, because the base told him that you were very ill indeed. He's been in touch with them since asking for news. I told them to arrange for him to write to me."

"Puzzled how? Does he know about Ray?"

A small shake of the head. "No one who's been involved in this does. I told the base that you're my adopted son, and that you are the human who triggered *russma* in a crewmember. But if they suspect that it's Ray, they won't have discussed that with anyone, including the Hailin team on the ship."

"But... you're saying they all know I'm married to a man? It says 'crewman' in the files, doesn't it? So everyone on the ship knows?"

Another shake of the head, more emphatic. "Not the humans. They've been told the same as Major Cowley. We made it a policy, with humans, not to discuss any aspect of our biology or our marriages. Anything about who has sex with whom. Our people on Earth don't give humans any reason to ask, and if they do ask, they're told that our marriages are nothing like human marriages, and that it's a private thing that we only discuss among Hailin. But if Major Cowley writes to me..." A shrug. "He'll probably have some very specific questions. He knows about you stowing away. The doctors don't."

Bodie gave a long groan, pressed the heel of his hand hard to his forehead for several seconds, then threw himself back against the pillows. "Oh, fuck it. If Ray can face everyone knowing he's married to a *glarus*, who gives a shit what some humans think of me? Go ahead and tell Cowley. Tell them on the ship. Not gonna kill me, is it?" Ray and Malun shook their heads, both very serious, then Malun thanked him.

By three o'clock Bodie was itching to get up and walk some more, and Malun went to find Lugas while Ray set up the handrails. Bodie immediately felt the benefit of the longer rest, and Ray and Lugas both commented on how much more smoothly he was moving. Malun said nothing throughout Bodie's first walk to the end and back, beyond a couple of quiet grunts of agreement. From the glimpses Bodie got of his face, he was struggling to hide some kind of shock. Like he'd really thought that Bodie was too tough to ever need support – as long as he was breathing and awake.

Malun seemed fully recovered by the end of Bodie's second walk, however, and was the one who asked if Bodie felt ready to try turning around at each end of his walk. To make the first attempt, Bodie took just a few steps out, to be close to the bed in case he got

into real problems with his balance. It was a different kind of hard work and it was a relief to get back to the bed, but after his usual rest he was up for more practice.

Malun's next question was about whether it would be possible for Bodie to have dinner at the house that evening, assuming Bodie wanted to, of course. Bodie definitely did want to, and Lugas saw no problem with him leaving the hospital for a few hours, but he should be accompanied by someone with medical training. One of the nurses that Malun had hired to help when Ray was in *gimana?* That would be fine. So Malun left almost immediately to go to the house and call the nursing agency, and soon after that Ray went to buy some loose-fitting clothes for Bodie, and some shoes and socks.

Left alone with Bodie, Lugas turned serious and awkward. Bodie wanted to joke about the Bakkels taking over the hospital but that wouldn't have helped, so instead he went for the safest small-talk about how long the guy had been at the hospital, where he was from, and soon enough they moved on to food and then films.

When Malun returned, bringing a fresh flask of tea, Bodie had just settled back in bed and was starting a Ken Follett novel. The nurse would be bringing a wheelchair to collect him at six. They'd be eating at seven. Bodie was allowed a beer; Malun had checked with Tumele, the senior doctor.

"Yeah, I checked with Lugas, too. Good we're on the same page." A mouthful of tea, then he said, "Ray told me you met Ullis."

A pause of a couple of seconds, then Malun raised an eyebrow and said, "I met a large number of your friends. You had many visitors."

"OK. So you don't want to talk about it."

"Not today, no. You should call your friends this evening when you get to the house. Maybe the ones who live nearby would like to come to dinner tomorrow, or a drink. They can drop in at any time."

Malun at his most controlled. So he was that pissed off with them. Bodie nodded. "Yeah, thanks, I'll do that. I'll call them as soon as I've written to Turon." That got a broad smile from Malun, and then Bodie asked about the house, and whether Lenneva had done this before: spend weeks away from home to cook for Malun.

Ray had brought two changes of clothes: a deep-blue tracksuit, and an outfit of spring-season beachwear that he thought should be warm enough. Bodie's skin wanted the casual hug of a tracksuit, but his sense of pride thought the beachwear would give less hint of the catheter bag taped to his thigh, and his sense of pride won.

With help from Malun and Ray, he was dressed within minutes of making his choice. He'd thought that Ray would have to look away during the parts when he was too naked, or find reasons to be busy elsewhere, but he was as matter-of-fact as Malun. The reflections in the window of the visitors' room showed that Ray had made a good choice. OK, he still looked like he'd just stumbled away from a very bad fight, but you could see there was a cocky bastard in there just waiting to bounce back.

The nurse was a man of about Bodie's age, called Beven. He'd taken care of Ray for most of the previous week, and he and Ray greeted each other with a quiet relief. Ray pushed the chair the four blocks. The house was one of six of the same design on either side of a

short side-street. It was on a single level, with a huge dome-shaped living-room in the middle, with the kitchen at the front-left side, and the four bedrooms at the back. Malun had the master bedroom, and Lenneva, Ray and West had the children's rooms.

Lamon, Ferros and West were already there when they arrived, and the hugs and flurries of tears took several minutes. Yata had insisted that West leave work early, had given him a small, inlaid bowl as a gift for Bodie and Ray, and they promised that they'd come to thank him as soon as Bodie could walk to the workshop.

Bodie's computer was set up in the study on the front-right side of the house. Bodie apologised to Turon for giving him such a scare, and explained that he'd only realised how bad it had been when he'd focussed on Ray's face and seen the state of his beard. "I have to admit, I've never been this shaky on my legs before, but I'm getting stronger every hour. By the time you get here, you'd never guess anything had happened." He said he wouldn't wait for Turon to reply, but would send him an update every day before dinner.

Lenneva had a list for him with the numbers of people who'd visited the hospital. He started with Barrow, whose yelp of relief brought his wife running. Yes, they would come to dinner tomorrow, and yes he would bring his notes from the lessons that Bodie had missed, and also Bodie's own folders and notes, which he'd collected from the bench and had been keeping safe. The twins were out, but the man who answered said he would pass on the good news as soon as possible, and that the girls would be free for dinner as far as he knew.

There was no answer from Annis, or from Gamlan, or Plassen or Shilda or Buka. He left messages. Ullis's *iskolpa* answered, and was so noisily thrilled by the news that it was some time before he was able to explain that Ullis was with a client. A fair bet the guy now knew as much about them as Malun did. Bodie found he didn't care. What did it matter, if it made someone so glad to hear your voice?

Espen was the first person to ask about Ray, and after that her main question was about when they'd be back at *pulsonranas*. Not that week, but maybe the week after. In that case, she'd like to visit at the weekend. And not just her, of course, once she'd called around the others.

Gamlan called back while they were eating; Buka was working that evening, and Gamlan was going to drive into Parass to give him the good news in person.

Ferros and Lamon left at half eight, taking the promise that they'd all meet in Clover as soon as they could after Turon arrived. Shortly after they'd gone, Bodie suddenly felt exhausted, and Beven and Ray immediately took him back to the hospital, then helped him get ready for bed. Bodie nearly fell asleep while a young woman doctor was checking him over, revived sufficiently to properly appreciate his first goodnight kiss in... what was it?... twelve weeks?... and then was asleep within seconds of turning out the light.

Chapter 30

He woke to the smell of pastries. Ray was there, with a flask that surely contained coffee, a box from the Parass bakery, and a jug of juice so freshly-squeezed it was frothy. Bodie checked his watch: 7:47. “You’ve been to Parass and back? Damn, you’re a good husband.”

Ray grinned. “Picked up a couple of bottles of red wine for tonight, too. In case we need some with dinner.”

“I take it back. You’re not good, you’re the best.”

About halfway through Bodie’s first hour of exercise in the morning, Tumele said that he no longer needed to have a doctor monitoring him: there were only two things that needed checking now, and she’d teach Ray to do that. By the end of the hour he could walk nearly the full length of the rails without support, though it was more of a shuffle than a walk, and it still all fell apart when he tried to turn around.

The next milestone in his recovery took place about twenty minutes later, when after a few subdued farts he suddenly very much wanted to crap. Ray wheeled him to the bathroom, got the chair out of the way for him, and then left him to yell when he was done. In fact, he found he could get back in to the chair easily enough, and push himself, and he stayed in the chair for the rest of the day when he wasn’t exercising.

By lunchtime he was 90% confident about turning around, by two o’clock Ray was agreeing that he didn’t need the rails, and by four he’d made his way to the bathroom and back enough times to convince Lugas that it was time to remove the catheter. Ray went to wait outside, in the corridor, and Lugas watched him go with a worried-looking frown.

Bodie thought he should say something to reassure Lugas about Ray, stop him asking Ray any questions about why he’d left the room. ~You wouldn’t think it to look at him, but medical things make him feel ill.~ He didn’t know “queasy”, or “squeamish”. Ray would rather have the doctors thinking he was a wimp, wouldn’t he, than making any kind of guesses about their sex life?

~Oh! I was assuming he didn’t want to be reminded of when Insu was putting it in. You won’t remember that but it was – Very difficult.~

Bodie took a second, and then was ready with his best sheepish smile. Shaking his head, ~Yeah, that sounds like me. Sorry. I’ve always been a difficult patient.~

He was braced for the catheter to hurt coming out, but there was just a slight tugging. He celebrated by changing into the tracksuit, and then he met Ray out in the corridor, and they walked up and down until dinner, resting when they reached a convenient chair, and pretending they were in the mountains with magnificent views, and the staff and patients were fellow-hikers to gossip about.

Malun didn’t come to the hospital in the afternoon, but instead arrived with Beven to collect them for dinner, and to ask for the probability that Bodie would be going home the next day. It was 95%, and they’d definitely know by 10 am.

The twins did come to dinner, but they were dropped off by the older brother who ran the family’s shop, and he was going to collect them at nine sharp. He also started off

horribly polite, but relaxed considerably when Gamlan arrived. They talked about birth rates and skin parasites for a while, the brother arranged to hold a particular cut of meat for Gamlan for An Embrun, and then he left them to what was shaping up to be a strange mix of people. But Barrow and Manoko turned out to get on very well with Malun, and everyone else was pretty easy.

Toward the end of the meal, the twins said that they wanted to hear the story of how Bodie and Ray had really met. Malun and Bodie looked at one another then at Ray, and Bodie thought Malun was about to say they'd save the story for another day (or something like that), but Ray got in first. ~It was more or less the way Bodie told you. Except I already spoke his language. So I was able to go up and start flirting with him straight away.~

They all looked at Bodie, who nodded in confirmation, and then back at Ray, who smiled and shrugged. ~He invited me to spend the night, and soon after I got back to the ship, I found out that I'd gone all the way through *russma*. It was complete.~ A gasp from everyone, including Beven, but Ray was still smiling, and shaking his head dismissively. ~As a general rule, I'd say, 'Before you leap into bed with a gorgeous alien man, do sit down with him and compare all of the details of your *!?!* biology.' But in our case...~ A shrug and a relaxed sigh. ~It could have been something from a nightmare, but Bodie did everything possible to make it easy.~

The expressions were a mixture of impressed and concerned. Eventually Gamlan said, ~But you told us it was a *tolmin* marriage,~ and the others nodded, frowning.

Ray winced, and Bodie too, but no one was watching him. ~Yes, I – We're sorry about lying to all of you.~ He swallowed. ~I don't know if you can understand but... There's a difference between feeling very happy and lucky living with an *iskolpa* who happens to be a new type of *glarus*. And -~ A deep, uneven breath. ~Being ready to deal with the reactions. With what you know will be the first reaction from anyone who hears about us.~ A shrug then he waved his hand with a lopsided smile. ~I'm a Bakkel who switched to the Vasmar name as soon as I left home. I know there are people who don't care much about seeming normal. But I'm not one of them.~

Everyone laughed, including Malun and West, then Barrow said, ~That's what we'll tell people, then. That you're normal. If anyone asks. If the subject ever comes up.~

~No, no.~ Salcha was very definite. She wagged a finger. ~We'll tell people that you seem normal. That's it, isn't it?~

Ray grinned and nodded. ~That's always more convincing.~

The twins' brother did arrive promptly at nine, and the others left then too. They thanked Malun and Lenneva for the meal, and looked forward to seeing everyone else again at Bodie's birthday party.

Again, the day caught up with Bodie very soon after their visitors left, and he didn't even finish his second glass of liqueur. Malun said he'd visit them at the weekend, assuming Lenneva would be closing up the house the next day, and he expected daily reports. As they were about to leave, he said to Ray, "The way you talked about how the two of you met, why you lied... How much of that had you planned in advance?"

Ray took a few seconds to reply. “Most of it. But not what I said at the end about living as a Vasmar. Seeming normal.”

Malun gave a grunt and a nod of approval. “I think that should work very well. Let me know if you feel the need to make any significant changes.”

Ray waited in the chair while Bodie was in the bathroom, then perched on the side of the bed for the goodnight kiss.

“You gonna bring pastries again tomorrow?”

“Sure. You’ll be OK with a selection from down the street, right? Lenneva says it’s a perfectly decent bakery.” Teasing, but hard to say exactly how.

“OK with being taken for granted so soon? Course I am. Who wouldn’t be?” Pouting, but in a way it was true. It meant he must be looking so much stronger. Properly like himself. When they next surfaced from the kiss, he said, “Sounds like you’ve not had these decent pastries from down the street.”

Ray shook his head, looking grim. “No appetite. Especially not for anything sweet and light and fun.”

“Buy a big box for the whole house. Surprise Lenneva. I’ll make do with the leftovers. Not the coffee, though. Make that fresh?”

“So fresh you’ll still be able to hear the beans rattling.”

* * * * *

Bodie was dressed and sitting cross-legged on the bed reading when Ray arrived. Ray had his backpack with him, with his few changes of clothes from the house, along with Bodie’s college folders. He was ready to go home, the moment the doctors gave the word. There were three pastries left in the box, and a lot of crumbs. The argument about whether Ray could have divided the third pastry more evenly got quite heated, and Bodie refused to share any of the crumbs.

Bodie’s slow-motion running wasn’t as slow or as extravagant as he would have liked but it got the right kind of laughs, and combined with his medium-speed walking and the steady recovery of all of the functions, he got his transfer to a team in the Parass hospital before half nine. He and Ray were taken to the hospital in a small ambulance, and they decided on the way that they’d just use public transport to get Bodie’s car back from the college and Ray’s back from the police station – no need to think about involving West or anyone else.

Bodie’s dayshift team was a doctor, Mersin, and a nurse, Palmash. They very quickly checked him over, with Palmash seeming particularly impressed by the neat healing after all the tubes that had been in his left arm and his chest. They took him to the flat in the wheelchair, and then asked him to give them a walking tour of the bed and the bathroom (~So our bed’s just through here. And our bathroom’s only a few feet away. That’s always been my side of the bed, too, so I’m not going to get confused in the middle of the night.~). They were happy with what they saw, they confirmed the arrangements for an emergency and for the daily check-ups at the hospital, and then Bodie and Ray were properly alone together for the first time in over two weeks.

“So what d’you wanna do?” Bodie was half-sitting on the arm of the couch, and Ray was just coming back from the front door.

“Lie down with you.” Immediate, but then just as quickly he was shaking his head. “But we can’t do that yet. We need to take time. Settle.”

Bodie had to laugh at that. “Good thing you warned me you’re still confused. I’d never have guessed. You wanna book a time for one of our talks? With the tea and the bottle of *brosha*?”

Ray frowned hard, then dragged a hand slowly back through his hair. “Don’t think we need that. There’s nothing new. Nothing that’ll surprise you. We can talk in bed tonight. That’ll be enough.”

Ray talking so casually about the two of them in bed. With the promise that, whatever he was confused about, it was nothing new, nothing worse. He was nowhere near ready for bed yet, just got out of the damn thing and had been looking forward too much to staying out of it for the whole beautiful day. But that would make the day even better, knowing how it was going to end.

He nodded, knowing his erection must be visible, and not caring. “Can I tell you what I wanna do?” He didn’t wait for Ray to respond, but immediately started counting off on his fingers. “Open some windows and get some fresh air in here. Have a shower. Call the house and make sure they know we’re home. Walk as long and far as I can. I guess decide what we’re gonna do for lunch.” With a nod at Ray’s message-light on the TV: “Maybe you should check your messages before we decide, in case it’s someone inviting themselves over.”

Ray grinned. “Go and have your shower. I’ll deal with the windows and everything else. But leave the bathroom door open so I’ll hear you yell if anything happens.”

The bending parts of getting undressed and dressed were slow, but he didn’t feel unsteady for a moment, and being clean actually made him feel stronger, like the dirt and grease had been seriously weighing him down.

The hospital had called the house with the news about Bodie’s release. Lenneva and West were in the process of packing up, then West was going to drive back to Parass and then head off immediately for his holiday at Clover, only a day later than planned.

The message had been from Ward, sent as soon as he’d heard that Bodie was ill; he was shocked, and would be thinking about both of them. It was the first message Ray had ever received from Ward, and he had replied as briefly with thanks and with the news that they were home. Malun had told him that Ward had written, but he hadn’t felt able to deal with any messages while he was in *gimana*. Seeing the message itself had got him almost ready to admit that Ward might be a better person than he was, in some things, at least.

Ray had also had time to empty Bodie’s backpack, and he had put Bodie’s computer and college folders in the spare room, and Yata’s inlaid bowl in the centre of the coffee-table. The bowl looked odd there on its own, but they’d leave it there for now to remind them to go and thank him.

Both Bodie and Ray had been thinking of Bodie doing his walking on the balcony because of the fresh air, but West had suggested the walkway inside the building. It really was a useful distance, and without the obstacles of the plants and tables and trellis, Bodie would really be able to work properly on his speed. They'd save the balcony for his rests.

On his first attempt he found he could get nearly halfway round before he had to lean against the parapet. The parapet wasn't as good for recovery as a chair but it was better than nothing, and he didn't let himself get frustrated that he wasn't constantly breaking his own records.

As for lunch, they decided to go to Buka's restaurant, though Gamlan hadn't been sure if Buka was working that lunchtime. Ray took the wheelchair in case Bodie needed to rest during the walk, and he did, after they'd crossed the first street. Buka was there and had been hoping they'd come in, since Gamlan had said that Bodie was looking really well. They could probably have got unlimited beers on the house, but kept it at one each.

Yata's workshop was at the other side of town and they decided to leave that until the next day. Bodie made it to the park behind their building, and they rested on a bench and took in all of the flourishes of spring.

When it was time to write to Turon that evening, Bodie was able to tell him that he could do a full circuit of the walkway, no problem, and at a respectable speed, too. They were cooking kedgerree for dinner, to get in practice for him, and Ray would take his camera when they went out the next day, so they could send pictures of Bodie strolling through the best parts of the garden (or maybe even striding!).

They were back to their normal, natural positions on the couch, with Bodie on the left and Ray curled up against him. They watched an episode of "The Six Million Dollar Man", of course, and argued about which episodes would be worth watching again, because they couldn't expect Turon to just pick it up in the middle with them.

Shortly past nine the phone rang. It was Espen, who was delighted to find that they were home. She had just got back from *pulsonranas* – which they had completely forgotten about – and the people at the arena were wondering if they still wanted to make the booking for Bodie's party. The arena had also been wondering why none of them had turned up for two weeks, and had been horrified to hear about Bodie's illness. No wonder they hadn't wanted to play when that was happening.

Bodie said he'd call the arena straight away to make a booking but before he could hang up she quickly asked if a visit over the weekend would still be OK. All six who'd played that evening wanted to come. Could they take Bodie, Ray and West out for lunch on An Uraba?

Ray was already nodding, so Bodie thanked her, and told her that West wouldn't be there, but Malun might be, instead.

~Buying lunch for Malun Vasmar?~ She came closer to giggling than Bodie would have imagined possible. ~My pupils will never believe it.~

No one answered at the arena, so he left a message saying he'd call back the next day to pay the deposit.

At around ten, Bodie said, “How d’you feel now about lying down with me? You reckon we’re settled?”

A nod, and a smile that was half-eager, half-anxious. “Reckon we are.”

Bodie led the way through, but stopped just past the foot of the bed. “I’m guessing we’re keeping our clothes on?” A nod. “We back to dry-humping?”

A grimace, and Ray was shaking his head. “I’m sorry. I need to hold you so much. Having you get hard for me, it – It’s a gift. But I – I can’t help you come. I still see...” He screwed his eyes tight shut, then opened them with a violent shudder.

“You still see us in that pool.”

“Yes.” A pained whisper.

“Can I help you come?”

“No!” Then a pause, and a quiet sigh. “It has to be equal. Shared. I need it to be like that.”

“So... a *tassuram* on the bed and jerking off in the shower. In secret or can we share that now?”

Finally, a small smile. “We can swap shirts like we did before. Probably not say what we were thinking about, though.”

“OK.” Ray had been right. They hadn’t needed the *brosha*. A *tassuram*, and kissing, and openly enjoying getting each other hard. Pretty damn good, after what they’d been through. “What about a goodnight kiss after the showers?”

“God, yes!” And then they were laughing, and throwing themselves on the bed, and finding that everything they did together felt even better than they’d remembered.

They had the goodnight kiss under the covers, in their robes. After about ten minutes Bodie found himself getting very drowsy, but he was alert enough to hear the depth of reluctance in Ray’s sigh as he started to pull away.

“Stay.” Reaching out to lay a hand on Ray’s arm. “Get dressed again. Lie on top of the covers. Whatever you need to do so you can stay.”

“Oh.” Ray gave a long groan. “You don’t know how I want to. I can’t get enough of... But I can’t trust myself. You know I can’t trust myself with you.”

“Then how about you trust me?” That got Ray blinking, startled. “You think I’d let you do anything I know you’d regret? Trust me. Go and get dressed. Bring your quilt and lie on top of the covers. And trust me that we won’t do anything except sleep together.”

Ray stared at him for a long time, breathing heavily, then suddenly he smiled. “I do trust you. I could never have thought of that. But of course I trust you. We can do it, after all. I don’t have to let you go.”

“Not for a second. Well, just a few. C’mon. Let’s really make this our bed.”

He went to sleep with Ray’s weight all along his side, and when the alarm went off at half six the next morning, the weight was still there, against his back.

The alarm would have been going off every morning while he was in hospital. He wondered how long it kept on for. A minute? He would probably have forgotten to turn it off when they went away on holiday, too. At that thought, he shifted onto his back and gave a contented sigh. “We’re on holiday. You don’t have a ferry to catch. West’s bugged off for a week of playing with babies. We can get up when we damn well choose.”

A drowsy grunt from Ray. “I’ll remind you of that. The next time you say we need to do the mountain trail with twelve hours of walking a day.”

“Y’know we’d have done it in eight. You can’t compare that, anyway, what I said when I didn’t have a husband sharing my bed. Makes everything different about waking up.”

“Yeah.” A drawl of pure contentment, as he stretched his arm around Bodie’s chest and burrowed closer. “Makes every day a holiday.”

In the end, they got up shortly after seven. Bodie did circuits of the walkway while Ray went to the bakery, and he declared over breakfast on the balcony that he didn’t need the wheelchair anymore, not to get around town. Yes, he still needed rests, but they could plan routes with benches or low walls. He’d be fine.

They tested this out with the visit to Yata’s shop, taking the park all the way east, with time for photographs, and allowing extra rest before the trek south into the streets. Yata was delighted to see them, insistent of making *kenit*, and showed them some of the pieces that West had worked on. He was very pleased with West: the boy listened, and he was steady. Yata asked if West was enjoying his holiday, but they hadn’t heard from him.

The hospital was seven blocks to the west, one street closer to the beach, and they decided to play it safe and go back through the park. The team were surprised to see him without the chair but they couldn’t argue with his results. They still wanted to see him the next day, but if he showed the same progress, they’d only ask to see him at the start and end of the next week.

They had an early and slow lunch at the top of West’s building, and when they got home they found Bodie’s message-light blinking, and also the one for the phone.

Ullis had called, to ask if Ray would be keeping his appointment for that evening, and if so, whether it would make sense for Bodie to attend too. They’d forgotten all about the appointment. And they had plans that afternoon for several hours of walking the length of the beach, and were looking forward to choosing a couple of mild curry dishes for dinner and then watching a horror film. They could make the appointment, and, yes, it did make sense for Bodie to come, but they weren’t ready yet to take that much time away from home. Maybe the next afternoon, though, if Ullis had an appointment free? But if Ray went to the station to fetch his car, there was the risk of bumping into people and was he ready for that? He needed to talk to his boss first. He’d call him at home that evening. And first thing the next morning they’d get the bus into Harding to collect Bodie’s car. Ray called Ullis back, and within a few minutes they’d arranged an appointment for three the next day.

Bodie’s message was from Turon, who said he’d never been so happy about anything in his life. He called Bodie “my dear cousin” twice, and also “my precious friend”, and Bodie

blushed, and thought back wondering what he'd done to earn this. He'd reply in the evening, with some photos, while Ray was talking to his boss.

* * * * *

As soon as he'd answered his boss's questions about Bodie's recovery, Ray had apologised for lying to him, and then had explained the truth in much the same way as he had at the house. But the boss knew about the counselling, which the others hadn't, and when he'd commented that it was no surprise that Bodie had found it hard to adjust, Ray had hesitated for a few seconds and then admitted that the problems weren't with Bodie, they were with himself.

"I couldn't have him thinking it was you. Not any longer. So I said that being married to you, the way it had happened, had made things even more complicated for me with my family. I was having times of being difficult to live with."

"Which wouldn't surprise him either."

"Not for a second. And he won't ask any questions."

"So do we go ahead and collect the car tomorrow?"

A shake of the head. "Let's leave it for a few days. Let him get the word out. We were thinking it might be an idea for the team to meet you before I go back to work. Have dinner in town. Or invite them here."

"Wow, I – Yeah, I can do that. When?"

"Let's have him ask them." So Ray called his boss back, said they couldn't do At Pontal or At Kamaran, but any other day next week would be fine, including the weekend.

* * * * *

Ullis asked Bodie to please consider himself hugged. ~As Malun pointed out, I have become unusually involved with your situation. More than my own counsellor would ever advise. My *iskolpa* thinks a hug would be appropriate under the circumstances but...~ Shaking his head. ~We don't deliver shirts. We don't hug.~

Bodie grinned and said that worked for him. He and Ray sat close together on the couch, with his arm around Ray and Ray's hand on his thigh, and they explained all that had happened since Bodie had woken up.

After Ray had described the phone call with his boss, he shook his head and said, ~Everyone's taken it so easily. Shocked when they hear it happened overnight, but...~ A shrug. ~By the end no one seems to be worrying about – Well, about any of it.~

~You do explain very well that you're happy.~

~Yes, but I think I explained that just as well to the other counsellors, and they hated the thought of the two of us together.~

Ullis nodded slowly as he thought about that. ~The difference may be that you didn't tell your friends that you were wearing Udom Kol at the time it happened. Or describe your own thoughts about the Mabein. Because you also explain those very /?/. Once the counsellors had those images in their heads, I think they would find them hard to ignore.~

Ray looked very reassured by that, and also strangely proud. ~So it might go that well with everyone. Y'know, it'll be fun to have Bodie meet the team. I hope they decide to visit us. See everything that has me rushing home.~

Bodie reached up to ruffle Ray's curls, then tilted his head at Ullis. ~He means the balcony.~

~Of course.~ A small smile, then he turned serious. ~Ray, what's happening with the Mabein? It's quite a big step you've taken: sleeping together. And allowing yourselves to /?/ each other. Has there been any reaction from them?~

Ray shook his head. ~I feel as if something's changed for me. Something important. But I don't know what. Of course Bodie's still an animal. But they must see how much he can be trusted. And I think they were truly shocked when he got so ill.~

Ullis frowned. ~You think they're letting you sleep together because they feel sorry for you?~

Ray looked at a point in mid-air and took a long time to reply. ~I don't think it's that. I feel different. As if...~ A shrug. ~All my bones have changed colour or something. And I don't know what that means. Not on any level. Not for me, not for the Mabein. So I'll watch carefully. Listen carefully. Until I find out.~

~We can talk more about that next week. Do you still want the weekly sessions on At Kamaran? I admit it will feel strange, no longer having the phone calls with Bodie about your flatmate /?/. I was looking forward to seeing what Ray came up with about Etto to use on your holiday.~

They all laughed, then Ray said, ~Yes, I'll still have the weekly sessions. Just me, though. Unless we reach a point where we obviously need to include Bodie.~

Bodie nodded, fine with that. As they were leaving, he said, ~Please say hello to your *iskolpa* from me. I know he's got involved too.~ A glance at Ray for confirmation. ~We appreciate it.~

Ullis gave a delighted smile. ~I will. Thank you.~

They decided that they would stop at the police station to collect Ray's car after all. It was four o'clock. Enough people would know by now, and Ray was sure he could cope with anyone who didn't. They got the half four ferry, and spent the journey walking the decks, concentrating particularly on the stairs.

They found a message from Ray's boss when they arrived home. The team would like to visit them next At Oba Nyon. They'd arrive at seven, and plan to leave at nine.

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They got up with the alarm on An Embrun, and went down to the gym for an hour with the weights. Bodie had always ignored the running machines before, but now he was vowing to be on one of them by the end of the day. Maybe only for ten minutes at first. But he trusted his body. Two, three days, and he'd be out around the coast and through the moors. OK, maybe around the coast and back, now that Ray reminded him the *soragons* had started having their cubs.

The moors were still OK if you had enough people, though. Plassen and Shilda dropped in for a pot of *kenit* at ten, which they both still thought of as “conversation session time”, even though West had been working at Yata's on An Embrun for two long months now. When they heard about Bodie's exercise plan they asked if they could join the morning's walk. Four would normally be enough to put off any *soragon*, but what if Bodie had to stop and rest? They decided the cliffs would be better. They had all the steps up, too, and regular places to sit, and the length of the walk was more flexible.

Plassen and Shilda still wanted to try out *pulsonranas* before Bodie's party. They wouldn't invite themselves for lunch on An Uraba, but they'd drop in for a drink before lunch, and they'd keep the next At Pontal free, because they would put money on Bodie being fit enough to fight by then.

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They had no visitors on An Udom Kol. For their morning walk they went to the prison peninsula, and that went well enough that after lunch on the island they drove to Antoness and walked home along the cliffs.

During the walk they discussed going away somewhere for a couple of days to get at least some real holiday. It would have to be after Bodie's morning check-up on At Mordez and before *pulsonranas* on At Pontal. Something that would let Bodie keep up the exercise, though day-long hikes carrying a tent would probably be too much. That place on the lake that they'd been to in the autumn would be just right for types of exercise. But Ray still couldn't face staying in a hotel. And he had wanted to use the holiday to take Bodie somewhere new.

But right now it seemed more important to choose something they knew they liked. That hotel couldn't be the only place to stay in the area. A cabin would be great. A room in someone's house should be fine, too. Just no reception desk, no room numbers. No long anonymous corridors.

As soon as they got into town they went to the library. There were several groups of cabins in the area, but the ones on the lake were fully booked. They could stay in a small forest about half a mile from the lake. It was a mile from the hotel by foot, or four by road. They had to take their own bedding and towels.

Bodie shrugged, and nodded. “Sounds just different enough. We can sit and look at water any day.”

Ray saw his point, and they booked the cabin from At Mordez to At Pontal; they should easily be home in time to give West a lift to *pulsonranas*, if he didn't want to drive in himself.

After they'd made the booking, Bodie drove them back to Antoness to pick up Ray's car. They'd send West a message to let him know about the holiday; it'd be easier than trying to phone him at Clover. Ray wrote that message while Bodie went to send the day's message to Turon, which this time involved explaining that the next message would be the last for several days.

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Ray had booked a table at the top of West's building for one o'clock, and everyone arrived at their flat between twelve and a quarter past. Malun brought six bottles of *toroquil*, all chilled, though he didn't expect them to drink more than three before lunch. They'd put Ray's quilt back on the single bed, but kept Ray's toiletries in the second bathroom; they'd be the ones to point this out when they were giving the tour, admitting (with a grin) that they'd found it prevented arguments.

The boys were nervous of Malun at first, but Malun must be used to that. He was casually pleasant to them, as friends of Bodie's, and then seemed to leave it to the boys' other friends to calm them down. The boys were fascinated by Bodie's music, and the material for his course stacked in the study, and the photographs of the places where his unit had trained. They asked if he had anything else from his time as a soldier, and he immediately shook his head.

Malun said that West was having a good holiday. He'd only seen him once, when he'd had dinner and spent the night at Clover on An Embrun, but it had been a particularly good dinner. He hadn't heard from anyone at Clover since, so Bodie and Ray's holiday was news to him. Most of the Dishna visitors had been to that lake at least once, so they got a lot of extra suggestions.

They'd decided during the meal that they would do the walk through the moors afterwards. The boys took the lead, eagerly looking out for *soragons* and spotting rapid movement several times (they were sure). Early on, while they were rounding the coast, Malun had hung back with Bodie and Ray, and asked if Ullis Hanvert had got them started on any new nonsense since they'd got home. They laughed hard enough to make everyone else turn to stare, then Ray did what they'd agreed and told Malun that they'd found a way to share a bed together. "Not the way you're thinking, not like a normal couple. And Ullis didn't have anything to do with it, it was all Bodie's work. But it's good."

Malun looked impressed. "So you don't need separate beds anymore?"

They shook their heads, then Ray said, "But we do need separate quilts," and at Malun's quietly baffled expression, they cracked up again.

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They set off in Bodie's car immediately after the check-up at the hospital. They collected the keys to the cabin, a map and a flashlight from the grocery store in the nearest village, and were in and putting the beers in the fridge by three. The cabin was raised off the ground, with a small deck at the back. They had tea first, with Ray's nutty biscuits, and agreed that this might be better than the lake. There would be people on the lake, other cabins, but here there was nothing else in sight – and their landlord had even made sure they had a flashlight in case they wanted to walk to the hotel or into the village for dinner. The trees around them were very tall, and while there were small things in them, scurrying around and obviously caring deeply about something very urgent, that was all far enough above them to make the quiet down by the ground seem even deeper.

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They'd been planning to go back to Parass to pick West up, but in the end they called him at Yata's at lunchtime, while they were still in the mountains, and arranged to meet him off the half six ferry.

He'd had a very good holiday and had some lovely pictures of the girls to show them, but it was good to be back, especially with Bodie well enough for *pulsonranas* so soon, and he was really looking forward to seeing Turon on An Udom Kol.

Plassen and Shilda both found it surprisingly upsetting to get shot, but having the team instantly take care of them redoubled their loyalty and they came back from recuperating with a thirst for revenge. Shilda thought she would play next week, too, and they'd both definitely be playing at Bodie's party.

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On the morning of At Kamaran, they played a game of *gulshor* for the first time in many months. Bodie ordered Ray not to go easy on him and so lost quite badly, but at least he got to see Ray in full flight. They went up to the flat still in their kit, kissed and gasped for a while against the front-door, and then Ray closed his eyes, pulled Bodie's top off with one motion, and immediately turned on his heel and was heading down the corridor to his bathroom.

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For At Oba Nyon they decided to make a big police interrogator's pie, and an equally big bowl of a filling salad with small beans and roast vegetables, with toppings of yoghurt and a sharp fruit sauce. Both could be eaten from bowls, sitting anywhere or standing, and both could be prepared ahead of time. And of course the name of the pie would be good to get people talking. The dining table could easily sit everyone, but it would be better to let people wander around, and that was the main reason the team was making the trip, wasn't it?

Bodie already knew the names, from the stories that Ray had told, but Ray had never given any idea of what they looked like. Bodie just knew how long they'd been with the force, their reproductive status, and how they'd impressed or amused or annoyed Ray from day to day. They arrived in two cars, with the two who were parents driving: Kisa was the mother of eight-year old twin boys, and Tashmor the father of a three-year-old girl, with another girl due in four months' time. They accepted a beer in the first round of drinks, but then switched to water and fruit juice.

For most of that first round, they were all wearing near-identical expressions of friendly curiosity, but they got jolted out of that when Sten, the youngest woman, asked Bodie about his family, and Bodie explained about running away from home. They were shocked, but fascinated. Ray's boss, Dixtan, said, ~So they don't even know you're here?~

Bodie shook his head, and Ray said, ~No one on Earth knew. Until Bodie got sick and we had to get their help. Men can't marry other men there. There was no way to explain to them what had happened. So Bodie just...~ An extravagant shrug. ~Didn't go back to his team in the negotiation room. We made it look as if he'd stowed away.~

Now the expressions were open-mouthed amazement and incredulity, and then Uviva, the oldest woman (with more police experience even than Dixtan), burst out laughing

and said, ~That's exactly what I'd expect of Ray. Bodie, you've no idea how much I've been wanting to thank you for saving us from listening to Ray's /?!/ arguments with Gavio.~ And everyone else laughed and nodded, and the questions and comments got much more interesting.

The food was a big success, with everyone asking for the recipe for the pie, and so was the red wine and the coffee. Every inch of the flat got admired, it felt like, though they spent most time on the balcony. It would be too much of a scramble, in the end, to catch the nine o'clock ferry, so they had another round of *kenit* and liqueurs, and got the half nine instead. Obviously, there was going to be some world-class gossiping done on that ferry trip.

"D'you think it'll have got to Gavio by now? Would Plassen tell him?"

Ray had been wondering that. He couldn't see Plassen making a point of telling Gavio. But maybe if Gavio asked if he'd seen them.

"Would he spread it all over town again?"

A long sigh and a shrug. "It would just make him look like an asshole. That's rarely stopped him but I'll check with Plassen. Maybe I need to go and see him. Definitely on my own."

Bodie raised an eyebrow. "Couldn't hurt to apologise for that message."

A grimace, which might have been guilt or reluctance, Bodie couldn't tell, but then a nod. "Yeah. That'd probably work. I'll check with Plassen."

Chapter 31

Turon's ship got into orbit at three in the morning, and they'd agreed that he'd arrive at the flat at eight. This time Ray got back from the bakery well beforehand, and they were both waiting in the doorway to the balcony when Turon appeared a couple of feet behind the couch, facing the TV.

Turon's tears of relief were as noisy and painful as Ray's had been, and Bodie murmured to calm him, the same as he had with Ray. Ray came over, too, and stroked Turon's shoulder and kissed his cheek, and made his own soothing sounds. Turon's sobbing got worse for a while, but he pressed his face against Ray's at the same time as he clutched Bodie even tighter, so it looked like they were doing the right thing.

Gradually he recovered, and then stepped back and stood blinking, and swallowing, and smiling, and wiping his fingers across his face. "I smell coffee. And those good pastries. I'll go and wash my face, and then I'll join you on the balcony."

"Use our bathroom, it's closer." Ray pointed him towards the open door. He'd see Ray's quilt, spread out on the far side of the bed. For Turon, they weren't going to hide anything, though they weren't necessarily going to answer every single question.

It had been over nine months since he'd last had coffee, and he vowed with every mouthful of the first mug that he was not going to let that happen again. They talked about the holiday in the cabin, the visit from Ray's team, the day's conversation session which would have both Plassen and Shilda, and now Turon, as he immediately invited himself along.

Sasha was enjoying the work on her new ship, but was missing him. She wasn't in the mood for a girlfriend, though maybe she would be by the time she got to Skina Station, in three weeks' time. Hulsa had always warned Turon that he didn't do well with messages; the enthusiasm was obvious, but they were so short and random and disjointed, and nothing at all like the real experience of a conversation with the man.

He'd been hearing every day from the doctors on the ship, usually via Shaffan, the head of the Hailin team, but he'd written to introduce himself to all of them, and each of the British doctors had got back to him at least once with questions or requests. He'd introduced himself as the brother of Bodie's husband, because the human doctors did now know about Hailin biology and about Ray. They were starting to adjust to both parts of the news, he thought, but he didn't want to talk about their reactions right now because some of it had made him very angry.

Bodie shrugged. "They've got another five weeks to get here. Take as long as you want."

But Ray did have an immediate question. "Are you saying that they know who I am? That it's Ray Bakkel? And the Hailin team knows it too?"

Turon nodded. "They're under orders to keep it secret inside the fleet. They were offended that we thought they needed telling."

Bodie and Turon went over to West's flat a quarter of an hour before the conversation session, so West and Turon would have some time to hug and catch up. Some of Turon's luggage from the ship had already arrived at West's flat, including the large and heavy box with his *orbarcho*. Turon opened the box to check on the instrument, and Plassen

gave a low whistle when he arrived and saw it, and so the first part of the lesson was a rapid conversation about music, while the rest was mainly about *pulsonranas*, including a re-enactment of that week's battle with a full cast of origami animals.

West had plans with friends for the afternoon but would come around for dinner, which of course was going to be kedgeree. They took Turon to the prison peninsula, where they spent twice as long as usual because Turon could not be hurried through a garden. He hadn't had any breakthroughs with his garden projects in the last year, but no disasters, either. He'd got better at designing for maintenance.

They went into Harding to buy the fish for dinner, and to point the college out to Turon; he didn't want to see the hospital, or the house. They needed some vegetables and herbs, too, and decided to try the twins' shop. Dot was working that day, and she yelped when she saw Bodie, and rushed over to meet him. She and Salcha had got the word around to everyone on the course, and they'd be so pleased to see him back on At Mordez. Was he going to be well enough to have the party? He looked well. Bodie told her about the arena booking and she did a little dance, and then she asked what they were looking for in the shop. They introduced Turon and explained what they needed for dinner, and left with all of that and also some spring steaks to grill for lunch the next day and everything to go with them, because she said the steaks were so good right now, it would be a crime to miss them.

They got home around five, then Bodie and Turon sat outside on the bench with some beers, while Ray put some music on and got busy changing the beds and doing laundry.

"You know you can sleep over here whenever you want. You'll have the spare bed to yourself now. I'm guessing Malun told you. And everything about..." A shrug. "What happened at midwinter. How we were living after that."

Turon nodded. "He didn't tell me immediately about what you'd tried at midwinter. Only once you'd got home from the hospital. All I can say is..." A sharp sigh. "You must be so good at being happy together. Through all that. I wish it was something I could learn and use in my work. But – It's just what you are."

Bodie smiled and nodded, and they drank in silence for a while. Ray came out to tend to the plants, and when he was checking on the trellis, Turon said, "Bodie says I can come and use your spare bed when West gets sick of me."

Ray laughed. "Of course you can. As long as you do your share of buying beer and going to the bakery. And as long as you're quick with the bathroom."

Turon looked thoughtful, then said, "I might spend the second half of the week here, and the weekends with West." For the first half of the week he'd be at Clover, working to prepare for the doctors.

Ray said that sounded fine. When the laundry finished, Turon helped with hanging it out, and then they all started on the cooking.

The phone rang ten minutes into the first ever episode of "The Six Million Dollar Man". It was a number they didn't recognise, which turned out to be Annis. She'd only just heard Bodie's message because she'd been away on holiday. He'd been starting to recover when she'd left, but it wasn't until she heard the message that she knew it was

obviously OK for her to call. That was wonderful that he'd be back next week. How could they help him catch up?

She was impressed that he'd already got the notes from his group and had done all that part of the work. If he could stay an hour late for three or four evenings, she could teach him what he'd missed in the workshop. They could start on At Mordez, if that would suit him.

~The quicker I catch up, the better. Thank you.~

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They spent the morning of An Uraba on their own, getting the sort of exercise that Turon wasn't interested in, including the run along the cliffs. In the afternoon they took Turon for lunch at the far end of the island, and then they went for a walk on a part of the west coast where Bodie and West had never been before, across from the long beach on the mainland. Bodie's wristband beeped during the walk, and when they got home he found that Malun had sent him a photograph of a handwritten letter in English. He recognised the signature immediately: George Cowley's.

Malun's message said that he'd received this from the base, and he and Bodie should talk on the phone or in person about how he should respond.

"Dear Admiral Vasmar,

Thank you for keeping me informed about the progress of William Bodie's illness. As you will imagine, I am very relieved to hear that he has recovered so well.

Mister Darat at the Hailin base has told me that I should address any questions about William Bodie to you. I have also been told that he joined an important Hailin family, and I deduce that he is currently on Pen Embrun. May I ask you when he joined this family, and how, and what his situation has been on Pen Embrun? Please be assured that I will keep any information entirely confidential, as I have everything connected with his disappearance.

Your sincerely,

Major George Cowley, Controller, CI5"

Bodie groaned, and clutched his head, and then shook himself, turned off the computer, and went through to the living-room to phone Malun and tell him that he'd write the answer to Cowley himself.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I owe him that. I'll do it by hand, so he'll know it's really me. Might take me a week or more, though, to figure out what to say."

"Should I reply and say that you'll write to him within two weeks?"

Bodie hummed and hawed, then said, "Yeah, that's OK. I'll get it done before my birthday. Though don't put it like that to him. Two weeks is fine. Thanks."

After he hung up he threw himself back on the couch and closed his eyes, and he stayed like that until Turon pressed a cold beer-bottle against the palm of his hand.

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By seven o'clock on At Laura Var, Bodie was caught up with the workshop techniques that he'd missed. Annis and Sona had both stayed to help him on all three evenings, and he took them for a drink afterwards to thank them.

They'd heard about his birthday party. People had mentioned it quite a lot during the week that he'd missed, and there had been plenty to overhear this week, too. They were very amused by the idea of the whole class rampaging through a forest.

~I was going to ask you, some time before the holiday, whether it was something you'd want to come to. You and the rest of the staff. I wasn't sure how you'd feel about...~ He shrugged. ~Going to a party with all of the kids.~

Annis nodded then waved a hand around the bar. ~If it was a drink like this, we'd /?/ accept – and then leave after half an hour so we don't get in the way. But your party -~

~Doesn't have a half-hour exit ramp.~ They laughed, and agreed with him that it was a terrible mistake in the design.

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Turon arrived back in Parass at eight on the morning of At Pontal. He'd just done a morning's work in the main hospital in Monor, and would be happy with coffee and toast for his lunch.

He joined Bodie for the morning's lesson. West did have something prepared, but Bodie mentioned the drink from the night before, which led to the problem of how to start your first letter to your ex-boss (and of course Turon had told West about that), and to other types of problems with bosses and friendship, which, as Bakkels, they'd thought a lot about.

They discussed West's plan for the afternoon's lesson, and decided that Turon could take care of it just as well as West. While he was in town, Turon could do all of the afternoons' lessons. The change would be good for all of them. West would go and ask Yata about making those children's toys, and see if they needed any kind of help at the library.

Turon collected his *orbarcho* and some clothes from West's flat, and on the way home they stopped in the building's bedding shop to buy a quilt for the spare bed. In fact, they forgot about West's afternoon lesson almost immediately, though they did keep to Hass Embrun right until Ray picked them all up at the metro station for *pulsonranas*. With Turon, Bodie could go into the full details of why he hadn't got past the first word with this letter, when all he was prepared to discuss in front of West was the mind-blowing gulf between "Dear George" and "Dear Major Cowley".

In turn, Turon told him more about how the human doctors on the ship were adjusting to the idea of him and Ray. They now understood just how many of the crew on the ship were queer, including Hordin in the Hailin team, and also that the queer Hailin were as likely to be married as anyone else. And since they could see that the ship functioned perfectly well, that everyone did their jobs and ate together and went to the same weekend parties, they were making the expected progress with accepting this as normal, at least for Hailin. The woman doctor, Alison Chambers, had written to Turon early on, asking if it was really true that Ray's family had never minded that he had sex with

men, and when he'd written back he'd told her about Sasha, too (including Sasha-and-Ferros), and he'd mentioned Hulsa. Since then they'd been having an interesting general discussion about jealousy, and the examples she gave for people she'd met on the ship soon started including some queers.

But all those queers were Hailin, and when it came to Bodie the doctors still hadn't got past the idea that someone queer enough to be married to a man had somehow managed to get into the SAS, to get into CI5. Apparently they kept on looking at the photos on his file, and then shaking their heads. Turon was braced the whole time for Bodie to get angry and upset, but Bodie could only shrug and say, ~It's how we think.~

Talking about Cowley in Hass Embrun turned out to make the letter easier to think about. Whenever he'd started out a sentence for himself in English, it had felt like being on a parade march down a tunnel, the words jerking forward in a rigid line, impossible to miss the signalling of the point in the distance where they were all headed. But in Hass Embrun, the words didn't feel that pull to fall into lock-step. He could push the ideas around, flip them up, see them from very different angles. Tomorrow afternoon he'd shut himself in the study for an hour, see if he could get all the way through a first version. Probably show it to Turon. Maybe to Ray. Keep on kicking it around in Hass Embrun until he had something that didn't make him cringe. It would be harder work than any part of his recuperation, but now he really could see himself sending Malun the letter in time for his birthday.

Both Plassen and Shilda came to *pulsonranas*, but it became obvious that Plassen and Turon would have to be separated, after they were found talking about music (with wide gestures, and even some singing), when they should have been grimly focussed on keeping watch. Even when Turon was assigned to the steadying influence of West and Shilda, he kept getting distracted by the many possibilities for garden-design that he saw in their battlefield, and he only started to shape up once he was put in charge of getting the wounded to the field hospital. On the ferry, he and Plassen soon got back into gesticulating and singing, and by the time Parass came into view, Turon had arranged to have dinner with Plassen on An Udom Kol and to join the next rehearsal for Plassen's main group.

It had been a long day for Turon, and he went to bed as soon as they got home. No, thank you, he wouldn't come and watch them play *gulshor* at six in the morning, but he'd have the coffee ready when they got back.

The doors to their bedroom were both open, and they heard when Turon finished in the bathroom and closed the door of his room. Ray took a drink from the beer they were sharing then said, "It's good to have him staying, but it's gonna take me a couple of days to want to do more than *tassuram* while he's here."

"I know what you mean. Course he's gonna guess we've got a sex thing going on with the showers, and I'm fine with that but – Yeah, let's take a couple of days to see how he sleeps. We'll just shower in the morning, after *gulshor*."

Ray gave a soft groan. "You had to say that out loud? Make me think about –" He briefly closed his eyes then shook his head. "Now we won't even be able to *tassuram*. We'll have to have the quilt between us right from the start."

"Go straight to the goodnight kiss?" Making a big show of trying to stay positive.

“One kiss. Two seconds, maximum.”

Bodie’s turn to groan. “Damn, you’re going all out with teaching me a lesson. Gotta keep my mouth shut.”

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For lunch, Bodie made omelettes while Turon made a crunchy salad, then they took a walk along the beach, and then Bodie shut himself in the study while Turon listened to some of the records he’d picked out for Bodie in London. Bodie wasn’t ready to show Turon the letter immediately, so they skimmed the day’s news, found the stories that Bodie understood least, and spent a couple of hours picking them to pieces. After that Bodie was ready to go back to the study for another hour, and then it was time for a beer out on the bench. They decided quickly on which curry to cook for dinner, and then Turon wanted to know all about Ray’s colleagues and about Ullis.

When Bodie went to get another couple of beers, he also fetched the latest version of the letter. Turon took a long mouthful before he picked up the sheet from the bench – bracing himself, it looked like – but then in the first seconds he let out a spluttering laugh of surprise, and each laugh after that was less of surprise and more of simple amusement. As he handed the letter back, he also raised his bottle in salute, and Bodie grinned and clinked his own bottle against Turon’s.

~It’s good. It’s obvious how much you like him and respect him. The apology is real. I think he’ll feel comfortable reading this. He’ll recognise you in it. He’ll want to write back.~

~What about what I said about the family? I mean, Malun’s going to see this. How much is he going to mind?~

Turon considered that seriously, then shook his head. ~That won’t make him laugh, no, but it’s true. Where you and Ray are concerned, it’s entirely true. And we all know that your Major Cowley will keep everything to himself.~

Bodie smiled and nodded, then laughed in relief and finally allowed himself a drink from his new bottle. ~It’s not ready yet. There’s some other stuff I need to work out how to fit in. I’ll do another hour tomorrow. Show it to Ray at the weekend.~

Turon was very impressed with the *felgran* pickle and decided to start a batch of his own the next day, so it would be ready before he headed back to the fleet. He’d never seen “Jaws” and watching that meant that Ray was able to catch up immediately when he got back from his session with Ullis.

That night all three of them went to bed at the same time. Bodie and Ray sat on the side of the bed with their arms around each other’s waists, waiting for the sound of Turon’s door closing.

When the sound came, they raised their eyebrows at each other, then Ray immediately said, “I discussed it with Ullis. He asked what I’d have done while I was with Gavio, if Turon was next door. And I said we wouldn’t have had sex: it’s only three days; we’d just have met somewhere else during the day. So why do I feel the day can’t possibly end until I’ve felt you hard?” His voice had suddenly got rougher.

“We’re gonna do it?” Supposed to come out as a simple question, but no, that was naked eagerness.

For a few seconds, Ray’s expression was unreadable. Then he slowly reached up and touched the tips of two fingers to Bodie’s lips. “We’re gonna do it even more quietly than if we were on the balcony.”

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After he’d turned out the light and they’d settled together as closely as the quilt would allow, Bodie said, “Y’know, I think for tomorrow we should try something different. I mean really different. Almost crazy.”

“I’m listening.” Very wary indeed.

“It’s time for me to be on top. For you to sleep in the bed. I wanna get to walk out of the bathroom and find you already between the sheets. Knowing you’re almost stripped down in there. Just briefs and a T-shirt.”

Ray was tutting and sighing and making reluctant noises. “Too right that’s crazy. That’s... That’s downright shocking. I mean, I like to think I’m broad-minded but you don’t just spring something like that on a man.” He sounded like he could carry on like that all night, but Bodie was already laughing. By the time they fell asleep, they’d almost managed to agree on which T-shirt Ray would wear the next night. Probably the pine-green one. Probably.

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On An Embrun they took Turon to the mainland for a walk along the beach, getting back home just after West finished work so Turon could immediately move his things to West’s flat. They wished they had time to take Turon into the mountains, because he’d loved their description of the cabin in the forest. Though if they set off really early, they’d get enough time in the area to make the drive worthwhile. Not next weekend, though, because of Bodie’s party. Or they could even book a cabin for a weekend, if there was one free. Ray would have to go to the library again in the morning; he hadn’t kept the information from the last time.

As good as it was to have Turon staying, it felt like luxury to have the place to themselves again. Bodie had meant to spend another hour on the letter before they started on dinner and then maybe show it to Ray once they’d had a couple of drinks, but Ray felt he was owed an hour’s worth of *tassuram* on the couch, and he made his case very persuasively. The letter could wait until tomorrow.

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Ray went to the library when Bodie went to the conversation session, and he dropped in during the session to say that the only weekend free for that same cabin was in three weeks’ time, and should he book that? That was the weekend before the ship arrived, but Turon thought he could get everything ready the week before, if he spent most of that week in Monor. They could drive up on At Oba Nyon as soon as Ray finished work, and West would probably join them on An Udom Kol, although he might manage An Embrun if Yata let him leave early. They wished they could invite Plassen and Shilda too, but the cabin only had three beds.

Ray read stretched out on the bench while Bodie worked on the letter, though in fact he was dozing when Bodie came out with beers and the latest version of the letter. Bodie pressed the cold bottle against his neck, and he woke up with a start.

He laughed even harder at the letter than Turon had, though he was frowning as he handed it back. ~You couldn't make me sound more impressive? More steady?~

~What, you want me to lie?~ Which got him swatted three times over the head with the letter before he managed to grab it back. ~I think you sound impressively flexible.~ And Ray snatched at the sheet but for once Bodie was too quick. He managed to protect the letter through a chase up and down the balcony, and around and around the flat, and when he was finally cornered he pulled off the decisive dirty move of folding the letter up and stuffing it down his trousers.

Much later, when they were out on the balcony watching the night sky, Ray asked to see the letter again. He had some suggestions for small changes in the order, and some questions about the choice of English words when Bodie did the translation, which would be after breakfast the next morning. And they'd make it a quick, early breakfast, because Bodie was impatient now to see if he could convince himself as well as he'd convinced Ray.

* * * * *

“Dear George,

I know you'll hate me calling you George, but for what I'm about to tell you, it's easier if I imagine you already glaring at me for one of my predictable bits of bare-face cheek.

First off, I haven't joined the Hailin mafia. It's not that kind of family. Though when my husband Ray told me that his family was obscenely rich and obscenely powerful, believe me that was the first thought that entered my mind. Not that I knew he was Hailin back then. I still thought he was something with the Foreign Office.

But just the day after that, I found out he was Hailin and we got married, and that afternoon the Hailin arranged for me to disappear. Which does make it sound like the mafia again, but I was the one who insisted. I never thought of myself as queer and I didn't want you or anyone else to know what had happened. I'm really sorry for dumping you and CI5 in the shit like that, and for worrying you, but I couldn't think of any other way out. And now I think of it, if I had let the Hailin make the big wedding announcement, I'd've embarrassed CI5 a hell of a lot worse, though I don't expect you to thank me for that.

Second off (or maybe it's third, fourth or fifth by now), it turned out Ray wasn't exaggerating about his family. They're the nearest thing the Hailin have to a royal family, but it works really differently here and people take them for granted most of the time. But not enough for Ray, though, who was so bloody-minded and rebellious he stormed off to join the police force.

He has a small flat in a line of buildings all shaped like pyramids, and the city where he works is an hour away on a very ordinary ferry – in case you were imagining hover-cars everywhere. They do have cars a lot like our cars, though, and I'm a few months in to a course to become a car mechanic. I had to learn enough of their language before I could think of taking the course, and that kept me busy full-time, starting the day after I left.

It was bloody hard work, but I had Ray's family helping me, every step of the way. You can probably tell I'm happy here, which is thanks to the family, and Ray, and my friends here.

I don't know if this is a proper answer to the questions you had for Admiral Vasmar. Or maybe it's more than you wanted to know. One last thing before I sign off is that the admiral is Ray's uncle, and he adopted me as his son a few days after I married Ray. So I'm known as Bodie Vasmar now.

Again, I'm sorry for the way I left. You were a great boss, and the thing I miss most about Earth is working for you.

I hope you'll write back.

Bodie Vasmar"

* * * * *

Bodie called Malun to tell him the letter was ready, but Lenneva answered the phone and said that Malun wouldn't be home for at least four hours. Bodie told Lenneva that now Turon had a batch of *felgran* pickle on the go, too, and they joked about turning it into a business. Then Lenneva asked what food they were planning to serve at Bodie's party, and Bodie admitted they were struggling over that.

~We'll be out playing *pulsonranas* all afternoon. So it has to be something we can prepare in the morning. Or the day before. And it's a lot of people.~

~Yes, that's why I wondered. Would you like me to take care of the food for you? I know Malun can spare me.~

~That'd be fantastic! Would you bring everything, or do it all here?~

~I wouldn't bring anything except my knives. I'd arrive in the morning. I'll need to know what you and West have available in your kitchens, though. And obviously we'd need to agree on the type of food. And the budget.~

~And you'd stay for the party?~

~For at least the first hour, I think. I will not stay for the washing-up.~ They laughed, and arranged that Lenneva would send Bodie some suggestions for the menu before the end of the day, and Bodie would send him pictures of all of the drawers and cupboards in both kitchens.

They decided to take the pictures immediately. When they went to West's flat, Bodie took the letter to show Turon, and Turon said he could give it to Malun at work the next day. Turon had thoroughly enjoyed his evening at Plassen's. They were having dinner again on At Pontal (missing *pulsonranas*, yes), and the group's next rehearsal was the afternoon after the party.

Lenneva suggested three types of salad, and samosas, and little pies, and fruit and tiny cakes – and bread and cheese and meats, because that's what everyone expected. It sounded great to Bodie and Ray, but they wondered if they could have pizza as well. After they had replied to Lenneva and sent him the pictures, Bodie sent a message to Malun about the letter. He didn't hear back from Malun that day, which might mean that Malun got home late, or that Malun knew the letter would be fine.

Chapter 32

By the end of college on At Pontal, after what felt like five hundred phone calls and messages, Bodie had everyone from the college group assigned to a car for the ride to and from the arena. They were all getting the bus into Parass for the one o'clock ferry, Bodie, Ray, Plassen, Shilda, Buka and Gamlan were taking their cars, and all of the teachers would come to meet the ferry; they were leaving West's car for Lenneva. It would have been so much easier just to hire a coach for the day, but that idea didn't occur to any of them until the day after everything was finalised.

Bodie's wristband beeped just before six on the morning of At Kamaran, which turned out to be Ward wishing him a happy birthday. He didn't find that out until gone seven, though, since Ray and Turon had ordered him to take a half-hour lie-in so they could get everything set up for his birthday breakfast, which involved a lot of whispering and shuffling and clattering in the living-room and out on the balcony.

There were pastries, of course, and flowers on the table, and glasses of a special type of *toroquil* with a slight fizz to it. Ray had bought him the next two items in his list of car maintenance tools, and a membership of a famous club in Dishna that built cars to compete in various competitions. Turon had also bought him a membership: to a beer club that sent you a case of twelve special beers every three weeks. While Bodie was happily leafing through the information pack for the beer club, Turon got up, saying he had something to fetch, and came back with a long thin box which he laid on the carpet and knelt to open. Bodie thought at first it must be some musical instrument and he was about to hear the Hailin birthday song, but when Turon carefully raised the lid, both Bodie and Ray gave grunts of surprise: there were three paintings, each about a foot square, and each with a different balance of silver, yellow, black and deep red. There were maybe hints of a landscape, but it was a landscape on fire.

"Ward thought that these would look interesting next to 'Mar Mar Insoor'." Turon nodded at the black-and-copper painting. Bodie hadn't realised before that it had a name. "I collected them from the vault on At Rahden. He says you can hang them in any position you like. That's part of their point. They don't have to be in a line like this. Or even on the same wall."

Bodie looked at Ray, who seemed surprised, still, but with no hint of his usual prickliness with anything involving Ward. "I say we do put them next to the other one. They'll all look good. Don't you reckon?"

"Yeah. Ward's right. I think we're gonna need Plassen's eye, though."

"Plassen's got some ideas. I showed him a photo last night." Turon was smiling broadly, which looked about a third relief.

West had made Bodie a set of twelve bookmarks: very thin ovals of different types of wood, with a long tongue cut into them so they could clip onto a page; and he'd also made a small box to keep them in.

~I know you're going to lose them all sooner or later. Tell me when you're down to two, and I'll make more.~

Bodie opened his mouth to protest that he wouldn't be so careless, but then grinned and nodded, and asked if the bookmarks were going to be another new line in Yata's shop.

He got a birthday message from Sasha just after lunch, and Ferros called around five, while Bodie and Turon were out on the bench. Homa, Malun and Lamon were with Ferros, and when it was Lamon's turn, she asked Bodie if it was OK if she came to help Lenneva with the food. She'd like to stay the night, too, if there was room at West's place.

~It'll be great to have you here! Turon says there'll be room.~ And of course they should have invited her from the start; they just hadn't thought as far away as Clover. ~It's really good of you to help. Especially when we'll all be off enjoying *pulsonranas*.~

She laughed. ~I'd be terrible at *pulsonranas*. You'd all be so annoyed with me. I've always liked helping Lenneva.~

* * * * *

Some glasses got broken, but that was hardly anything, really, when the flat had three times more people than it could seat. Lenneva did leave after an hour, but Lamon kept the hot food coming and got dirty plates collected and washed, and seemed to enjoy making things run smoothly just as much as she enjoyed meeting all of the people Turon and West had been telling her about.

The Parass people helped with the cleaning up, but there wasn't much to do and soon only the family was left. Ray suggested a pot of *kenit* but Lamon said she was feeling tired, now that everyone had gone, and Turon made a show of carrying her back to West's flat that had her and West giggling all the way to the lift. The three of them had plans for most of the next day, but Turon and West would come over in the evening to help eat the leftovers.

Left to themselves, they had tea instead of *kenit*, and a small glass from the bottle of good *rusha* that Espen had brought, which tasted like a kind of grassy gin. Bodie couldn't decide if he actually liked it, but then he found that something happened to it on Ray's tongue that made his whole mouth tingle. Ray said the effect was the same for him, and they left their tea barely touched and went straight to bed.

* * * * *

Ray with a hangover was a monosyllabic lump with a strong burrowing instinct, but Bodie refused to take anything ending in "off" for an answer, and once he'd ripped away both quilts and hidden them in the big cupboard, Ray didn't have much choice except to change into the jogging clothes that Bodie had left for him. Not that Bodie was feeling exactly bright, but he'd rather increase the misery for a while for the chance to sweat it out quickly. They took the long route around the coast and through the moors, which was still too risky for the birdwatchers but Bodie said that Ray's griping would drive all the *soragons* to cower in their dens, and anyway the extra adrenaline would clear their systems all the faster.

They spent most of the rest of the day out on the balcony, reading and snoozing and drinking tea and fruit juice, and eyeing each other up. It had been a great party, one of the best, but it was good to know they had nearly a year before they even had to think about throwing another one.

West and Turon weren't due around until seven, but at six on the dot Bodie suddenly felt ravenously hungry, and after two samosas slathered in *felgran* pickle, he found himself thinking that a beer would be just the thing to wash down the next two or three

samosas. One beer, and a weakish one, because alcohol was still basically evil, but when you had samosas needing eaten, you had to have a beer.

Turon and West also arrived with healthy appetites, though they winced at the suggestion of a beer. They talked about the party and the surprises about who had and hadn't hit it off. Bodie had written to thank Lenneva as soon as he was showered and changed from the run, and to Malun, too, to ask what sort of gift Lenneva might appreciate.

When Ray suggested it was time for an episode of "The Six Million Dollar Man", a look passed between Turon and West that had Bodie and Ray raising their eyebrows at each other. Ray said, "You've gone off it all of a sudden?"

West shook his head. He looked very uncomfortable. "It's not that. I –" He took a deep breath. "I'm going to leave Parass. I've been talking it over with Turon and..." Nodding his head over and over. "Now it's decided."

Ray said, "You're going to leave?", with Bodie on his heels with "What the hell happened?"

"Well, it's..." A shrug, and another deep breath and he dropped his gaze to the coffee table. "Bodie came this close to dying." A twitch of his hand, and he closed his eyes briefly. Then he swallowed and raised his head to look at them. "It's been good here but I need to stop basing everything around the two of you and go and – Get on with my own life. I need to do something. Move on."

"But you're doing the woodwork."

"There's still a fuck of a lot of Hass Embrun I don't know."

West was shaking his head, very determined. "I enjoy the woodwork, but done like that it's just a hobby. It's like *davanap*. I admire Yata's skill and his attitude. And the fact that he's able to make a living from it. But I –" He frowned, then raised a hand and gestured towards the windows. "Real life doesn't notice manufacturing on that scale. I want to produce well-made things that will reach millions of people."

Like spaceships? "You gonna go back to the course in the shipyards? You mean that kind of scale?"

West didn't answer Bodie but instead looked at Turon, and it was Turon who shook his head. "That isn't right for West any more. He's looking at courses in Industrial Design."

Now West was nodding enthusiastically. "It's been fascinating, with Bodie's course, to hear about the different effects from the way the cars are made. I want to make things better, and cheaper."

Bodie had to laugh. "You wanna put me out of a job?"

West looked shocked, like he hadn't thought of that. "I'll stay away from cars."

Bodie laughed harder and shook his head. "Just give me fair warning about what problem you're gonna fix next. There'll be time to plan, right?"

West gave a weak grin, and shrugged. "It'll be a four-year course. I don't know when I'll start really doing anything."

Ray said confidently, "Bodie'll be established by then. He'll adapt just fine."

"So when're you leaving? When does the course start? Where is it?"

West shook his head. "I'm not on a course yet. I've spoken to some people on the phone, and I've got an interview next At Pontal. My time at the shipyard helps. I should be able to start some sort of industrial placement pretty quickly." A shrug. "In a few weeks?"

Bodie's eyebrows shot up. "What about Yata? We know how he plans around you being there."

West winced hard. "It's a three-week notice period. Though I know that's too short for what he needs." He took a shuddering breath. "I'll tell him tomorrow. First thing."

They all nodded in sympathy, then Ray said, "Does Malun know what you're doing?"

A shake of the head. "Turon's going to tell him tomorrow, and then tell everyone else in the evening. Lamon already knows, but she agreed we should leave it to Turon."

Bodie said, "They're gonna be so excited for you. It's good news. Of course you weren't gonna stay here forever. Why wait, when you know what you want?" He was thinking of having those three days a week to fill. Could he do a second part-time course? Even without West around to teach him the vocabulary? Or maybe get stuck into some serious reading in Hass Embrun? They'd help him with that in the library, from what he'd seen. He'd find a way to keep it from being boring and lonely. Probably not immediately, but he would.

"So if you might be leaving in three weeks, do we still want to go to the cabin the weekend after next?" A slow, thoughtful question from Ray. "You've got lots of people to say goodbye to here. D'you want to stay here that weekend and have your own party?"

West thought he'd have plenty of time to say goodbye to his friends, and he was really looking forward to the cabin. He could come back to Parass any weekend, but it might be another two years before he could do something special like that with Turon. Turon gave a glowing smile, which took in all three of them, and said he was glad, and he was looking forward to it for the same reason.

And now they were ready to watch "The Six Million Dollar Man", and to have a pot of despicably cheap *kenit* (as a favour to Bodie), and a plateful of Lenneva's tiny, dense, multi-coloured cakes.

They watched two episodes, but then Turon had to go home, because he had a very early start for work in Monor the next day. Turon was about to open the front door when Bodie had a sudden thought. "What if I take over as Yata's assistant? He'd be OK with having someone working the second half of the week instead of the first, wouldn't he? Maybe I could start this week. Learn at least something before you leave." The other three were simply staring at him. "What? I'm good enough with my hands. I already know about Yata talking to the radio. It'll keep me busy. Should keep Yata happy."

Ray said, "You want to make plant stands and coffee tables for the rest of the year?"

"Why not? If they're good ones. And if it's not working out..." He shrugged. "I'll figure something out with him while he's looking for a new assistant."

West glanced first at Turon, then said, “So I can tell him that tomorrow morning? And you’ll start on At Pontal?”

“Sure.” Then Bodie grinned. “We’ll split the money 50/50, right?”

Instead of answering, West grabbed Bodie tight in a hug. It was Turon who offered the thanks, and then opened the door and coaxed his brother away.

Back in the living-room Ray declared that he was ready for a beer now, too, and Bodie said he’d share it. The TV was still showing the list of episodes, and Ray leaned forward to turn it off before settling properly against Bodie.

“D’you think Turon knew before today?”

Ray shrugged. “Probably. Sounds like West’s been serious about this for weeks. And he couldn’t do better than Turon for talking it over.”

“You reckon it’s the right move for him?”

“Oh, yeah.” Very definite. “He’ll thrive. He’ll be drinking in every big idea. Like he was with the ship-building.”

“You didn’t guess he was building up to something?”

Ray sighed and shook his head. “I haven’t really been noticing anyone except you. It did affect him badly, I know. Seeing you in the hospital. And seeing me while you were in the hospital. I do remember noticing that, and seeing that Ferros was doing best at reaching him. Helping him. So now, no, it’s – It’s not a surprise.”

“You think it changed his mind about sex, too? Or made it worse?”

A grunt from Ray. “I’m not gonna ask. We’ll hear if he starts again. From Turon, probably.”

“I’ll miss him, but it is about fucking time.”

“I thought Turon did a great job of just looking serious and supportive. When he must’ve been wanting to bounce around and sing his head off with relief. And you’ll be coming home smelling of wood-shavings as well as engine oil, so it’s good for everyone.”

Bodie got home from college the next day to a message from Turon saying that of course the family was delighted with the news, and Malun had flown him to Clover that evening so they could tell Raina together, and now they were all on the second bottle of *toroquil*. As soon as West arrived for dinner that evening, he told them that Yata was happy with the plan; Bodie should start at the workshop at nine on At Pontal, though West would have to leave at lunchtime because he had an interview in Goros. West hadn’t told any of his friends yet that he was leaving; he’d start the next day.

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The good news about Yata did have its downside, though; it meant that Bodie couldn’t spend that half of the week hanging out with Turon. By At Laura Var they’d decided between them that Turon would spend the first five days of the week in Monor, then arrive in Parass at five on At Kamaran, and keep himself busy around town during At Oba Nyon.

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Bodie had done some carpentry before, but nothing with precision or finish. He started off assuming he was beginning from scratch, but he did have long habits of precision from handling military equipment, and those habits turned out to transfer well. He liked having the radio on all the time; there was a wider range of voices and subject in the course of the day than he'd realised. He wasn't so sure about dealing with customers, which seemed to be 90% waiting for them to make up their damn minds. Not so different from a lot of body-guarding, really, so maybe he should approach each customer that that kind of important-but-clueless problem.

West got back just before four. He thought the interview had gone well and they'd be offering him a place on the course. Though he still thought the best course for him would be the one in Addo, where he had an interview on At Oba Nyon. He'd be happy with Kathun, too, and that interview was next week, on At Rahden.

They worked until five, and Ray met them off the ferry at half six. Maybe West should have saved his news until after the battle, although that would have been difficult after Espen had asked if Turon was having another musical evening with Plassen. They were distracted, particularly the boys, but it wasn't their first bad loss and the drink afterwards was cheerful, with talk about West and the party and Bodie's new job.

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West got offers from all three courses, and he accepted the offer from Addo as soon as he received it, on At Laura Var of the week after the interview. Addo was only two hours ahead of Parass, but it was a long distance away, deep in the northern hemisphere. The industrial placement would start in three weeks but he was going to take a week to settle in the city, so he'd still be leaving the weekend after their trip to the cabin, which meant he'd be leaving in a week and a half.

When they'd mentioned the cabin to Yata during Bodie's first week in the job, he'd been rather grudging about saying that West could leave work at three on An Embrun, but on At Kamaran of the next week, the day before the trip, he said that the two of them could finish work at half four on At Oba Nyon, to meet Ray straight from his work. Even with the time involved in teaching Bodie, the extra hours from the two of them had put him ahead of schedule, and he could easily spare both of them.

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For a change, it was them picking Ray up after work, in Bodie's car. Turon had taken charge of packing the supplies for the weekend. He admitted that his *orbarcho* did take up a lot of space – space that could have been used for beer – but he knew for a fact that the grocery store near the cabin sold a decent range of beers, while he doubted that it could offer even a third-rate *orbarcho*.

This time they couldn't manage to pretend they were the only people in the forest, though with Turon playing his music out on the deck, they were probably the noisiest group around. They could see where the other cabins were from the rising cooking-smoke, and they met people on the paths. The lake was busy, too, and the trails through the mountains, and it was only because of someone's broken-down car that they got

seated for dinner in the hotel on An Udom Kol. By that time Bodie had got over the jolt of Ray casually introducing him to strangers as “my *iskolpa*”.

Bodie got a message from Malun while they were on a long walk on An Embrun, but he knew it couldn't be anything urgent since Malun knew they were away. They were back in Parass at five on An Uraba. Turon had been planning to leave for Clover as soon as they'd unloaded the car, but the sight of Bodie's message light reminded him, and he asked if he could wait until Bodie had read it; it might be something that could save him time for the next day, and with the ship arriving early on the afternoon of At Rahden, they knew how much he had to get finished that day.

Bodie went to the study to read it, and found that Malun had sent him a reply from Cowley. It was so short that at first glance he thought it must be a curt dismissal, but no, it was good news.

“Dear Bodie (Vasmar),

In some ways your letter was the most surprising I have ever received, but in other ways I see that you have not changed. It is obvious that you are indeed happy, and I look forward to hearing more about this new life of yours. I will write again with questions, once I have had time to arrange them in a useful order.

May I offer my regards to your family?

George (Cowley)”

Bodie called them both in to see the letter, and they all laughed and hugged with relief. That would make Turon's day easier, because having that sort of reason to be happy always gave you so much more energy. He hoped that it would make him so effective that he'd be able to come on At Kamaran, but so much would depend on the doctors. Whatever happened, he'd arrive in time for dinner on At Oba Nyon.

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With everything that had been going on with West, Bodie was less fired up than he would have expected about starting the four-week stint in the garage, certainly less excited than the others on the course were. Obviously he was looking forward to it, that hadn't changed, and he was a bit nervous if he thought about it, but really he hadn't been thinking about it.

His garage was on the outskirts of Budjard. He'd made the detour once to have a look at it on the way home from college, but there hadn't been anyone in sight and he'd decided not to stop. All he really knew was that it was named after the two Sidson brothers who ran it (and who weren't twins), it had a full-time staff of five, it was open from seven in the morning to seven at night, it had a minor side-line in the old Dalvang cars, and it looked in good shape, seen from the street. For his first day he was working from nine to half five. If they asked him to work different hours, they had to give him a voucher he could use for fuel.

This time, the full crew was in sight when he drove up. The oldest-looking man gestured at him to park around the side, and when he walked back around to the entrance, they all came out to meet him. They were openly staring, more than he'd come across before.

Just friendly curiosity, it looked like, but they'd clearly taken the time to get fired up over him.

The brothers were in their 40s, Peel probably six years older than Dini. The other mechanics were Bo, in her 30s, and Malfa in her early 20s, who had gone to the same school as the twins and had done the full-time version of Bodie's course just four years earlier. The man who'd pointed him where to park was Nelsit, who did the books.

Whatever they'd been told about him it didn't include his views on *kenit*, and of course he had to accept. He'd brought along a thermos of milk, ready for this after the weeks with Yata, and was apparently convincing when he said he "really liked it with milk". Peel said he'd bring some milk in from home the next day; they provided the *kenit*, so of course they'd provide the milk, too.

It was a good day. He got to be useful, and to take part in one of the most expensive repairs on Annis's top-twelve list, and to poke around in some models of cars that he hadn't met before. And they were all more than happy to stop and explain when he didn't understand a particular word, and to write it in the grime on a bonnet. Dini was a bit too fond of the sound of his own voice, but God knows he'd worked with worse.

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As for the idea of meeting the three doctors, he'd been caring steadily less and less about that, and once he'd got the reply from Cowley, he found he truly didn't care at all. Turon arranged the meeting for the afternoon of At Oba Nyon; he would join them for the meeting, and come back to Parass with Bodie afterwards.

The team was in the main teaching and research hospital, right in the centre of the city, which was the only hospital on Pen Embrun with any direct experience of alien medicine. Doctors from the hospital had helped when Bodie got ill, though that had mostly been a matter of making it very clear that he mustn't be given any drugs, and absolutely no blood transfusion.

Turon had got the team set up in a large room that looked part office, part laboratory, and part classroom. Bodie thought he'd be able to tell the humans from the Hailin at a glance, but in fact they all had similar expressions of guarded curiosity. Turon introduced everyone, and then made a round of tea while the infectious diseases woman took samples of blood and saliva from him, and sent him to the nearest toilet for a urine sample.

While the samples were being analysed by various machines, they sat around one of the laboratory benches and asked him about his typical week, because that would affect the systems they put in place to support him. He was braced for them to ask about sex: how often, who did what? He'd say once or twice a day, and it depended what mood they were in. But no one asked.

"What sort of systems?"

"Well, to start with, we're going to give you a different wristband." Shaffan reached out to get a small box from another bench. The new wristband looked identical to his current one. "You're to trigger the alarm on this if you ever feel unwell. We'll get an alert with your location, and at least two of your team will arrive immediately to decide where and how to treat you."

“OK.” Bodie nodded and changed into the new wristband. He’d completely forgotten that the other one was set up as an alarm; Ray had never given him any reason to remember. “What else?”

Shaffan reached into his pocket and brought out another small box, that contained a stack of printed cards. “You should give these to all of the people you have regular contact with. It gives a phone number and a fleet address to use if they’ve had contact with anyone with an infection, or if they fall ill themselves. The number’s connected to your phone at home, and the fleet address is connected to that wristband. So you’ll be able to answer personally, but we’ll also get notification and we’ll decide how best to protect you.”

Bodie’s jaw was tight as he closed the box and dropped it into his pocket. “Sounds like I’ll be spending half my time living in a fucking bubble.”

Turon quickly reached across the bench to put a hand on his arm. “It won’t be like that. You lived with us for nearly a year without getting sick. It’ll be a matter of taking a few extra precautions. Until we know more about where the problems lie, and we’re confident we know how to treat them.”

Bodie looked at him intently for a few seconds more. ~You’re sure?~

~I’m sure.~ And of course Turon was the one here who wasn’t a doctor, but he’d trust Turon with anything (except a secret, of course).

He sighed, and slapped his pocket. “I’ll keep a bunch with me.”

“Thank you.” Shaffan nodded. “Do you want to hear more today about the systems we’re going to set up? The wristband and the cards are the only things that will affect you in these first few weeks. Everything else is many months away.”

Bodie shrugged. “Go ahead.”

They were going to get reports from medical services in Dishna and on Roslin about the state of infections in the area, and get the Parass hospital to run monthly tests on him. They were developing an intensive training program in human medicine, and although the core of specialists would be based in Monor, they wanted to make sure that the Parass hospital always had at least one doctor who had received the training. All of the current team would be returning to their regular jobs as soon as they’d trained up three specialists and the first doctor for Parass. That first doctor would probably be one of the general doctors currently in Monor, who would be sent to Parass to cover while one of the Parass doctors came to Monor to get the training.

He wouldn’t have his own full-time physician, nothing close to that, but it was still a lot of people putting in a lot of effort. He grunted, looked at the machines still whirring away, then said tightly, to no one in particular, “Thanks for doing this.”

Shaffan smiled, which took ten years off him. “We do get paid.” Everybody laughed, then the smile turned lopsided. “Thank you for still being alive when we got here. The first half of the journey out... It wasn’t cheerful.”

“I bet.”

“But now it’s an adventure.” Professor Bethel’s eyes were actually shining with excitement.

That was the first time any of the humans had said something to him that wasn’t distant and clinical, and Bodie grinned. “That’s what I said, when Malun asked why I didn’t want to stay on Earth. How are you getting on with the food? D’you miss curries?” They did. “We should –” He stopped and raised an eyebrow at Turon. “I guess it would be easiest if Ray and I come to Clover. We promised Ferros we would, anyway, while you were still here.”

Turon nodded. “I have orders to raise the subject with you this weekend.”

They didn’t need him to wait for the machines to finish the analysis; they would take his word that he was feeling perfectly fit, and they were going to see what the results looked like for that situation, and compare them with the results from the different stages of his illness. He and Turon could leave any time, and it sounded as if they’d next see each other at Clover.

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Bodie worked until one on An Embrun, and then joined the others in packing up West’s flat. West hadn’t had much stuff, but the flat did seem very empty without it. He came over to their flat for his last night in Parass, and slept on the couch. After a late, slow breakfast, they walked West to the transporter station. He said that he’d miss them, but he couldn’t hide how excited he was to be moving on.

As they were walking back to West’s flat to give it a thorough cleaning, Ray said, “Of course I’m no expert on what women are looking for, but don’t you think he suddenly got a lot sexier in the last couple of weeks?”

Bodie and Turon stopped dead and stared at him. Finally Bodie managed to say, “You really expect us to answer that question?”

“Oh, come on. He’s different.” To Turon: “When did he have the *dumut* removed?”

Turon shook his head. “I don’t know if he ever got one fitted. I do admit I can imagine an inconvenient proportion of the women of Addo taking an active interest in him, and I can imagine that he might respond to the attention now. But he hasn’t said anything to me to suggest that he’s definitely changed his mind about sex.”

“So you don’t want to take a bet on how long it’ll be before we hear he’s got a girlfriend?”

Turon did not, and immediately changed the subject to the question of what they might do with West’s flat. They had given some thought to moving back in – that much closer to the ferry, corner location, sixth floor – but the place felt too damn small to Ray now; he couldn’t imagine giving up his four green walls, and his bench and his trellis, and he’d got thoroughly used to the sounds of the neighbours’ kids. Of course, the real problem with the size was adapting their sex life to a single bathroom, but even after weeks in their spare room, Turon hadn’t made a single comment about their late-night showers, and Bodie wasn’t surprised that Ray didn’t include it in his list.

It didn’t make sense for them to keep the flat for visitors, as they were never going to get enough of those. Ray wasn’t ready to sell it yet, though. He’d look into renting it out. Turon asked if he’d mind waiting until at least one Parass doctor had been through the

human medical training; the Monor doctor who came to give cover would need a place to stay, and surely anyone would be delighted with that flat. That was fine with Ray.

West called them that evening from his cheap hotel. He'd been to a few rental agencies and he should be able to find a flat within the week. However, when he'd eaten dinner in the college district, he'd seen notices about rooms available in shared houses and thought he'd look into that too, for the sake of having company in a new city. They asked which weekend would be best for him to come to Clover for a curry dinner with Bodie's medical team: the next weekend, or the one after that? He'd prefer the second weekend, on An Embrun, and he would aim to arrive around six.

They'd thought that Turon would be glad to have the dinner arranged, but instead he looked almost sad.

"You look like you really don't trust us to pick the menu. You've got your heart set on a huge vat of kedgeree?"

Turon looked slightly startled, then laughed. "I was thinking about kedgeree, but –" A shrug. "About that time we all cooked it at Clover. Which made me really miss Sasha. It looks as if I won't catch up with her until Skina Station. And that's if I leave during the week after the curry dinner. Otherwise... We're looking at Nadiac Station, and another three or four weeks." A deep, pained sigh. "But if I do leave just after the dinner, it's only tomorrow and another two weekends I get to spend with you."

They both grunted in surprise. Ray said, "It's gone quickly, your visit," and Bodie said, "But the doctors have only just got here. They said the training's gonna take months."

Turon shook his head. "I just need to make sure they know the right people, and that everyone knows what's expected. That should only take another couple of weeks. They'll be properly productive without me." A lopsided smile. "That might be all they'll talk about at the dinner."

Ray nodded several times. "We'll make the most of these weekend, then. And once you're back with the fleet, I'll make sure Bodie writes to you more regularly."

Bodie and Turon looked at each other, eyebrows hoisted high. Then Turon said seriously, "Thank you. I know he tries to be a good cousin but it doesn't come naturally to him."

Bodie snorted, and snorted harder when Ray said, "It's the least I could do."

"It would be. You calculate it as precisely as ever."

The brothers laughed so immediately and so hard that Bodie guessed it was a family joke. Bodie wasn't sure he really got it, but it felt OK to be left out. Of course he loved Turon, just as much as Ray did.

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They went to Clover as soon as Bodie finished work on An Embrun, taking only the last full jar of *felgran* pickle, and a set of activity-filled children's books as a belated birthday present for the girls. It was a stray remark from Turon the previous weekend that had alerted them to the fact that the birthday was on At Laura Var; Turon had assumed that they'd known the date, as well as he and West and Ward did. Which meant that the anniversary of their marriage was in just a few weeks' time. For Bodie that date was the

13th of August; he thought the Hailin had translated that as the 6th of Set Idamo, but it might be a day earlier or later. Did they want to celebrate it? How did they want to celebrate it? A tricky one. Tricky enough that neither of them had brought up the subject, even despite the nudge of the girls' birthday.

From the photos that West had shown them, Bodie hadn't realised how constant the exploration and babbling were, or that the knitted otter that Akula carried everywhere was quite so matted and smelly. The girls were more interesting, but they took a whole new level of work.

After they'd spent an hour catching up with Ferros, Homa and the girls in their living-room, they went down to the main kitchen to grab something to eat, and then they went to see Raina. She knew about Bodie being ill, as no one in the family had been in a state to hide that from her, and she beckoned them into a long joint hug. She didn't cry, though, nothing like Turon, and then she had them sit down and she asked about Bodie's work and the birthday party. He made her laugh, and that did leave her panting, but then she found new energy from somewhere, and it was nearly a quarter of an hour before she had to send them away.

West arrived promptly as six, followed shortly by Lamon, then three of the doctors in Malun's flyer, the other three in Turon's car, and finally Lenneva. That was too many people for the living-room so they moved to the main kitchen, where Bodie and Ray got started on dinner and some of the others helped, while others played with the girls, and others sat around and talked. The doctors had brought presents for the girls, and Afmad definitely remembered Doctor Chambers from previous visits.

The doctors did talk a bit about work, but when it came to things they'd done that week in the lab, they talked most about the taste-testing and analysis that they'd done of the Hailin foods that they couldn't eat. Chambers was the one who got on best with Hailin food; she genuinely liked *kenit*.

Their ship had been very well supplied with human food, though not with good curry, and their visits to Clover and Malun's house were their only experience so far with human recipes adapted to Hailin ingredients. They were keen to hear the history of Turon's kedgeree, police interrogator's pie, and the local versions of pasta and pizza.

Apart from food, West's two weeks in Addo were the main topic of conversation. He was sharing a house with three other students half an hour's walk from the university and a twenty minute drive from the factory. One of the women in the house was a keen knitter, and he'd known it was the house for him as soon as he'd walked into the living-room and seen her work-basket by the side of the couch. The first two days in the factory had been very boring, but then they'd assigned him a small project in the Instrumentation department, and people were being helpful and he knew he was asking the right type of questions. He'd also seen something of what the other two students were working on, and was looking forward to every step of building up to that. He knew there would be other boring days, but he was starting to have ideas for how to get more out of them. He liked what he'd seen so far of Addo, though it was odd being so far from the sea, and part of him felt that he'd cheated himself, moving from late spring to late autumn.

After dinner they went for a leisurely walk up to the terraces to watch the sunset, and then down to the library for drinks and music. Everyone except Bodie and Ray was staying the night; they'd known they wouldn't be nearly tired enough yet when bedtime

came around at Clover. They left around eleven, with hugs for everyone in the family, waves for Lenneva and the doctors, and strict instructions for Turon about the type of pastries to bring for breakfast the next morning.

Bodie thought he'd caught every one of the doctors staring at him and Ray at one point or another of the evening. All with shades of quiet disbelief, it had looked like. At the *glarus* and his victim, that would be for the Hailin. And for the humans, at the ex-SAS so obviously married to the police interrogator. The doctors had treated them normally apart from that, had chatted and laughed with them like everyone else. Maybe that had been the disbelief: that it had been so easy to forget that they were dealing with something so unnatural.

Bodie was first into bed after the showers that evening. He kept his left arm held out while Ray was settling himself under his quilt, then gathered him close. Of course, he couldn't really feel much except quilt, but his hand had got so good at calling up the memory of the supple grooves of Ray's spine, the fine plane of his shoulder-blade. He guessed it was the same for Ray.

"Isn't our wedding anniversary coming up soon? Marriage anniversary, I suppose I should say. I've never been sure of the date."

Ray had pulled away slightly. "Yeah, it's pretty soon. At Rahden of the week after next."

Bodie gave a grunt of surprise. "The second of Set Idamo. Right. My best guess had been the sixth. We gonna celebrate it?"

A sharp sigh – not impatient, maybe just some kind of surprised – and Ray hauled himself up on an elbow. "I've been discussing that with Ullis. I was planning to talk it over with you some time this weekend. Just needed a bit longer to get ready. Sounds like you want to celebrate it?"

That definitely sounded like surprise, and Bodie's eyebrows shot up. "You don't?" He lifted his head off the pillow, and drew his arm back to start to sit up. If there was bad news, he wanted to face it square-on.

"Course I do." Almost urgent. Ray had thrown his quilt back and his hand was pressed to Bodie's chest. Pressed firm enough to reassure. Not trying to push him back down. "It's not that. It's because of feeling like I still needed to find exactly the right way to ask. And I've got too many thoughts that I haven't been able to get in order."

Bodie let himself sink back down, then covered Ray's hand with his own. "Any point in asking what kind of thoughts? You've not mentioned Ullis in... what?... a couple of months?" Ray did tend to come back from the sessions looking thoughtful, but Bodie would never have guessed it was all because of their anniversary.

"Well..." Another sharp sigh, then Ray turned his hand and took a rough hold of Bodie's fingers. "To start with, there's what that day was actually like. The second of Set Idamo last year. How I behaved." He squeezed Bodie's fingertips hard, and then let go. "How were we going to celebrate with that weighing down on the whole day? That was the first question I had with Ullis."

Bodie flexed his hand so his fingertips brushed against Ray's, and took a few seconds to reply. "Y'know, that just doesn't bother me. I know it was hell for you. All of the first few

days. But the way I remember it, Malun and Turon spent at least half of the first day warning me how difficult you were gonna be. And I could tell you'd had a lot of practice at it." They flashed grins at each other. "But it didn't turn out anything like that. I just had to look at you once. Have you touch me once. To know you'd always be thinking about me. About what you could do for me. That's what I remember about how you behaved back then."

Almost a whisper: "You looked up in the pub and saw me. And the pub became the whole universe. With my heart the blazing centre of everything. And I thought I must never have known myself. I had no idea how I was likely to behave."

Bodie laughed. "So you behaved like Dishna's best police interrogator. You played it so cool. Not like me."

If anything, Ray's expression had got more intense. Even lower: "No. Not like you," and then he was leaning in for a slow, deep kiss that soon had Bodie wondering if this would be a two-shower night.

The third time they came up for air – or maybe it was the fourth – Bodie said, "We could make that the anniversary. That day in the pub. If you don't wanna think about what we were doing on the second of the month."

Ray immediately shook his head. "No, it should be the second." A quick smile. "Now I know it doesn't bother you, I can forget about me at my worst. And remember the good parts of the day, like Turon starting to tell me the reasons he liked you."

"Now if you'd just asked me if it bothered me. What was it, a month ago? How much time would you and Ullis have saved?"

Ray shrugged, looking slightly annoyed. "That was just the first question, like I said. Mostly we've been talking about how I want to celebrate."

Bodie grunted. "If it's another party, you can take charge of hiring the coach."

Ray blinked several times in surprise. "You think I'd want a party? Not something special for just the two of us?"

Bodie's turn to shrug. "I'd only got as far as imagining getting a couple of really good steaks from the twins' shop and having a bottle of the Australian wine. Your idea's gotta be more complicated, if it comes with questions."

Ray nodded in concession, then took a deep breath. "It's a hotel. I'd really like us to spend the night at a good hotel in the centre of Dishna. Now we can finally sleep together. There's a couple right on the water I've got in mind."

"A hotel? But – You were the one who said no reception desks. No long corridors. After the airport. That's why we got the tents."

"I'm over that now. I think it'll be years before I can face any airport hotel, but the two in the city are completely different. Much smaller and older. Much more personal. But of course you've got to tell me if it's too soon for you."

Bodie shut his eyes for two or three seconds while he thought about it. Then a couple of seconds more before he said, "No suite. We'll get the most ordinary room they've got that's still got a decent view. Any suite that had a couch facing a TV..." He shook his

head. "I'm not over having to get through that night. Not knowing if I'd ever see you again. But I trust you to know if your city hotels are really different enough." He relaxed, and reached over to circle and stroke Ray's forearm. "It's a great idea, going somewhere new to celebrate. Spending the whole night in the city. And if we're not gonna be grilling steaks, we can dress the part, too. Wear our best shirts. You got a restaurant in mind, too?"

Nodding seriously: "I'm weighing up a few." And then Ray gave a long sigh of relief, and finally straightened out his elbow, sank back down on the bed, and rolled to curl against Bodie. "We could all go in to town tomorrow, if you like. Ask to see the most ordinary rooms. Look at the menus and find out how helpful they'll be about the things you can eat. If it wouldn't be too weird taking Turon along for all of that?"

Bodie immediately shook his head. "He'd get a kick out of it. Helping us decide." Then he frowned for a while, thinking it over. "But, y'know, I'm gonna be selfish. I wanna have you surprise me. See what you choose."

Ray laughed, sounding delighted, and pulled himself even closer. "That means that next week I'll be Dishna's worst police interrogator. I'll be so distracted trying to decide on the best surprise."

They kissed again, and now it was more like a normal goodnight kiss. The effect of talking about the airport, probably. Or Ray already distracted, weighing up views and menus.

"There's one last question, though." Ray had pulled away abruptly, with a sigh that sounded almost exasperated. "And I bet Ullis would fire me as a client if I tried to put it off until tomorrow."

Bodie raised his eyebrows, and twisted his mouth to one side. "Let's have it, then."

"With the ordinary room... Well, with any of the rooms, probably. We'd only have one bathroom. And it won't be like the cabin, where even with one bathroom we still had a lot of privacy to work around each other after we'd swapped shirts. So as far as anniversary sex goes, it'll be..."

"Bloody awkward. Yeah. Now that you mention it." He briefly pulled a face, but seeing how Ray's apprehensive expression had got even deeper, he decided immediately that it didn't matter. It certainly shouldn't change their plans. He reached over and brushed his knuckles along the line of Ray's jaw. "Would it ruin the night for you if we didn't have sex? That's what the last question's about, right?" He shrugged and shook his head. "Because I'd be fine with just a properly long goodnight kiss. With something like this." He ran his hand gently down Ray's back to find the edge of the thrown-back quilt, and then carefully tugged it back into place.

Ray didn't make a move to help, just lay looking at him with a frown that could mean anything. But once Bodie had finished with the quilt, and had slid his arm around Ray's waist, Ray abruptly said, "No. It wouldn't ruin anything. You're gonna get me hard. Even if you hardly touch me I know what you'll look like. But it's perfect, really. For the year it's been. All about proving we can wait." Quietly resigned, not even a hint of bitterness.

Bodie laughed. “See? That was the easy question. You and Ullis were really taking it that seriously? You didn’t notice straight away that it was perfect?”

Ray grimaced. “He might have said it once. But I had all my hopes on working out a choreography.” He lifted his hand off Bodie’s chest, and traced out some slow zig-zags and swoops. “Smooth enough that it wouldn’t seem bloody awkward. Because I really wanted to have something to offer you.”

Bodie nodded. “I’d probably have got in the same state if it was me with Ullis. Now, you’re sure that’s the last question? You’re not gonna wake me up at three in the morning to tell me there’s a Hailin tradition that we have to have a herd of goats in the room all night?”

Ray laughed, then shook his head decisively. “It’s *culdups*, so you were close. But it’s not a herd. It’s one *culdup* for every year of the marriage, so it won’t be a herd until next year. But the hotel will want to know soon what colour *culdup* they should order for us.”

Bodie grunted, all business. “What’re our options?”

“Well, personally, I think we should get olive-green, with at least one patch of white on its nose and chest.” And as smoothly as that, Ray was away. The *culdups* represented the best things they’d learned about the marriage in the past year, and apparently the Hailin could say some very specific things with just one blotchy *culdup*. Ray’s olive-green *culdup* boasted that neither of them snored, even when drunk. Bodie guessed he could live with that, but he’d prefer something that expressed appreciation for Ray’s family, which meant some shade of red. Ray said he liked that idea, but then as Bodie asked for details of what happened as the years and *culdups* added up, Ray kept on coming back with quibbles about their red *culdup*. Did they want to go into details, via the exact shade of red on the back, about what they appreciated most? There were shades of red for money, advice, sympathy and much more. Or what about any particular people they wanted to thank, which would mean special patterns of colour-variation and hair-direction on the legs, tail and ears? So round patches of lighter colour on the left haunch would be thanking “the lighter-haired *iskolpa*’s older brother, of whom the *iskolpa* is in no way jealous”. By the time they fell asleep, they hadn’t agreed on much, except that their *culdup* order might tell the hotel staff more about them than they really wanted, and maybe they should take along their own *culdup*.

Chapter 33

Bodie got back from work at lunchtime on An Udom Kol to find Turon fiercely determined to get them an anniversary present, and no more willing to hear from Bodie that they really didn't need anything than he had been from Ray.

Eventually Ray said, "The thing is, it's not like when we moved in here, when we'd already seen a bench we liked in the garden centre. If I said, 'Well, we could do with a nice set of liqueur glasses,' for example, you wouldn't just buy the first nice-enough set you saw. Would you? You'd want to search all of Roslin and half of Monor, to be sure." He shrugged and shook his head. "Sounded like your last two days in Monor were already spoken for, and -"

"And we wanna do regular weekend stuff with you. A hell of a lot more than we want anything new for the flat."

Turon glanced at his vigorously nodding brother then back at Bodie, and finally sighed and shook his head. "It goes against all my instincts, but of course I have left it too late. I'll make up for it next year."

Ray grinned. "And we'll send you a shopping list well ahead of time."

"We still going to the prison peninsula for lunch so Turon can see the changes in the gardens? Or had you two already ditched that plan before the subject of our anniversary came up?"

No, they were still going to the peninsula. Bodie said he'd drive: he was hungry; he wanted to get going. But as they were about to leave, Ray's message-light came on. He said it was probably only Ullis, replying to say he was glad they'd agreed so easily on their anniversary plans, but he should go and check. He came back looking thoroughly pleased with himself; Ullis thought the idea of the *culdups* was hilarious, and wanted permission to borrow it to tease his *iskolpa* with. Turon was impressed with Ullis's good manners: he'd been planning to steal the *culdups* outright, and present them to Sasha as all his own idea. Their anniversary would be just a couple of weeks after he reached her on Skina Station.

On the way down in the lift, Ray said, "You know, it wouldn't surprise me if the *culdups* really catch on. In five years' time, the fleet will have a need for vets, to take care of the herds of anniversary animals." And they entertained themselves during the drive imagining the part that Turon would play in setting up the *culdup*-delivery-system, because of course it would come under his department.

The gardens had changed a lot in the three months since Turon had arrived, and it was nearly four by the time he was ready to leave. Over breakfast they'd been talking about going to see a film and then having dinner in the steak restaurant, but Turon had decided that wasn't right, after all, for their last night together. Better to give Salcha and Dot the chance to demonstrate their ruthless sales techniques, and have the steak at home where there was red wine.

Bodie was on top in bed that night, and he said what he had to say as soon as he was under the quilt, propped up on one elbow like Ray the night before. "You told him everything we talked about last night, didn't you? Every last word." Quietly. Resigned, really, given that this was Turon they were dealing with. But needing to know.

“No.” Even more quietly. Not surprised or offended. “I started out telling him how excited I was about planning our anniversary. And it turned out he’d been thinking a lot about the date, too. Most of the family has, and they’d got just as stuck as me and Ullis on what that day was like, with the same doubts about whether or not they should mention it. But that’s all I told him about what I’d been worrying over with Ullis. I didn’t say anything about us and hotels. Well, except that your first idea had been the steak and wine, and the hotel was my idea. And of course I didn’t even hint at us and bathrooms. I know he won’t say a word about Ullis when he tells the rest of the family that we are going to celebrate. Mostly we talked about the surprises I’m planning. And *culdups*.”

Bodie took a deep breath then let it out in a rush. “Sorry. I – Guess I’ve got too used to assuming he knows everything.”

“Not this time. You can thank my years of professional experience. I threw him off the scent.” Ray was pulling him down.

“You distracted him with *culdups*.”

“It’s a classic technique. The skill is making it look like they wandered in on their own.”

* * * * *

Plassen had invited them to lunch on An Uraba. There was some space on Plassen’s walls this time, which turned out to be because he’d taken down Turon’s three favourite pictures, and packed them up for Turon to take back to the fleet. Or to leave at Clover, he really didn’t mind. Turon said he’d take at least one with him; he knew Sasha would love the painting of Plassen’s balcony on a stormy day. It was Ray who spotted the pencil portrait of Turon playing his *orbarcho*, near the middle of the wall that Plassen kept for portraits. Turon hadn’t mentioned that Plassen had drawn him. It was very good. You’d recognise him straight away, even if the details of his face had been much less clear.

Ray said, ~I’d have thought you’d’ve given him that as well.~

Turon and Plassen both shook their heads, and Turon said, ~Plassen took a perfect photograph of it, before it was framed. And Sasha loves that.~ He grinned, and spread his arms wide. ~She printed it out almost life-size. As large as she could. Apparently she’s been serenading me almost every night. And I’m very appreciative. In the most subtle way.~

After lunch Bodie drove them to Antoness for the walk along the cliffs. They stopped several times for refreshments, and by the time they got home after picking up the car, it was nearly six. Turon said he’d stay for one last beer on the bench, and while he drank it very slowly, he could not be persuaded into a second. They hugged him together, took it in turns to kiss him – two, three, four times, until they were all laughing. After he’d picked up his bag and the paintings, he said, “You know I’m hoping I won’t see you for at least another two years?”

“We know.” Simultaneous. Ray said, “Give our love to Sasha,” but then Turon was gone before he could reply.

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Ray came home on At Mordez saying he'd chosen the hotel, and he'd start on the restaurants on his next lunch break. So how quickly could Bodie get to Dishna from the college? What time should they book for their dinner?

They decided that eight would be best for dinner. Ray would be in their hotel room from six. Bodie would arrive at either seven or half seven, depending on his luck with traffic. He'd get the seven o'clock ferry the next morning. The hotel served breakfast from half six, so they'd be able to share at least a few bites.

"Will you get changed on the ferry? I'll be fully changed by the time you arrive."

Until Ray had asked the question, Bodie had assumed he'd wait until the hotel. But Ray obviously wanted him to say yes, and the toilets on the ferry were clean and private enough. He nodded. "Yeah. They'd be too nosy at college if I changed there. And I'd rather get away quicker."

Ray nodded, with a faint, satisfied smile. "And you'll wear your necklace?"

It would be the first time he'd worn it in public. "Well, I'll be with you, so it'll already be obvious I'm important, but sure." That earned him a grin. "You got anything similar I'd enjoy seeing you in?" It would be interesting to see what else Ray had in his collection, but mainly he wanted company if he was going to be making himself conspicuous.

Ray looked thoughtful. Slowly: "Not very similar. But I'm sure I can find something that'll make you even more glad you got me that shirt."

Bodie laughed then gave a twitch of the eyebrows. "Now you've got me thinking I don't know which shirt is my best one. It was the pink on your birthday." Ray was agreeing strongly with that. "Then when you gave me the necklace - Showed me what it looked like. It was sure as fuck that blue."

Ray had tilted his head, acknowledging the scale of the problem. "And then you had to go and pass your driving test." A brief pause, then he shook his head. "They'd all be good for everything I've got planned. They're all a treat for me. I don't have any kind of hint to give you."

Bodie had to smirk at that. "You want a surprise of your own."

Deadpan: "I'm reckless like that. Everyone says it'll get me into trouble." And Bodie pulled him into a kiss, knowing he was every kind of trouble, and he could be proud of it.

* * * * *

Turon's ship left at midday on At Laura Var. They both sent him messages before they went to bed the night before, but hadn't heard back by the time Ray left for work. They hadn't really expected to, but they had a bet on who would heard from him first.

Bodie hadn't heard by the time he left at half ten, either, when the ship would be past the moons. It was his last day in the garage, and he was working until seven so they could all go for a drink afterwards. They didn't have much in common apart from work, but they almost always had time for each other's stories, and if you were having a tetchy day or you forgot something, it wouldn't be held against you. He thought they could probably work faster, but he'd happily recommend them to anyone.

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They were missing West at *pulsonranas*. And they admitted there was a lingering sense of anti-climax after the epic battle of Bodie's party. The boys, in particular, had been thinking about it, and that week they suggested that they should use some random method to split themselves up between the two teams. Make something different out of maybe knowing each other too well. They didn't have anything to draw for lots – Espen said she'd make something for next week – so instead they alternated by date of birth, which put Bodie in Yellow and Ray in Blue. That really did make a big difference. Bodie shot Ray twice – the first a glancing blow just above the elbow, the second squarely on his thigh – but the Blues still won. They were back, on the ferry, to their old thing of staring at each other in silence, and for the first time Bodie felt quite glad that West had gone.

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Ray had a strange expression when he got home on At Kamaran. Some shifting mixture of excited and uncertain. Which had to mean that he and Ullis thought they might have solved the problem of the hotel bathroom. Damn Ullis, because it must have been him who'd got Ray thinking again. Too much of a challenge to leave alone, now Ray knew the layout of their hotel room.

A week ago Bodie might have been excited by the idea himself, but he wouldn't have known then that he had anything to lose. It had been a particularly good week, with the sight of Ray looking more pleased with himself every day, so confident that after At Mordez he hadn't even felt the need to discuss any aspect of the plans with Bodie.

Who cared whether or not they had sex on one particular night when they got so much pleasure out of scheming to make each other happy? Ullis must have seen that Ray was happy, that neither of them thought there was anything missing from their plans, but he couldn't resist trying out his ideas on them. So Ray needed to get yanked back on course, and it needed to happen now.

"You spent the session messing about with choreography ideas for the bathroom, didn't you? You've got that look. I told you, I don't need it. We'll do better if you just forget it."

Ray looked surprised, then amused, though he took a few moments to get serious before he replied. "I know we don't need to have sex that night." Shaking his head: "I haven't wasted a second on choreography since you convinced me it didn't matter." Then a shrug and a half smile. "But you're not wrong about the look: we were talking about some practicalities for sex. About how I might get a particular idea to work."

Urgently: "What idea? I mean, what can you tell me? Is it – Are we gonna be able to go back to dry-humping?"

"I think – I think there's a good chance."

Bodie closed his eyes, let his head fall back in relief, smiled to himself at the strong throbbing between his legs, then snapped back and strode over to the fridge to get a couple of beers. "How many more sessions do you think you'll need?"

Ray took a long drink, then briefly shook his head. "I think the talking part's done. We've been piecing it together for a couple of months now. I'm not stuck, not like I got before." He hovered his hand over his forehead, fingertips not quite touching. "There's no part that has to be forced into place. I believe it all." Then another drink and a small

frown. “But I can’t get a hold on when it might happen. There are steps that need to be taken to get everything ready...” Chopping the edge of his free hand against the kitchen counter, marking out movements of a couple of inches at a time. “And the picture of me as the person taking those steps...” A shake of the head that was almost a flinch. “I can’t get it in focus, somehow. It keeps sliding away.”

Bodie grunted, and leaned back against the opposite counter. “Anything I can do?”

Ray thought about it seriously. Finally, slowly: “I don’t know. I don’t see how you could help me get started. But I’m gonna need you to trust me once I have got started. Because some parts of it are going to sound strange.”

Bodie’s eyebrows shot up. “You mean stranger than the stowaway in the hold?” Or anything to do with the Mabein, for that matter. He took several long mouthfuls to stop himself giving any more examples.

Ray laughed. “OK, if you ask me, I’d say it’s maybe two and a half times stranger.” Waving his hand in the air as he made the estimation. “But I bet Ullis would say it’s less than 70% that strange. If we called him up and asked for his expert opinion.”

Bodie gave a brief, lopsided smile. “What would he say for the chances you’ll end up in *gimana* again?”

Ray seemed slightly startled, and looked at Bodie very seriously, nodding slowly, but when he did reply, he was brisk and definite. “We’re both sure I won’t. Even if it doesn’t work, I won’t stay away for more than a night. I’ll call you up the next day and say I hear you’re looking for a flatmate. I promise you it won’t be worse than that.”

Bodie stared at him for several seconds, then grinned and took a step forward to clink beer-bottles. “Course I trust you. If you promise me strange, I know you’ll deliver it in truckloads.”

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Bodie guessed he had managed to help Ray, somehow, because after their talk about Ray’s new idea, Ray never showed any further sign of uncertainty. Indeed, he was purely, quietly excited, and not so much pleased with himself any more, but delighted with the whole world.

Over the weekend he was very horny, too, starting on An Udom Kol, when Bodie found himself practically dragged to the bedroom the moment he got home from work. Bodie had no problems getting up to speed, though he did manage to hold back for long enough at the bedroom door to say, “We’re not gonna dry-hump, are we? It’s too soon. You’d have told me if you’d got ready to take the steps.”

Ray had nodded. “Yeah, it’s too soon. But I’ve got much clearer on when I’ll be ready to take them. And thinking about it... It’s got me like this.”

“You gonna give me a clue?”

Out of the question. “Telling you the idea is the next-to-last step. It’s Step 14.”

“OK. Got it. What about updates on what number you’ve reached?”

“Sorry but I think it’d make us both too impatient. I mean, look what I’m like now!”

“You hear me complaining?”

“I see you dawdling.” Mock-stern, and then he literally did drag Bodie to the bed.

* * * * *

They got up on At Rahden to find they both had messages waiting. These turned out to be anniversary greetings from Turon, Sasha, Ferros, Malun, Raina and Ward, each message sent jointly to both of them. Turon had included what he said was his best attempt at a present: an hour’s worth of music that made him think of them. He didn’t expect them to listen to it immediately; any time before their next anniversary would be good. Ray said he’d have time at work to send a quick thanks to everyone.

As they’d arranged over the weekend, Ray handed Bodie a sealed envelope as he was leaving, with directions to the hotel’s parking and the number of their room. He wasn’t to open the envelope until he was about to drive off the ferry, and once he’d parked the car, he should go straight up to their room. Ray’s good clothes were already at the police station: he’d packed at the weekend and taken them in the day before.

Bodie had asked the week before about leaving the workshop session a quarter of an hour early, to be sure of catching the six o’clock ferry to Dishna. The staff had said immediately that it wouldn’t be a problem: they’d make sure he got his practice in first. Nearly as quickly, he’d had Dot asking if he was going to Dishna for something fun, and by the day itself, the news had got around the whole class. The twins were most interested in the surprise of the restaurant, whereas Barrow had been worried on his behalf about how he’d know what to wear.

The hotel was called the Musco. It was on the water four blocks from the river, with parking in an underground lot a couple of blocks inland. The hotel was five storeys high, shaped a bit like an upturned basket, with a huge, heavily-carved entrance on the side away from the river, and with more carving on the surrounds for each window, and on each cup-shaped balcony. Inside, everything was much plainer but obviously expensive: a restful mixture of very light and very dark browns.

Their room was Number 17, on the fourth floor, and there were enough mirrors on the way to show that he really had made a good choice with the driving-test shirt. He belonged here so well, the hotel should use him in their next advert.

He stood for a few seconds before he rang the buzzer. The corridor and the door could hardly be more different from the one on the ship: all polished wood and inlaid fixtures. But the layout of the keypad was exactly the same as on the ship, and on the other side, he knew that a notably self-assured man was waiting for him.

He’d thought Ray might immediately pull him into a kiss, but instead Ray just stood looking at him, and Bodie found his gaze fixed on the gleaming deep-red oval resting half an inch below the hollow of Ray’s throat. It wasn’t a solid red: there were slight ripples set deep within the stone; but the real fascination of the red was in seeing how its richness was more than matched by the colours of the hair curling out around it. And the moon-white sheen of the shirt, the glow of the stone, they were just dim reflections of the fizzing energy that was radiating out at him from every exposed crease and pore of Ray’s skin.

He was already breathing audibly as he reached out. The lightest touch, his fingertips urgent for every sensation. Like defusing a bomb. Cracking a safe. He wasn't even touching Ray's skin, just the flat smoothness of the large red stone, the hard roundness of the three beads next to it - which looked like the same grey stone that Bodie was wearing - and the roughness of the fine silver strands in the intricate braiding of the chain. But he could feel the heat from Ray's skin, thought he could feel Ray's heartbeat, starting to race like his own.

He swallowed then looked up, mouth open to say something about how of course they couldn't do anything. The first step in the process of getting himself to step away. But at the sight of Ray looking so pleased, so excited, he had to stop and catch his breath, and it was Ray who spoke first.

"Do you fancy a gin and tonic out on the balcony? I'd just need a minute to get everything together."

Bodie gave a bark of delighted laughter, then dropped his hand and took that step back. "That's exactly what I fancy." Ray was right: it didn't need saying. And a gin and tonic was the perfect way for them not to say it.

Ray had brought the cut-glass tumblers from home, and their smallest knife and chopping-board to slice the *mandal*. Their room looked across the water at an angle, and if you leaned over the edge of the balcony you could see most of the promenade that led to the police station. The promenade was busy, and the noises drifting up were city noises. He'd missed this. Ray must have guessed that he'd missed this.

In the other direction you couldn't see the bridge or the port, but looking down you could see part of the raised terrace of the hotel bar. It was very popular for a drink after work, Ray said, though the prices meant that his team kept it for special occasions. Ray thought they could have a last drink there after dinner; it would be quiet by then. Bodie couldn't imagine himself wanting to argue with any part of Ray's plan.

The restaurant was a ten minute walk away. The room had a very high ceiling, with a small gallery at the back, and their table was at the front of the gallery. It was an old building that had been the studio for a firm of architects. The restaurant had kept some of the cabinets and other fixtures, and the architectural plans on the walls were clumped in messy groups, like the team might show up any moment to gather around them for the next discussion about the design. Ray knew a lot of the buildings the firm had designed; if they took a longer route back to the hotel, he could show Bodie a couple.

The menu was short, and all of the options were safe for Bodie to eat. The wine list was much longer, and Ray gave a lot of thought to picking out something dry and light. For dessert, however, they both went with the menu's suggestions for the liqueur to accompany their choices, since by that stage the restaurant had more than earned their trust.

They were deep in conversation when the desserts arrived, and Bodie just murmured a distracted thanks when his bowl and the glass were set down. When a cup appeared behind the glass, though, he shook his head and looked up at their waitress with an apologetic smile. ~Not for me, thanks. I don't really drink *kenit*.~ He didn't remember them ordering *kenit*; maybe all really good Hailin restaurants included it automatically.

But the smile the waitress gave him back wasn't anything like he'd expected – it was practically a smirk – and she made no move to take the cup away. Then she glanced at Ray, who gave her a small nod of approval and watched intently as she reached around to her tray, which she was holding out of Bodie's view.

It wasn't *kenit*. It was a pot of coffee. Bodie gaped, threw his head back with laughter, then grinned at the waitress. ~I told my *iskolpa* to surprise me. He really took that seriously.~ They all laughed, and then Bodie thanked her fervently, immediately echoed by Ray, and she beamed at them as she lowered her tray and bid them to enjoy it all.

"I thought for a second it was our pot, but the handle's wrong."

Ray nodded. "It's on loan from Clover. If you'd caught me trying to sneak ours out this morning..."

"Goodbye, surprise." He gestured at the table in front of him. "And it's a fucking fantastic surprise. No wonder you've been looking so pleased with yourself this past week."

Ray shrugged and tilted his head in smug agreement. "Well, it's my brain. There have been some harsh things said about it, over the years. But for so many jobs..." Nodding over and over. "Nothing else will do."

The coffee equipment was delivered to them with their bill, neatly packed in a smart shopping bag. They left the restaurant shortly after ten, and took nearly half an hour ambling back to the hotel. The bar was much quieter now, and while Ray went to get their drinks and send the coffee stuff to the kitchen, Bodie settled in to the table they'd chosen at the far end of the terrace, in view of their balcony.

They drank slowly, enjoying the view of each other, of the lights of the boats and the moons on the water, of central Dishna enjoying a warm spring night. They talked about the day's messages from the family, and about making time to listen to Turon's music and to reply to him in a way that showed they'd listened properly. It could be interesting to see (or hear) what sort of thing he thought about them. Ray was half-expecting a hundred and fifty choruses of "What the fuck is going on there?"

The waiter was circulating diligently. After the second time he'd checked on them, refilling their water glasses, Ray suddenly shifted in his chair, and then leaned forward with both hands up on the table, fists loosely closed.

"I need to ask you. Will you..." He swallowed, and turned his right hand over, opened to show a small, shiny, dark-blue box. He did something with the fingertips of his left hand and the lid flipped back, and then he tilted the box so Bodie could see straight inside. "Will you wear a ring with me? A ring for our marriage."

They were plain, flattened bands, made from Ray's favourite grey stone. "Of course I will." Bodie held out his left hand, palm upwards, and twitched his ring finger in invitation. The ring fit nicely, and once it was in place Ray gripped Bodie's hand hard, closed his eyes, and bent to press his lips to the ring. For five seconds, six seconds. When he straightened up and opened his eyes, he looked drunk with relief. Blissfully drunk.

On a sigh: "I asked. And you said yes."

“I said, ‘Hell, yes!’ Look at you. You want me to do something with you, I’ll come running every time.”

Ray looked slightly startled, and opened his mouth as if he was about to argue. But instead he paused for a few seconds, then closed his mouth and held out his left hand like Bodie had, though giving the hint by looking between his ring finger and the box, not by twitching his finger.

Bodie held Ray’s palm to steady it while he slipped the ring on, then he turned Ray’s hand over so they could admire their hands side-by-side on the table. The Hailin didn’t have a tradition of wedding rings, Bodie was pretty sure; when he thought of the people he knew in *esmana* marriages, they definitely didn’t all wear rings. But from Ray’s look of possessive thrill, you’d have thought that he’d spent his life believing in the ring as a proof of every hope and promise, just as much as he believed in Udom Kol and Embrun.

Bodie slid his hand over Ray’s until the bands met with a small clink. “And now I’m definite I don’t want a second drink. I don’t even care about finishing this one. We’ve got a room that needs us in it.” A gesture of the head towards their balcony. “But you’re going to have to – You’ve been looking far too good all night. You know you have. Without a table between us... You’ve got to find a way to look ordinary. I mean just your normal level of gorgeous. Before I can think about getting closer than this.”

Ray nodded. “I’ve been thinking the same. Look, we’ll go up together, then you go in first, and I’ll wait exactly five minutes while you change into your T-shirt and briefs and a robe, and then go out onto the balcony. I won’t call you back into the room until...” A shrug. “I look like I take you so much for granted even Gavio would be indignant for us.”

Bodie laughed, then tossed back his drink, stood up, held out his hand, and nodded towards the door as an invitation to Ray to lead the way. There was a joke just asking to be made about Ray and choreography, but the risk was too great that Ray would see it as a hint that he’d changed his mind about them having sex.

It wasn’t a new experience: the sound of Ray next door changing his clothes. But it was the first time in their married life that they’d shared a wardrobe, and he liked the idea of their shirts and their trousers hanging next to each other. He flexed the fingers of his left hand as he listened, enjoying the shifts in the way the ring caught the light, and the pressure of the hard surface against the fingers on each side.

“I’m ready.”

Ray was standing just inside the doorway. Bodie looked him up and down, then slowly shook his head. “I guess I must be the least picky man you’ve ever met, because I think you look even more distracting like that. OK, I wouldn’t pick you out now as Dishna’s Bakkel, but you look... so ready to have a good fight with me about who’s gonna sleep on top.”

Ray grinned, then took a step back while gesturing towards the right. “That’s exactly what I’m ready for, but there’s one last thing I have to show you.”

There was a red origami *culdup* standing in the centre of the desk, inside a circular corral made of pebbles. Its ears were sticking out at different angles, and it looked like it wanted to head-butt someone. Bodie burst out laughing, then made a fist and gently

rapped the animal's head with a knuckle. "OK, you've won the argument. You get to sleep wherever you want. And to take charge of surprises for the rest of our lives."

A lopsided grin and a twitch of the eyebrows. "I can do that." Then mock-stern: "I will be sleeping on the bottom. On the side nearest the *culdup*."

"After some sort of special anniversary *tassuram*?" Wide-eyed and hopeful.

"Well..." Nodding his head slowly. "The specialness will have to depend on how well you cope with how distractingly gorgeous I am."

"Fair point. Very fair point. But I've had so much practice at it. That's gotta count for something?"

"It counts for a lot. But we still need to take it moment by moment." Flirtatious, mostly, and he reached out to grasp Bodie by the arms, and put him into a gentle kiss.

Bodie led the move to the bed, where they lay loosely entwined and talked much more than they kissed. Bodie wanted to know when Ray had asked Lamon to make them a *culdup*. The day after they'd had the talk about celebrating their anniversary, it had been, while Bodie was at work. She'd replied almost immediately, and the *culdup* had arrived at the police station on At Laura Var of the following week, along with the coffee pot. He'd collected the pebbles from one of the streams coming off the moor, again while Bodie was at work. They agreed that they'd clear a shelf in the living-room in order to house their herd of *culdups*.

After about half an hour Ray started yawning, and then declared that he'd use the bathroom first. On his way there he paused to stroke the *culdup*'s ears, and Bodie tickled the belly when he in turn came out of the bathroom.

Bodie waited until Ray had turned out the lights before he said, "OK, you can thank Ullis from me for making you spend so much time thinking about all of this. A steak at home?" He snorted. "My imagination's learned a few tricks from you, but it's still fucking pitiful."

Ray chuckled. "I don't see it like that. You love our home. Our ordinary life. It makes me happy, that you make it so obvious."

Bodie like that, and leaned in for a brief kiss. "D'you think Ullis will let us have the steaks next year, then?"

Ray took a few seconds to reply. "He'll probably want to argue about it for a month. But I'll take him a bottle of red wine. That'll convince him."

"We have a plan." Then he gave a huge yawn, which Ray joined him in halfway through, and they laughed, and yawned some more, and were soon asleep.

Chapter 34

Ray came back from counselling on At Kamaran looking quietly excited and confident. “Ullis says you’re welcome, and he’d love to try some red wine.”

“Did you tell him every last detail?” Bodie was simply curious.

Ray shrugged, as relaxed about it as Bodie. “Some gossiping did take place. A normal amount, I think. And after that, we decided that I’m completely ready to take the last few steps in the other idea we’ve been working on.”

“The dry-humping idea?”

Ray nodded. “I’m going to tell you about it tomorrow evening. We don’t be dry-humping tomorrow, the very last step will have to wait. You’ll see why. But we’ll probably want a dinner that’s quick to cook. I know I’m hiding it well, but -” A flash of a grin. “I’m impatient to tell you.”

“How about that grilled fish you like? I can go to the fishmonger’s at lunchtime.” Then with a tilt of his head towards Ray’s growing erections: “Some parts of you are hiding it better than others.”

“And some *iskolpas* wouldn’t feel it necessary to point that out. Especially if they were in a similar state. With steamed vegetables, or a salad?”

They were smirking at each other so broadly. They’d be heading for the bedroom in record time. “I don’t mind. Just decide before breakfast so I can buy everything.”

Ray decided on steamed *avigat*, which was like beans, and Bodie bought them at lunchtime along with the fish. He had the *avigat* chopped and the dressing made and the grill-pan oiled and ready when Ray came home from work.

They did the washing-up as soon as they’d eaten, then Ray nodded towards the fridge and said, “Get us a couple more beers. I’ll meet you on the couch.”

Ray’s route to his side of the couch took him around the back of the couch, and he paused on the way to reach into the pocket of his jacket where it hung on the back of one of the dining chairs. Once Bodie had sat down, Ray moved over the last few inches so their thighs were touching.

The thing Ray had fetched from his jacket was a standard mailing carton. Unused, without any label on it. He opened it, pulled out a set of what looked like photos, about five or six, then pushed the carton aside. He sat the pictures square on his lap, with both hands cupping them and half-hiding them. They looked at each other for several seconds, serious, assessing, then Ray nodded, picked up the first photo, and handed it over.

It was the living-room of West’s flat taken from near the door, looking towards the balcony. It wasn’t quite as bare as the last time Bodie had seen it, though: there was a bowl and a couple of books on the coffee-table. Ray waited for just a split-second after Bodie had blinked in recognition, then said, “This is the flat of an ex-soldier. About three years ago, in his last months in the army, on an exercise alone on the moors, he came across an orphaned *soragon* cub in a very bad state. He took care of it, and now it lives with him in the flat.” With that, Ray passed over the second photo, which was taken across the coffee-table, looking towards the TV. There was a quilt folded up on the floor

under the TV, with a hollow in the centre like you'd get if a dog used it as a bed. Bodie recognised the bowl on the table now: it was Yata's present, and he quickly turned his head to confirm that it was gone from the shelves.

Ray paused for a couple of seconds after Bodie had turned back, and then took a deep breath. "The man and the *soragon* have sex." Bodie jerked in reaction, opened his mouth, closed it with a thunk, blinked several times, then raised his eyebrows with an indistinct questioning grunt. Ray swallowed, then said, "They've been having sex almost since the *soragon* reached sexual maturity. They're devoted to each other. The man can't imagine he'll ever have sex with a person again."

Bodie's turn to swallow, and then he had to cough several times to clear his throat. "Wow. So... I mean... How did they – How does something like that start?"

"Well, everyone knows that male *soragons* turn dangerous when they reach sexual maturity. They're aggressive. Territorial. The man knew he was supposed to get the animal cut. Everyone was telling him that. But he couldn't bring himself to make the appointment. And one day he was sitting on the couch while the animal was asleep on its bed, and it got an erection in its sleep and that got him powerfully excited. So he was watching it and masturbating, when it woke up. And it immediately went over and started nuzzling him and licking him. He couldn't let it suck him off, he can't trust its mouth with that, but it carried on licking him while he brought himself off, and after it had licked him clean he sucked it off." The third photo was a close-up of the bowl, which was full of sachets of lubricant. "The next time, he tested to see if it wanted to fuck him. And it did." Ray was starting to breathe heavily, but Bodie still wasn't sure enough that he knew where Ray was going with this.

"What about – What about the other way around?"

"It took the man weeks to decide that it wouldn't be too much to see if the *soragon* enjoyed his fingers. And then a week of increasingly frantic yelping before he took the last step. Of course it was bestiality right from the start, he's not the sort of man who'd hide from that fact. But I think he knew that once he'd claimed the beast as his territory then..." A shrug. "He'd be changed. They'd be changed. And it looks like he was right."

Again, Bodie had to clear his throat. "Does anyone know?"

"Just me. And you now. He never lets anyone see the *soragon*. He has to shut it in the bathroom if someone's going to visit the flat. Its bowls are in there, and its litter tray." Ray handed him the next photo, which showed how the bathroom was set up for the *soragon*. It was taken from the corridor, not the bedroom.

"He's building up a library of veterinary books about *soragons*, and taking classes to be a veterinary assistant so he can get real experience of tending sick and injured animals." The next photograph was of the bookshelves in the living-room, with twenty or more hefty books that looked as if they could well be medical textbooks. "Because he can't risk taking it to a vet. The vet might report him, take steps to get the animal cut and he'd -" A deep sigh. "Well, he'd move far away from Parass, they'd start a new life somewhere. But so far he thinks they're safe here. No one's given him any real reason to worry."

"Does it sleep in his bed?"

“No. Only on its quilt in the living-room. The only times it goes into the bedroom are to nose its way into the wardrobe.” The last photo was of the wardrobe with one door open: Bodie’s uniform was hanging there, with his army boots beneath it. Ray really had been busy the previous weekend while Bodie had been at work. “I don’t know how this part of it started but when it’s feeling determined to get fucked, it comes in here and drags out some part of the uniform, or the boots. Sometimes it wants the man to get changed into the uniform. Sometimes it’s just a crude order.” So the *soragon* was Ray? That was it, wasn’t it?

“What about when it’s determined to fuck him?”

“Then it knocks over the bowl.”

Bodie took a deep breath, then let it out noisily. “So it’s shut in the flat all the time? That’s rough. Even with the best sex.”

“Not all the time. Look, these were taken last weekend.” He waved the photos, then put them on the table. “The flat’s empty. He takes it for regular walks, to places where they’ll have privacy, and the animal can run and play without anyone seeing that it hasn’t been cut. They go to the far end of the beach late on most nights, and spend several hours deep on the moors every weekend. He has it wear protection on its feet whenever they go out, because a cut paw would bring the risk of a vet while he’s still building up his knowledge and equipment. So you see it’s completely healthy and content. Believe me. But it gets so excited when he’s due to come home from work. It knows what his hours are, from day to day. So on An Embrun he finishes work at twelve noon. He wears overalls for a lot of his work, and he often keeps them on for the walk home. So no one will notice how ready he is for what’s waiting for him.”

You couldn’t say that of them. From across the room, from the next building, you’d be able to see right now that Ray was qualified, and Bodie wasn’t. “Does he know that you know?”

“God, no. I saw them heading home one night, when I was in the shadows and they didn’t see me. I thought... Well, something about the way the man was walking said that he’d just had the best sex imaginable. And the angle of his head as he talked to the *soragon*, and his hand stroking its head...” A shrug. “He had the *soragon* wearing a coat that covered its back and haunches, as well as protection on its feet, and I didn’t see then that it was uncut. But what I saw was enough that I decided that I had to investigate. Found out if something needed to be done about him. I knew the last person who lived in that flat, and it turns out the man didn’t change the door code when he moved in. The bowl with the lubricant confirmed my suspicions immediately, but then I found a diary at the back of a drawer in the bedside table, and I didn’t have to read much of that before I’d decided that it’s no one’s business. But I’m telling you because it’s too fucking exciting and romantic to keep to myself.”

Bodie burst out laughing. “That would be your idea of romantic. It bloody would.”

Ray somehow stayed serious and intense. “Well, yes, I know it’s sad that they can’t kiss. But they *tassuram* nearly as well, on the couch. They’re devoted. They are.”

“Is that –” Bodie broke off, and leaned forward to get his beer. He took two deep mouthfuls, then rolled the cold, damp surface of the bottle over his face then down his

throat. Two more mouthfuls, and he put the bottle back on the table with a thud. “Is that the end of our talk on the couch? Can I go and jerk off? And then come back for a mid-evening kiss with the strangest mind on the planet?”

In reply, Ray stood up, then held out a hand. “I’ll walk you to the door of your bathroom.” At the door, he pulled Bodie into a fierce kiss, rubbing their cocks hard together. Just for a few seconds, though, and then he was pushing Bodie towards the door.

Bodie looked down at his hand wrapped around his hard-on, and imagined Ray nuzzling him. Open, his mouth was too dangerous, too full of sharp teeth, but closed, it was so eager to know him. Pushing, feeling, with his whole face, the urgent shock of his stubble, the brush of his curls. Snuffling at him. Smelling him. Panting. A startled yelp on seeing him come, then a low, rumbling growl. Not threatening. Possessive. His cock was Ray’s territory now. Now Ray knew it better than he did.

Really, he had no idea what Ray was up to. Except that Ray – or some *soragon* version of Ray – would presumably be waiting for him at West’s flat when he finished work the next day. And he should turn up still wearing his overalls. And then they were going to break all records for complicated sex things.

* * * * *

Yata commented on Bodie keeping his overalls on, and Bodie said that he and Ray had decided to paint West’s flat that weekend, so he might as well stay in them. Yata wanted to know what colour, and seemed rather disappointed to hear they were keeping the same colour, and just wanted to make the place look properly cared for.

When Bodie stepped into the living-room, he found Ray kneeling up on the quilt, naked and fully erect. Bodie’s T-shirt from the night before was on the quilt by Ray’s knee. Bodie gasped, and rushed over to drop to his knees in front of Ray.

Ray leaned forward to nuzzle at his neck, or that was what Bodie thought at first, but in fact Ray had got the collar of the overalls between his teeth, and was now jerking at it, growling. Impatient and angry with the overalls.

“Just a second. Just a second. I’m taking them off.” He felt like his fingers had never worked so fast. Reloading a pistol was nothing to this. Ray had released the collar as soon as Bodie got the hint, and was sitting back, panting, eyes darting up and down the length of Bodie’s body. When the overalls were open, Bodie stood up, forcefully hauled off his shoes, pushed the overalls down, stepped out of them, and threw them aside in the direction of the balcony. In the next moment Ray’s teeth were on his belt.

He hadn’t expected this. He hadn’t expected anything like this. Even with the bowl there full of lubricant, of course he’d known that Ray couldn’t let things go that far. Some dry-humping was the most he could cope for. They’d learned their lesson at midwinter, they wouldn’t be so reckless again.

But Ray had the belt nearly open now, and Bodie’s body was refusing to do anything to stop it. Instead, his finger flew to undo his shirt, and by the time that had joined the overalls, the belt was open and Ray was attacking his waistband like it was a rat’s neck. He had to soothe Ray with a hand on his head before he could safely reach the fastening.

Ray had started making small, high sounds. When Bodie straightened up from pulling off his socks, he was surprised to see Ray getting to his feet. So Ray's *soragon* didn't go on all fours. Well, that was good. He'd've got used to it, Ray would have made it seem natural, but it sure as hell wasn't something he needed from Ray.

Ray walked quickly over to the coffee-table, knocked the bowl over with the side of his hand so the sachets spilled out nearly to the edge of the table, then jerked his head towards them with an impatient growl. He didn't make any move to pick a sachet up, though, and it took Bodie a few more seconds of being growled at to decide that Ray must be *soragon* enough that his hands were actually paws. He couldn't pick a sachet up. He certainly couldn't open one. He needed his man to do all that.

For some reason that thought melted Bodie. He dropped to his knees as he reached out towards the table, finding a sachet by feel because his eyes were fixed on Ray's face. Ray looked almost delirious with excitement and he was making the high sounds again, but louder, and more frequently.

Bodie prepared himself first, then squeezed every last trace out of the sachet to spread onto Ray. Ray yelped at his touch, trembled with the effort of control while Bodie was working for an even coating, and then was pushing clumsily at Bodie's shoulder with a lightly balled fist to get him to turn around. Not that Bodie needed any persuasion.

Aggressive. Fiercely territorial. A wild animal made content indoors because its most basic urges were being met in full. Bodie didn't kid himself that sex with a real *soragon* would be anything like this – it would be over in seconds, there would be no chance for any signs of curiosity about why he was making those different sounds, or about what made him tremble. But sex with some strange, special animal that loved him beyond anything? Oh, God, yes.

He didn't know how Ray was managing to avoid coming out with anything close to a word. Not even "oh". And keeping his hands in fists all the time, not cheating for a second to get a better grip. Bodie couldn't even manage to stop himself from using Ray's name. He hadn't thought to ask if the man had given his *soragon* a name, but it sure as hell wouldn't be Ray. He told himself it didn't matter. It wasn't as if a *soragon* would understand English. Or Hass Embrun. To a *soragon* it would just be another of his sounds, that showed that he wanted this, that there was no chance he was about to make it stop.

Ray howled as he came, and as the various waves of heat and throbbing surged and clashed in his arse, Bodie had a split-second image of a dozen women in that pool, all now suddenly pregnant, so ripe you could see the snouts of the litter pressing against the skin of each huge belly. Not Hailin semen from Ray. Not this time. Something much more hungry. Much more primitive. Bodie thought he might come with the next wave of throbbing, but he was just too late, the peak had passed.

Ray hadn't paid any attention to his cock during the fucking, but now he reached one hand under. Carefully, very carefully for a *soragon*, so his knuckles just brushed against it. A low grunt, then he pulled out – carefully, again – and pushed urgently at Bodie's hip.

Once Bodie was on his back, they stared at each other for a long time. Discovery, Bodie thought it was, though of course the story was that they did this every day. He wanted

to try beckoning Ray down to nuzzle at him, but maybe touching his cock like that was still too much for Ray. He had to let Ray set the pace, in anything to do with making him come. So he reached down slowly to take hold of himself, wanting to give Ray time to look away, wander off to the bathroom, whatever he needed. But Ray definitely wanted to watch.

Bodie's hips soon started to rock, and with that Ray bent down low, sniffed up and down the shaft from just an inch away, darted his tongue out to taste the pre-come. Then again, for longer, and he might have done much more but Bodie was already coming.

Bodie was still lying in a daze when Ray started to lick him clean. "Oh, that's good. That's good. You're so good. Everything you do to me is so good."

Some contented grunts, a more-contented sigh, then Ray turned onto his side, rested his head on Bodie's thigh, and seemed to go to sleep.

Bodie felt almost too happy to sleep. If he did sleep, maybe he'd wake up to find Ray gone, holed up again in some hotel in Dishna. And he didn't care. It was worth it. So what if they had to be flatmates again for another three months? It was worth it. Ray's shoulder naked under his hand, Ray's breath warm and damp against the crease of his thigh. Ray's wild, animal come trickling out of him. Everything to do with Ray was always worth it.

* * * * *

Ray sat up with a start when Bodie's stomach started growling, and then looked around from side to side exactly like a *soragon* set on alert. Bodie reached out, smiling, stroked Ray's face with the back of his hand, and Ray immediately relaxed.

"I don't know about you, but I'm ready for lunch." He started getting to his feet. "Let's see what we've got in the fridge."

To his surprise the fridge was turned on, and there was milk in it, and several types of cheese, and a meat pie, and half a roast bird, and vegetables and fruit. There was a loaf of really tasty bread in a bag on the counter, too.

He grinned. "This'll do us, won't it? We won't need to leave for days. Well, except I've got work tomorrow, but that's only three hours." Was that what Ray had planned? That they'd spend the whole weekend in here fucking? Apart from walks for Ray on the beach and the moors? He couldn't see yet how it would all work, but God knows he trusted Ray to think something like this through.

"But I'm gonna take a shower first. Get dressed. That way you can drag the clothes off me again, because I don't wanna miss that."

He took the route through the bedroom, with Ray following closely, and there he found that the bed was still stripped. OK. So Ray must not be planning on having them spend the night. In which case, how was Ray going to hint that it was time to go home? He needed to look out for it, but he knew that Ray trusted him, too.

The bowls in the bathroom were full, with water and the dry type of pet-food, and the litter tray was spotlessly clean. Well, of course, Ray wasn't going to touch any of this stuff. He'd sneak off for a normal piss when he had to, and all of the food was picnic food, wasn't it? He'd chosen food that he could eat from Bodie's hand.

There were a few other things in the bathroom that Bodie was sure hadn't been in Ray's photograph: a selection of towels, soap in the shower, a classic Parass beach-robe hanging on the back of the door, a pair of beach sandals next to the water bowl, along with a multi-coloured ball about the size of a tennis ball, and an inch-thick disc like a flattened football. Ray had talked about the two of them "playing" when they went outdoors, hadn't he? Having throw-toys would probably help the *soragon* get exercise. There weren't any toiletries, though; another hint that Ray didn't mean them to stay the night.

Bodie didn't hesitate about beckoning Ray into the shower, and Ray seemed thrilled to be asked. Bodie soaped them both, up and down, realising in the process that Ray had taken off his wedding ring. Bodie guessed that must have been the very last step for Ray. Maybe the most difficult? They rubbed against each other, and held each other, and roamed with lips and tongues. Neither showed even a twitch of arousal, though; it was far too soon.

Bodie dried Ray first, then himself, and then led the way back to the living-room. While Bodie was getting dressed, Ray headed back toward the bathroom. Bodie guessed that this was Ray sneaking off for a piss, and maybe he did that too, but it turned out that he'd also gone to fetch a hairbrush, which he carried in his mouth. He knelt and put the hairbrush in Bodie's hand, then stood again, bent his head slightly, and shook his damp curls at Bodie in a pointed manner.

Bodie laughed. "Yeah, I guess I did leave you in a tangle. Sorry about that." He'd never brushed anyone else's hair before, but doing it with both of them standing just had to be awkward. "Now, where's the best..." Before he'd completed his scan of the room, Ray started nudging him towards the couch.

After Bodie had sat down, Ray knelt side-on to the couch, then rested his forehead on Bodie's thigh, and wrapped his arms around Bodie's leg. Bodie ran his free hand lightly over Ray's hair, a promise that he'd be careful, and then made his first, tentative stroke with the brush.

It had been a jolt to see Ray carrying the brush in his mouth, though Ray had been so matter-of-fact about it, and even graceful in the way he'd knelt to pass the brush over. And for the first few seconds of the brushing, Bodie was glad that Ray couldn't see his face, because this felt like some weird dominance game, and not the type of straightforward tussle he'd enjoyed in the past, but something toe-curlingly twee. But he got his toes to uncurl by telling himself that Ray had thought everything through, all this must fit somewhere in Ray's scheme. Ray needed all of this, if he was going to be able to lick up Bodie's come and still sleep soundly afterwards.

Within just three strokes, however, Bodie discovered that he had a *soragon* that loved getting its hair brushed. This wasn't twee any more than Ray shaving him in the hospital had been twee, or them tending to each other in the shower. Taking care of each other. Finding out what the other liked. Showing their appreciation every way they could, like Ray now with all his little contented sounds, and his shifting grip on Bodie's leg, and the way his whole body joined in when he worked his head against Bodie's hand.

"All done, Sunshine. You're presentable now." With a squeeze of Ray's shoulder, then a light slap below his shoulder-blade. "Sunshine" had come to him just that second as a name for the *soragon*, from seeing the gold strands get brighter as Ray's hair dried,

probably, and from getting to look his fill at the gently-baked tones of Ray's skin. Yeah, that felt right.

Ray sat up, and immediately opened his mouth for the hairbrush. While he took it back to the bathroom, Bodie went to the kitchen and started putting their lunch together. He poured the beer into a broad glass, because he thought that would be easier than a bottle for a *soragon* mouth. They sat on the floor in front of the couch, and Ray soon trained Bodie to feed him exactly the same thing that Bodie had just eaten.

Even more impressive than the not talking was the way Ray kept from ever smiling – let alone laughing – or giving any reaction that showed that he truly understood what Bodie was saying. And yet you couldn't doubt for a second that everything about this meal was making him blissfully happy.

When they'd had enough to eat, Bodie got up to take the tray away, signalling to Ray to stay. He got another bottle of beer from the fridge, then wandered over to the window to size up the weather. It wasn't raining at that moment, but by the look of the clouds, it would be within half an hour. He turned back to Ray, shaking his head. "Doesn't look good out there for a walk on the moors. Let's watch some sport on TV instead. That's nearly as good as getting some exercise, right?"

Before he started looking for some suitable sport, he checked the weather forecast, and, yeah, it said rain for the next three or four hours. An Udom Kol was going to be sunny, though, and he told Ray he was going to plan on them spending most of the afternoon on the moors. He'd take their lunch out to the moors in a backpack, with a blanket and a tarpaulin, and a good stock of lubricant.

He found a *cutro* march that had just started, so that should keep them entertained for the next two hours. He poured the beer into the glass, sat back, and put his arm around Ray. Ray accepted a few mouthfuls of beer, then gave another of his contented sighs, and turned and shrugged and shuffled and turned again until he was lying half-curved on his side with his head in Bodie's lap. Bodie rested his hand briefly on Ray's head, then slid it down and started stroking along the hairline at the back of Ray's neck, very slowly and gently, wanting to soothe with no risk of tickling.

Ray didn't seem sleepy, though. No one would have guessed that he was directly interested in the action on the screen, but he was definitely interested in Bodie's reactions to the match, and whenever the crowd or the commentators got particularly loud and excited, he'd sit up and look expectantly at Bodie, and Bodie would explain to him what was happening and why it was good or bad, and once he was sufficiently reassured that Bodie had everything in the world under control, he'd give one of his happy-*soragon* sounds, then take his time again getting comfortable lying down. Once, after he'd finally got settled, Bodie bent to kiss his cheek, and almost, almost caught a smile.

The match finished shortly after four and was followed by a cooking program. There was probably some more sports on somewhere else, but first Bodie had to get rid of some beer. "Time to shift all the way up, Sunshine. I have to take a piss."

Passing back through the bedroom, Ray didn't do more than glance at that door of the wardrobe, but that was enough for Bodie. He'd always give Ray what he wanted, but that didn't mean he had to wait for Ray to insist. He could ask.

So he opened the wardrobe and lifted out the hanger with the uniform, and Ray's eyes opened wide. He flung himself at Bodie, knocking him back against one of the wardrobe doors, and then was snarling and nipping frantically at Bodie's shoulder, hard enough that he must be leaving teeth-marks. Thrusting against Bodie's groin, too.

Laughing, Bodie took hold of his shoulders, managed to push his teeth just out of range. "Steady, steady. Don't you want to give me a chance to -"

No, no chance, because now Ray was on his back on the bed with his knees raised. Bodie was a split-second away from dropping the uniform, burying his head between Ray's legs to get Ray ready with spit. But he wanted to get in the uniform. He wanted to open the door and step into the next room, and see Ray whimpering with delight at how desperately he wanted to be fucked.

"Five minutes. Wait." And he lunged for the boots and ran into the living-room and closed the door behind him. The howl was almost immediate and full of real distress, and it continued, with banging and scratching at the door, while Bodie was tearing out of his clothes and hurrying into his uniform. Because of course a *soragon* wouldn't understand "five minutes". It would only think the worst of a shut door.

He couldn't go into the bathroom to check the angle of the beret. And the only other mirror was on the wardrobe. Next time. He'd plan it better next time. With the next time in mind, he put a handful of sachets in his pocket, then went over to open the door.

He should probably have said something to warn Ray before he opened it, but maybe it wouldn't have made any difference. Ray burst out, banged into him, then stumbled past to slam against the back of the couch. When he turned around he looked thoroughly confused, but then he focussed on Bodie – coming towards him, hand outstretched, apologising – trembled all over for four or five seconds, then gave a strangled whimper and turned again, to bend over the couch.

"Not yet. Not there." Bodie's voice was half-strangled, too. "I want you like you were in the bedroom. So you see me." Carry him back to the bedroom? Get him down on the floor? He scanned the living-room, dismissing the couch and the coffee-table, but then – of course – the dining-table. He dragged the nearest chair out of the way, then slapped twice on the top as he coaxed Ray around with a hand on his arm. Ray understood immediately.

"See? You see? It was worth the wait, wasn't it?" His right hand was working at Ray's clutching arse, his left was loosening his belt. "When Sergeant Bodie's assigned to you. When he's taking care of you. You won't know what that really means until you watch him getting ready to fuck you."

Ray panted and whimpered while Bodie was pushing in, and once Bodie was as deep as he could get, he stood panting hard himself, feeling nearly overwhelmed by the heat and by all of the layers of tightness and texture. Ray, on the other hand, had turned lazy and smug, with long, hoarse growls in time with a slow, undemanding rocking of his hips.

It felt like a minute before Bodie trusted his voice to cope with a complete sentence. With a smile: "You look like you've forgiven me for making you wait. I am sorry about that, you know. But if I hadn't spent those years of my life wearing this uniform, then I never would have met you. I never would have found out that the thing I was really

meant for was sharing this with you. And today's one of the days when I'm feeling enough of a romantic to want to wear all of it. I wish I could have explained that to you in the bedroom, but... I'm going to make it up to you, I promise."

In response, Ray gave a grunt, opened his arms out to the side in a way that said "Take me" in anyone's language, and then brought his heels up to tug hard on Bodie's hips.

Amid all the yelping and sighing and snarling, Ray did forget himself enough to clutch at the edge of the table. He didn't want Bodie's hand on his cock during the fucking, and afterwards he used the grip of his legs to push Bodie down, stopping the instant that Bodie got the message and opened his mouth to take Ray's cock in. It wasn't a *jarupard*, not here, and no Hailin had ever got around to introducing him to the Hass Embrun word for an animal's cock. But if "cock" was good enough for him, he thought it was good enough for a *soragon*.

Once they were off the table, they stood for a long time with their arms around each other, and then Ray led the way to the bedroom, and they lay down together for another long time. More and more, Bodie wanted to kiss, but Ray would twitch and give a warning grunt at even the lightest touch between their closed mouths.

It was Ray, too, who led the way into the shower. Partly, it was his turn to piss, and he used the toilet just like Bodie, but didn't flush. But then he walked into the shower and stood waiting for Bodie to undress. He wanted to be soaped again, he'd liked that, and he stretched and turned and pushed back, which he'd barely done before. But then the moment he was dry he walked out of the bathroom, and when Bodie was dry enough himself to follow, he found Ray curled up on the quilt with his back to the room. He definitely didn't want his hair brushed this time, and it wasn't that something had suddenly gone wrong; Bodie was as sure of that as he'd ever been of anything. This was the signal. It was time for him to go home.

He got dressed, put his uniform back in the wardrobe – apart from the tunic, which needed washing – then picked up his overalls. "I'll see you soon, my love." He didn't expect a reaction and there was none, and he headed straight for the front door.

Ray arrived home only about a quarter of an hour after him, while he was in the middle of starting a load of laundry. Ray was wearing the same cream shirt and moss-green trousers that he'd had on when Bodie had left for work that morning, which seemed like the most bizarre thing of the whole day.

"Hi." Ray's smile. Just a few hours and it seemed he'd forgotten what Ray's smile could do to him.

"Hi, yourself." The most stupid, gormless grin, he could feel it.

"Y'couldn't – do that later?"

"Any time." He'd immediately got to his feet. "Why?"

"Because..." And he was in Ray's arms, and Ray was kissing him, and he could feel the chill of Ray's wedding-ring against his shoulder-blade, and if he stayed like this until the washing-machine crumbled to dust, that would be fine. But Ray, eventually, had other ideas. "OK, I want a beer. And let's make pizza. And watch a horror movie. Maybe two."

They watched “Assault on Precinct 13” and “The Thing”. During the break between the films, Ray made a pot of coffee and got out a range of liqueurs, including *brosha*. Bodie asked for a Scotch, and Ray poured himself a *tharva*.

“We gonna talk about... what we got up to today?”

Ray looked like he’d been expecting the question, but was still slow to reply. “Not yet. Probably not for at least four more weekends. I don’t want to rush any part of this.”

“It’s just a weekend thing? For after my work?”

“Let’s say... Let’s say yes. It fits – It fits well, doesn’t it?”

“Like a glove.” Yes, how would they manage evenings, when Ray was the one coming home? “Speaking of weekend things... D’you know if there’s anywhere in town that sells bags for picnics? For keeping food and beer cool, I mean. If we’re gonna be spending a lot of time out on the moors.”

Ray nodded. “I know a couple of places. I’ll get one tomorrow morning. Something that’ll fit easily in one of our shopping backpacks, right?”

“Yeah, that’s it,” and they grinned at each other. Bodie guessed that Ray was thinking the same thing that he was: that this was going to be cheaper than being flatmates, if they could sort out the daily details of this new story without having to go through Ullis.

They didn’t have sex that night, though they lay awake kissing for a long time after Bodie turned off the light. Ray was on top, which would presumably make it easier for both of them if the Mabein got to work in his head again and he had to leave. But he was still there when the alarm went off at half six, and a few minutes after that they were getting each other hard in bed for the first time ever in the morning.

Again, Bodie left work in his overalls, but that was because Yata expected them to be applying the second coat of paint that day, and it was less effort just to go along with that. He was looking forward to getting home to his *soragon*, of course, but now he knew how Ray’s game worked, he was confident about pacing himself, keeping his reaction under control.

After he left the workshop, he went to their flat first to collect his backpack and get out of his overalls. He packed the tarpaulin and blanket, and also a towel and some matches and a knife. Next weekend he might pack his trapping and cooking equipment, too, but right now they had a lot of picnic food that needed eating. He’d thought that Ray might leave the picnic bag somewhere obvious for him to pack, but it looked like Ray had taken it to West’s flat.

Yes, there it was waiting on the kitchen counter. Ray was getting up from the quilt again, all eager, but this time he didn’t have Bodie’s shirt with him, and he wasn’t erect. That changed as the distance between them closed, but Ray didn’t get nearly as frantic as he had the day before. In fact, they ended up dry-humping on the couch – though not dry, of course, but naked and sweaty and sticky, and a wonderful use of an hour and a couch. They lay together quietly for a while afterwards, but neither fell asleep, and Ray was the one who led the way to the shower.

When they were both dry, Bodie held out the hairbrush for Ray to take, collected the robe, sandals and toys himself, then nodded in the direction of the living-room. "Let's go through to the couch."

He dealt with Ray's curls first, and once Ray got back from returning the brush to the bathroom, he had Ray sit on the couch so he could put the sandals on him. Ray seemed fascinated by the process of fastening the buckles, and once he was on his feet he took a few excited, bouncing steps from side to side, but then he immediately settled when Bodie held out the robe, and was helpful with his arms in a way that would probably have been impossible for a real *soragon*, no matter how willing it was. Bodie dressed himself in record time, and Ray seemed to enjoy watching that too. The picnic bag already contained some plastic plates, cups and cutlery, so Bodie just had to pack a couple of bottles of beer and a selection of food for lunch.

There were probably plenty of places on the moors where you could run around with complete privacy on a weekend afternoon, but the only place Bodie could vouch for personally was the area by the distinctive tree. They'd take the path by the garden centre that led to the coast, then follow the coast to the large stream, and the stream would lead them to the tree. They'd be bound to pass a few people on the way, but no one who'd insist on talking, no matter how curious they might be about the silent man in the beach-robe, not reacting at all to the jokes and comments from his fully-clothed friend who was doing all of the carrying.

It still seemed to be too early in the year for most of the beach-hut people, and by the time they reached the coast, Bodie was hungry enough to decide to stop so they could share the meat pie and one of the beers. Ray nestled against him as they ate, in a way that would look natural either from a lover, or from a secure and affectionate pet.

They reached the tree shortly after three. Bodie did a few circuits of it, explaining to Ray that he was looking for the stack of firewood he'd left the last time. "We've had some strong storms since then, though. I wasn't really expecting it to be here." He bent down to pick up a short, zig-zagging branch that looked like it had come from the tree itself. "D'you fancy playing at looking for sticks? We won't need a fire today, but if we bring our tent and spend the night here – maybe next weekend? – you know we'd be glad to have a head start on the firewood."

Ray came over and sniffed up and down the length of the branch, then abruptly turned and ran back along the stream for about ten yards. He stopped with his gaze fixed on the ground, gave a satisfied yelped, looked around at Bodie and gave another yelp that bordered on the boastful, and then got down on all fours, lowered his face to the ground, and came up with a two-foot long stick in his mouth. Bodie struggled to control his expression while Ray was trotting back to him, torn between profound relief that Ray had made the rule that the man and the *soragon* never kissed, and admiration for how graceful and natural Ray had looked through every moment.

Ray passed the stick over to him, then preened as Bodie patted and stroked his arm. "Wow, you've got a good memory. You've got to be a firm favourite to win the game. But don't think I'm just gonna give up. I'll still give it all I've got. I think down here is the best place for our fuel depot, don't you?" He was bending to put the two sticks in the space between two of the tree's roots. "It's pretty sheltered, and large enough for a day's worth of wood."

He thought Ray might show his agreement by running even further back to get some other branch he'd spotted, but instead Ray went to the top of the nearest hummock, then went up on tip-toes to do a 360 degree survey of their surroundings. He came back to Bodie making fretful, impatient noises, wriggling his shoulders violently, as if he was trying to shake something off, and pawing at the belt of his robe.

Bodie got the hint. "Yeah, no need to hide anything here. Let's see how tight I tied that knot." Tight enough that he ended up kneeling down to get a proper angle on it. Ray shrugged the robe off, revealing the beginnings of an erection, but Bodie allowed himself only a glance before he looked up, grinning, then reached down behind Ray to pick the robe up by the nearest part of the hem. "You think you're gonna distract me from our firewood crisis. But we've got priorities at this camp: supplies first, sex second." He got to his feet and went to drape the robe over a high branch in the tree. "Well, no. A good chunky sandwich, a piece of fruit, and a cup of fresh water first. But sex last. And the other bottle of beer either after the sex or during it."

While he was getting a cup of water from the stream, he filled the empty beer-bottle to take along on their wood-hunt. After they'd eaten, he wrapped the picnic bag and blanket in the tarpaulin and wedged the bundle next to the robe, explaining to Ray that they needed to make space in the backpack to carry the wood. They'd follow the stream inland to the start of the hills, and then meander back through the hillocks.

In the end, Ray did find well over half of the wood. They filled the backpack, but Ray kept bringing more sticks, until Bodie couldn't fit any more in the crook of his left arm, and he threw away the next stick that Ray brought him, in what turned out to be an extended game of fetch, with Bodie employing many of the tricks of misdirection that he'd learned from Ray in *gulshor*.

Sometimes they walked together, and Bodie would point things out, and talk about hunting and camouflage and navigation, and any other easy, light-hearted stories that occurred to him from his army days. Ray showed no reaction apart from looking delighted to have Bodie's attention; or, rather, the only specific reactions came from his cock, which tended to fill during the stories which involved Bodie catching out another soldier, or hatching a plan with someone. But Ray frequently wandered away, too, sometimes seeming to get distracted mid-story, and he'd come back in a minute or two, with a stick and without an erection.

Bodie dumped the wood in their depot, and Ray leaned forward and, with great ceremony, dropped his last, much-fetched stick on top of the pile.

"That's some good work. Job done. So you still wanna have the fuck now?" An instant, emphatic yes from between Ray's legs, and Bodie burst out laughing. "That's the one English word I know you definitely understand. Let's get that blanket laid out, then."

He decided on the sunny side of the hollow next to the tree, and put the tarpaulin down first, for extra cushioning. He slid the sachet of lubricant in a fold in the towel, out of sight to avoid distracting Ray, and placed the towel on a corner of the blanket. Then he undressed, with Ray watching patiently but attentively, and moving in at suitable points to clamp a fold or hem between his teeth, and gently tug the fabric down. He seemed so pleased as each new area of skin was revealed, and not just because it meant that the fucking was getting closer, but because he'd been missing the sight, and the warmth and texture and scent against his face, and the taste and resilience under his

tongue. Some of the biting made Bodie gasp with surprise, and then hasten to tell Ray not to stop. Bodie did some biting of his own once they were down on the ground, and Ray jumped and shivered nicely, but Bodie was sure he was weeks of practice away from having even a tenth of Ray's precision. He could more than make up for that with his hands, though; today Ray did want Bodie's hands on his cock, though it took Bodie a while to understand that what Ray wanted even more was to see Bodie handling his own cock at the same time. That seemed to amaze him; he couldn't believe his luck.

Soon Bodie decided that he needed to ease off, and he trailed his fingertips up Ray's stomach to his nipples, closely copying the movements on himself. Ray like that, too, looking back and forth between Bodie's hands, and reaching up to briefly rub his knuckles across the backs of Bodie's fingers.

The next time Bodie eased off he went in the other direction, to squeeze and tease balls and inner thighs, and the time after that it was the lightest touch he could manage along collarbone, around the neck and throat up to the chin, to graze and then part the lips. The instant he felt the wet heat of Ray's mouth, the ridges of his teeth, the silky caress of his tongue, Bodie decided he was at most four breaths away from being done with foreplay.

He withdrew his fingers slowly and carefully, then leaned over to get the towel and hold it up so the sachet fell out onto the blanket, then immediately tossed the towel to the side. He slid a fingertip under the sachet, tilting it towards Ray. "Next time I'll bring the bowl along, and my army boots. But for today can you work out a different way to tell me what you're in the mood for?"

Ray abruptly sat up. He stared at Bodie, then at the sachet, and then knelt up and looked around the hollow with an intent expression, first to one side, then to the other. Then he got to his feet, looked Bodie up and down, nudged the sachet with the edge of his sandal, and then quickly crossed the hollow and braced himself against the trunk of the tree.

It lasted longer than the fuck against Bodie's front door, but they came within seconds of each other, just as they had then, Bodie couldn't bring himself to press his face to the rough tree bark to lick up Ray's come, but he collected as many drops as he could on his fingertips and sucked them deep, and Ray gave one of his yelps, pushed his face next to Bodie's, and forced his tongue between Bodie's fingers, searching hungrily. Bodie parted his fingers, kept his tongue still, asking nothing, and congratulated himself on having discovered how to get a kiss from a *soragon*. A brief kiss, alas, as Ray soon had to accept that there weren't any more drops of come to be shared.

Bodie dragged the blanket over to the base of the tree, got the beer and cup from the picnic bag, then sat back against the tree and beckoned to Ray to sit between his legs. They drank slowly and quietly, just nuzzling each other from time to time, or briefly tightening their grip on each other. By the time they finished the beer it was nearly six o'clock. They'd need to leave soon if they were going to get home before dark.

Bodie wet a corner of the towel in the stream, and carefully wiped the come from Ray's backside. "I know you'd love to walk through town with my come running down your legs for everyone to see, but I'm just as keen myself on not getting arrested. Next weekend, when we spend the night here, you can stay sticky for as long as you want."

As soon as they got back to West's flat, Ray made it clear that he wanted out of the robe and the sandals, and once Bodie had obliged, Ray went to lie down on the quilt and ignore him. Bodie took the robe and sandals back to the bathroom, but decided to take everything else home; it seemed the simplest way to deal with the things that were going to need cleaning.

"See you soon, Sunshine. It was a great afternoon."

Bodie was in the kitchen washing the picnic cups when Ray came home.

"I'm going to brush my teeth." From the doorway, abrupt and unsmiling.

"OK." Bodie nodded, and Ray immediately headed along the corridor to his bathroom. So he'd finally caught Ray failing to think something through; Ray could easily have kept a set of toiletries at West's flat, hidden away in a cupboard somewhere. Then in the next second, Bodie was shaking his head, exasperated with himself: Ray probably did have a set of toiletries at West's flat, and he might not even be brushing his teeth at that moment; Ray's priority here was to let Bodie know that he needn't worry about coming across traces of bark or worse. They could kiss now, like any normal couple.

Ray came back via their bedroom. "What do you say to eating out if we can find a table at this time on An Udom Kol? I'm not really in the mood to cook. Somewhere fairly quiet, so we can talk."

Bodie liked the idea, especially after they'd been working so hard all day to avoid other people. They ended up eating in the restaurant at the top of An Embrun, which was full when they arrived but had a very pleasant bar for them to wait in.

They didn't kiss until the goodnight kiss in bed. Bodie thought he could feel a slight swelling on the inside of Ray's bottom lip, maybe even a scratch. It didn't seem to be hurting Ray at all, and Bodie soon decided that he liked that small irregularity for itself, and also for what it said about how far Ray would go when he really needed an idea to work.

Again, Ray was still in bed when the alarm went off the next morning. Bodie found he didn't mind at all that it would be seven days before he'd get to see Ray naked again; those were seven days in which he'd get to make Ray laugh, and that might be an important to him as sex. He wasn't impatient, either, for Ray to tell him what was going on behind this *soragon* game; three or four more weekends like this would suit him just fine.

Chapter 35

It was good to be back at college. He hadn't actively been missing the twins or Barrow, but damn, they were a useful team. Separation had made him appreciate the others more, too, or at least made him appreciate having a crowd close at hand.

Some people had had a fantastic time in their garage, and no one had any bitter complaints. Bodie seemed to be about in the middle of the range. Between them they had all learned hundreds of different things, and that came out even in the first day, in the questions and comments in the lessons. Bodie had to assume that some of it was bullshit, but even so, they were going to be picking up a lot from each other from now on.

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They were on the same side at *pulsonranas*. Bodie took a bad hit to the shoulder and Ray was the one who took him to the field hospital, and later Bodie nearly got them disqualified when he snatched Ray out of danger. On the ferry, about ten minutes before they were due to dock, Ray suddenly broke the long silence by saying quietly, "I want to fuck you."

Bodie swallowed, took a brief glance out of the nearest window, then said just as quietly, "That can be arranged. I'll drive, yeah?"

He dropped Ray off at West's building, then parked as normal and took his time walking to West's flat. Ray didn't want him to get undressed, just wanted his trousers down, and then afterwards wanted his trousers up again almost immediately, so they could go for a walk to the end of the beach. It turned out that the throw-toys weren't in the bathroom – they must be somewhere in the backpack in the other flat - so Bodie said they'd need to keep a look out for a good stick if they wanted to play fetch once they had enough privacy.

They passed a few people on the way, and Bodie returned their nods and smiles, while Ray looked alert and friendly and tilted his head. There was a regular scattering of driftwood along the beach, and Ray kept kneeling to sniff at the smaller pieces, though he never picked any of them up. Bodie teased him for being in such a fussy mood, while keeping any eye out himself for a stick with the right kinks and curves to make sure that part of it would be standing clear of the sand no matter how it landed. He found a couple, then once they reached the end of the beach he chose the one with the lightest colour, because even on a night with two nearly-full moons, you wouldn't want to make night-time fetch more difficult for your *soragon* than it needed to be.

They played for less than a quarter of an hour, which was enough time for Bodie to get head-butted twice on the sternum as punishment for only pretending to throw the stick, and for Ray to overcome his initial indignation at the temperature of the water, so that each dash into the sea took him deeper and deeper, though he also seemed to run out more quickly each time. His last dip took him to mid-thigh, and he stayed there for several seconds, scolding and warning the waves with yelps and snarls, and then when he ran out he headed straight for the robe, and picked it up and carried it to Bodie. Ray was shivering slightly, and after Bodie had belted up the robe, he took off his jacket and used it to dry Ray's legs off, and then held him as close as he could during the brisk walk home. That seemed enough to keep Ray comfortable, though he did also stretch and arch and sigh beautifully when he met the warmth of the shower.

Bodie took some time to watch and to shake his head before joining him. “You really know what you like, don’t you? I’m going to take a towel now whenever we go to the beach, but I’m never gonna worry that you’ve got so fired up on *soragon* adrenaline that you don’t feel how cold the water is.”

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By the evening of At Kamaran, Bodie had decided how he was going to handle the equipment and supplies for their night on the moors: he was going to pack his hiking rucksack that evening while Ray was with Ullis, and take it over to West’s flat and lay everything out on the bed. Then on the afternoon of An Embrun he’d be able to show it all to the *soragon* and explain how they’d use it, which would give Ray the morning of An Udom Kol to make any changes he needed. Bodie was sure that Ray would want to add a few things to their stock of food, and he guessed that Ray might have a better idea for keeping a *soragon* warm after dark than the padded jacket and extra blanket that Bodie had picked out. Bodie was most curious, though, to see if Ray agreed with him that only the man would use a sleeping-bag: the *soragon* would sleep next to the man, under a blanket. The way Bodie saw it, if the man didn’t let the *soragon* sleep in his bed at home, then he’d want to keep them separate in the tent, too.

It turned out that Ray did agree with him about the sleeping-bag, and also that a *soragon* wasn’t going to let anyone put trousers or thermal leggings on it, no matter how much he loved and trusted the person, or how chilly the spring night might get. Ray’s contributions to the food were some packets of herbs, a dozen assorted bread rolls, and a couple of vegetables that he’d mentioned the night before as being particularly good for frying.

Bodie realised at their first meal what a great idea the rolls were. He could load them up with the cooked food, and hold them for Ray to take bites from. For that campsite, at least, it looked like the haul would have a pattern: only fish on the first day, with the trigger snares paying off overnight. You could probably add a bird to the fish with a box-trap, but as Bodie explained to his *soragon* as he started preparing the fish that first evening, he thought they’d both prefer to spend the afternoon roaming around collecting wood and berries and enjoying the view, rather than lying quietly in wait for maybe an hour or more.

Ray was wary of the fire but also fascinated by it. He kept his distance, staying always slightly behind Bodie, but he put himself firmly in charge of making sure there was wood immediately to hand in case the fire started to die down, and he could be forceful in letting Bodie know it was time to build the fire up again. Between these period of hard work, though, he found plenty of time to curl against Bodie and watch the flames with a lot of contented sighing.

Bodie was feeling great waves of tenderness for Ray, but, to his own surprise, with barely a twitch from between his legs. Could it be something as basic as knowing that there wasn’t going to be any goodnight kiss? That they wouldn’t be lying in the tent with the lamp on low while Ray surprised him with a lost episode of “The Six Million Dollar Man”? It was the first night they’d spent with Ray as the *soragon*, and while he knew he’d be crazy to miss out on any part of this weekend – and he was hoping for good weather next weekend, so they could do it all again – he really wished he could stop thinking right now about what he’d give to have just five minutes tonight to catch up

with his husband. Maybe Ray was feeling something similar? Impossible to tell. Ray was so good at this. He was so single-minded. And of course he was the one who knew the real story behind this game.

A huge yawn overtook him, and startled Ray enough that Bodie kissed his head and stroked his back to settle him. "Sorry, Sunshine. I guess I don't have your stamina." A chuckle and a kiss to Ray's cheek. "You wear a man out. Let's give the fire ten more minutes then go to bed. If I don't fall asleep sitting right here."

Ray looked at him for a few seconds, then suddenly gave a jaw-popping yawn of his own. Bodie laughed, and in the next moment they were yawning together, and Bodie announced the new plan, which was for him to put the fire out immediately.

Ray preferred to sleep naked and without the sandals, and Bodie got him settled under two layers of blanket before shedding most of his own clothes and sliding into the sleeping-bag. Once the tent was sealed and the lamp was out, the darkness was nearly as thick as in the holds. The burbling of the steam was as constant as the hum of the ship's engines, though the scurryings around them were harder to fit in to the picture.

Bodie didn't want to fall asleep just yet. This was special: the two of them lying warm together in this tight space, the only people anywhere on the moor. Not that they had to huddle together against the hard world, of course. Nothing like that. But they'd had to make up everything as they went along. It involved so much trust in each other.

"You know, I'd say that this feels like we're in a very small spaceship, but I've come across too many people who can get annoyed for days if they hear any comparison being made between camping and space travel."

Ray burst out laughing, and then immediately turned it into a coughing fit. Bodie stroked and patted his back, all concern, and said this sounded rougher on him than the last time he'd brought up a hairball. The fit went on for some time, and when it finally subsided, they both gave murmurs of relief, took a closer hold on each other, and were soon asleep.

* * * * *

Bodie came awake to a dim, purple-tinged light; dawn not yet broken, he thought. Ray was still asleep beside him, with the blanket pushed down to his waist. Bodie opened the tent just enough to be able to wriggle up and stick his head out. Yes, about ten minutes till dawn, he reckoned, judging by the pink tinge on the thin lines of clouds, and by the way the birds were tuning up. He gave a deep sigh of satisfaction at the quality of his internal clock. You owned the day if you got to see it like this.

Ray was stirring beside him, and he widened the opening some more and peered in. "D'you want to join me out here? The sun's about to come up. My second-favourite type of sunshine."

By the time the light reached the upper branches of their tree, the air had warmed noticeably. "Do we get up when it hits the tent? Or wait until we start to feel hungry? I'm not in a hurry. Are you?" In response, Ray briefly raised his head and looked around their clearing, then fell back and nestled closer. Bodie soon drifted into a near-doze listening to the morning noises, but a flurry of wriggling from Ray made him open his eyes, and in the next moment Ray's closed fist was nudging at his forearm, and then

lifting it and pulling it across, until the backs of Bodie's fingers brushed against a well-advanced erection.

Bodie exclaimed at Ray doing such a thorough job of waking up, they spent a few moments adjusting their positions so Bodie could take a proper grip, and then less than a minute later Bodie kicked his way out of his sleeping-bag and began to get himself caught up.

It was quick and basic, and, God, such a good way to jump-start your system. He took a few moments to recover, and then opened the tent as wide as it would go, partly to help them cool off, but also so he could raise his head and admire his work.

"Damn, but we look good. I'll never get tired of seeing how good we look together." He rolled onto his side to trail his fingertips through the drops of come on Ray's belly, and Ray reached over and did the same, but with his knuckles. They rubbed their stubble together, and Ray was entirely happy today for Bodie to kiss the corner of his mouth.

Finally Bodie announced that he was hungry. He was in the mood for a mug of *kenit*, even. They went down to the steam to wash first then back to the tent to dress, and while he was dressing Bodie decided they should check the snares first before he got the fire going. They had two plump birds, and one of the long, thin *garvinches*, and that would do them nicely for lunch. "There'll be some parts we won't want to eat. Well, you'd probably be fine about eating them, but I don't wanna watch you do it. If I throw the parts over the stream, we might get to see some of your cousins. I wonder if the pack's grown since the last time I saw it." He'd mentioned the local *soragons* to Ray several times, either making conversation about the moors, or explaining precautions he was taking. If Ray didn't want to risk seeing the pack, Bodie was confident that Ray would find a way to stop him throwing the carcasses over.

For breakfast they shared a couple of fried-egg butties and some strips of dried meat, washed down with mugs of *kenit*. For the morning's firewood hunt, Bodie had decided they would go far around the coast, scouting at the same time for other places they might camp. He put the robe on Ray before they left, because they'd be going near the huts. "And I know you won't have forgotten that we don't collect firewood where people can see us. We don't want anyone to guess we're camping and come looking for our tent. When I slap my thigh like this, you're to come straight over and walk quietly beside me." That was true enough about keeping their camping secret, but even more he wanted to be sure that Ray wouldn't take the *soragon* act so far that he'd keep on carrying sticks when other people were around. Of course, Ray's mind was always going to surprise him, but it had to be a relief to Ray to be told that the *soragon* had been trained that there were some things it mustn't do in public.

By the time they'd gone half a mile away from the huts, Bodie decided the robe could come off. If there was anyone else on this stretch of coast, they'd see them well ahead of time; they wouldn't be taken by surprise.

Ray enjoyed the coast, and got distracted from firewood by shells and rockpools and strands of kelp, and by the rhythms of the waves. He spent a lot of the time dodging in and out of the water, and when they reached a good stretch of sandy beach, Bodie took off his boots and socks and joined in.

Whenever they crossed a stream, they followed it inland for a few minutes in search of a campsite. There were some places that might work, but Bodie said he was realising how fond he'd got of their tree.

After lunch, when Bodie went to pick up the remains and then got ready to throw them, Ray just looked alert and curious. Bodie was hoping the *soragons* would show up this time, because he himself was curious as hell to see how Ray would react. He wouldn't be surprised if his Sunshine didn't realise it was a *soragon*, but how would Ray act that idea out?

He was pleased with his aim, getting all of the carcasses to land with a circle of about a yard. He retrieved their last bottle of beer from the stream, washing his hands in the process, then gathered Ray next to him to sit against the tree and watch.

They really were sharp and quick, the local birds. It was a wonder they didn't get too fat to fly. But then, the way they all flocked in did broadcast the news of the find across half of the moors, putting them in immediate competition with anything big enough to fancy its chances. Today Bodie was in luck – and the birds were out of it – as a pack of six *soragons* arrived within minutes.

Ray gave a startled yelp when the animals burst into the clearing, and then he nearly made Bodie spill the beer as he leapt to his feet with a snarl and planted himself in front of Bodie. A brief glance back at Bodie, then he hunched his shoulders, arms out to the side, and stepped forward to the edge of the stream, a threatening growl rumbling in his throat.

Bodie wanted to laugh, but managed to bite down on that. Ray making himself look bigger. Ray's first instinct to protect his man from all the dangerous wild *soragons*. Or maybe to let them know that this man was taken. Yeah, why wouldn't it think that all *soragons* wanted a man to have sex with? Such a ridiculous idea, but so typical of Ray, and it was getting him powerfully turned on.

He leaned to the side to see how the *soragons* were reacting, but mostly they weren't. The two smallest members of the pack had come forward slightly, and were giving short yaps, without any real heat. If the other members of the pack had ever paid Ray any attention, he was already forgotten for the fight with the birds. Soon one youngster and then the other turned and joined in the fight, and Ray's growl gradually faded to just a slow rasping, and his shoulders relaxed.

"You took charge of that so quickly. I didn't have to worry for a second." Quiet and sincere. Not a hint of teasing. When Ray turned around, his expression was proud and fierce, and Bodie wasn't surprised to see that he was fully erect. Bodie grinned and got to his feet, and was about to reach into the breast-pocket of his shirt for a sachet of lubricant when Ray got there first, rubbing his knuckles back and forth to make the sachets rustle.

"Of course you remembered that I put some in my pocket. Hold it for me while I get my trousers down?" When Bodie held out the sachet, Ray immediately parted his lips to take it, and he stood panting as Bodie unfastened his trousers and pushed them down past his knees.

Bodie turned his back on Ray before he started to lubricate himself, hearing Ray's noises become higher and more uneven, and then he got down on all fours and parted his legs as wide as his trousers would let him. The *soragons* and the birds seemed to be nearing the end of their fight. Would they take more notice of Ray fucking than they had of Ray issuing his challenge to them? Bodie quite liked the idea of them taking a few idle glances as they gnawed on the bones, he had to admit that, but he thought he'd need a few more years of Ray's twisted influence before he'd want to meet the eyes of a *soragon* that was watching him being fucked.

Ray was in a happy, possessive daze for a long time afterwards, insisting on keeping contact with at least some part of Bodie while they got to their feet, and Bodie dealt with his clothes, and they moved back to the tree and the beer. He nuzzled at Bodie's neck and armpit and collarbones, and when he paused to take a mouthful of beer, he seemed to appreciate it most for the chance to clutch tight at Bodie's hand and arm. Bodie teased him that he was lucky that the pack had moved on, because they'd never believe his tough act again if they could see him like this.

There was enough of the afternoon left for them to take a walk up into the hills for a view of their building. Bodie had wondered if Ray's sandals would give him problems on the steeper sections of the paths, but Ray was thoroughly surefooted. They should explore more of the hills next time, maybe see if they could find a good path home.

Ray recognised their building, and promptly acted out stretching and being washed under the shower, and then kneeling to have his hair brushed. Bodie laughed, and agreed that there was always a point on these weekends when you decided you wanted to get really clean more than you wanted unlimited fresh air, and he was close to that point himself.

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At breakfast on At Mordez, Ray said that he was hoping to meet Gavio for a drink that week. "If he'll agree to meet me and we can arrange a time. I thought I'd send him a message this lunchtime. Say I want to give him a proper apology."

Bodie nodded. "Go for it. Arrange any time you want. You don't have to check with me first. Just send me a message to say you'll be home late."

"Or that I'll be missing *pulsonranas*, if that's the only night he's got free?" Ray pulled a face. "I'd really like it to be before At Kamaran so I can discuss the meeting with Ullis. Otherwise I can see us running out of things to talk about."

Bodie laughed. "So it's not so much about owing Gavio an apology. More about getting your money's-worth out of Ullis."

With a twitch of the eyebrows: "That and keeping him entertained. I admit I've got very used to being his most interesting client."

Bodie's eyebrows did more than twitch, but he busied himself with breakfast and kept his mouth shut. How much entertainment could Ullis Hanvert need, if the story about the weekend's pack of *soragons* was going to leave him yawning?

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Ray hadn't heard back from Gavio by the time he left for work on At Laura Var, but Bodie got home from college to find a message from Ray saying that Gavio had called him at work, and they were meeting at seven that evening. Ray was assuming the drink wouldn't last more than an hour.

In the end, Ray and Gavio got something to eat as well, and Ray didn't get home until ten. Bodie could see immediately that the meeting had gone well; he'd been guessing that even with this two, there had been only a small chance that they'd got into a nasty, time-consuming fight.

"He doesn't want to meet you. I mean, he doesn't want us all to be friends, we've got no plans for another drink. But if Plassen invited us all to a party, he wouldn't think twice about accepting."

"So he's doing OK? He's over you? Maybe even got a nice new boyfriend?"

He had at least two, and from what Ray knew of those two, they were good choices for Gavio. Gavio hadn't really wanted to talk about that, though: he'd wanted to hear the story of meeting the alien *glarus*, and how Ray had handled everything after that. He gladly accepted Ray's apology, and now cringed to think about what he'd done with the photographs.

"Sounds almost too good to be true, for a talk between the two of you. Guess it's not gonna get you very far with Ullis."

Ray laughed. "Well, Gavio and I weren't trying to reach a decision on something. That's when the sparks would fly. Maybe Ullis will have some tough questions for me, though." A shrug. "Or maybe he'll end the session early."

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Ray did get home half an hour early on At Kamaran, but he said he still had a full session booked for the following week. He got back from that session looking quietly resolved, with maybe a flicker of excitement. He got beers for both of them, but then turned the music off on his way past the shelves, and sat at the far end of the couch.

Bodie raised an eyebrow. "Looks like we're having a talk."

A brief nod, very serious. "It's the talk about what we've been doing for the last three weeks. Over at the other flat and..." He tilted his head towards the window. "Outside."

Bodie couldn't stop himself from beaming, though of course he didn't know yet if this was going to be good news. "You're ready? Now?" But beer instead of *brosha*, who wouldn't take that as a sign?

"I'm ready. I don't need to sleep on it. I'm ready if you are?"

"You know I am."

"OK. Well..." Ray took a deep breath and then a mouthful of beer. "It started when you got sick. I saw then that nothing in my life that I'd thought was important before... None of that counted for anything compared with giving you as much of a marriage as I possibly could. How could anything else matter?" Shaking his head over and over. "It couldn't. It was nothing. And after that I knew that what I had to do was find a way to make every single last part of myself understand that nothing else mattered."

“And the *soragon* thing is what your brain came up with?”

A fractional shrug. “Eventually. With some help from Ullis over the details. It’s about not being Hailin any more. I realised even before Turon arrived that I needed to look there for the answer. Because if I’m not Hailin then nothing I do or want has anything to do with the Mabein. If I didn’t come from them any more than you did. It took several weeks of thinking about not being Hailin to realise that I had to be an animal. At least as much an animal as you. And I had to find a way to make myself understand what I was. What I am. Ullis and I spent weeks arguing about ideas for how to make it work, and then when West announced that he was leaving, the ideas got a new focus. And a timescale, because whatever I did, it had to be after Turon left but before any of the doctors arrived from Monor. Then as it got closer to the anniversary, we were spending more and more of the sessions arguing about that too, and even though I couldn’t see how I’d get to the point of feeling ready to start the *soragon* thing – it still seemed like such a huge leap – I just -” Shaking his head and throwing his hands in the air. “I just had no patience left for my stupid, precious nerves, when it was a whole fucking year now that I’d been asking you to wait.”

“Or a whole non-fucking year.”

Ray laughed, raised his bottle in salute, and then they drank together, grinning. “You’re right. That’s a thousand times more powerful in the ranking of swearing. So then you and I decided how we’d celebrate the anniversary, and because that conversation went so well...” Another grin. “Because you let me have everything I wanted, I decided at the next session that I was ready to start taking action. To get the *soragon* plan underway. I set everything up in the other flat while you were at work at the weekend. Took the photographs. Then there was one more session to practice the story on Ullis, work out some last details, and – And then it was up to you.” His voice suddenly grew rough. “And of course you understood me. You understood your *soragon*. Sharing being an animal with you... It was easy. It was natural. As a *soragon* I couldn’t have the concept of being married to you...” He lifted his left hand off the bottle, and tilted it so they could both admire the ring. “But I knew I could trust you. With my life. With everything in my life.” He closed his eyes briefly, then gave a faint, lopsided smile. “And I didn’t doubt, as a *soragon*, that I was giving you every last scrap of love that I had. I’d never think to hold anything back.”

Bodie swallowed, and nodded, and took a long drink. “You’d said they were devoted to each other. And I know you’d never lie to me about anything that important.” Another mouthful of beer. “So what about the Mabein? If we’re having this talk... If you haven’t had to run away in the middle of the night. Does that mean you’re sure they’re OK with us carrying on with the *soragon* thing?”

Ray was shaking his head, and Bodie winced and wished he was alone in his bathroom with a good, hard wall to pummel, but in the next second Ray had crossed the couch and they were thigh-to-thigh. “No, I’m sure of more than that. We can have any kind of sex we want now, any way we want, because they’ve seen how thoroughly they were wrong: I’m not any kind of Hailin. I’m a typical animal that met another typical animal, and we meet each other’s ordinary animal needs.” A shrug. “We’re a pack of two, this is our den. I wanted to be Hailin before, I believed it so strongly that they didn’t question it. But now they see me for what I am and... They’re gone. I think they started to accept that I’m an animal three or four weeks before our anniversary. Over the first week of the

soragon thing, I sensed one of them after another giving a... sigh or a grunt or a nod of confirmation. That there's no threat to the Hailin after all. No degradation of the names of Udom Kol or Embrun. It was like a great, slow wave of relief, and now..." An extravagant shrug. "It's as if they'd never noticed us. They don't know and wouldn't care that we're going to sleep in one another's arms tonight. The soundest sleep, after I've treated myself to sucking you off for the very first time."

Bodie closed his eyes briefly, then put his arm around Ray, gave him one tight squeeze, then relaxed his hold. Slowly, with a faint smile: "If you'd asked me... I dunno, just a month ago... how I'd react to that line, I'd've said that of course I'd drag you to the bedroom so fast there'd be a sonic boom. But, now, I'm thinking it would be sexier if we waited till our normal time, and watched an episode of "The Six Million Dollar Man", and didn't rush our beers. How's that sound to you?"

"It sounds perfect." They clinked bottles and drank. Of course it wouldn't really be the first time Ray had sucked him off, but it would be the first time outside the holds, so Ray was right: it would be the first time they could really count.

Bodie waited until Ray was leaning forward to turn the TV on to say, "You mustn't think I'm dragging my heels about going to bed because I'm worried your technique might have got rusty after such a long gap."

Ray threw himself back, cackling with laughter, and Bodie joined in. When the laughter had faded, Ray sat up and turned towards Bodie, looking very solemn, like this was the real start of the talk. "Thank you for trying to reassure me, but it's as if you'd been sitting in on this evening's session. Ullis and I have put together a questionnaire that I'm going to ask you to fill out the moment you've got your breath back. It's only a few pages. It shouldn't take you more than a quarter of an hour."

Bodie nodded, just as serious. "Of course. Anything I can do to help. And then you'll phone Ullis with the results? Because I know he'll want to know, so he can put us on the right track for tomorrow morning's hand-jobs in the shower."

This time Ray's laughter started with a snort. "He's assuming we'll be spending every moment we can in bed. That I'll be walking much too carefully when I arrive for next week's session. Which suggests I hadn't been doing a very good job of explaining to him how much attention and imagination and enthusiasm you'd been bringing to the task of keeping your *soragon* happy. Of course it'll make it even better to be able to kiss you and use my hands on you and argue with you. But it doesn't feel like suddenly starting a completely different life. Which is why I had no hesitation about telling you tonight, when we both have a full day's work tomorrow."

Bodie smiled and nodded. "It does make it sexier. Thinking that we can take it for granted: the idea of you sucking me off. So are we completely done with the *soragon* thing?"

Ray shrugged. "I think we'd only have to go back to it if I started having doubts about the Mabein for some reason. But it was fun. I can see myself being in the mood from time to time. What about you?"

"I – Yeah. I can see that too. I'd miss it, if I never got to do any of that with you again."

Ray stared at him for several seconds, looking very intense, then suddenly reached out to pull him close and plant the lightest of kisses on his cheek. "Good. I'll keep up with the anti-bacterial shots, then, so we're safe to go out and play fetch at any time."

"You've been getting shots?" Bodie had done a double-take, though of course this was pure Ray: thinking things through.

A rueful half-smirk. "There's a lot involved in getting Dishna's best police interrogator in condition to play fetch. You'd be surprised."

They grinned at one another, then Bodie nodded at the TV and asked if he should get more beers while Ray was setting the episode up.

Chapter 36

They were both awake well before the alarm went off on At Oba Nyon, both partly hard. Ray said he felt like he'd been at least that hard all through the night; the few dreams he could still remember had been so raunchy, he refused to describe them to Bodie for fear of shocking him.

It was their first morning sex in bed and they took their time; Ray barely got to touch his mug of coffee before he had to leave for the ferry. After he'd pushed his mug away and stood up, he nodded towards the TV. "See if you can find us a *gulshor* court for first thing tomorrow morning? I mean early enough for us to play a game, misuse a cubicle, and refuel with a proper breakfast before you go to work."

Bodie raised an eyebrow. "You're missing dry-humping already?"

Ray grinned and shook his head. "I wasn't thinking dry. I was thinking good and wet. It's time we did what everyone's always assumed we were doing."

Bodie found a court in At Rahden for half past six. The same slot was available for the other days of the weekend, too, and Bodie decided to book it; he'd bet that people had come up with quite a few ideas from day to day about what they were up to in the cubicle.

Ray asked about the *gulshor* court as soon as he got home that evening. He agreed about allowing full scope for their neighbours' idea, but easily persuaded Bodie to cancel the An Uraba booking so they could humour Ullis by at least trying to spend an entire day in bed.

On An Udom Kol, Ray was in the mood for them to keep their hands clasped at head level on the cubicle wall; he wanted the only difference from their previous life to be those few layers of cloth. Afterwards, when they were slowly soaping each other in the cubicle's cramped shower, Ray admitted that there had been several moments when he'd been close to saying that he'd changed his mind and they had to stop. "I knew it would make a huge difference, being naked. Of course it would. But I didn't know it would make me feel so sad. How could it take me so long to see the signs that I'm an animal? It should have been obvious. Before, the thought of what I was putting you through made me angry for you. Impatient. Exasperated. But I've been feeling some mix of those ever since I learned to recognise the sight and sound of Ward." He raised a rueful eyebrow and Bodie laughed.

"Yeah, not much room there for feeling just plain sad. I can see it would put you off your stride. Does it make me a lousy *iskolpa* if I say I didn't notice? I was too busy just enjoying the difference."

Ray frowned and nodded slowly to himself as he thought it over. Finally, on a sharp grunt: "Not lousy. Just slightly below average, I would say. I imagine, for my first time feeling that sad, I simply looked unusually gorgeous."

Bodie pulled a face. "That doesn't really narrow it down. So I guess we won't be doing that again." A gesture with the head towards the wall outside the shower. "Or not until I can convince you that you've got no reason to feel sad. You're a marvel, if you ask me, to figure things out like you have in just a year."

A brisk nod, then Ray gave Bodie's hip a firm squeeze. "I'm not saying you've convinced me yet, but you've just jumped up to above average."

Soon after they'd sat down to breakfast, Bodie said, "How long d'you think we'll keep on using the cubicle? There's gonna come a time, right?, when we don't see every shower as a chance to have sex. When we can shock everyone by finally using the main changing room."

Ray raised an eyebrow. "You want more space to shower? Or a chance to show me off?"

A shrug. "Both of those, but mostly I'm thinking about us joining the *gulshor* league. About me getting involved in some kind of martial art. If we're not using the cubicles, that'll all get a lot simpler."

Ray grinned and nodded. "I hadn't thought that far ahead. Maybe... another month in the cubicle?" His turn to shrug. "My cock doesn't really believe that you're not being ruthlessly rationed anymore. But a month feels about right for it to catch up."

"Yeah. Same here." He'd expected Ray to act evasive about using the main changing room, sure he must still have some lingering hang-up about endangering some poor Hailin's soul with the sight of Bodie's animal cock. But Ray seemed relaxed, perfectly sincere in looking ahead. Still, Bodie thought he should give Ray a few minutes before the next question, which had occurred to him in the shower, and he waited until Ray had topped up their coffees.

"If we join the league, start to do more things in the gym, then we're gonna meet new people. And I'm guessing we'll be talking about 'my *iskolpa* Ray' and 'my *iskolpa* Bodie'?" Ray was nodding, expression very serious, maybe watchful. "So what does it mean for us, saying it's an *esmana* marriage, if we're animals? Or is it like when we were flatmates, and you said we didn't need to worry about how West or anyone else fitted in with us being flatmates? The important thing was that... it was good enough for when we were alone together."

Now Ray was shaking his head, definite and determined. "No, it's not like that. It's the truth, it's reality, so of course it's not like that. Ullis thought I should wait until after the next session to explain about my past, because it's..." A sharp sigh. "There is so much we can't know, and any way I tell it, it has to be... unsettling." A pause, while he frowned deeply. "But I should tell you now, before you go to work. I can't leave you to wonder about it all morning."

Bodie glanced at the time; they had over half an hour before he was due at Yata's place. "Yeah, I'm ready." Well, as ready as he'd ever be to find out what it took to unsettle Ray and Ullis.

Ray swallowed, then took a long breath. "My original parents – My birth parent – We think they must have been pets on board a ship belonging to one of the business's trading partners. The ship must have been in orbit or somewhere in-system when Ward and Ray Bakkel were about three months old and I was... " A shrug. "That sort of size, anyway. Raina visited the ship for a meeting, bringing the twins with her, and I met the twins somehow. If you can say 'met' when you're talking about babies. And there was some confusion and I got taken for Ray Bakkel." Shaking his head, over and over. "An accident. We think it must have been an accident. No one knew. No one ever suspected,

including me, until Ullis got me thinking back, looking for clues. Well, except Ward must have suspected, immediately, probably because I would have smelled different from his twin. That's when the fighting started, when the two of them had been peaceful before. I must have been scared by the change, too, and all too ready to fight back. And it went on from there." His voice had got tight, and he paused and took a long drink of fruit juice.

"Jesus. So you're not really Ray Bakkel?"

"No. I'm an intelligent, alien animal. Just like you. Though of course 'Ray Bakkel' is the only sensible way of saying who I am. I don't have a single memory of being anything else. The Bakkels and the Vasmars are my family. Nothing's changed in what I share with them except..." A shrug. "Hailin genetics."

Bodie grunted thoughtfully, and took his time finishing his coffee. Finally he said, "D'you think you always knew on some level, though? And that's why you took so hard against the business? Got out to Dishna as soon as you could?"

Nodding slowly: "Maybe. I've been wondering that. Though Ullis reckons I've never needed any excuse for being an obstructive little sod."

When they finished laughing, Bodie said, "Are you sure you're his favourite client?"

"No, his most interesting. Wasn't that what I said? It's like the difference between 'lovely' and 'gorgeous'."

"Yeah, of course. Well, as long as Turon's still my cousin, I can cope with any kind of surprise about you. Like – Are we even married? Or have we been living in sin this whole time, like the shameless animals we are?"

"I think the answer's 'Yes' to both, depending on how you look at it. I am biochemically dependent on you. We've seen the proof of that. And it would look exactly like an *esmana* marriage to anyone who didn't know that I've been fertile all the time I've been having sex. Just like you except..." A shrug. "I've never had sex with a woman of my own kind, so there was never a chance that I'd accidentally find out that I wasn't a nice, safe, unbonded Hailin man."

"Yeah." Bodie nodded. "That would've been a hell of a shock for everyone. It was a mutation, I'm betting, that got you dependent on me?" That was the line Ray had gone for when he'd been trying to convince himself that it was a *tolmin* marriage, and knowing Ray, he wouldn't let a good story go to waste.

A loud sigh, and Ray was nodding. "Mostly, I think. But it also seems likely that my species are natural mimics. By instinct. We take on aspects of our surroundings without even thinking about it. Maybe that's how I got confused with Ward's twin in the first place. How my pretty cock changed to look like a *jarupard* at the time that it would with a Hailin." He gave a snort of amusement. "But when my body decided to copy what it had picked up about *esmana* marriages, it did it with another animal. What more of a clue to my true nature could you ask for? My body recognised its match."

Bodie raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips in concessions. "Yeah, that makes sense. D'you think it's what makes you such a great liar, too?"

"Again, Ullis is sceptical, but to me..." A shrug. "It looks like a perfect fit."

“Fuck. A planet out there that’s full of brains like yours. You’re right: that’s as unsettling as it gets. I’ll have to tell Yata I’m standing in a draft and that’s why I’m shivering so hard.”

Ray gave a bark of laughter, then pulled a face and turned sombre. “I see your point but that wasn’t what I thought you’d be worrying about. To be honest, I thought you’d have asked by now about Ward’s twin. If we can be sure he’s OK.”

Bodie hadn’t bothered to worry about that because he knew damn well that Ward’s one and only original twin was sitting across from him at that very moment. But if he had a primary animal instinct, it was to play along with Ray, so he winced and did his best to look guilty and concerned. “I’d have got there but... There’s so much to take in. How much have you been worrying about the kid? Is there a way we can find out?”

Ray shook his head. “To get really sure, I’d have to tell Malun, have him start the investigations. And I’m too much of a coward for that, I’m too selfish. The reactions, the repercussions, they’d –” He swallowed and gave a ragged sigh. “They’d be a thousand times worse than any of the things I was so afraid of in the first few days of knowing I’d married a *glarus*.”

Bodie grimaced. “Doesn’t look selfish to me. Can you imagine Malun having to tell Raina?”

They both shuddered, and Bodie reached out to give Ray’s hand a squeeze of reassurance. It seemed to work almost instantly, as he got back a shaky but genuine smile. “But the worst of the worry was just my brain, from a week when it was determined to overheat. While at the same time I was making progress with some investigations of my own. There was only one ship visiting at the time that Ward and I started fighting. A Trafa ship. They’re a pair-bonding species, from a planet that’s closer than Earth but takes much longer to get to because the jump points aren’t good. They found us, in fact, about a hundred years ago. With the same ship and some of the same crew, who still spoke fluent Hass Embrun from that first visit – because they live a very long time, and might even be better at languages than the Hailin. We haven’t done much trade with them, and the fleet’s Anthropology files are very thin because the business didn’t have to do its normal research phase. So I haven’t been able to find out what animals they have on their planet that look enough like me. Or what animals they travel with on their ships. But everyone who’s ever had any dealings with them agrees that they’re... unshakeably civilised. They’re generous. They’re fair. I spent every lunch-hour for weeks looking for bad news about them and...” Shaking his head. “If I let myself, I can still worry now and then about Ward’s twin, but really I think he got as lucky with his new home as I got with you.”

Bodie nodded then drained his coffee. “That’s good enough for me. And the Mabein didn’t suspect any more than anyone else. They couldn’t see inside your cells. They didn’t notice the babies being swapped, because even they can’t be keeping track of everything everywhere.”

Ray gave a small, rueful shrug. “I thought I was Hailin. Absolutely everyone thought I was Hailin. I believed in the Mabein like a Hailin so... Why wouldn’t they take me on trust? Accept my respect and my loyalty.”

“Any sign they’re sorry for giving you such a hard time?”

Ray laughed. “No. They’ve been like Malun: never less than annoyed with me. Particularly annoyed with me for the amount of work I’d given them.”

“Does sound a lot like Malun.” Bodie got to his feet. “If I make a fresh pot of coffee, will that make you feel more appreciated?”

“Much more. Thank you.”

After Bodie had poured the coffee, he sat back, crossed his arms, and studied Ray intently. Ray raised an eyebrow but said nothing, and after about ten seconds Bodie said, “Now I know, it’s obvious. My Irish granny would have seen through you in a moment: you’re a changeling. Not the sickly kind, but the kind that’s been born with too much knowledge. Straight out of a fairy-tale, she’d say: it’s in your cold, cold eyes.”

Ray snorted. “If she’s saying that while you’re in the room with me, you should tell her she needs to get new glasses. Cold? You could boil an egg in the air between us. Even when we were flatmates, our friendship had enough... lively affection in it to keep a room pleasantly warm.”

“When you’re looking at me, sure. But what if I told you that the name I had for you was ‘Ice-Cold Cupid’? Before we went through our formal introductions, this was.”

With narrowed eyes: “You’re just making that up.” Then he tilted his head and gave a lopsided smile. “Cupid’s good, though. Like you were lying awake thinking about my mouth.”

“Nah, it’s all true. With your lips just begging to be kissed, your name was always gonna have Cupid in it somewhere. And you earned ‘Ice-Cold’ while we were scanning the room, sizing up the looks of all the men in Security. We’d been flirting and in the next second it was like you were millions of miles away. Nothing in that room could surprise you or affect you. Nothing except me. You could see right through everyone. I’ve met some good poker-players in my time, but I knew...” A deep, noisy sigh. “I knew I’d never met anyone like you. That’s what kept me awake. And got me hard. That and wondering how close you’d been to kissing me goodbye that evening.”

Low and rough: “Close. I’d been so close.” He shut his eyes briefly, then gave one, abrupt nod of the head. “That sounds like one of my interrogation looks, if I was seeing through everyone. And I’ve never felt that I’d got any of the looks cold enough, so thanks.” He raised his mug in salute and then drank.

“You’re welcome, Officer Cupid,” and Bodie copied him with the mug.

“If ice-cold eyes turn you on, I can interrogate you any time you want.” A straightforward offer, without a hint of flirtation. “It’ll be a challenge to act as if you’re boring me, but I do like a challenge.”

Bodie laughed. “I’d cave in a second. I know how good you are.” A fractional shrug. “The turn-on wasn’t the eyes. Not in themselves. The turn-on was realising just how strange you were.” He grinned. “And every day since, you’ve come up with a new way of proving how right I was.” A Hailin prince swapped at birth with some alien trader’s pet chameleon. It was going to take even Ray and Ullis another year to top that one.

Ray raised an eyebrow and gave a slow smile. "Then what if I show you how I wanted to kiss you goodbye that evening? Better finish your coffee first, though, because it's going to take up every second until you leave for work."

Bodie drained his mug with a snap of the head then sprang to his feet making "up, up" gestured which Ray immediately obeyed. "So let's say you're already checked your watch and said you have to go..."

A long sigh, even more reluctant than Bodie remembered it. "And I do have to go, I can't be late for Malun's meeting. But... But... How can I leave when I haven't touched you?" He swallowed, then looked down at Bodie's left hand and slowly reached out. He seemed to be holding his breath as their fingers met, and his sigh when Bodie returned the grip would have been audible at the far end of the buffet table. They looked down at their joined hands for a few seconds more, then raised their heads to look into each other's eyes.

When time was willing to move forward again, Bodie leaned in and pressed his lips to the corner of Ray's mouth, and then Ray's arm was around him, and their mouths were opening lazily, like they were confident the negotiations would allow them all the time they might need to finish falling in love.

It was Ray who kept an eye on the time, moving the kiss off the balcony, manoeuvring it through the living-room to arrive at the front door about a quarter to nine, and then breaking it and taking several steps back.

They stood smiling at each other, then Bodie said, "By tomorrow, I should have recovered my breath enough to be able to ask your real name."

A small shake of the head. "By tomorrow I'll be married to you. I'm gonna take 'Ice-Cold Cupid' as my married name."

"And tell me to guess about the others? See, that's the next clue that you're straight out of a fairy-tale. My granny read me so many stories about mysterious men like you."

Ray gave him a sceptical look and nodded towards the door. "The moment you're gone, I'll be on the computer seeing what the fleet's files say about these changelings of yours. I think I need to know just how badly you insulted me."

"Ah." Bodie winced. "Yeah, it's – OK, there's not much about changelings that matches with you. With where you came from. But you mention babies getting swapped, that's the first thing I'm gonna think of. And I did say you're not the sickly type, didn't I? You're the type that makes up for all the rest."

A long, expressionless stare, then Ray suddenly said, "What would you give me, not to look in the fleet's files after all?"

Bodie thought about it for several seconds. "I'd take you to dinner tonight, and then let you fuck me out on the balcony."

A moment of frowning, then Ray shrugged. "I'll see where I can get us a booking. I think there's some rain forecast for after dinner, but I can make good use of that."

Bodie laughed and opened the door. "Ray. I trust you to make use of anything."

* * * * *

By ten o'clock on An Uraba, they'd decided that they really weren't the type to spend large parts of the day in bed. Waking up slowly together was good, and having the first coffee in bed after sex, but there was a limit to how often even they could have sex, and after a point they'd rather be up and active. However, Ray still wanted to be able to use "spent the morning in bed" as a set-up line with Ullis, and they agreed that as long as one of them was in the bed then it still counted, and they'd play it like that until lunchtime. Bodie went to the living-room to fetch their books and put some music on, and then for a while he sat and read, and Ray lay and listened to the music, and made occasional remarks.

"You know, we ought to make time to listen to Turon's anniversary music. It's only an hour. Then we'll have to figure out some nice things to say to him about it, but we should still be able to get it all done in an evening."

Ray was right. Turon had said they had all year to get back to him, but you shouldn't treat a present like that. "Yeah. Let's do it next week. At Rahden, maybe? Then when we write to him to tell him we've sorted out problems out, we can tie it to the songs, mention the parts that don't apply any more, and the others that fit even better now."

"That makes sense. So you're thinking of telling him soon? Within a week or something?"

Bodie shrugged. "I'm thinking of leaving it up to you and Ullis. I mean, to decide when it's right to tell people."

Ray was nodding slowly. "Then I think, where Malun's concerned, it needs to be after I've had my last session with Ullis. The best way to stop Malun from worrying will be to tell him that I'm no longer seeing Ullis."

Bodie laughed. "Yeah. He'd rush out to buy a bottle of *toroquil* just to celebrate that. You're gonna miss Ullis, though. D'you think he ever makes friends with clients afterwards, or is that too weird? I guess there's rules."

"Well, he has mentioned that he and his *iskolpa* have friends who used to be his clients. Saying they're coming to dinner, things like that. Nothing about friends he meets for a drink on his own. Would you mind if I did keep up with him over drinks? If we did go over there for dinner?"

"I'm fine with the drinks. For dinner..." Bodie pulled a face. "I'd want to know exactly what he's told his *iskolpa* about us. I'm betting he told him a lot while I was ill. And I might still be fine about dinner, but I do wanna know."

"Yeah, me too. I'll ask him this week."

When the music finished, Ray went to turn the record over. Shortly after he'd got back in bed, he said, "We should write to Turon a few days before we tell Malun. Arrange it so they both get the news at the same time."

"I like that. Glad we'll have a few days' rest, though, before he can write back. What do we say when they ask how we solved the problem?"

"Nothing. Probably say it's private, but..." A shrug. "We need to find another word, one that wouldn't automatically make them suspicious. Let's think about it."

The next time Ray got up to deal with the music, he didn't come back to bed but instead opened all of the wardrobe doors, saying he was going to move his clothes to this bedroom, so Bodie's Earth clothes were going to have to learn to get on with his Hailin clothes in the side to the right of the bathroom.

Ray moved his work clothes first, then took a few minutes break sitting on the bed so Bodie could use the bathroom and make himself a mug of tea. Once back in bed, Bodie kept his book open in his lap but didn't get much reading done; the fact that there was the space of the bathroom door between them didn't take anything away from the sight of Ray's clothes hanging next to his, in their bedroom. More and more clothes, with some he knew well, and others he was sure he'd never seen.

With the last of the smart clothes in their new home, Ray shut the doors on the left-hand side, but then headed out to the spare room again, leaving Bodie's doors open. Bodie raised an eyebrow, then put down his book and sat up straighter, very curious to see what kind of shirt Ray had got him this time. But instead Ray came back with Bodie's uniform on a hanger in one hand and the army boots in the other, and Bodie gave a grunt of surprise and sat up even straighter. He wondered which morning Ray had chosen for paying a visit to West's flat: the An Embrun? Or the An Udom Kol?

Ray stopped near the bedside table and looked almost nervous as he held the uniform up a few inches higher, out to the side. "I've never had a chance to talk to Sergeant Bodie about his work. About his training or the places he's travelled. About his impressions of Pen Embrun's defences, or its men."

Bodie couldn't tell if Ray wanted him to put the uniform on then and there. Ray was getting hard – they both were – but then they had a lot of practice getting a charge from just talking and imagining, without either expecting that it was all about to come true. "He's looking forward to that, but..." Bodie sighed and gave an apologetic shrug. "You're going to have to wait a few days. Maybe a week or more. His unit's been sent off on some missions. I dunno where. I don't get briefed anywhere near that level." He had to put Ray off, because he wanted to make a proper entrance as Sergeant Bodie for their first time in this flat, and he needed time to come up with something big enough to cancel out the disaster of their first attempt.

Ray just looked impressed, with no hint of disappointment either in his face or between his legs. "That'll give me more time to get his uniform properly cleaned. Is it OK if I hang it up here for now?"

"Go ahead."

Ray put the uniform at the far end of the rail, then looked down at the boots. "Might as well polish these now, though." He went into the living-room, and Bodie heard him clattering around in a kitchen cupboard; it sounded like the shoe-cleaning kit had got shoved right to the back. When the clattering stopped, Bodie listened for the noise of the kit being opened and then the hunt for the jar of black polish, but instead there was silence. He shrugged and reached for his book, and had just found his place when there was a soft thud from out on the balcony; Ray, beautifully framed by the open doorway, had dropped the boots on the tiles, and was now getting to his knees. Ray had lost his erection while he was away from Bodie, but he was rapidly catching up now; maybe the *mana* was in the bedclothes, which were just a few feet away from him, or maybe the whole bedroom was thick with it.

It turned out that with a shoe-cleaning kit and a pair of army boots, Ray could be fierce, and thorough, and tender, and precise, all within the space of a few minutes. And casual, too, like this had been part of his An Uraba routine for as long as he could remember: on his knees out of doors, naked and very erect, conscientiously polishing his favourite soldier's boots. Bodie, on the other hand, lost all idea of playing it cool soon after Ray started smoothing on the polish, when he had to throw back the covers to get the pressure off his cock. But that meant he could look back and forth between himself and Ray, and his hips started jerking, and he had to clench his hands to stop from touching himself. Ray gave no sign of noticing, just kept to his rhythm with the brushes and cloth.

When the boots were gleaming brightly enough to pass any inspection, Ray packed the kit up nearly, then got to his feet and walked quickly through the bedroom to place the boots and the kits together at the bottom of Bodie's wardrobe, closing the doors with a satisfied clunk. Then he turned around, all of this attention immediately on Bodie, and was crossing to the bed when Bodie held up a hand to stop him.

"You've got streaks of boot polish on your hands. With any other type of sheet, that'd be a turn-on. But with *pasalur*, you know we've got to show the right respect."

Ray gave a resigned sigh as he backed away towards the bathroom. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have told you so much about the Bakkel family history. Or I shouldn't have told it so well that you'd actually take it to heart."

Bodie nodded. "All your fault. I wanna be the most reckless man you'd ever meet, but instead I'm stuck here waiting for you to go and wash your hands."

Ray went, and the rest of the wait was short. When Ray came back to the bed they got the sheets noticeably damp, then fell into a happy doze that lasted until nearly half past twelve. So a good weekend's morning in bed, and now they could start a good weekend's afternoon by washing all the bedding and putting together a quick lunch while deciding where to go for a long run.

They chose the cliffs in the end, and during the run Bodie got an idea for how the SAS sergeant could make his big entrance; Ray deserved most of the credit, really, for taking the boots out onto the balcony. The evenings were warm enough now for leaving the balcony doors open for hours after the sun had gone down, and some evening soon, Sergeant Bodie was going to abseil down from the floor above, landing just feet away from Ray's end of the couch. Maybe he'd been sent to protect Ray, or maybe this time it was just chance that Ray was there and had seen him. Either way, he needed Ray to cooperate with him, and that wouldn't be too difficult since he'd have a gun, or at least a wooden mock-up of a submachine gun painted in black. He could make the gun at Yata's workshop early in the morning and at lunchtime, and he thought he could have it done by the next weekend.

Of course he wasn't actually doing to abseil down. Even if they had upstairs neighbours who'd be delighted to help out with a complicated sex thing, there was just no way of bringing the subject up casually in the course of a first meeting. Well, Ray would manage it, without blinking, but Bodie still had too much to learn. No, he'd fix some sort of bracket in the wall above the doorway, and hang the rope on that, looped out of sight. And he'd put their stepladder next to the doorway and jump down from it holding the rope. Ray would hear the thud of the hard landing, and when he looked, he'd see the rope hanging down. A grappling iron at the end of the rope would be good, too; he'd need

to loop the rope so he could jerk on it to shake the iron free for the next stage in the assault. Or maybe it was an escape? But those details weren't important when it came to getting things ready.

The bracket for the wall, he could probably borrow from college. Brackets might do for the grappling iron, too. And he'd want to use some metal parts for the gun, like the rod of the extendable stock, which would be too fragile in wood. And the trigger and the trigger-guard, and the attachment-points for the strap. In real life he'd want a knife, too, and a handgun, but for their purposes he thought a submachine gun would cover everything.

* * * * *

After dinner on At Rahden, they settled down on the couch with two good beers, and with a pad of paper and a stylus to make notes about anything that sounded worth including in the message to Turon. Ray turned on the TV and brought up the message with Turon's anniversary music. It said that they should listen to the pieces in order the first time though, so Ray lined them up properly and set them playing.

They'd seen in the list that the first piece was the shortest, and it turned out to be Turon himself, speaking in Hass Embrun, with occasional phrases from his *orbarcho* for introduction or emphasis. Apparently there was a theme behind the collection that he needed to explain to them. ~As a pair, you've certainly caused us some moments of anxiety, but the more we saw of Bodie, and of the two of you together, the more obvious it became how much we'd all gained as a family. So in this collection each piece of music is about a different member of the family. It's music that makes me think of something that I associate with them and the two of you. I'm not going to tell you which piece is for which person, or explain anything about the associations, but I will tell you that the pieces are in ascending order by people's ages, and where we have twins, I've put them in the order in which they met Bodie. And to make it up to an even twelve, I've added a second piece for myself. I don't expect you to enjoy them all as music, but I hope they'll give you a good amount of entertainment.~

They raised their eyebrows at one another and agreed that Turon's approach would certainly make it easier to come up with things to say in the message. Bodie started writing down people's names, beginning with West and Lamon, but then they hit a real problem, because neither of them could understand a word of the first piece of music. The rhythms were similar to Hass Embrun, but they couldn't catch anything of the sounds. It must be a reference to the language lessons, though should they take it as implying that Bodie hadn't really learned very much, or as a comment on how hard he and West had worked?

Ray recognised the second piece as traditional dance music, lively but purely instrumental. And that was really peculiar, as if Turon was saying that the main thing Lamon had in common with them was the fact that none of them danced. Which might be true, but they would have sworn that Turon's mind didn't work like that.

The next name was Ward, and they both recognised the third piece as a song that Turon and Sasha had played quite regularly after dinner on the ship. It was sweet and silly, about a group of friends making big plans for a meal, and they'd heard it most recently in the cabin up in the mountains, when West had asked Turon to play it on their first

night sitting out on the deck. So this wasn't Ward's song at all, was it? It was West's. This was about that weekend in the cabin: how it had been special for all four of them.

Then what did that make the first two pieces? Were they both Turon's? Had he kept himself out of the sequence? Well, the second piece could be about the parties on the ship. Maybe the first was about the whole idea of the contact mission. They shrugged and were about to move on to the fourth piece when Ray suddenly laughed and said, "It's the girls, of course. It's Afmad and Akula. Of course he'd include them. They don't know who we are yet, but they've babbled at us. And I guess we've danced with them if you include peekaboo. Look, let's write all the names down now, including Homa and Sasha. I think Homa's younger than Ferros, and Sasha's older. Raina will be last."

That did give twelve names when you counted Turon twice, so now things should be easy. Lamon's song had two fierce mountain cats, which must be about the origami dinner scene, and Ward's had an expensive painting, but all of the next four were confusing, and Ray had to admit that he was doubting himself now about those ages for Homa and Sasha.

The tenth piece was a song about a well-meaning gossip, which could be Turon joking about Malun, or rather about Malun and himself and all their speculations about things being "private". And the eleventh was definitely Raina and the footage from the ship, with a mother watching unseen from a window as her many children work happily on something together.

The last song was a complete surprise: loud and brash and in English, it was The Jam's "Going Underground". Bodie laughed while Ray looked baffled, and Bodie quickly explained. "I'm pretty sure this is just about me. From the first few days, when you were still stuck in your quarters. Turon was so keen to travel by tube. And I kept trying to discourage him."

Ray pointed a finger across the coffee table, suddenly remembering. "You said you wouldn't take the deep line into the centre. Not even for him."

Again, Bodie laughed, thinking of Turon telling his difficult, demanding brother everything about that day. "Yeah. That was after our first time in Kew. I guess when he was trying to persuade you to join us the next day."

Ray shrugged then grinned. "I needed time to think about it. I've got such a sluggish and cautious brain, you know I have."

If The Jam was Turon's second track, they might do better now at identifying his first, knowing it had to come immediately before Ferros no matter how old Homa and Sasha were. They listened to the mystery four again, in reverse order. The shy girl might be Sasha, with Turon thinking about the Kew pub, and how he'd just started telling Bodie about Sasha's loud family when Ray had arrived. The song about a couple's first home was probably Ferros, for the part she'd played in finding their flat. And that meant that Turon's first song must be the heart-breaking one about the man heading into exile, which had Ray shaking his head, exasperated.

"So it's all about you again. Like you were making a huge deal about leaving home. God, he's more of a romantic than Buka."

Bodie had been surprised himself by the depth of feeling in the song, and he pulled a face. "It must be another joke. He did ask me once how I could just shrug about leaving." He gave the same shrug again. "I guess it's about that."

The last song must be Homa, so Ray had been right first time about the ages, but it still made no sense to them. Three friends making a bet about where some birds would land? Neither of them could remember discussing either birds or betting with Homa. Well, Turon would probably have been disappointed if they'd understood everything.

They weren't sure yet how much they liked the music; they'd been concentrating too hard on the puzzle. Ray set up the list to play randomly, without Turon's introduction, and they sat back to see what grabbed their attention while they were concentrating on each other and their beers. It wouldn't be too difficult to find something to say in the message; apart from anything else, they could admit how long it had taken them to realise that he'd started with the girls. They didn't have a hope of putting together anything similar for Turon and Sasha, but could they think of something they could do in return?

They kicked around a few ideas for things to send Turon, then Bodie raised an eyebrow and said, "We could visit Clover more often. Maybe go for the weekend a couple of times a year. Y'know, I wouldn't be surprised if Turon meant this whole list as a hint about that. And I'd be OK with that. What about you?"

Ray was already nodding. "We should coordinate with West. Let's not tell Turon until the first visit's arranged, though. We don't want to give him too much good news all in one message."

Bodie grinned then immediately turned stern. "No. He'd not tough like us. He couldn't handle it."

* * * * *

Bodie made a good start on the gun on At Pontal, and he'd finished all of the woodwork on it by eight o'clock on At Kamaran. He'd told Yata that Ray wanted to get more of a feel for his life as a soldier, and Yata had been happy for him to stay late in the workshop.

Ray got back from the session saying that he and Ullis thought that the next session would be the last one. "He wants you to come in for it. He wants some time with you on your own. He doesn't see any reason to worry, but -" A resigned-looking shrug. "He thinks he shouldn't immediately believe every single word I say. He wants to hear your version."

"And if it doesn't fit with yours?"

"Then we'll have that same sort of session every three or four weeks. Maybe half a session if there isn't enough to talk about. If we're going to become friends with him and Molulco, he needs us to get to the point where any problems we've got as a couple are just the typical ones for an *esmana* marriage. So we could go to any counsellor in town and never have to mention the Mabein."

Bodie nodded. "That's thinking ahead. But that's the first time I've even heard his *iskolpa's* name, so he's got to be pretty damn confident."

A quick, smug grin. “He refused to put a number on it, but it’s obviously high. He said Molulco is keen to meet us. Well, keen to meet you, anyway.”

“Did you ask him how much he’s told Molulco about us?”

“As soon as we agreed that we did want to be friends. He mentioned to Molulco that you were human after things went wrong at the airport hotel. Because he knew you’d be calling a lot and Molulco might answer the phone. But he didn’t say I was a Bakkel until you fell ill. He was so shaken by what he’d seen in the hospital that he had to talk about it, and that included having Malun yell at him. Molulco doesn’t have any idea, though, why I’ve been seeing Ullis; he’d never attempt to ask, about any client.

That was all good enough for Bodie. “Are we gonna meet him after next week’s session, then? Get invited through for a pot of *kenit*?”

Ray was shaking his head. “Ullis says we should wait for at least two months, and then start with a meal in a restaurant in town.”

“Got it. Neutral territory.”

“Yeah. A fresh start. I bet there’ll be awkward moments, but it’ll be worth it.”

* * * * *

With a first coat of paint on At Oba Nyon and a second on An Embrun, Bodie would be able to fit the metal parts and the strap to the gun on An Udom Kol and bring it home by the middle of the weekend. However, he’d realised halfway through the first coat of paint that there was no point trying to skimp with a single coat or with getting both coats done in one day, because he couldn’t make his entrance over the weekend. The problem was with finding the right time for fixing the bracket to the wall and getting the rope in place, which had to be soon enough before he made his entrance that he could be sure of stopping Ray from going out onto the balcony in the meantime and looking up. So he had to do it while Ray was at work, and since he wasn’t going to have either the rifle or the story ready before the weekend, that meant the evening of At Mordez, at the earliest. With the whole weekend ahead of him, including a few long runs, he was sure he’d find a solid reason for Sergeant Bodie to be in Parass. Something sound on tactics, with room for Ray to add plenty of his own.

Three times during the run on An Udom Kol he thought he’d found the idea, but each of those collapsed in the end, weighed down by pointless, distracting complications. After the run he took a beer and his book onto the balcony, thinking that an hour of reading might reset his brain. The workable idea started to come to him there, while he was taking a swig of beer and glancing up towards the top of the building.

He’d need some kind of radio, which would be best clipped to his shoulder. Any small box would do, he wouldn’t need Yata’s workshop. He’d pick up something in college, and a rod for an antenna, and wrap them together with black tape. It would be good if he could make the box squawk on command, just enough to make it seem like he was receiving calls as well as making them. He’d ask around at college on At Mordez; maybe someone would know a gadget he could use.

He said at college that he wanted to play a joke of Ray. He had in mind some kind of button he could press, and there'd be a noise like an aggressive bird from somewhere else in the flat. The part that made the noise should be small, easy to hide.

The twins knew just the thing. It was called a *zapala*, and her family used one whenever they were training a new *keetral* cub on their farm. There weren't any cubs at that moment, and they'd bring the *zapala* in for Bodie the next day.

The *zapala*'s speaker unit was battered grey metal, slightly longer than a pack of cigarettes, and it look perfect as it was. It came with a selection of clips and straps, to cover the whole range of types of animal that you might want to attach it to, and Bodie found a loop and a clip that should do the trick for a military-breed human. The control unit was a cylinder that fit in the palm of your hand and that you squeezed. If necessary, Bodie could keep it in his pocket, but he was hoping it would work when taped to the hand-grip on the barrel of his gun, so he could get maximum effect of wanting to keep his hands always on his weapon.

He tested out taping the control unit as soon as he got home, choosing a position an inch around from his natural grip. It did work, both when he was holding the gun and when the gun was lying on the kitchen counter.

Installing the bracket didn't give him any trouble either; the only tedious part was clearing up all the brick-dust afterwards. He fixed the radio to his tunic, just below the left shoulder, put the tunic on, slung his gun across his chest, and then did several run-throughs of jumping off the ladder, securing the living-room, and dislodging the grapping iron. The radio stayed firmly attached through all the jolting, and after some adjustments to positions and timing, he was confident that he'd got it all nearly as casual and attention-grabbing as Ray collecting firewood.

As he'd expected, he'd got half-hard during the preparations, and he stuck to his plans for that, too, quelling himself with a cold shower rather than wanking away the energy and the appetite that by rights were destined for Ray. After Ray had got home he worked hard to keep his attention on the cooking and the conversation, and then on the long edition of the television news, and Ray showed no sign of suspecting a thing.

Bodie waited until twilight, when the last of the neighbours' children was called in to bed, and then gave himself one news-story more before dislodging Ray and announcing he needed a piss. He closed the bedroom door as he left.

He did go into the bathroom, to make sure that both sides were good and even when he applied the swipes of boot polish under his eyes, and to wash his hands afterwards. A last tug of his tunic and tweak to the side of his beret, then he gave an emphatic nod to his reflection, and turned to make his silent, stealthy way to the balcony.

The moment his feet hit the ground, he flung the rope aside, grabbed his weapon with both hands, and ran into the room, taking an instant survey. Ray's reaction was perfect: a cry and a shout of genuine alarm, and then a grin of incredulous delight that was almost immediately wiped clear, replaced by an ever-shifting mix of fear, watchfulness and determination, with his growing erection as the one reliable element.

"3.7 reporting. Room one is clear and Cupid is secure. Over." After he finished speaking he pressed the control unit to get five or six seconds of low, continuous squawking,

tilting his ear to the radio with a frown like he was picking out the words. He released the control, gave a satisfied grin and nod, then brought his mouth back towards the radio to reply. "Roger that. I will brief Cupid, obtain that information, then advise. Over."

He straightened up, met Ray's eyes for the first time, and relaxed his expression enough to allow a faint, respectful smile. "Your Royal Highness, I'm Sergeant Bodie of the SAS. We had received credible intelligence that you were being held hostage. There is a large network coordinating multiple kidnappings in the area this evening. In your case we managed to arrive before the kidnappers, and I must offer our apologies for causing you undue alarm."

Ray was blinking, looking dazed. He gestured vaguely at the TV. "I was just watching the news." Then a nod at the bottles on the coffee table. "And having a couple of beers." He shook himself, swallowed, then attempted a smile. "And I'd never ask you to apologise for arriving too early. Not in a situation like this."

Bodie smiled back, now with real warmth. "Thank you, sir. No, we don't yet know the full extent of the network. One of tonight's other raids might have picked up the kidnappers that were assigned to you. Or they might still be on their way, or the network might have a backup team in place. We think it's too risky to move you, it's better to protect you here, but how we do that depends on whether or not your flat has a metal storm-shutter that runs the whole length of the balcony."

Ray nodded, now looking almost too intrigued to be frightened. "It does."

"Good. Then we can seal off the outside of the flat, and we'll only need one person inside here with you. That will be me. The men outside covering the front door will stay, but we'll be able to release Corporals Simmonds and Davies." He gestured with his head towards the balcony. "They abseiled down at the same time as me, to cover the other windows, but they'll be more useful now on a different part of the operation."

He bent his head to the radio again, delivered the news and received a brief reply, then stepped out onto the balcony to raise his voice towards the trellis. "You're both assigned to C Unit. Rendezvous with them at the ferry terminal." He took a moment to move the ladder away from the wall so it wouldn't catch on the storm-shutter, then grabbed the rope, yanked it upwards, and stepped neatly aside from the falling grappling iron.

Once back inside, he closed the door. "They're on their way. They're like ghosts, that pair. Much lighter on this than me." He held up the rope that he'd just finished coiling. "Now, how do I lower the storm-shutter?"

"There's a switch. I'll do it."

Bodie laid the rope over the back of an armchair as he went to join Ray by the switch, and they stood side-by-side and watched the shutter slowly descending. At the final, rattling clunk, Ray took a deep breath then turned to look at Bodie, his eyes now wide with questions and apprehension. But Bodie had his most reassuring smile all ready. "There's no need to worry, sir. I've been through this any number of times. You couldn't be in safer hands."

At that, Ray glanced down at Bodie's hands, in position on the gun, and he swallowed, and closed his eyes, and shivered, and his erection grew so obvious that it would be downright rude not to mention it.

Bodie took a step back, waited for Ray to open his eyes, then held them for a second, looked down at Ray's bulging crotch for the space of one breath, two breaths, then back up with a raised eyebrow. "Is that just nerves? About the situation? Or are you one of those princes who likes to have sex with bodyguards? It wasn't in your file, but I know there's a lot of us who wouldn't think of reporting it."

Ray swallowed again, then hesitated for a moment before replying. "It's not nerves. It's nothing to do with nerves."

"You like what you see?" Unsmiling. Like he was assessing unknown terrain. Ray opened his mouth, but no sound came out until he started to nod, and then it was just a strangled grunt. Bodie put a sliver more of flint into his tone and gave. "Then I've got a policy to get it done straight away. If I'm sure the threat's distant enough, and I am. Getting it done makes everything easier with the prince after that. Let's start by taking out our cocks, then you can tell me how you want me."

Ray was ready first, within a blink it seemed, and Bodie had to pause in pulling his belt through. "Jesus! That's bloody incredible. You must get teams of bodyguards fighting for the chance to fling themselves onto that."

Ray turned self-conscious, enough that it almost looked like he might blush. He looked to the side, bit his lip, then said quietly, "It's good when they wrestle."

Now Bodie had to bite his lip too, and hard, to stop himself from laughing. But he could also imagine it so easily, the wrestling, and his hands were ripping now at his belt and his flies, and no power inside him could have stopped them.

Ray looked him up and down, his breath getting rougher with each hungry survey. Finally, almost a whisper: "Beautiful. You're beautiful." Then more strongly: "You've won. Forever. Against any other bodyguard. You need to fuck me."

"Yeah. I do." He took a step to the side and nodded towards the bedroom. "I guess all your lubricant is in there?"

"In the bedside table. I'll get it."

Bodie grabbed his arm, hard enough to jerk him back, but then quickly let go. "I'm sorry, sir. I have to stay in here, with a view of the front door, and you have to stay here with me. We'll use oil from your kitchen."

While Ray was getting the oil and a small bowl to pour it into, Bodie went to the position at the kitchen counter that gave the best angle on the front door. He unslung his gun, laid it on the counter, and took a step back.

"Here, sir." Beckoning Ray to the space in front of him, and Ray was there in an instant, shoving his trousers down and then bracing himself on the counter. No more preamble and no words as Bodie dipped his fingertips in the oil, then pressed them carefully into Ray. He kept every part of the exploration slow, but he went deep, and he worked the muscle thoroughly with his knuckles, testing how small a rotation of his wrist or a flex of his fingers could bring a sudden change of focus in the grip, a flood of new textures.

He didn't want to stop, Ray didn't want him to stop, but he should have both hands free, to do his job. So he pulled out, but kept the pad of his middle finger pressed lightly over the hole while he caught his breath – maybe in promise, maybe in farewell, he couldn't

have said. Then he plunged his fingers back into the bowl of oil, swiped once over himself with none of the care he'd shown Ray, and God he was getting them both so slippery now as he guided himself in, and God it was messy, and God this was so obviously the logical, practical way to kick off a stake-out with an apprehensive prince. What else, what else, could their bodies possibly be doing right now?

When he was all the way in, he reached out for the gun, pulling it closer and adjusting the position so he could lay his forearm across it and grasp the barrel. He thought Ray would like that, and yes there was a gasp, and Ray was reaching out to touch the gun too: the narrow section at the top of the body, where it emerged under Bodie's arm.

"Careful, please, sir. It's not a toy. There's nothing dangerous right there, but the best habit to learn is to stay well away."

"Of course, Sergeant." Ray had obeyed promptly, no sign of being offended or embarrassed. "I did know that, in theory. But this is such an unusual and... close angle. The sensible lectures from other bodyguards... Well, they weren't the first thing on my mind."

"Do you like this angle?" Starting to rock his pelvis against Ray.

"Yes, it's..." A long, ragged sigh, and then a longer silence as every part of his body joined in the task of meeting Bodie's movements. After Bodie had gradually slowed the rhythm, Ray gave another sigh then spoke almost in a drawl, in waves along with the rhythm, "I have to admit, I've never had another bodyguard fuck me anywhere in this flat. Let alone with an active threat underway. But you..." His voice slowed further, got thicker. "You're such an exciting, deeply involving experience, I'd be happy if we were locked in here, like this, for the whole night."

Bodie licked his lips, and his hold on the gun tightened involuntarily. "I'm an experience? Now, that needs to go in my file."

"I'll tell them..." Ray twisted as far as he could to the left, which was probably far enough to see Bodie's shoulder and the radio. "That you know exactly what to do..." A glance down and to the side, which Bodie followed; his boots looked twice the size of Ray's light indoor shoes, and Ray had given the boots a shine of unshakeable authority. Bodie's cock gave a throb of such heat he had to choke back a groan, and Ray made a small sound of contented agreement then slowly raised his head and faced forward again. "I'll tell them you know exactly what to do with someone in my position."

Ray wanted it to last. He was clear on that, he didn't waver. He was delighted by the three brief demonstrations that Bodie gave of his techniques for a hard, pounding fuck, and each of those demonstrations now had a firm place in his fantasies and would colour his whole view of the military from this night on. But each moment of even the slowest fuck from Sergeant Bodie was worthy of a demonstration. He could fantasise at any time, but he didn't know how long he'd have the reality of Sergeant Bodie. Of course he wouldn't be shown everything, he knew that, there was too much, but he had to try.

Maybe they could have kept going for the whole night, or close to it, if Bodie hadn't got the idea that it might be time for an update on the rest of the operation. At the three short squawks that announced incoming contact, he stilled his hips, and tugged at the neck of Ray's shirt to get him to bend lower over the counter, properly clear of the radio.

Ray took the order even further than Bodie had intended, all the way down until his cheek was pressed to the counter. He was breathing audibly, his gaze fixed on Bodie's hand wrapped around the gun barrel.

"3.7 receiving." About ten seconds into the long squawk that followed, Bodie started thrusting again. Ray's whole body shuddered, and then he was thrusting back jerkily and grunting, and his hands were clenching and unclenching on the edge of the counter. "Understood. I have Cupid right here. I'll explain the changed assessment to him now." In a gentler tone, while he made his thrusts more forceful, though widely spaced: "Your Royal Highness, a team of kidnappers has been apprehended boarding the ferry in Dishna. But we believe they may have had time to alert a second team, that will most likely come from elsewhere on the island, possibly across the moors. If you prefer, we would now be prepared to move you to another location."

That might be Ray shaking his head, or it might just be the shuddering. Ray's eyes were closed tightly, and he was whimpering.

"That's a negative from Cupid. We'll be staying here. Over." After a squawk of a few seconds in reply: "Yes, there is a pet *soragon*. That is the sound. Very well trained, not a problem. But not used to hearing no about getting its night-time exercise. Over."

Ray's left hand let go of the counter and dove down to his cock, and his panting and moaning got so loud he might not have heard anything of the last two exchanges in Bodie's conversation with Operation Command. Bodie wanted to take his hand off the gun then, to seize Ray by the hips for those last few seconds. But any soldier knew how much a second's delay could count, and even without that he was able to meet Ray's frantic rhythm well enough that they brought each other over the edge at almost the same time.

"Don't pull out. Stay as long as you can." Urgent, and uneven, because Ray was still some way from getting his breath back.

"Don't worry, sir. I'm not going anywhere."

Such a contented sigh. A few moments later his hand settled tentatively on top of Bodie's, the tips of two fingers far enough off-centre to graze the gun-barrel, and when it was clear that Bodie was going to let them stay there, the sigh was even richer. "I'm going to be easy to work with now. I can say to people, I can say to my family, 'You'll find me easy to work with, and it's because of Sergeant Bodie.'"

Bodie laughed, then dragged his face and his lips several times back and forth against Ray's curls. "I always knew that was a sound policy of mine with princes."

A long silence, with Ray's fingers gently stroking Bodie's hand, not trying to stray further. But as Bodie's cock started the last stage of its outward slide, Ray's fingers suddenly took a tight grip, and after the small, gulping sigh of the parting, the grip turned tighter still. "You're not going to be able to kiss me, really, are you? You have to keep your eyes on the door."

"No. I'm sorry. I want to. That's gonna be the core of the fantasies for me. Even more than the bed-breaking fuck."

Ray released his grip, and his shoulders slumped, but then he shook himself and pulled away to the side. “Can I get you a mug of tea, Sergeant Bodie? Or maybe a cloth first, before that oil seeps any further?” They grinned at each other, then Bodie said yes to both.

Bodie took up position resting against his arm of the couch, while Ray sat a few feet away at the dining table, with the quickest possible exit to the bedroom in case of trouble. They talked easily about beer and food and Ray’s work. They could have carried on indefinitely, but after half an hour Bodie thought they deserved a change of scene and it was time for the final update. After he’d listened with a smile of relief to the squawk of good news, he said, “I don’t think I should leave yet. Not with Stone and Marshall. Cupid’s held steady, but I can see he’s badly shaken from all this. He’ll be better for some company for the next few hours.” A brief reply then he was nodding and grinning. “Rendezvous on the cliffs at twenty hour hundred hours. Roger. Over and out.”

Before he could even start taking off his weapon, Ray was in front of him reaching for his shoulders. “You are so goddamn smooth, Sergeant Bodie. Don’t bother to tell me what’s happened out there. Not after I can see I shouldn’t believe you.”

“But you’ll still kiss me and get me to fuck you again?”

A resigned-looking nod. “As many times as you can manage before this rendezvous. Because what are the chances you’ll ever be back in Parass?”

“Oh, they’re good. Better than good. Though maybe I shouldn’t have told you that if it means you’ll slacken the pace for tonight.”

“I won’t. I couldn’t. But are you saying there are going to be more raids like tonight’s?”

“Nah, we got the whole network. But we’re due to start coming to the area for training. I dunno when. Never likely to be able to give you any warning. Sorry.”

Ray was shaking his head. “No, it’s better. If I knew and was counting down the days...” He swallowed. “I’d be bloody impossible to work with. I’ve always liked surprises; I’m going to love them now.”

Bodie had thought that Ray might want him to stay in uniform, but in fact Ray was eager to get him naked and into bed. First, though, he had to let Ray wipe away the boot-polish from under his eyes, because Ray had heard more lectures than you’d believe about the importance of taking care of expensive bedding like his. Bodie sat on the edge of the bed with his eyes closed while Ray dabbed away with a soft cloth wetted in some ocean-scented ointment from the bathroom.

“I bet your codename among the other princes was Sergeant Eyelashes. They’re the most lethal thing about you. One flicker and you’d steal a man’s heart. While stirring up a typhoon at the same time.”

Bodie smiled to himself and kept his eyes shut. “I’m the army’s newest secret weapon.”

Ray did want to see the uniform strewn about the bedroom, though, and at half past eleven, when Bodie had to start preparing to leave, Ray somehow managed to find enough energy left to haul himself up a few inches and watch the uniform going back on. Still, it was a fight for him to keep his eyes open, and when Bodie leaned down for a last kiss, Ray was clearly just moments from sleep.

“I love you, sir.”

“I fucking adore you.” Fervent but so drowsy, and with the next breath he was under.

It was going to be lost on Ray, of course, but Bodie took the time to open and shut the front door, like he was letting himself out; God knows, it was his turn for that trick. He undressed again in the computer room, hanging the uniform up as he went, and stowed the rope and gun next to the boots. He’d sort it all out later. The twins weren’t in a hurry to get the *zapala* back.

Ray didn’t wake up when Bodie slid back into bed and gathered him close. He looked so completely contented and peaceful, like there was nothing that life could come up with that could trouble any part of his mind.

* * * * *

Ullis’s waiting room was an up-market shed in the garden. Ullis wanted to see Ray first, so Bodie made himself a pot of cheap kenit and read his book. Over half an hour passed before Ray came to get him; by the look on his face, Ray had been telling Ullis all about Sergeant Bodie, and Ullis had been suitably impressed.

~Bodie. It is a pleasure to see you again. A lot has happened since you were last here.~

Bodie caught himself from snorting, and raised an eyebrow instead. ~That’s one way of putting it.~

~How do you feel about the things that have happened? Are there any aspects that worry you? Ray has told me that you became comfortable with everything almost immediately, but maybe you are even better at pretending than he realises? Are you really comfortable with the ways in which Ray is an animal?~

~You mean how he’s really a pet who was swapped on a spaceship with one of the Bakkel babies?~

~That was one of the things I had in mind. Yes.~

Bodie gave an elaborate shrug. ~Well, I wouldn’t want to try to convince anyone else of that story. They’d lock me away. But I know it’s completely real to Ray. And that means it’s real to me, too, when I’m with him. I don’t spend any time at all worrying about it.~

Ullis was nodding. ~I was involved in creating that story, which meant I also worked hard to destroy it. We had to start again several times. And at least twice I’ve come awake in a panic because I haven’t taken the slightest action to help the real Ray Bakkel.~ A brief, lopsided smile, then he said, ~Has it affected your attitude towards the Bakkel family or the Vasmars? Maybe made you feel separate from them in a /?/ way?~

Bodie shook his head, very definite. ~They’re still our family. What other ones would we have? In fact, we decided last week that we were going to visit Clover more often. Did Ray tell you about that?~

Ray hadn’t mentioned it, or Turon’s music either, and Ullis asked to hear more. He recognised most of the references for the music and laughed in the right places, and at the end he said that he could see it would be difficult to feel separate from a family that had Turon in it, and that Bodie had answered his question about the Bakkels very thoroughly.

~My next question is: have you seen anything with Ray to make you think that the Mabein might come back? You see him as he cannot see himself, and for many more hours of the week than I do.~

Bodie had to shrug. ~I'm not the expert. You know they're not my gods. But if they haven't come running in to pull Ray off me... With the things we've been doing in the last few weeks...~ Another shrug. ~I can't think what else we might do in the future that would make them decide that we have to be stopped. That we're dangerous to the Hailin even though we're both animals.~

Ullis nodded, looking unsurprised. ~My main worry is that something external will happen that will destroy the baby-swap story in a way that I couldn't. I can't discuss this possibility with Ray any more, because for him it isn't a story.~

Bodie pulled a face and shook his head. ~I don't see the point in discussing it. Not that you're wrong. Of course that's where the danger is, but there's nothing we can do about it. Not right now, and I'm not going to wait around worrying about the Mabein when I've got an *iskolpa* to ~ Bloody Hass Embrun, always so specific when it came to sex. He couldn't just say "fuck", and now Ullis must be thinking he'd suddenly got embarrassed, and that was ridiculous of him after everything that Ullis had heard from Ray.

After a few moments, Ullis came to his rescue. ~To start having normal arguments with?~

Bodie laughed. ~Yes. That's it. You're lucky you won't get to hear about those.~

A brief but amused smile, then Ullis said, ~Is there anything that you'd like to ask me?~

~No. Thank you. Not really. So can I go and get Ray? You're letting us go, aren't you?~

Ullis was, and Ray didn't need fetching: he was halfway down the path before Bodie had reached the bottom of the steps, and he'd read the verdict in Bodie's face. Ullis didn't make them sit down; he just wanted to congratulate them on their hard work, and to confirm that he would be getting in touch in exactly eight weeks time to arrange their first dinner.

As soon as they got home, Ray wrote to Malun asking if he could come for either breakfast or lunch on An Uraba; they had some good news that he'd want to hear in person. Malun's reply was waiting for them the next morning, and it was one line saying he'd look forward to seeing them at eight o'clock for breakfast.

Now they knew when they'd be telling Malun, they could decide when to send their message to Turon, and that evening would be just right. Bodie started on it when he got home from work, and enjoyed describing their confusion over the music even more than he had with Ullis.

The second part of the message was much shorter but took him far longer to write. It was nearly as tricky as writing to George Cowley, and he really could have done with Turon himself around to help him get started.

"I know you always like an update from college and around town, but we're going to skip that this time for one update just from the two of us, and once you've read it, you'll see why. Ray and Ullis figured out how to solve all our problems around sharing a bed, and we can do anything we want now. If you and Malun spent any time worrying that our

expectations were too high about how things would be once we'd got the problems solved, we have to tell you that you couldn't have been more wrong. Malun's coming to breakfast on An Uraba so we can give him the news, but we wanted you to hear it from us first. We know it's been difficult for you, not being able to do anything to help, but we were glad in our way that one of the people who knew what we were going through was our cousin, friend and brother Turon, who's the kindest man we know."

He couldn't imagine that Ray would let even half of that go through, especially the last part. It was true and Turon had earned it and it would make him happy – but Bodie couldn't convince himself that he and Ray would ever be the types to say something like that, even at a time when they really should want to share some of their own happiness. But Ray just nodded and said, "Yeah, that's good. At first there I thought you were going to go for 'loveliest', and he wouldn't have been able to take that in the way you meant it. But with 'kindest', he won't doubt for a second that we mean it seriously. It's good."

To make the message a proper joint effort, Ray added a line about giving Sasha a hug, and then signed off with love from both of them. Seeing the message sent felt like such a good way to start the weekend, Bodie almost wished their secret had got spread further, so they'd have more people to tell.

* * * * *

Malun appreciated the offer of the good pastries, but this time he'd just have a coffee and fruit juice. "So what's the good news that I'll want to hear in person?"

"Well... I'm no longer seeing Ullis Hanvert."

Malun's eyebrows shot up. "My first thought is that they must finally have revoked his license, but as well as you know me, that can't be the entirety of your good news."

Ray flashed a grin. "No, it's just the start. Ullis did his job so well that I don't need him any more. Bodie and I don't need separate quilts now, let alone separate beds."

Malun clearly still didn't know what to make of this. He nodded slowly, expression watchful, and looked back and forth between them several times before settling back on Ray. "This does sound very good news, and you do both have a recognisable glow about you. But I can't help wondering if I'm going to be furious with myself in six months' time for not recognising the signs that you were deep in some experiment of Hanvert's even more stupid than the previous one. I know you wouldn't get my hopes up just to give yourselves entertainment, I know you'd think you had a good reason, but..." A long, weary sigh. "I might be more comfortable just continuing to worry."

They looked at one another, surprised and dismayed, and then after a few moments Bodie leaned forward and put his hand on Malun's forearm. "Damn. We never thought of it like that. We've been too busy enjoying... having the problems behind us." A quick glance at Ray, who was staring at Malun, frowning hard. "But I dunno what we could say to show you it's really over. That there's nothing here but plain good news."

"I think..." Malun turned his head abruptly to look out over the water, and after a couple of seconds started drumming his fingers rapidly against his mug. That was only for another few seconds, though, and then he looked back at Bodie. "You could tell me – or rather your *iskolpa* could tell me – what his Ullis Hanvert managed to do to allow him to come to accommodations with the Mabein." Bodie couldn't stop himself from

flinching, and his hand slipped from Malun's arm; he didn't dare look at Ray. They hadn't thought this through. Not even close. Malun instantly wanting to break out a case of *toroquil*: that's all they'd imagined.

"He got me to consider the possibility that I might have a rare mutation." Ray's voice was level and quiet. "That in many important respects I'm not fully Hailin, and that's the reason I was able to enter into a bonding with Bodie the way I did. So if I'm not fully Hailin and it's not an *esmana* marriage in any of the senses that we all grew up with -"

"Then the Mabein don't have the same reason to regard it as a threat." Malun twitched an eyebrow and gave the briefest grunt. "They're able to ignore you. Ignore what happens between the two of you."

Ray was nodding, with a growing smile. "That's right. The idea fit so well with what they already knew of me, they accepted it without insisting that I get a genetic test. They've been ignoring me completely for over a month now. So... that's the accommodation." Ray shrugged and shook his head. "I don't know what you'll have to be furious with us about in six months' time, but for now it's safe to be happy for us. I had my last session with Ullis on At Kamaran; there's nothing more for him to do now."

Malun carried on looking assessingly at Ray for a while longer, then gave a head-tilt of concession. "Sometimes it does take an outsider with some special training to see these things. Though no one would contest that you were always the most peculiar of Raina's children. I would ask you to pass on my apologies to Hanvert, but if you're not going to be seeing him again..."

Bodie decided to get in before Ray, and to do it with a grimace rather than Ray's current grin. "Actually, we're meeting him and his *iskolpa* for dinner in a few weeks. But I can remind Ray about the apology if you like."

Malun closed his eyes hard, and his head jerked forward as he mouthed a single, vehement syllable. Bodie couldn't imagine it was "Fuck!" or any of the Hass Embrun equivalents, but it clearly did the job for Malun. Then Malun opened his eyes, gave a quiet but decisive sigh, and said, "Well, with news this good, one can absorb almost any incidental setback. I would accept a glass of *toroquil*, if you had any chilled."

They did, and it was one of the bottles that Malun had brought after Bodie got out of hospital. Ray went to get it.

Malun asked if he could tell Turon, and they explained that they'd already written. "We didn't say anything about my mutation, though. When we wrote, we didn't think either of you would want those details. So if he asks you, could you refer him to me?"

"Of course. Will you stay in this flat, now you don't need the extra bedrooms? West always felt rather guilty about taking the other flat, because it does have an even better view than this one."

They looked at each other, but just needed a second to concur and to confirm with fractional shakes of the head. Ray said, "This is home. We made it home. I've never missed the view."

"Good. Then I can keep the same address for the next cases of red wine. How close are you to running out?"

Malun only stayed for one glass of *toroquil*, and after he had gone they decided to move to the bench so they could have their arms around each while they finished the bottle. The boating season seemed to be well underway: there were never fewer than five sailing boats in view, some small, with just one person, others large enough for any family. West's fancy friends were probably out there somewhere, busy working up an appetite for lunch.

They talked for a while about Malun's visit, and laughed hard as they wondered how many people had ever seen him swear like that. Ray drank much more slowly than Bodie, and after he'd finally drained his glass he nodded towards the water and said, "They're all heading out right now. And if we sat here this evening with another bottle, we'd see them coming back. And you know they're just going out for the sake of being on a boat, they'll just have been spinning out the time running loops around a few islands. But they all become dots, they all go out of sight. And then they come back home. I went out. And then I came back home with you."

Bodie gave an amused snort. "You set a new record there for playing fetch."

Ray looked so smug, soaking up the tribute as his due. "Well, it is in my blood. The instant I saw you, I wanted to grab you. Keep a tight hold on you and take you... where we both needed to go."

A long sigh of satisfaction, then Bodie nodded. "Using your mouth like an expert all the way. I remember a few bitemarks, but who'd complain about that?"

Ray gave Bodie's waist a squeeze, then nestled even closer. "Not you. Never you. I couldn't have guessed that you'd be so patient. Not when I first got you in my sights. I wouldn't have recognised it, nothing could've been further from my mind. But here we are."

Bodie turned his head to press his lips to Ray's temple, then rested his cheek back on the soft curls. "Yeah, you said it. Here we are."

The End