

SEBASTIAN

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GLASGOW

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HELEN  
RAVEN

THE SAME RIVER

*The original working title of this story was quite different from the final version: too blatant, too brittle, too cold. Helen debated what to change it to, and I, of course, had my favorite candidates. No, she said, your choice is not quite right, it's too revealing also. We'll call it The Same River. And you know something? She was right. It strikes just the right note, for flowing water casts a strong vision: inexorable, persistent movement along the river's course joining more water until it reaches the sea only to return to the sky and repeat the cycle again. But I think you will find that The Same River has other pervasive images and moods. There is an enduring sadness and quietness to the piece. Perhaps we should have called it Melancholia. No, don't make the mistake of expecting heart and flowers, sweetness and light, fast-paced action, or even cozy domesticity. This is a world of gloomy, overcast days where just as the clouds begin to break, night's bleak darkness overtakes it all.*

Late-summer 1988,  
approximately five years after "Graveyard"

"WELL, WELL. RAY DOYLE WITH REQUISITION FORM M23. CAN IT BE THAT TIME OF year already?"

"Gotta keep up with the trends, John. Can't be seen with an outdated model. Man's got a reputation to think about." Doyle leaned lightly against the counter and pushed the form towards the mechanic.

"You wear 'em out, more like. I know you lot. Precision machine and you send it to the chippy in the rain."

Doyle snorted, imagining the reaction at his local take-away, and waited while Edgely checked against a list sellotaped to the wall, and then wielded a rapid biro. "So what have you got for me this time?"

"Oh, a beaut, sir, a beaut." Lifting the hinged counter: "Come right this way to the luxury showroom."

Each workshop they passed was filled with light, the smell of oil, and the hiss of hydraulics. "Busy today?"

"We've got a refit-program on the knees. Supposed to reduce the stresses when the loading's off-centre."

"Shame. Shearing-failure was always good for a few days off."

The warehouse-area was deep in the basement. The word was that the designers had taken the specifications for a high-security prison and multiplied them by ten. The guard checked Doyle's I.D. and then shut him away out of sight of the complicated, two-man procedures for opening the foot-thick door. Released, Doyle followed Edgely down the dimly-lit aisles.

"There you go." Edgely stopped by one of the bays and flicked a switch set in the partition. "Fifty-Twenty Four. Fresh out of the shrink-wrap."

The mechanoid was in low-energy mode, seated and slumped under the pull of gravity. Seen like this, they made Doyle think of the past, not the future: an ancient statue carved out of some grey stone, with the painted hands and eye-slit eerily fresh and black. He glanced briefly at the serial number stencilled above the bay, then addressed the bowed head, inviting the machine to share his grievance: "They knew I'd be

collecting you today. Did they think to warm you up ready? Did they buggery."

In turn, Edgely complained to the figure in the neighbouring bay. "This is one of those trainers I was telling you about. See what I mean about bloody prima donnas. You're best off in here, lad." To Doyle, with his best obsequious twist of the lips, "Shall I boot him up for you now, sir?"

Doyle returned a genuine smile. "Nah, I'll do it myself. Break him in. What's his password?"

Edgely knelt, unlocked a drawer set in the base of the bay, and passed a thin cardboard folder up to Doyle.

Overcast. *Where do they come up with these?* "Huh. Well, I'll be changing *that*." Standing directly in front of the head, he enunciated, "Fifty-Twenty Four. Overcast." A green light started to blink at the top of the visor. "Power. Up." The light changed to a continuous red, and a low humming noise started.

Doyle watched with his hands on his hips and his head tilted slightly. "Last Fifty-Twenty I had took about a minute. Don't s'pose that's changed?"

"Won't change till the next model. Not to notice, anyway."

Doyle looked at the mechanic. "Any word on that?"

"Just rumours. There's talk that they're moving up to a Six-Thousand, and they won't do that overnight."

"So what would—" Doyle broke off as a whispering of hydraulics announced that the sleek head was rising. It was his third time for this but the strength of the adrenalin-rush showed how far he was from taking it for granted. Breath held, he felt his pulse measuring the slow sequence as the line of the eye-slit centred on him, and then the small, inset oval that was the protective plate moved smoothly to the side.

"Not a bad-lookin' lad, is he? Would you call that a pout?" Edgely had the soul of a turnip—the adrenalin in Doyle wanted to pulp him with a single blow.

"Could be." Terse to the point of impatience. "When'd you last shave him?"

“Rick did the lot 'bout an hour ago.” Edgely had gone all subdued. Doyle made an effort to relax, to get back to the standard banter—if only to prove to himself that he could still cope with humans directly.

He turned to the other man and produced a wry smile. “All part of the job, eh? Bet it's not what you expected when you did your HND?”

A snort. “Probably part of the course now. Five years time, *all* machines will have to shave.”

“Why d'they do it, John? It's mad. Isn't it?”

“Well, they have to put testosterone in the cloning-vats or the meat never goes through puberty, and you wouldn't want a kid's mouth stuck in *that*, would you?”

Edgely had no reason to know how very unsettling that image was for Doyle. “Yeah, but why do they mess about with the meat in the first place? I don't think they even tried using metal for the whole thing, not even at the beginning. They've got it into their heads that a few pounds of meat instantly makes this beast 'user-friendly'.” A brief glance and a harsh laugh. Too harsh, to Doyle's own ears. “And lumbering it with a life-support system... Well, it's mad.”

“They're tekkies, Ray. It's a challenge. Their idea of fun. That's all there is to it.”

“If it's so much *fun* let *them* come in each morning and brush its teeth.” The incomprehension was genuine, the resentment displaced. So much for his effort to relax. “Well, let's take him off your hands. C'n you give me vision?” Doyle turned back to the mechanoid, looked into the black slit of the visor.

Edgely flicked another switch. The screen at the back of the bay made a spitting sound, displayed a few seconds of migraine, and then settled to a clear picture of Doyle himself, with Edgely in the background and green status-messages chattering above it all in the corners.

Doyle gave the screen a brief glance, then folded his arms. “Fifty-Twenty Four. Do you know who I am?”

“Yes. I know who you are.” Doyle winced slightly. He'd asked them to change the voices, introduce a bit of variety. How difficult could it be, for God's sake? But no. The standard-issue mechanoid drone seemed to be here to stay.

“Who *am* I?”

“Raymond Doyle. CI5 Agent 6.1. Assigned as Trainer to Unit Fifty-Twenty Four.”

“Spot on.” In a lower tone, to Edgely, “It was Trent got one imprinted for Bancroft, wasn't it?”

“Yeah, January that was. Had to send him back. Couldn't do a thing with him.”

“Hmm.” He raised his voice again. “Fifty-Twenty Four Overcast. Self-defence. Off.” The red light on the visor started to blink rapidly. Wasting no time, Doyle stepped onto the low platform, reached behind the helmet to pull out the cable that connected the mechanoid to the screen, and stepped back out of range. “Fifty-Twenty Four. Self-defence. On.” The light stopped blinking.

“I'll go see to the door.” Edgely headed off down the aisle.

Left on his own, Doyle dropped the air of briskness, and stared at the mechanoid as he'd been wanting to. The body was the same as his last 5020, and not so different from the 5010 before that—compelling, of course, but by now he knew by heart the patterns of light on titanium and steel and latex. Maybe that developing familiarity explained the growth in his pre-occupation with the few square inches of a mechanoid that were harder to describe and impossible to predict. It was a pre-occupation he seemed to share with no one else, not even other Trainers. A human mouth set in a head of bullet-proof steel. Horrible. Beautiful. How could you stop looking? How could you resist the urge to touch, to feel the contrasts? Or to extrapolate the slightest individuality of shape or movement into an entire personality? Dangerous games to play.

Doyle's absorption in the machine was broken by the sound of human voices: Edgely had reached the door and was dealing with the guard via the intercom. Time to start the lesson. He took a step back, lifted his gaze to meet the mechanoid's. “Follow me,” then he turned and began the walk to the door. He heard the characteristic bursts of sound from the neck—the vision system tracking him out of sight. Then silence. Was he going to have to go back and spell it out?

No, he wasn't. A chorus of hydraulic hisses from legs and spine and arms, and then the first thud on the concrete floor—a quarter of a ton of machinery in sublimely inefficient motion.

Doyle turned and waited while the machine caught up with him, then gave a brief smile. “Good. You realised what the command meant, and that it was directed at you. That was a good start.” One of these days he'd come up with a mechanoid equivalent of a pat on the head and a chocolate button.

By the time they reached the door, it was open. The guard formally checked the serial number,

formally made Doyle and CI5 take responsibility for the mechanoid's actions, and very formally obtained Doyle's signature three times.

On the way up to the ground floor, Doyle asked, "You gonna put me through the same routine to get a batch of day-packs?"

Edgely laughed. "He's getting worse, isn't he? Still...sitting there looking at them on the screens all day. What d'you expect?" They reached the reception area with its small store-room. "How many d'you want?"

"Make it ten. I've got most of a batch left at HQ."

"OK. They're in the usual place." Edgely busied himself with the associated paperwork.

"Do you know what one of your day-packs looks like?" Eye-contact again—or should it be 'visor-contact'?

"Yes."

"Fetch a batch of ten from the shelf over there."

Edgely raised his head to watch the moment when the machine lifted the substantial container—if it weren't for the adjustment of posture, you would have thought it no heavier than the cardboard folder that Doyle carried—then he went back to the paperwork. Doyle carried on watching. An experienced mechanoid would know that it was supposed to return to Doyle's side immediately, but 5020-4 was fresh out of the lab. The head swivelled through nearly 180 degrees to locate Doyle—an action impossible for a human. Doyle simply watched, neck aching in sympathy for non-existent sinews, giving no clue. A pause, then the body came smoothly round into alignment with the head, and the mechanoid walked the few paces to stand by its Trainer, who rewarded it with a nod and a smile.

"Seems a bright lad. D'you wanna sign for his rations?"

Doyle signed. "Thanks, mate. See you in a week or so." He headed out of the building and 5020-4 followed him.

The security procedures at HQ started at the front desk. Warned by Doyle, Crawford had a fresh log-book ready, but the procedures and signatures still took nearly ten minutes, with another five minutes to prepare a security card for 5020-4.

Once through the main door, they headed for the kennels in the cellar. While not built to the same standards as the warehouse at the central depot—the security on the building itself made up the difference—the local kennels would still defeat any safe-

cracker Doyle had ever heard of. CI5 had installed four kennels: Kennel A was reserved for the mechanoid under training, and Kennel B was currently assigned to 5010-12. Doyle doubted that there would ever be a time when all four were in use.

"The other packs are over there." Doyle pointed to the steel shelves opposite the chair (or 'throne'). The mechanoid looked in the correct direction but did nothing. Doyle waited. The head turned back towards him. Doyle sighed quietly.

"When I said, 'The other packs are over there', I meant that I wanted you to place the batch that you are carrying on the shelves."

A slight pause—Doyle always imagined circuits melting and reforming—then the mechanoid obeyed the command. When it turned round, Doyle had that impression of uncertainty, of questioning that he tried, as always, to analyse. Was the head tilted slightly to the side? Probably not.

"When I told you about the packs the first time, that was an 'implied command'. Humans use implied commands a lot. Did you think I wanted you to carry that batch around all day?"

"Humans are complex, varied and inconsistent. Sometimes they can not explain what they want. Sometimes they do not know what they want." The measured pacing made it sound like a quote.

Doyle grinned. "Well, that's true enough." Serious again: "But when we concentrate we can be rational enough and predictable enough to work together. And to work together well enough to build... Well, to build something like you.

"So it's best if you assume that there *is* a reason behind everything I do and everything I say. If I don't explain immediately, make guesses—I *know* you can do that—and if you need more information, ask for it. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

Doyle held up the cardboard folder, then pointed at the throne. "The seat of the chair lifts up and there's a storage space underneath. I like to keep this file in that storage space."

A pause, then slowly, "Do you want me to put the file in the storage space?"

"Yes."

The file was taken smoothly from his hand, the hinged seat lifted with minimal fumbling. It never ceased to amaze Doyle: the coordination, the problem-solving, the capacity to learn, the (occasional) appearance of spontaneity. It was a bloody miracle. It was indeed *the* British achievement of the twentieth

century, even if Thatcher *had* been the first to say so.

“Good. Very good. Next, I’m going to change your password and give you an alias so I don’t have to use your serial number all the time. Do you have any preferences for your password or your alias? Well, I know you *don’t* but try to guess what *I* might choose.”

A long pause. “Grey.” If the voice had been capable of changing tone, that would probably have come out as a question—maybe the 6000 Model would get there. A longer pause. “Testosterone.”

Doyle’s initial reaction was a yelp, then he settled down to helpless, knee-weakening laughter. It was well over a minute before he regained control over his lungs. “Don’t tempt me. Oh, God. To see their faces.”

“Did I make an incorrect guess?”

“Umm...” Doyle frowned and scratched his head. “Not ‘incorrect’ so much as...inappropriate. Or maybe *too* appropriate. Look, I don’t normally get onto humour this early, but... You’ve been taught the word ‘machismo’, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And do you understand the connection with testosterone?”

“Yes.”

“Well, how much machismo would you say you have? Going by the definition? A lot? A little?”

Pause. “A lot.”

“Right. On a scale of one to ten, you’re a twenty. And how much testosterone have you got?”

“None.”

“Right again. And those two facts in combination are very funny.” He waved a hand dismissively. “I don’t expect you to really understand this now. Maybe not ever. But humans make jokes—or see humour in things—a lot and you need to be able to recognise it so you can...ignore it. Anyway, if we used ‘Testosterone’ as your alias you’d never get any work done ‘cos every human you met would be helpless with laughter.”

“Do you want me to make another guess?”

The appearance of spontaneity. How *did* it work? “No, that’ll do. I like ‘Grey’. We’ll use that as your alias. And for your password...” A few seconds of studying the ceiling, then he addressed the mechanoid’s underlying security-system in his special ‘command tone’: “Fifty-Twenty Four. Over-cast. Change Password.”

<<State. New. Password.>> The security-system’s voice was, if anything, even more mechanical, and the mechanoid’s lips did not move. It was very eerie. Maybe the meat wasn’t such a demented idea.

“Guesstimate.”

Pause. <<Repeat. New. Password.>>

Doyle had to repeat the word twice before the system was satisfied that his pronunciation was consistent—not bad since he was always half-prepared for it to reject the change altogether.

<<Password. Changed.>> And the system switched itself back to normal operation.

“Grey, what’s the energy level on your current day-pack? Rounded to the nearest percentage point.”

“Eighty three percent.”

“Oh, plenty. Right, let’s go and get a coffee.”

On the way up to the rec room, Doyle took them into the central office, slid his marker to ‘In’, and asked Betty to make a label for 5020-4. Betty was still not used to the mechanoids and avoided looking at them whenever she might be in the field of view—it was a common reaction.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us to your new friend?” The most common reaction of all in the corridors of CI5. Doyle reflected that humans—*some* humans—were far more predictable than machines.

“Can’t you read, McCabe? It’s only written on him about twenty times. And he’s had the standard briefing so he already knows enough to want to avoid you.”

“So who am I, Mister Fifty-Twenty Four?”

The machine looked at McCabe and then back at Doyle and said nothing.

A brief nod from Doyle. “Answer him, Grey.”

The head turned again. “James McCabe. Agent 3.2.”

“See? They all get the standard briefing. Maybe one day you’ll accept that and leave them alone until they’ve had a chance to settle in.” At the beginning he’d had the same attitude as the rest of the lads—a mechanoid was the ultimate gormless newcomer—but the more he got to know the design, the more protective he became. It simply wasn’t *fair*, not with something that would never get its own back. Besides, he didn’t like conducting his lessons in public.

“Grey? Sounds like a professor.” Lucas. “What’s wrong with ‘Rambo’ or ‘Masher’ or—”

“Or ‘Frankenstein’? Proper names. You’re letting the side down, Ray.”

“His choice, mate. Don’t blame me.”

“His choice?” Lucas was not impressed with spontaneity. “Between what? Your hair-colour and your eye-colour?”

“3.2, tell your partner it’s not wise to insult a man who’s in sole command of a Model Fifty-Twenty.”

“Oh, Terry’s not bothered. He’s got a spare skull back home. And a couple of arms.”

Once they were on their own in the rec room, Doyle said, “You probably didn’t understand much of that. Lucas hasn’t really got any spare body-parts at home—McCabe was joking. And I was joking when I threatened Lucas after he commented on my grey hairs, on my age. People *do* tend to be sensitive about signs of ageing—signs that their body is deteriorating—but it’s usually presented as a joke, especially when the person is still fit, like me.

“When there are other people around, I will probably joke quite often about ordering you to hurt someone. Or someone else will. Don’t get the wrong...expectations from these jokes. I will probably *never* order you to hurt someone or even to touch someone. And if I ever do have to give you such an order, I will make it very, very clear that this is not a joke, that this is serious.” He lightened his tone and gestured towards the corridor. “So just ignore nonsense like that outside.”

There was about half a centimetre of grit-and-liquid left in the pot. If he had been on his own, Doyle would have made do with the despised vending machine.

“You know how to work one of these coffee-makers, don’t you?” Along with the standard briefing, there seemed to be a standard course (or memory-chip?) in basic twentieth-century skills.

“Yes.”

“Good. Get on with it. You’ll find everything you need around somewhere.” He sank into a chair and picked up the paper that had been left on the arm. French farmers and British lamb. Pages on the wedding of some actress he’d never heard of. Off-the-shelf outrage from politicians. Not the easiest job in the world, making this mess comprehensible to a machine.

“How do you take your coffee?” Grey had been standing motionless by the sideboard throughout the process of gurgling and dripping.

“Black, no sugar.”

“Is one of these mugs yours?”

“Not really, but if there’s a plain yellow one there, I’ll have that.”

Quite a sight: several million pounds-worth of lethal machinery, meekly pouring you a coffee. *Any* man would get a charge from that.

“Now pour one for yourself. We’ll take them up to

my office.”

Sitting in his own chair, Doyle said, “The chair by the window’s designed to take your weight. Lug it round to face me, and sit down.”

Doyle was sideways on to his desk, right elbow propped on it, mug resting on the opposite thigh. He and Grey looked at one another for over a minute. To Doyle, it never felt like being stared at.

“Why do you think I asked you to pour yourself a coffee?” Quickly, before the mug was more than halfway to the mouth: “That wasn’t an implied command to drink the coffee.” The mug was lowered again. “It was a genuine question. What do you think my reasons might be?”

Long pause. “Do you want to find out if I can drink the coffee?”

“No, I’ve found that out with my previous mechanoids. I know you can...ingest small amounts of liquid and solids. I know you have no sense of taste. Or smell. I know that you’d look bloody ridiculous drinking from the mug because the visor gets in the way. Think again.”

A longer pause. “Do you want to drink the coffee? Is it a second mug of coffee for you?”

“No, that’s not it. It’s not a practical reason, really. It’s connected to the reason for this whole training-period with me. Think again.”

Slowly, “You are training me to be human.”

“Well, that’s the goal, but it’s not realistic. You’re never going to fool anyone.” Probably confusing those circuits horribly, but it had to be said. After that, Doyle fell silent, wanting to see if Grey would recognise that the question was still in play.

“Drinking coffee is a human activity.”

Doyle had been about to give up. “That’s it. Good. That’s the reason. I don’t want you to drink coffee—that’s more trouble than it’s worth—but sitting there with a mug to play with is better than nothing. And ‘play’ is the important word. Humans tend to fidget. They like to have something to do with their hands or their mouths, and it makes them uncomfortable when another person is too still. Watch me, watch other people, and then try it out for yourself. I’ll tell you if what you’re doing looks unnatural, but I can’t really tell you what to do because it’s something that humans do unconsciously—I don’t know what the rules are, I just know when they’re being broken. A lot of human behaviour’s like that, I’m afraid.”

The head tilted forward to focus on Doyle’s hands. Doyle did his utmost to be unaware of the scrutiny

and to act as a normal fidgety human—in this he was improving with practice.

“How do you think I will conduct this training?”

Visor-contact again. “I think you will perform your work as a CI5 agent and I will watch and learn.”

“That’s probably how they imagine it in the lab, but you’re wrong. I tried that at first but mechanoids are just not suitable for the majority of CI5 work. You’re too heavy, too slow, too ignorant. So I had to come up with a different approach, and it seems to work well enough. Can you guess what that approach is?”

Pause. “You ask me a question. I give an incorrect answer. You explain the correct answer to me.”

A bright lad, indeed. How the *hell* did it work? And why didn’t all of the 5020s turn out like this? The old nature versus nurture problem? “That’s about the size of it.” Oh. Probably not in the dictionary. “I mean, you’re right. Well done. But I haven’t got a list of thousands of questions—I started one and it bored me stupid. Instead, we’re going to watch a lot of TV and I’ll ask you questions about what we’re seeing.” He nodded toward the left, and the shelves which held the large set. “Videos mostly, at first. I’ll give you things to read when I’m not here. And when you’re ready we’ll start dealing with real people directly, but that might take a month or more.”

He paused, and studied the motionless mechanoid. “Something else I want you to observe and copy—as well as the fidgeting—is the way humans behave when they’re listening to someone. You’ll see that they nod from time to time, and say things like ‘uhuh’ and ‘yeah’ and ‘really?’. If I’m talking to someone and they *don’t* give me that kind of encouragement—they just sit there like you’re doing—then I’ll think that they’re not really listening, or that they disagree strongly with what I’m saying. And that’s usually *not* the impression you want to give. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“OK.” He stood up. “Shift your chair round so you can see the screen properly. I’ve found the best thing to start with is... When you were in the lab, did anyone ever mention a soap-opera called *Brookside*?”

Doyle gave them a long break for lunch. He bought himself a sandwich and they sat in the park, observing and being observed. His natural inclination was to avoid being seen in public with a mechanoid, so rather than churn himself up with procrastination, he probably went for ‘walkies’ more than any other

Trainer.

It wasn’t that he was ashamed of the mechanoids—the romantic in him found their willingness and their dependence almost touching, almost brave—but the reactions of other humans could sometimes be difficult to deal with. The fear and disapproval he could ignore easily enough, since those people simply kept their distance. But he hadn’t yet found a satisfactory response to the conspiratorial winks and the “Awright, mate?”

It would be easier if he were comfortable about examining his own motivations. He’d composed a speech (never delivered) for the benefit of the winking morons: “Look. They’re not like that. And I’m not like that. I don’t work with this mobile hydraulic ram because it makes me feel like a master of the universe. I work with it because it can’t die.” A painful truth, but one with no blame attached, and at the beginning, when CI5 first contacted him, it had been the pure truth. It had not stayed pure for long.

They finally left the park when a child started to cry and refused to walk past their bench. Doyle apologised, got Grey to apologise as well, and on the way back to HQ he explained the principles behind his techniques for calming frightened humans.

By the time the second tape of *Brookside* finished, it was past five o’clock. “Right. That’s the end of my working-day. What’s the level on your day-pack?”

“Forty-eight percent.”

“OK. Enough for a few hours’ homework. I’ll give you some books to read in your kennel. See on the right up there? Take the first two volumes of *Classic English Short Stories*.”

A few minutes later, in Kennel A: “I’ll be in at about nine tomorrow morning. I want you powered up, fitted with a fresh pack, and shaved and clean by the time I arrive. You can do your own grooming, can’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Start with a new toothbrush and razor. You’ll find supplies in the cabinet under the sink. See you tomorrow.” Doyle locked the door on the mechanoid.

Doyle’s own evening was not that much more exciting than the machine’s. A slow drive home, a revival of the previous day’s meal, more time in front of the TV. He frequently felt he should be doing something more, but that was only for the sake of appearances. He was not unhappy. Not

positively unhappy. Just tired.

Because he was still in mourning for Bodie. Three years. Was that long? Unreasonably long? No one trod carefully around him any more. Sometimes he felt that most of the lads had honestly forgotten Bodie, had forgotten that Ray Doyle had ever had a different number. But maybe they took each new agent to one side and briefed him on what not to say.

Had it been a mistake to come back? He asked himself that about once a month. He had been...happier in Scotland. Eventually. Once past the numbness and the anger and the worst of the hallucinations—‘phantom-limb sensations’ would you call them? Less tired. Well, a different tiredness, easily explained by the life of a trainee chef in a restaurant that took itself very seriously. There had been moments when he had *known* that one day he would be truly interested in life again.

Back in CI5... Well, there were memories all around, of course, but a lot had changed when Jensen had taken over from Cowley, and the changes were what he noticed—consciously, at least. And despite what they’d promised—tempted him with—his work was completely different. None of that swagger and sweat. He could still have some of that if he chose, but it wouldn’t do Grey any good, and these days his competitive instincts were pitting him against the other Trainers—when an agency was looking for a mechanoid, he wanted their first question to be: “Have you got one that was trained by Ray Doyle?”

No, not a mistake. The mechanoids gave him many good moments—this time with them was probably something he needed, part of his recovery. Another year or so would probably do it, and then he’d get back to the real world.

The real world. When you were in CI5 it seemed like the unreal world, a shadow world. Even in his place on the periphery, he’d rediscovered that habit of perception almost immediately. So difficult to leave such a vivid life, to make the decision to step into the shadows. He and Bodie had never managed to make that decision, never talked about it, even after Mayli had presented them with such an easy way out. No, for them it had to be the hard way: months of pain and effort to get Doyle back on strength, and Bodie dead in surgery less than two years later.

Was it any wonder that he was having problems combining CI5 with a normal life? Especially this time round. “*And what do you do, Mister Doyle?*” “*Oh, I train mechanoids for CI5.*” Real bloody conversation-stopper. Once in a while he’d go out for a drink with

the lads, but that was hardly a bid for normality.

Still, he wasn’t unhappy. Or if he was, he didn’t want to make any effort to be happier. Contentment of a sort. Things would change soon enough. Nothing was forever.

The training proceeded. Grey was working hard, although Doyle felt uneasy about thinking along those lines since it led inevitably to the preposterous notion that the other two had been coasting. A lazy machine. Ridiculous. But Grey was starting to display human mannerisms (or rough approximations), making his way steadily through the books, and gradually making more and more comments of his own.

Several times, Doyle had been on the verge of saying, “You really do want to pass for human, don’t you?” Despite all of the off-putting aspects of the design, it was very difficult to stop yourself ascribing emotions and motivations to the mechanoids. Doyle frequently felt that he was the only person in the universe who tried to resist making the error. Britain’s comedians didn’t help: the craze had died down in the course of the year, but at the beginning no evening of TV was deemed complete without a portrayal of a neurotic or bashful or lecherous mechanoid. Particularly lecherous. Ben Elton’s contribution was undoubtedly the best (and most obscene), but it had increased the difficulties for any Trainer appearing in public with a mechanoid. For a while he’d been making a compilation tape—something for late Saturday night at the next Trainers’ conference—but before long things had gone too far. He’d never even watched the tape himself.

At the end of the work-day on the second Friday, Doyle said, “It’s time you got to see how humans live. You’ve never been inside someone’s home, have you?”

“No.”

“Well, tomorrow afternoon at about five I’ll come in and collect you and take you to my flat for a few hours.”

“Tomorrow is a Saturday. You said you do not work on a Saturday.”

“Usually I don’t. But I do think that this sort of visit is important, and tomorrow is the most convenient day at the moment. Anyway, it’s not going to be exactly hard work for me. I’ll just be doing what I was going to do anyway.” An automatic smile of reassurance, but the lack of response immediately reminded

him what he was dealing with.

His neighbours seemed to have got used to the occasional presence of a mechanoid at Number 33. Grey's arrival didn't go unnoticed, but the curtain-twitchers no longer summoned the entire family to gawp and giggle. In the early months he had thought many times of the CI5 house that had its own courtyard—that house would have spared him the walk from the car to the front-door. But that was strictly A Squad accommodation and these days he was practically Support—lucky to be assigned a flat at all.

"It's through here. There are two more flats upstairs, with civilians in them. I want you to walk particularly carefully. The floors here *can* take your weight, but dynamic loading doubles the stresses and it's best not to take any risks." Not that Grey ever did more than a steady plod.

"The rooms all lead off this corridor. This is the living room. The furniture belongs to CI5 but the other stuff's mine." Doyle knew that the flat was probably not the best example of a human home, not a cosy accumulation of forty years. "Most people have more things than this, I suppose. Working for CI5, you get moved around a lot. Packing and unpacking—it's a nuisance. You get into the habit of living simply." True, but not the whole truth. He was living much more simply than when he'd been 4.5. He'd started getting rid of his largest things while he'd been clearing Bodie's flat, having decided immediately that he could not continue with CI5. When he'd got the job in the north of Scotland—the far end of the earth, it had seemed—he'd discovered that everything in his life that was still important fit easily in the boot and back-seat of his car.

"And this is my bedroom. Again, the furniture belongs to CI5. You know that humans sleep lying down, don't you?" Grey had had a brief sight of Newson stretched out on the sofa in the rec room, but at the time Doyle hadn't had a chance to comment on the phenomenon.

"Yes."

There was little else to say about the room.

"This is the bathroom. Do you understand the purpose of everything you see here? Or do I have to explain the basics of human physiology?"

Doyle counted the head-movements as the mechanoid scanned the room. He hoped the 6000 Model would do something about the field of view—the bird-like twitching got on his nerves sometimes. With the thirty-fourth movement, Grey turned to him

and said, "I understand the purpose of everything I see here."

"Yeah?" Suddenly sceptical, Doyle leaned forward, took a Body Shop bottle from the shelf and held it up. "Bath oil. What on earth do they tell you about that?"

"Oil moisturises the skin, preventing irritation. Scented products provide sensual pleasure."

Doyle nodded and put the bottle back. "You've convinced me. Don't tell anyone I'm getting dry skin, though."

A few seconds later, in the corridor: "Why must I not tell anyone?"

"It's..." Doyle sighed, and frowned as he tried to analyse the potential embarrassment. With a mechanoid there was no such thing as a throw-away line. "It's partly machismo and partly basic human privacy. Men aren't supposed to pay any attention to the state of their body beyond basic hygiene—'take me as you find me' attitude—and most men wouldn't admit to finding dry skin uncomfortable or to going shopping for something to help with it. That's the machismo thing.

"Otherwise...you don't generally give information about someone's private life—something you've found out by visiting their home, for instance. The rules for this are very complicated and humans love breaking them, but to start you off... Only pass on information about someone if you think it's public knowledge or if you think it's important to your work and that people could benefit from it. If someone asks you for information, and you think it might be private, ask them to explain why they want it and how people could benefit from it, and only give the information if you are satisfied with their explanation. And check with me or your next Handler if possible. Can you think of any reason that someone could benefit from knowing that I get dry skin and use Body Shop bath oil?" It was a rhetorical question and he turned and continued the walk to the kitchen.

"If the human had dry skin too, he might benefit from using the same bath oil."

Doyle laughed, then smiled up at the mechanoid. It was *fun* dealing with an unformed mind. Like being a parent but without the sleepless nights and the tantrums. "Yes, but is that relevant to CI5 work? To any work you're likely to end up doing?"

Pause. "No."

"OK. This is the kitchen. A lot of flats in London have small kitchens, especially in houses that weren't designed as flats but have been converted later. I'll be

making myself a meal soon. Getting you to help me. What have you ingested in the lab? Any solids? They teach you to swallow, don't they?"

"Yes, they have taught me to swallow solids with different textures and moisture-content. These included pieces of an apple, pieces of an orange, chicken-meat, biscuits—"

"OK, that's enough." He hadn't seriously been intending to give Grey any of the pasta or salad. What was the point?

"And the last room's... Well, it's a storage room, really, and that door leads out to the garden. I won't take you into the garden—mechanoids weren't designed to walk on lawns."

Back in the kitchen, he showed Grey each of the ingredients of his meal, explained where he'd bought them and the preparation required, and then made a start by putting the kettle on for the pasta. Later, he got Grey to chop the onions—one of his favourite uses for a mechanoid, since mechanoids couldn't cry and their hands were very easy to clean. When the meal was ready, he put everything onto a tray with a bottle of beer from the fridge and a glass.

"Carry this into the living room and put it on the table by the window."

Doyle liked to have music while he ate. His current favourite was a Jacqueline du Prè compilation, already on the turntable.

"Go and sit down in the armchair." Maybe it would be more educational if he let the mechanoid sit opposite him at the table, but Doyle preferred not to provide entertainment to passers-by. He ate slowly, his chair turned so that he could talk to Grey easily. Without any teaching-plan, he wandered between topics: music, du Prè, serious illnesses, mouth-ulcers among mechanoids, the sense of taste, national cuisines...

He took the tray back to the kitchen himself, put the dishes in to soak. The beer-bottle was still half-full. He topped up his glass, leaving about an inch in the bottle, then carried both over to the coffee-table.

"I want you to turn the record over and play the other side, but I don't suppose you know how to work a record-player, do you?"

"No."

"Well, come over here."

Doyle demonstrated the correct technique for handling a record, then put it back on the turntable and watched critically while Grey turned it over.

"OK. Then just push the arm until the needle's over the outer rim of the record. A bit more. And flick

that needle to lower the arm. That's fine. You can sit down again now."

When Grey was seated, Doyle held out the bottle. It was taken, but the arm remained raised and the gaze shifted several times between the bottle and Doyle's face, finally settling on Doyle's face. Even without the help of an expression, the routine said clearly, "What on earth do I do with this?"

"It's a prop. Like a theatrical prop. I want you to try to behave like a man relaxing with a friend. And with the shape of the bottle, you should actually be able to drink from it.

"Look, slump in the chair, like this. As if you were in low-power. Umm. Try letting your hips slide forwards a bit. Yeah, that looks more natural. And let's have your legs wider apart."

"This position increases stresses on the spine. The normal service-interval should be reduced." The textbook voice. Doyle smiled to himself.

"You'll survive. You're just a youngster. You can start worrying about your back when you get closer to my age. Now, rest the bottle on the arm of the chair and hold it more loosely." Doyle glanced at his glass to check quite how it was done. "Just use the last joints of your fingers. Don't have it touching your palm—that looks far too tense. That's it.

"And now we just sit and listen to the music. And every now and again we drink. And if we feel like it, we talk."

"This is a man relaxing with a friend." Presumably a question.

"That's right."

"Are you my friend?"

"Do you think a machine can have friends?"

"No."

"No, I don't think so either. Though I suppose a Trainer is the closest you can get." Doyle thought for a while about his duties as Trainer and the potential for comparison with human friendship. Absently, he took a mouthful of beer, then realised a few seconds later that Grey was copying him. He turned in time to see the bottle lowered smoothly to the arm of the chair—the level in the bottle was lower.

"Good. That looked fine." His broad smile of encouragement was, of course, not returned. The normal progression for the first evening, though slightly earlier than usual. "OK. The next lesson is 'smiling'. What do you know about smiling?"

"A smile indicates pleasure or amusement."

"Sometimes, yes. But sometimes it just indicates...goodwill. Showing that you're pleased

with someone. It's important between humans. If someone smiles at you and you don't smile back, they will think that you are actively hostile. You have to learn how and when to smile. Can you smile back at me now?"

Grey apparently couldn't. Doyle had expected nothing else—a mechanoid's mouth was controlled by either the speech-system or the ingestion-system, and you had to work with one system or the other to get the appearance of independent movement.

"The muscles you use when you smile like this —" He demonstrated a close-lipped smile, "—are similar to the muscles you use when you say the word 'me'. Just before you open your lips to say the 'ee' sound. Say 'me'."

"Me."

"Now just say the 'm'. Don't let the vowel out."

"M." Tense and quavery, but better than nothing.

"Not bad. Try it again a few times." Doyle watched the lips stretch and relax, stretch and relax. Was that a dimple? Or was it just a shadow from the edge of the helmet? No, not a dimple, but there was definitely something unusual—and appealing—about the way the meat flexed. He'd pin it down sooner or later.

"You've got the idea, but we need to turn the sound off. Now, you may not have used it many times before, but I know you have the ability to change the volume of your speech. I want you to turn the volume right down." He waited for a few seconds. "Have you done that?"

The lips moved silently.

"Good. Now make the 'm' sound again." Much better. Maybe over-eager, but certainly good enough to stop him making enemies. "Now turn the volume back to normal. Say something."

"Something."

Fair enough. "Now we're going to carry on talking as before, and when it's appropriate I'll smile, and I want you to smile back with as little delay as possible. It will take a lot of practice before your response looks at all natural."

Gradually, in stages, Grey improved. Doyle stopped having to remind him to smile, the number of spurious 'm' sounds dropped off, and the delay grew shorter and shorter. Even though it was the third time he'd been through this, it still astonished him the way the feel of the conversation changed. From now on it was going to be even more of a struggle to remember that Grey was just a machine—if you didn't know, you might take him for an over-

polite foreigner stuck in a protective suit.

"You have a nice smile, Grey." Serious, assessing. Pause. "How is a smile nice?"

"Well, tastes vary, but *I* like the way the corners of your mouth seem to be pushed inwards, as if you had a dimple just at each end." He touched the corners of his own mouth with his little fingers. "It gives an attractive curve to your mouth, makes your smile seem particularly...friendly." It reminded him of Bodie, but of course that was just one of those hallucinations. The most persistent hallucination. 5010-12's smile had reminded him of Bodie too, and that was how it had all started. His pulse suddenly speeded up, remembering, anticipating.

"Is your smile nice?"

"I've had no complaints." Brief pause. "Do you like it?"

Pause. "That question requires an aesthetic judgement."

"It does, rather."

"I am not designed to make such judgements."

"I know. I know. It wasn't a fair question. I'm sorry." He stood up, putting his glass on the table. "Grey, come into the bedroom."

He had drawn the curtains before setting off to fetch Grey. He'd never yet seen anyone using the path beside the house next door, but he simply could not take any chances. The living room, which would have been his natural choice, was out of the question.

"You've been taught a bit about human sexuality, haven't you?" Doyle was standing near the bed, Grey a few feet away near the door.

"Yes."

"Do you understand that humans...that men *need* regular sexual release?"

Pause. "I understand."

"I'm going to use you to achieve that release. I'm going to use your mouth." His heart was pounding, his cock swelling. "The formal term is 'fellatio'. Do you understand what I want to do? What I want *you* to do?"

"I understand."

"Describe the act to me." Partly for genuine confirmation. Mostly for the thrill.

"You will put your penis in my mouth. I will stimulate it until you ejaculate."

A flash-flood of sweat on Doyle's face, the least of his symptoms. He fumbled at his belt, shoved his jeans down his thighs, keeping his eyes on that mouth all the while, even as he kicked off the slip-on shoes—bought exclusively for these evenings—and stepped

out of his jeans. Grey's gaze had dropped to his groin almost immediately. There was no visible reaction to the first appearance of Doyle's erect cock—Doyle found excitement in the very indifference. When he sat on the edge of the bed, it was almost a collapse.

"Kneel here. Between my legs." Smooth, cold metal on the inside of his thighs. Oh, God.

"Turn down the volume of your speech system. Now, make the sound 'oh' and keep on making it until I tell you to stop. Good. Come here, Grey." Gently, with a hand on the back of the helmet, Doyle pulled the mouth closer. Closer. Onto his seeping cock. His eyes pressed closed and he made a long, beseeching sound.

Grey had no idea what to do, was exerting very little pressure, hiding his tongue. There would be other lessons. For now this was perfect. Perfect.

Doyle pulled with his hand, pushed with his hips, sliding all the way in. Grey had no gag reflex, no need to breathe—those facts could make Doyle salivate, but he had always tried not to act upon his knowledge, not to spoil himself for humans. Difficult sometimes. Very difficult. He didn't dare open his eyes and look down. His free hand found the edge of the opening in the helmet, then stroked slowly over the short distance of warmth spiked with bristles, wanting to savour the approach of the moment when he would reach the lips—the second, inner opening.

They were soft. Moist. Worth savouring. But that would have to wait, since now the slight brushes of his own fingers through his pubic hair were making him grunt and sweat and jerk his hips uncontrollably. He pulled Grey's head back a few inches, grasped it in both hands, and used the mouth until he came. It was perfect.

Gradually Doyle's breathing quietened until the only sound in the room was the ticking of the alarm clock. He came out of his curl around Grey's head, and pushed the head away.

"You can stop now." There was a trail of semen at the corner of Grey's mouth—as Doyle watched, it met the edge of the jaw-plate, then spread out quickly in both directions along the curved line where steel met flesh. "If there's any semen left in your mouth, swallow it." He thought he saw the throat flex, but it was never easy to tell. "Fetch me a couple of tissues from the bedside table."

He was gentle as he cleaned the mechanoid's mouth, and as thorough as he dared be—it was surely not wise to probe around the join-line. The lips looked swollen—used—even after they had been

dabbed dry. "Can you sense any damage to yourself? Did I use too much force?"

A few silent syllables, then Grey restored the volume of his own accord. "There is no damage."

"Good." He laid a hand briefly on Grey's upper arm. "That was fine. That was what I wanted." *Thank you.* He always had to stop himself from saying that, as if there were any possibility that the machine could have refused him.

"Go into the living room and put another record on. I'll join you in a few minutes."

Once alone, he sank backwards and lay with his eyes closed, sounding his nerves for the remaining echoes of pleasure. So easy to fall asleep. So easy. The muffled bass-line coming from the living room could be a heartbeat. So easy to fall asleep next to someone else's heartbeat.

His eyes snapped open, his own heart clenched. Grey. He daren't fall asleep with a mechanoid in the house. A mechanoid with barely any training. He'd lose his job. And there were some things he had to make clear to Grey immediately.

Less than a minute to clean himself and dress, and he was in the living room. Oh, it was the new Eurythmics album. Grey had been standing by the stereo surveying the shelves around it, as expected. Doyle crossed the room to join him, leaned against the wall.

"Why did you choose this record?"

"It was sticking out. I thought it might be one that you had played recently because you liked it."

Quite right, but Doyle wasn't in the mood for praise. "What did you do with the other one?"

Grey pointed to the floor at the base of the shelves. "I put it by its cover." The record was propped on its edge—it could have been worse but Doyle wasn't going to admit that.

"In future, put it *in* its cover. Like this. And put it back on the shelves with the others." In time, Grey would learn these good habits.

Bodie never had.

A brief but deep stab of pain at the disloyalty, at the memories. Automatically, he lifted his eyes to the snapshot in the cheap perspex holder. It was still his favourite out of all the prints he'd had made from Turner's negatives. Bodie didn't even seem aware of the camera, or of the hilarity a few feet to his right. Some chance of timing and light had recorded him with a look of solemn concentration quite inappropriate to his task of popping open a can of beer. Doyle didn't remember the party, suspected he'd given it a miss for some reason.

When he looked away, he discovered that Grey had also been studying the photograph. He wanted Grey to go away. He'd give him the lecture and take him straight back to his kennel.

"It's a CI5 party," he said impatiently, turning away from the shelves. "A few years ago."

"More than three years ago. Before the sixteenth of July 1985."

Doyle blinked, then stared at the machine. "What makes you say that?"

"William Bodie is in the picture."

"You recognise Bodie?" Doyle's tone was pure astonishment.

The latex-covered finger obscured Bodie's face for a second. "I think this is William Bodie, Agent 3.7. He died on the sixteenth of July 1985. Am I wrong?"

"No. No, you're not wrong." Abstractedly, Doyle wandered over to the settee and sat down. "But my other two mechanoids had never heard of him. What about... Fields? Does that name mean anything to you?"

"Roger Fields. Agent 3.6. Resigned."

"Uh. They must have changed the briefing. Put in agents who had left or died." He picked up the glass, tossed back the mouthful of lager—warm lager, not at all the chill distraction he'd been looking for. "But why? Do you know? Did they say?"

"No."

"Huh. Well, ask next time you see them. Oh, sit down." Grey sat. "Look, Grey, I am going to give you a very important command. You must not tell anyone that I am using mechanoids for sex. You will not volunteer the information, and if anyone asks you directly—even another Trainer or Handler—you will tell them that I have never used you for sex, and that to your knowledge I have never used any other mechanoid for sex. Do you understand?"

"Yes." A pause. "Is using mechanoids for sex like having dry skin?"

That sounded like the beginning of one of Ben Elton's jokes. Doyle bit back his laugh... "*An itch you can always scratch*"...and then realised that Grey had just set him up for the perfect explanation. He must remember that routine with the bath oil.

"Very good. It's exactly like that. Sex is one of the most private areas of a person's life. And CI5—or the great British public—could not possibly benefit from knowing what I do for sexual release. Could they?"

"No."

Doyle was remembering more of what he'd said earlier. "And I can tell you in advance that no one

will have a good reason for wanting that information. So if anyone asks, don't even ask them for their reasons, just deny it the way I told you. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"Good." He stood up. "I'll take you back to your kennel now. We're finished for this evening."

When he got back from HQ it was past eight o'clock but still light. He got another beer, turned the record over and sat in the armchair. But it was difficult for him to settle: he got up to change the record, he got up to pour himself a scotch, he got up to get his book from the bedroom. It affected him like this sometimes.

Finally, he fetched the photograph from the shelf and put it down on the arm of the chair.

It was nearly a year since he'd first fucked a mechanoid's mouth and his foremost doubt still lingered and would, of course, never be stilled: what would Bodie think of him for doing it? Sometimes the Bodie he conjured behind his eyelids was breezy and unconcerned. "*You get it where you can find it, mate. And have one on me.*" Sometimes disappointed and reproachful, the hurt in his eyes not something he would ever have put directly into words.

But if Bodie knew about the mechanoids, then surely he would also know how difficult Doyle had found it to be close to people since...since the 16th of July 1985.

Without any breath behind them, his lips formed familiar words: "You shouldn't have died so easily." A plea. A statement. There should have been a fight, a struggle. For God's sake, *he'd* managed it—it should have been a walkover for Bodie. A simple shot to the lung. Immediate call for help. And a first for CI5: paramedics in a helicopter. How easy could you make it? During his drive to the hospital he'd been wondering how to suggest to Bodie that it was maybe time for them to call it a day, move aside for the youngsters. Any worry he felt was simply habit. But as it turned out Bodie couldn't even manage to hang on for those few extra minutes that would have meant that he could have died with his partner at least in the same building.

It was hard to shake off the notion that Bodie had been in some desperate, headlong rush to get away. To get away from him. Stupid. Self-centred, too, to see the various workings of chance as a message for himself. But he wished—oh, so very much—that he had seen Bodie's body. That Bodie had stayed for long enough to allow him that.

At the time, it had all been the same stupefying disaster. It was only later that it had started to resolve itself into individual, piercing regrets. He shouldn't have let Cowley lead him away from the hospital like that. He should have insisted on waiting. It mattered more and more that he had never had that one last look, knowing it was over. It mattered that his last sight of Bodie—unconscious on a stretcher in the doorway of the helicopter—had been tainted with hope.

But he hadn't known. He hadn't known that Bodie was dying. He hadn't known that Cowley would appear on his doorstep the next morning, speaking of a mistake at the morgue, a cremation during the night.

He'd scattered the ashes immediately after the funeral, and he didn't regret that at all. The idea of the jar on the mantelpiece would have brought out Bodie's blackest, roughest humour—imagining the comments was Doyle's surest way of summoning the sound of his voice, and many of the comments made him smile.

Regrets were only permitted for events following the gunshot. It was his strictest rule. They'd had their time, and it had been a good time. To seek safety, to make promises and declarations... Possible, yes, but not for them.

The next Saturday he started taking Grey through his record collection. As far as he was concerned, understanding the difference between the Beatles and Bananarama was basic general knowledge and he wasn't having anyone laughing at his mechanoids if he could help it. More immediately, he wanted to teach Grey what was and what was not acceptable post-coital music.

In the bedroom he was—initially—calmer than the first time, with the patience to begin some serious training. He taught Grey how an "ooh" sound would tighten his lips, how a "luh" produced pressure from his tongue. He taught Grey the form that the second-by-second instructions would take when the sex was underway, and they practised for a while on Doyle's fingers.

Doyle was very pleased with Grey. When it was over and Doyle pushed his head away, he fetched the tissues and left the room with no fuss, exactly as he'd been taught. And the music which followed was Simon and Garfunkel. Doyle smiled and considered making it twice a week sometimes.

The third Saturday, Doyle fell asleep afterwards. A

light, cool touch on his hand brought him out of a dream that dispersed immediately.

"Agent Doyle. The record has finished." Another part of the previous week's training.

Doyle smiled up at the machine, drowsy and contented. Grey smiled back and Doyle's feeling of warmth increased. "Think you're going to have to carry me through. Don't want to move."

He shouldn't have been surprised really when Grey knelt on the bed beside him and leant forward to slide those big, hard arms under his bare thighs and his shoulders. He knew he should be protesting right now, explaining that he must get dressed first. But it was exciting. And...sweet—in its way.

No one had touched the backs of his thighs in a long time. Three years. The desire to be fucked hit him like a wave, drenched him. There was no strong arousal—he didn't recover quite that quickly—but he wanted so much to be covered, filled. Taken care of for a while.

He thought of Grey's hands, then squeezed his eyes shut and shivered. No. That would be perverse.

They were at the open door. "Stop, Grey. I was joking. Put me down. I have to put my jeans on first. People can see into the living room." It was gentle and clever the way Grey knelt and tilted him onto his feet, making the process no clumsier than stepping out of a chair. Maybe it was a skill they were taught in the labs, but Doyle had never come across it before. The warm feeling had returned, was evaporating that uncomfortable, impossible desire. Another smile for Grey, a pat on the breast-plate—he allowed the machine to stay while he cleaned himself and dressed.

"No, don't. I'll walk." Grey had started to kneel, arms outstretched. "My neighbours just couldn't cope with the sight. Oh, and don't call me 'Agent Doyle'. Call me 'Ray'."

The Wednesday after that, Doyle took Grey home with him after work. The following week, it was the Tuesday, and by that time Doyle had won (or lost) some lengthy arguments with himself.

"You've become very good with your mouth. Very...stimulating. I think you're ready to learn something new." Grey smiled spontaneously—a reaction to praise they'd been working on for about a week. "For a start, undo my shirt. They're poppers, not buttons. Just pull." Face-to-face, this was about as close as he'd ever been to a mechanoid. His nipples were erect—he wondered if Grey had noticed.

“That’s fine.” There was another popper tucked inside his jeans, but he’d deal with that himself. “Now take my jeans off. You’ve seen how I do it.” Grey knelt, and Doyle’s breathing grew rougher as the hands tugged and nudged. The material of his shirt rubbed against his nipples but he refused to give them any attention—there was much more than this to come.

“Please lift your right leg, Ray.” Please. A very recent acquisition, that. “Now your left leg, please.” All smoothly done, then Grey stood up again while Doyle was ripping his shirt open, shrugging it off, and letting it fall to the floor. It was the first time he had been completely naked in front of a mechanoid.

He lay full-length on the bed, his erection throbbing deliciously. “Come here. Kneel here. I want to talk to you first.” He beckoned Grey to his side.

“In your files on human sexual behaviour, was there any mention of anal intercourse?”

“Aaaaaaaa?” Grey’s mouth had dropped open in a good imitation of human astonishment—which he must have picked up from *Brookside* or somewhere. Shame he’d forgotten to turn the volume down first. Next time.

Smiling, Doyle said, “What’s the problem, Grey?”

“It is not possible.”

“Sure it is. People do it all the time.”

“Not with mechanoids. I do not have an anus.”

Doyle truly hadn’t expected that. It had never even been something he’d fantasised about. “No, but I do. And before you say what you were about to say... You’ve got fingers. That’s quite enough for what I want.”

Silence. Circuits melting and reforming?

Doyle took the tube of lubricant from the bedside table and held it out. “You’ll have to put some of this on your fingers before you put them inside me. Otherwise you could hurt me.” He rolled onto his stomach and spread his legs apart. His cock felt huge underneath him.

“Just put your index finger in at first. Go very slowly.” He heard Grey moving along the side of the bed, guessed from the distinctive sounds of hand-movements that the tube was being opened and used. The mattress shifted.

The lightest of cold, wet touches against his hole and a surge of heat into his cock made him gasp and jerk. The touch vanished with a hydraulic-groan.

“Carry on, Grey.” Two long, uneven breaths. “You weren’t hurting me.” Two more. “I’ll tell you if you do.”

The touch returned. A pause, another shift of the mattress, then a hand settled on Doyle’s buttocks and gently pulled the cheeks apart. Doyle clawed at the pillow.

The finger was so hard, so unnaturally cold. Dear Christ, why had he never tried this before? “That’s good. Oh God, that’s good. Keep going. Push it all the way in.” And what did this look like? How much would people pay for a single photograph?

“Now rotate your finger. Slowly.” Within seconds he was panting and shivering, and when something especially hard passed over his prostate, he cried out. The finger carried on turning. “Back the other way.” Urgent and barely articulated, but Grey understood and obeyed. It was nearly too much.

“Let me...” Gasping. “Let me get to my knees.” The few moments of pressure when the hand was slightly too slow in following him made him think that next time he wouldn’t give Grey any warning.

He reached down to grasp his cock—distantly, there was a split-second of surprise at touching warm, supple human flesh. “Now...” A great effort of concentration to get the command right. “Turn it backwards and forwards again. And keep on doing that until I come.”

Maybe Grey had time to see the spurts of semen before Doyle slumped flat. Or maybe by now he could tell from other signs. In the moments when feelings became distinct and before true thought returned, Doyle adored him for the stillness of the finger—it made the presence in his body a comfort to be savoured with the other pleasures, not an annoyance to be stopped.

It was several minutes before Doyle reached back to cover Grey’s hand with his own. “Enough. Pull out slowly.” Once he was empty, he rolled to his side and studied the mechanoid, smiling a smile of satisfaction all the while. Grey smiled back, his usual over-eager version. Doyle wanted to kiss him. But that was silly. Start on that, and before long he’d be thinking of Grey as his ‘lover’. You had watch out for that sort of post-coital nonsense. His smile broadened in amusement at himself.

“That was... That was great. Just what I wanted.” Suddenly curious: “Could you tell that I was liking it? A lot?”

“I?” Unusual for Grey, that false start. “I could tell that it was intense stimulation for you. But at first many of your reactions looked like pain. I know that my hands were not designed for anal intercourse and I do not think that the tissues of the

rectum are very strong.”

“So you were worried.” Was worry an emotion? Not a proper one, anyway. He’d let himself get away with that. “But I knew you’d be careful. You always are. And I knew you’d stop if something went wrong. I wasn’t worried.” He grinned. “It’s not every mechanoid I’d trust to shove his fingers up my bum. Damn-few humans, for that matter.”

“Which humans?”

“No one you know.” He was still happy. He was thinking of Bodie, and he was still happy. He should have done this months ago. “C’mon, let’s clean up and then have a beer or something.” It was the first time he’d let a mechanoid stay for more than half an hour afterwards.

It work, he kept on glancing at Grey’s hands and smiling to himself as his pulse infallibly speeded up. Grey noticed the glances and smiles very quickly, which did nothing to calm Doyle.

On Thursday there was a moment when Grey’s answering smile seemed to be impossibly knowing. Ignoring their location and his own common-sense, Doyle whispered, “Can you guess what I’m thinking about?”

“I think so. I think you’re—”

“Don’t say it. Tell me later. At home.” He’d meant to hold out until Saturday, but it just wasn’t going to be possible.

For the Saturday, he brought the time forward to three o’clock and on top of that arrived at the kennel more than fifteen minutes early. Grey was still in low-power mode—‘asleep’ some people called it. Doyle could have woken him up as he’d done on the first day, but instead he squatted down by the shelves and waited for Grey’s built-in timer to do the job.

At ten to three the humming noise started, and after that Doyle’s eyes were fixed on the protective-plate. He was going to kiss Grey today. He’d decided. Of course, it might not work, but look how he’d dithered about having Grey’s fingers in his arse and that was certainly working. The plate was sliding back.

“Hello, Ray. You’re early.”

“The traffic was better than I expected.” Not true. He’d meant to arrive even earlier. “Don’t mind me. Carry on as if I wasn’t here.”

He’d used to watch 5010-12s grooming sometimes, when he was still getting used to the whole idea. The routine hadn’t changed, but it was as if he was

watching each action for the first time.

“Let’s see that toothbrush. Oh, it’s got a few weeks in it yet.”

Grey made the business with the cotton-wool and the lotions and the lip-salve look quite matter-of-fact, as if there was no incongruity, as if there was no other way of keeping the meat clean and healthy. Which there probably wasn’t, really, but it was the first time Doyle had felt no urge to smile.

“I’ll get it ready. You deal with the old one.” Grey had been reaching for a day-pack. Doyle hefted it off the shelf and rested it on the floor while he broke the seal. Still kneeling, he watched Grey take off his breast-plate and disconnect the used pack.

“No, I’ll do it.” Today he wanted to see inside. It still shocked him slightly how much was exposed to view, how it was all crammed in there. He’d always thought scientists were tidy, that they’d have gone for neat compartments—but Edgely said that chaos was normal for an experimental system. He slid the pack into its cage, waiting for the click that meant that the connection had been made.

“What’s your level now?”

“I’m still on reserve-power. It should switch over in a few seconds. Yes. A hundred percent. Thank you, Ray.”

Doyle conducted the locking-process largely by feel, eyes busy elsewhere. Wires, most obviously. All colours and thicknesses, with great ropes of them coming down from the neck. Enough gaps to give him glimpses of Grey’s huge spine, of the armour-plates behind it. And dull-looking boxes, each in its own cage, each a mystery to him except for the disk-drive under the day-pack—they’d switched to 3.5” disks with the 5020.

“OK. Get dressed and we’ll be off.”

He led the way to the bedroom as soon as they got home. His need wasn’t particularly urgent—barely noticeable compared to Thursday’s—but there was nothing he wanted to do more.

Grey now had standing orders to undress him. Once naked, he pressed himself against the chill hardness of the machine. His fingers did not quite meet around Grey’s back.

“You feel wonderful. Can you feel my cock against the inside of your thigh? Can you feel how it’s getting hard?”

“Yes.”

“Put your arms around me. With your palms flat on my back. Lower. Now squeeze my chest gently,

like I'm doing to you. That's it. That's the right pressure." He closed his eyes and for a while thought only about the way his lungs were working against the still chest, about the way the pressure increased when he breathed in, decreased when he breathed out.

"Let go, Grey. And then kneel." He felt full of gentleness as he leant over the machine. Right hand on the shoulder. Left cupping the edge of the jaw-plate. "I'm going to kiss you, Grey. You should probably turn the volume down."

The mouth opened easily as he pushed at the jaw-plate. It was dryer than a human's but still slick enough to be welcoming, and the lips were moist with salve. The helmet pressed against his face from all sides, and the feeling was as exciting as he'd expected. He opened his mouth wider, and pushed again at the jaw-plate. If he'd thought about it, he should have expected the metallic clunk and the sudden resistance as he reached the plate's limit of movement, but later, when he was in the mood to analyse, he would be glad of his lazy imagination: the jolt of surprise was delicious. Breath coming unevenly, he explored the still tongue, the perfect teeth, the butter-smooth inner surfaces of the lips, wetting them all with his own saliva.

"Put your arms around me again. Around my waist. Yes." Held tight, he shifted his right hand to the back of the helmet, and lowered his head again.

Whispered: "You have a lovely mouth, Grey. I knew you would." Grey smiled and Doyle, sighing with pleasure, pressed close to touch the tip of his tongue to the corner of the smile, wondering vaguely if he was going to get bruises from the helmet.

It was going to work. "Later I'll teach you how to kiss me back." It was going to be wonderful. He ran the backs of his fingers along the edge of lower lip, following the curve of the jaw-plate, and felt Grey's head move slightly—almost as if he was pushing against the fingers like a demanding cat.

"Does it feel..." He paused, frowning. "Is the sense data different from the meat? Than you get from the machine parts of your skin, I mean. I'm wondering if you can understand what I feel—" He laid a finger on his own lips. "—when I kiss you." And then moved it to the machine's lips. "It's probably a stupid question."

"There is no difference in the sense data. The density of sensors is high, though. Higher than all of my machine parts except my fingers. With this density I can sense textures and I guess that you enjoy

the smooth textures."

Despite his best intentions, Doyle was disappointed. "I suppose that's what it comes down to." He wasn't quite sure what he wanted now—he should have kept his questions to himself. Time for a break. "Let go of me." He stepped back and stood for a long time looking down at the machine, a slight corrugation to his brow.

"Is something wrong, Ray? Have I done something wrong?"

"No. Nothing. I was just thinking." His cock was still partially erect. It was only a few minutes since it had been throbbing and eager. Against Grey's inner thigh. A pulse of blood and heat at the memory and he decided that he was in the mood for something. Something slow, with room for detours.

"Grey. I'm going to show you a lot more things that I like. Not all of them can make me come, but I don't always want to come quickly. You'll see.

"For a start, I want you to touch my nipples. This one first. Now, I'll show you just what I like." He turned so that he could place the fingers of his right hand on top of Grey's and then he started the detailed instructions.

They were stretched out side-by-side on the floor and Doyle was just starting to remember how they'd got there. His nerves hadn't had a treat like that in a very long time—they were singing with delight all over his body, half-convinced Grey's fingers were still dancing with them.

Grey was surveying his sticky, relaxed body—or so he guessed from the sounds of neck-movements. The sounds stopped and after a few seconds he opened his eyes, mouth getting wet as he promised himself a kiss.

It was his chest Grey was looking at, not his face. "I'll have a shower in a while. Wash it off then." He could locate the drops of semen by the points of coolness on his skin.

"You cannot wash off scar-tissue. Were you joking?"

He propped himself up on an elbow so he could look down at his chest. "No. I thought you were looking at this." He dabbed at a drop and held up the glistening fingertip. "Hadn't thought about the scars in..." He shrugged. The other mechanoids hadn't seen his chest and it was well over a year since any non-medical human had.

A black finger reached out and slowly traced the path of one of the worst.

"Haven't you seen scars before?"

"I—In my life-histories. Dougal fell off his bicycle and needed stitches. And there was an accident most harvest-times. And—"

"Yeah, OK, that's enough." He dreaded to think how many scars you'd encounter in five people's life-times, even the edited versions. Especially the edited versions. The finger had moved to another path. Doyle waited, shifting his gaze between the finger and Grey's face—the mouth looked unhappy, but he was damned if he knew how.

"You were shot by a girl called Mayli."

"That's right."

"You were in hospital."

"For months, yeah."

"You were in a lot of pain."

"Was that in the briefing?" He was surprised anyone cared.

Pause. "No. These are very bad scars."

"Nearly killed me." He raised his head. "See that bald patch there? And there. Burns from their jumper-leads. When they got my heart going again." Grey's finger stirred the hair without touching the small, shiny marks. Deep concentration. What was its circuitry trying to sort out? "Not a problem you have to worry about, mate. Bet there's not a part of you they can't replace in five minutes. They're probably growing a spare face for you right now."

"It's grown. I've seen it."

"What? Floating in a jar or something?"

"Yes."

"Christ!" His face twisted in revulsion, his body flexed away from the machine's. Theory was *one* thing...

Grey's hand dropped to the carpet and his head moved down and away from Doyle in uneven stages. He looked as if he was about to cry.

Doyle hated feeling manipulated. "Where the fuck did you get that routine from? 'The Martyred Child' as seen in *Brookside*? Or is it *EastEnders*? How often d'you think you're going to get to use *that* with CI5?"

A long pause, and then Grey looked at him. "I don't know."

"Oh, get out. Go to the living room."

Grey went.

Doyle's first plan was to take Grey straight back to his kennel but he started to calm down once under the shower. Of course, being foul to a machine was nothing to feel guilty about, but it went against the spirit of his job as Trainer. And his reaction to the face thing had been downright unprofessional.

Grey was standing in the middle of the room watching the door. He showed no reaction when Doyle came to stand in front of him.

"I'm sorry. You must be very confused. I shouldn't have behaved like that. I don't think you know enough yet to understand *why* I reacted that way but I'll explain as soon as I think you're ready. You didn't do anything wrong."

Grey was silent.

"I'm sorry, Grey. Really." He gave the fingertips of one hand a brief squeeze.

"What do you want me to do, Ray?"

It must be seriously confused. "Sit down. Let's see what's on TV. You haven't seen much sport, have you?" He crossed the room to switch the set on, and when he turned back he saw that Grey was sitting in the armchair stiff as that ancient statue, even worse than on the first Saturday. It didn't seem right to order him to relax—no more commands until the 5020 system had finished processing the last ten minutes. "I'll get us a beer. Can't watch *Grandstand* without a beer." A can for himself, a bottle for Grey.

Grey held the bottle as he'd been taught but didn't drink in all the time that Doyle was explaining the rules, history and culture of football—good thing the season had started since he couldn't have given the same lecture on anything else they covered on *Grandstand*. A lot he'd picked up from Bodie, or maybe 'with' Bodie. Nearly ten years'-worth of boozy Saturday afternoons in front of the box. And of course that was where it had started. Less than romantic, but he couldn't imagine it any other way.

"Come and sit here, Grey." He patted the cushion beside him. A minute later his own cushion tipped dramatically—he hung on to the arm of the settee while he re-distributed his weight. After another ten minutes of commentary he thought that Grey might be slightly more relaxed, but only slightly.

"What are you thinking about? Or are you too busy reprogramming yourself?"

"I must have done something wrong. You wouldn't have shouted at me if I hadn't done something wrong. But I can't analyse it."

"Nothing to analyse. Didn't they tell you in your briefing that I hold the CI5 record for yelling at people for no good reason?"

"No."

"That was a joke. It's not as if anyone keeps a score. But... Well, you said yourself that we're inconsistent, humans. Don't know what we want. I guess I've been on my best behaviour with you until

today.” Previously, he’d managed to keep it up for the full five or six months. “Maybe you should take it as a compliment that I’m treating you more and more like a human.” A wry smile, but who could tell if Grey understood the nuances? Definitely not, if you were judging by his answering smile.

“Oh, Grey,” Doyle sighed. No one had even come close to giving the Trainers guidance in this area, and until now he’d never noticed the lack. “If you were human I’d do something to apologise. Cook you your favourite meal. Drive half-way across town to track down some fancy white rum you’d got a taste for. But there’s absolutely nothing you want. Or I’d tell you not to let me get away with it, to wallop me one. But a clip round the ear from you would probably kill me.”

“Uuuuuu?”

Oh, no. He’d just made it worse. Another crisis in the analysis-software. He covered the potentially-lethal left hand with his own far-from-innocuous right. “Another joke. It’s true that it’s not safe for you to try to pick up humans’ methods of losing their temper. But that wasn’t the right way to introduce the idea for the first time. Let’s just watch the match, eh? I promise I’ll be on my best behaviour.”

“Always. Will you always be on your best behaviour?”

A sigh. “Very unlikely. But don’t worry about it. We’ll both cope better when it happens again. Now just watch the match. Drink your beer.”

Doyle was thinking of converting the storage room into a...well, a sex room. Get one of those futon mattresses. Easier on him than the carpet, and box-spring mattresses didn’t perform well when confronted with Grey. He was probably ruining the bed right now but Doyle couldn’t bring himself to care. And get lots of cushions for the times when he winced at Grey’s lack of padding—not during, never during, but afterwards.

“I wish I didn’t have to take you back to your kennel. I wish you could stay the night. But I’d never get the security clearance for this place.” And what possible reason could he give to CI5 for wanting it?

Grey said nothing. Slowly Doyle dragged the back of his hand down Grey’s lower torso, listening to the small clicking-sounds his nails made on the overlapping plates. When he got to the crotch, he slid his fingers as far around the curve as he could reach. Of course he had fantasies about a great latex-covered cock, rising under his hands. Everyone in the universe had had those fantasies in the past year. He’d

learned how to deal with fantasies since Bodie died—you just swallowed hard and carried on with what you had.

“Are you wishing I had a cock?”

He considered lying. “Well. Yeah. Not that I’ve got any complaints, mind.”

“You could buy a dildo and a harness for me. There are shops for that in Soho, aren’t there?”

Doyle felt sure his blush must have reached his toes and in his shock he yanked his hand away from the crotch. What on earth would Thatcher say if she knew just how thoroughly the scientists had briefed her miracle-machines? He had to clear his throat before he could talk. “Umm. Yes.” Another throat-clearing. “Have to admit I’d thought of that. But it’d be too dangerous. You’re too strong. Maybe if it was part of you so you could feel how hard you were pushing... No, it’s too dangerous. And like I said, I’ve no complaints.”

No argument from Grey. After about a minute Doyle slid his hand back between the massive thighs. They lay in silence. It was gone ten o’clock—long past the time they would normally leave for HQ. Doyle knew he should check the TV-listings, see what film they could have been watching in case Crawford was feeling bored and inquisitive.

“The humans you have sex with, do they please you with their cocks? With what they do with their cocks.”

A mechanoid showing curiosity about his sex-life. Definitely a novelty.

Again, he considered lying, but the truth seemed to bring such interesting responses from Grey.

“You’re the sum total of my sex-life at the moment. It’s been a while since I had sex with a human.”

“When you did, then. Did he please you with his cock?”

It was some seconds before he replied, and then it was slowly. “Yes, he pleased me. Very much. But he’s dead now.”

“It was William Bodie, wasn’t it?”

He had got to his knees and was staring down at the machine. “It *can’t* be in the briefing. Nobody knew. I’m positive nobody knew.”

“It’s not in the briefing. That was my first guess.”

Doyle lay down again, but on his back. He felt suddenly exhausted. “You’re a clever machine, Grey. Maybe too clever for your own good.” He didn’t know what he meant by that. Just something to say. He closed his eyes and turned his head away. Silence again.

The mattress dipped then recovered. Floorboards creaked and pistons sighed.

“I have made you angry again.”

He opened his eyes. Grey was kneeling in front of him. “I’m not angry. I’m sad. Thinking about him makes me sad.” With an effort, he sat up. “It’s time I took you back.”

“Do you wish I was him?”

“I wish everyone was him. But you’ll do for now. Pass me my shirt.”

He should have made sure that Grey understood that their conversation about Bodie came under the privacy rules. It was probably obvious to Grey, but Doyle worried about it during the night and he seriously considered fetching him again on Sunday morning and spelling it out.

But who did he think Grey was going to talk to in the meantime? He was the only person with the code to the door, the only person Grey was authorised to deal with. OK, there were overrides, but it would surely take more than a day to assemble the team that knew them all. He already trusted Grey—Grey’s software—with his career. Why this sudden fit of paranoia?

Because of Bodie, of course. Because he and Bodie had spent years being careful. Because he’d never, ever talked about it before.

He left Grey undisturbed. Monday morning would be soon enough. Besides, he was feeling very subdued—the aftermath of that exhaustion—and it would be better if he didn’t force company on himself.

Not so subdued, however, that he couldn’t plan for the time when he would feel livelier. The only furniture store that he knew would be open on a Sunday was the Habitat in the Kings Road so he drove there after lunch. To his surprise they did have a double-bed futon, and after some serious haggling (what use was the base to him, for God’s sake?) he left with just one mattress, six cushions, and a small standard lamp.

Maybe he should have got a screen to hide the stacks of boxes beside the garden-door. And the doormat looked very odd now the room was being used as more than an extension of the corridor. Still, with the lamp on and the ceiling-light off, you didn’t really notice that part of the room. Doyle was pretty sure it wouldn’t put him off.

The first month was over. Doyle reckoned that Grey

was about 25% reliable at recognising that a joke had been made—better than some humans managed, and good enough for launching him on his social career.

This part of the training took a lot of organisation and diplomacy. Doyle was quite (no, very) proud of the way he’d devised the approach but now the challenge was over and it was 80% slog and he had no one to delegate to. It wasn’t helping that the other Trainers were stealing his idea—unimaginative slugs—and were eating into the supply of potential volunteers. There’d been no actual poaching yet, but it had taken him bloody hours on the ‘phone when the Latchmere School dropped out and it was only going to get worse.

There was a pattern of sorts to their days, or at least to their weeks, but it got complicated. The diary-keeping at least he’d managed to delegate to Grey. Social-secretary to a machine—Bodie would never have let him live it down.

The early part of the morning was usually spent at HQ, starting with an hour or so in the rec room, followed by a session in Doyle’s office where they watched the recording that Grey had just made of events in the rec room. Almost every morning Doyle found himself making a comment along the lines of: “Look. There. Who’s speaking? Freeman. Who are you looking at? Me. You’ve got to show that you’re following the conversation.” Grey had once pointed out that Doyle himself was almost never looking at Freeman (or whoever) at these times: “You’re watching me there.” Doyle had replied crisply that that was his job, and Grey hadn’t argued.

Most of the meetings with the groups were in the afternoon or evening which meant that they had the main part of the day free. Doyle would drive them out to the quiet roads of Morden and beyond, and then hand over the wheel to Grey—the lab’s simulator gave the mechanoids a decent foundation but it only took road-sense so far. If the weather was good they’d stop for Doyle’s version of a nature ramble—“*That’s a bird. That’s another kind of bird.*”—and then Grey would drive them just a bit further back into town each time before Doyle took over.

After the last meeting they’d go back to Doyle’s flat and wrap up the day’s work: reviewing the recordings of the meetings, discussing Grey’s report on the current theme, planning for the next day’s meetings. Then they’d cook Doyle’s supper and spend a while in the living room watching TV, or listening to records, or playing some game (though Grey got too good too quickly at poker),

and talking, talking.

They always moved to the playroom at some point even though they didn't always have sex. Sometimes they'd just kiss lazily and Doyle would drowse for an hour or more in the cushioned circle of Grey's arm. For that, the living room would have done, especially as autumn progressed and he could have drawn the curtains without risk of comment. But for him the playroom had become the centre of his home. The very idea of it could make him hard if he let it, and he spent time there even when Grey was locked away at HQ.

It was becoming a daily ordeal for Doyle, leaving him there, closing the door on the sight of his watching figure. A parting kiss or touch might have eased his feelings of loss and irrational guilt but the security camera made that impossible. He never asked Grey what he did when he was alone in the kennel.

Given the extra time and attention that Doyle was devoting to Grey, it was not surprising that he developed more quickly than Doyle's previous mechanoids. By the end of September he'd passed his driving-test, and a week later Doyle called Cowley and arranged their first visit.

Cowley was living just outside Little Chalfont—at the farthest reach of the Metropolitan Line though that was probably of little direct interest to most of his visitors. It was a Tuesday evening and it took Grey nearly an hour to get them out of central London.

"Yeah, maybe it *would* have been quicker by tube but I'm not coughing up for your ticket, OK? CI5 gives us this car, they want us to use it. And what makes you such an expert on train-times?"

"One of the kids at the Pimlico. His gran lives in Amersham and he told me that—"

"When the hell was this?"

"When you were taking a leak."

"It wasn't on the tape."

"Yes it was but we didn't watch it. Don't you remember you said we didn't need to look at anything after Emma's knock-knock joke?"

"Oh. Well, all right."

A beige Volvo from the opposite lane made a bid for the nearest side-road in marked defiance of common-sense. Grey braked, Doyle leaned out of the window and swore at it. Teamwork. God, it felt good.

"Now, what have I told you about meeting Major Cowley?"

"Call him 'sir'. Accept a scotch if he offers it. Go over to the french-windows and look as if I'm taking

an interest in the garden, but I don't actually have to say anything about it. Don't mention the limp."

"Nothing else?"

Pause. "No." Clipped and definite.

It had been a trick question; Doyle scowled and fell silent.

Cowley had prepared supper for two, although he had not mentioned food over the 'phone.

"Of course, thank you, sir. I just hadn't been expecting anything." Never thought of Cowley as someone who acknowledged meal-times at all, least of all his agents'.

"Will your machine have a glass of wine? 'Grey', you said?" Cowley would speak to Grey eventually—Doyle always got the impression the man was half-convinced the mechanoids were a practical joke and he was resisting being taken in. And of course he was a past-master at ignoring people.

"Ah, he'd better not." The container in Grey's pack had a limited capacity, and Doyle had plans for when they got home. "You see, he *is* driving." The two humans exchanged a smile, Doyle showing his teeth.

Doyle knew more CI5 news than he had realised and it occupied them nearly to the end of the main course.

"He's coming along well, then, this one?" Cowley didn't even glance towards the far end of the table.

Nodding, Doyle said, "He's a gem." A momentary grin at his own choice of words. "Same model as the last, but... *Something's* different. Probably in the software. Or in what they teach them in the labs. For instance, he's not just been taught about CI5 as it is now. He recognised Bodie in a photograph. He knows the history."

Now Cowley looked at Grey, the quick, searching glance that could almost be his trademark. Doyle knew he would see it full-on in the recording later.

"Why do you think they did that, sir? Maybe they came to you when they were putting the history together?"

A Celtic snort of disdain. "You think they're interested in my experience, Doyle? In my advice? The first I knew about these mechanoids coming to CI5 was when I turned on the news. If they *had* asked my opinion..."

"I'd be out of a job." Doyle was smiling. They'd had similar conversations before.

A few minutes later, Doyle paused in the act of lifting his wheat-cracker and brie. "I'm starting to change my mind, though. About mechanoids in CI5."

“Because of this one?”

He nodded. “I think it *could* work like a real partnership. With the right techniques. The right adjustments. After all, the reason Bodie and I made such a good team wasn’t because we were the same. It was because of all the ways we were different. Well, Grey and me, we don’t *both* have to be able to climb walls.” A shrug. “I should have seen it before, but with the others... I didn’t *want* to be teamed with them. Six months was enough.”

They were both looking at Grey. “You remind me of the tram-drivers, lad. Though you won’t remember the stories there were in the papers when they closed down the lines. I thought then...” He shook his head then turned back to Doyle. “People, eh? They can get attached to almost anything.”

Doyle gave a short laugh. “I hadn’t thought of it like that.” Then he continued as if there had been no digression. “But if I do form a team with him, they’ll have to find another Trainer for CI5. Or stop taking any of the new ones. I can see them saying no just to avoid the paperwork. Though I think this team business *is* something that needs to be tested out in the long term. If the mechanoids are here to stay. If they’re not just another Concorde.

“What I’m asking is: will you back me up on this? Because I’m going to argue as hard as I can but... I’ve never seen any sign that they listen to a word I say.”

“Have you spoken to Malcolm Jensen yet?”

“No. I’m not ready yet. I want to walk in and hand him a proposal.” At Cowley’s raised eyebrow, he shrugged. “That’s what he’s like.”

“I’ll do what I can, Doyle. Send me a copy of this proposal. Then if you do need help, call me. But I can’t promise you anything, understand? When people stop paying you, they stop taking your advice seriously.”

Doyle grinned. “Oh, I don’t think you’re *that* easy to forget, sir.”

Not long afterwards, they moved through to Cowley’s study. “Can I offer you a scotch, Grey? You wouldn’t deny him that, would you, Doyle?” Doyle shook his head, smiling.

“Yes, thank you, sir.”

Cowley was aware of the practical problems that mechanoids had with drinking. The shot-glass looked like a toy in Grey’s hand.

“That chair has sat your kind before and survived.”

An implicit command. No problem at all to Grey by now. Doyle suspected that Cowley regarded

computers as a form of magic—the man had no appreciation of what must be going on inside Grey, saw no reason to be surprised or impressed. It must be an age thing.

The conversation finally became almost comfortable when they started on the subject of CI5: what it was there for, how it should be run, what agents needed to understand. Doyle knew that Cowley was perfectly content to conduct this part of the visit as a monologue and hadn’t bothered to prime Grey—the important thing was not to offend, and besides, pleasing Cowley had always been a black art. But Grey was doing beautifully: factual questions built to intelligent questions built to intelligent comment. And Cowley was obviously enjoying himself. Doyle gave a lop-sided smile into his tumbler, wondering how he might go about getting a retraction of that dig about tram-drivers.

“Yes, that Sidcup training-course taught me a great deal. More than it did most of the boys, I’m sure. You’ll have seen the photographs?”

“No.”

“Well, the full set has been archived, of course. Still top-security. But there’s one I kept back from the last day.” Cowley was getting up, limping to the far side of the desk, and Grey followed. Doyle remained seated—he’d see it on the recording. “You know my name for this picture? ‘Healthy Young Animals’. What a pack, eh? No, Doyle’s over there. They weren’t speaking for some reason. Can you remember why, Doyle?”

“No.” And he truly couldn’t.

“No. Anyway, by then I worried more when they *weren’t* glaring at one another.” They studied the photograph for a few seconds and then Grey was tilting his head back in stages. “Regimental photographs, I’m afraid. You’re not required to take an interest.”

“Oh, no, sir. I was in the army. In 2 Para. And this looks like Burma. I grew up in that part of the world.”

Doyle knew he should have cut in immediately. Grey still had an awful lot to learn. “He means—”

“Or I should say that one of the life-histories I was programmed with is a man who was with 2 Para. He died in the Falklands. And another is a man who grew up in Malaysia. His father was running a cocoa plantation there. I know they were just invented in the lab...” He turned to smile at Doyle, who finally smiled and nodded grudgingly in return. “...but I spent months, I think, looking through their eyes. They had to explain to me later that none of it was

real. And I'd be very interested in hearing the experiences of a fellow-soldier."

Smooth bastard. Doyle finished his scotch with a gulp then sighed, reached out for a magazine, and settled himself for a long wait.

"How about a drop more, lad? And what about yourself, Doyle?"

"Just a drop, please, sir. I'll have to drive home after I've settled him in his kennel for the night."

"Surely he wasn't like this from the start?" Grey had taken his glass over to the french-windows, leaving the men standing by the drinks-table, watching him.

Doyle snorted. "He was like... Well, you remember the day you sent Bodie to the Ministry. I know that assistant didn't help, but—"

"You've made your point. And I'll do what I can with Jensen. If it's necessary." He went to join Grey and they stood looking into the garden. The light was fading but the main features were still clear.

"You won't have seen real countryside, Grey. The whole of the island isn't like London, you know."

"No, Ray's started teaching me. See, there's a bird. And that's another kind of bird."

Doyle choked on his whisky. Maybe that waste was the main cause of Cowley's glare, more than the flaws in his teaching or the excesses of his laughter. With a struggle, he got himself under control. "I'm sorry, sir. But I think we've just heard him make his first joke. It's quite an occasion." Narrow-eyed, at Grey. "You can't imagine how pleased I am."

"Oh, I think I can." He took the glass from Doyle. "Now it's time you were off. And your hilarious machine with you."

At the front door, Cowley relinquished his severity. "Send me a copy of that proposal. And good luck, Doyle." Glancing back as they reached the end of the drive, Doyle found that Cowley was still standing on the step, seeing them out of sight—he raised his hand but doubted that it was visible in the dusk.

"How long have you been thinking about forming a team with me?"

"'bout a week."

"That was the first I'd heard about it." Grey's tone was, inevitably, perfectly even. Doyle's conscience imposed on it an accusatory rise and fall.

"And what the fuck's it got to do with you? 'less you've got some career-plans I should hear about?"

By now Grey seldom had trouble recognising a rhetorical question. He remained silent.

To Doyle it was unmistakably a defiant silence. On some level, he'd been rehearsing for this for months. "Say, 'Oh, no, I exist only to serve, Agent Doyle.' Say it."

"Fuck off, Ray."

Seconds of high, blood-surgingly shock. "What did you say?"

"I told you to fuck off."

"You can't *do* that."

No reply.

"You can't. I'm your Trainer. I'm a human. You have to do what I say."

"Not when you're behaving like a prat."

Doyle couldn't think of anything to say. Besides, he was painfully hard inside his tight jeans, heart pumping with anger, apprehension and sheer excitement. He wanted Grey to stop the car right now. He wanted the road and the cars and the houses to disappear so the two of them could fight this out in the only way his cock would accept.

His breathing noisy and rapid, his eyes closed, he arched his back and started to unzip his jeans. A grunt as his hand closed around the ravenous heat, the pressure from each finger a separate line of torment, clear as a welt. The other hand burrowed down to clasp his balls, and then both hands began to work.

"Wait." A light touch on the inside of his elbow. "Let me help, please. Let me pull off the road and find somewhere safe. Don't do that without me."

Raggedly: "I can't wait." His hands had not stopped moving. "And nowhere's safe enough." This was going to be very quick. "But will you say it for me? Please. Say what I asked you to say."

There was no hesitation. "I exist only to serve you, Ray."

Doyle cried out.

They were nearly at Harrow before he opened his eyes and reached into the glove-compartment for a tissue.

"Thank you, Grey." The first time he'd ever said it.

"You're welcome." Grey's way of saying that he'd noticed? "You were behaving like a prat, though."

"Like I said before, you should be flattered that I'm not on my best behaviour with you."

Doyle was half-expecting to discover that Grey had graduated onto sarcasm as well, but there was no reply.

"Are you going to make a habit of disobeying orders?"

"Are you going to make a habit of behaving like

a prat?"

"I'm serious. That's *never* happened before. Are you going to decide to ignore everything I've ever told you?"

"No."

"Then what? What part of your program have I stumbled across? Give me some clues."

"I'll only do it when you deserve it and when it's not important. For instance, I've decided that I'm not making you your coffee every day. Once in a while, but not every day. You're getting too bloody lazy."

Doyle wondered if he should contact the lab. Send Grey back for some tests. But they'd just take that Ph.D.-tone and say, "You mean you weren't expecting him to do that? But surely it's obvious that when you take Program X and Chip Y..." Or they'd tinker with the program. And despite his continuing apprehension, he didn't want anyone else interfering. This was between him and Grey.

"What about...personal privacy? Are you going to decide to tell someone what we do in the playroom? Is that—"

"Of course not. I know that's important. I'd never involve anyone else. And I'll never disobey you when someone else is there."

Doyle had relaxed. He grinned and broached the topic he'd meant to bring up as soon as they'd got on the main road. "No, you'll just make a fool of me in front of Cowley. 'And that's another kind of bird.' You sod."

"I wasn't making a joke, Ray. I can't do jokes. It just seemed the obvious thing to say."

"Well, you couldn't have done better if you'd tried. Take my word for it." Briefly, he cupped his hand around the top of Grey's thigh. "And speaking of best behaviour, you did bloody well back there. With the Cow. I was impressed. Don't think you put a foot wrong." Grey's eyes were on the road so Doyle saw the smile in profile.

"And that was the easiest visit I've had with him by a long road. To be honest, I don't think we've ever really felt comfortable with each other. If we're working on something we're fine, but just talking..." He shuddered. "I always left that to Bodie. Bodie knew how to deal with him, somehow. All that fellow-soldier crap, I suppose. *He* was in the Paras, you know."

"I know."

"So without him we were bound to be in for some awkward silences. And it wasn't helped by... Well, he *must* have been remembering it too. Every time we

met. Not just me."

"Remembering what?"

"The hospital." *The day he told me Bodie was dead.* It had taken a fraction of a second for the memory to wrap itself around him, distance him from his surroundings. When he spoke, it was like speaking to himself. "I don't know how long he'd been there. If he'd seen him brought in. If I'd been— Just from the look on his face, I could've— But no. I think I smiled to show him I wasn't worried. That I didn't need him to reassure me. 'What's the tea like here, sir? Suppose we'll be in for a long wait.' And he said..." The voice trailed off and Doyle sat frowning out at the lights of north London, feeling the bewilderment settle on his skin like a dew.

"There'll be no wait, lad. He's dead."

A slight jolt of surprise, and then relief—not the sense of self-betrayal he'd always expected. Nodding, he turned towards Grey. "Yes, what else could he say? After that. You know, you're the first person— Person? What am I saying?" He paused and searched for a sensible way of putting it. "I've never spoken about this. Never."

"It makes you sad."

Sad? Then Doyle remembered that it was the word he'd used himself. "Yes. Cowley too, I'm sure. So it was...a shock when he showed you the Sidcup picture. And hearing him talk about it like that. He wouldn't have done that before. But I think it was because he really liked you. It stopped him worrying so much about me."

"How could he like me? I'm a machine."

Doyle shrugged. "Well, you heard what he said about the tram-drivers. People quite often become fond of a machine. Read all kinds of personality into it. You'll get used to it. The danger is when they expect you to like them back. I still haven't worked out the best way for you to deal with that."

"Why can't I just tell them that I don't have any emotions?"

"You'll find it very hard to make them believe you. They'll tell you all the things you've done and said that *prove* that you've got emotions. 'You just don't recognise them yet.' I'll probably have to rescue you the first few times. They *do* take another human's word for it eventually."

The journey from the North Circular to Doyle's flat was relatively quick now that the rush-hour was over. They headed straight for the playroom, work and the recording of the visit forgotten.

Afterwards Doyle said, "Would you mind getting us a beer?" He stretched, and smiled up at Grey. "I'd get it myself, but I'm too bloody lazy."

"Just the one?"

"Mmm. We can share."

He was propped up against the cushions when Grey came back. They leaned against one another (or that was how Doyle liked to regard it), the bottle resting between Grey's thighs. Doyle didn't make the obvious comment on the image this presented, but he was feeling talkative enough to voice his subsequent thoughts.

"You know when you asked me if I wished you had a cock..."

"Yes."

"I do think about it sometimes. Can't help myself. But I never find myself wishing you had an anus. Which is odd, isn't it? When it's *me* using *you* for sex."

"Maybe you get enough feeling of power without it."

"I hadn't th—" He pulled away so that he could study Grey's face. Finally he grinned, the discomfort of awe pushed to the side. "Are you *sure* you don't have any emotions? That was..." The grin faded. "...uncanny."

"Power is important in sex for some people. That was included in my data on human sexual behaviour. It's easy to see that it's important for you. I exist only to serve you." Grey's voice could not change its tone to show when he was quoting—Doyle's heart had a few seconds of giddy excitement before his brain caught up.

"Do you... Do you mind any of this? What we do in here. What would be too much for you? What would make you tell me to fuck off?"

"I'll tell you to fuck off when I think you're being unfair to me. And so far I've seen no sign of that when you're using me for sex so I don't think anything would be too much. I excite you very strongly, don't I?"

"Yes."

"More than the others."

"Oh, yes."

"I thought so. I think you only ever used their mouths like you did with me at first. I think that was all you did with them." Doyle was nodding, eyes wide. Grey smiled, a slow, sweet smile. "I can recognise a compliment, Ray. And I do exist to serve you. I enjoy helping to bring you pleasure."

"Enjoy?" Doyle's voice was very soft.

"It's the nearest word I can think of to describe

how my programming works." Another smile, with a perfect rueful twist.

Whispered: "Lie down. I want to lie on top of you. I want to kiss you." His cock was still, exhausted, but his heart felt huge and painful.

"Ray. It's time for us to go."

Doyle sighed and squirmed onto his back. Grey's thigh was warm against his—heat drawn from his body. Then he turned back onto his side. "Oh, fuck 'em. Let Crawford work for his living. I'll tell him you had six billion questions about Cowley." A tug at a cushion and he was comfortable again. "D'you think we should get some music in here?"

"Right now, do you mean?"

"No. Sometime. The weekend. Some kind of tape-deck, I had in mind. Like a ghetto-blaster but with separate speakers. I've seen them but it was a few years ago. You could come shopping with me." He chuckled. "You're probably the only way of getting decent service in Tottenham Court Road. Hey, they might even give you some sort of discount—you're practically family to the stuff they sell. Shall we do that? Saturday morning?"

"What'll you do if I say no?"

"Never let you choose the tapes."

"In that case, there's nothing I'd rather do."

A pat on the stomach in approval. Doyle lay trying to decide how much he was prepared to spend.

"Ray."

"Hmm?"

"What do emotions feel like? Is there anything you can describe to me?"

After a moment, Doyle propped himself up on an elbow. "Well, you've seen what they look like. How they make me behave."

"That's from the outside. What about from the inside? When you're sad about Bodie, what's happening inside you?"

Slowly, Doyle rolled onto his back. He stared at the ceiling, remembering what he'd said in the car, remembering the hospital. "I feel cold. All over, really, but particularly here..." A short sigh from the workings of Grey's neck. Doyle kept his fingers pressed to his abdomen until he was sure Grey had got his head high enough to see. "...and here." His heart. "And in those places it hurts. I mean, a real physical pain. It's like a cold aching feeling. Like a lump of ice inside me. And my breathing usually changes. Becomes deeper but more of an effort. Because the muscles on my ribs tighten up. Maybe you can hear that. Feel it." He

concentrated for the space of five more breaths then made an effort to clear his mind and relax. “I think that’s about all I can tell you.”

“But what about inside your head? What about your brain? What does that feel?”

“It doesn’t feel anything. OK, it’s *thinking* about Bodie. But it doesn’t feel anything. This—” He clapped his palm onto his sternum. “—is where it hits you. And here.” He slid his hand down to just above his navel, then clawed with his fingertips quickly but cruelly.

“And when you’re happy. What’s that like?”

Doyle snorted in amusement and heaved himself back up onto his elbow. “Same places, but it’s a warm feeling. Light. Like having sunshine inside you. And there’s no effect on your breathing. And before you ask, your brain doesn’t feel a thing. Rage and fear both increase your heartbeat, make your breathing quicker and shallower, but rage is hot and fear’s another cold one. Lust I think you can guess. Those are the main ones, really.”

“What about love? Or is that just a strong form of being happy?”

Doyle blinked and swallowed hard. “Umm. I think most people would say it isn’t. Though there’s probably different kinds. There’s a...a sort of an ache underneath the warmth. Because of wanting what you love so much, maybe. I don’t know. It’s a difficult question, Grey. Why are you asking all this, anyway?”

“I was wondering if they could have based part of my programming on human emotions, but it’s obviously not possible.”

“Nope, you need viscera. ‘Darling, the first time I saw you I thought my day-pack would jump out of my chest.’ Bit of a problem with translation there, eh?”

“A-a-a-a.”

Doyle stared. “Was that a laugh?”

“Supposed to be.”

“Good thing you tried it out on me first.” More gently: “It needs lungs, Grey. It *really* needs lungs. Give it up. Stick with the smile. D’you fancy a coffee? I’ve got some small cups you’d be OK with.”

“I can’t. My pack’s nearly full.”

“Well, I think I’ll make a pot of decaff. Maybe have a shower. What’s the time?”

“11.21.”

“Oh. loads of time. They shouldn’t page us until at least midnight.”

When Doyle returned to the playroom with his mug

of coffee, he found that Grey was lying as he’d left him, but with his mouth shielded.

“Grey?”

No answer. He must have switched himself to low-power. Not surprising, really—it had been a long day.

Doyle knelt on the edge of the mattress. Seen like this, Grey could have been any mechanoid, the stencilled serial-number making him seem, if anything, more anonymous.

What was it about Grey? Did it all stem from the day he’d fallen asleep on the bed, from the sensations in his body when Grey had picked him up? Because from that day he’d treated Grey differently. And now...

And now he was in love with him.

Wasn’t that a joke? Wasn’t that hilarious?

He should be fighting this with all his will. He should have put a stop to the sex as soon as he realised what was happening. He should be giving Grey nothing more (or less) than his best behaviour—the efficient politeness that provoked few surprises—and counting the days until Grey was taken off his hands and assigned to surveillance with some MI5 Handler.

Grey with someone else. As always, his fists clenched at the very idea. But they would take Grey away from him one day, whatever happened. One day he’d have to retire. Of course he’d had wild thoughts of the pair of them running away together. But where? And Grey needed his day-packs and needed them fresh. And once they’d been caught and he was in prison for the theft of over ten million quid’s-worth of protected technology, what would happen to Grey then? They’d probably wipe his program and start again. Unbearable.

Maybe the feeling wouldn’t last. Maybe he would soon be free. And when that happened he would go back to the real world. No more mechanoids. No more CI5.

A startling thought, or a familiar thought approached from a different direction: maybe if the feeling between him and Bodie had disappeared, then Bodie would still be alive. After all, why had they stayed in CI5 through all that had happened, without even talking about leaving? Because they were afraid that what they had wouldn’t survive the move. Wouldn’t survive being named and discussed. Wouldn’t survive any kind of change, or not in a form they could both accept and live with day after day. Those had been Doyle’s reasons, anyway—Bodie’s, of

course, he couldn't know. But if the feeling had disappeared of its own accord some day in, say, 1982 ...

A sharp shake of the head as he remembered some moments from 1982, feeling the spreading warmth in his viscera, feeling the sweet tension. Remembering the look on Bodie's face that night when— No. How could the feeling possibly have disappeared in the midst of all that?

He focussed on Grey's shuttered face, feeling the warmth and the tension shift and flex—but the combination still unmistakable. Should he tell Grey? Why? Because he wanted to, because he came closer to it every day. Why not? Because Grey certainly didn't need to hear it. And because he'd never said it to Bodie. But with Bodie it would have mattered too much, and with Grey it didn't matter at all.

One day. He'd probably tell him one day. Or maybe Grey had already guessed.

It must be nearly midnight. He wanted a last, leisurely kiss before HQ started chasing them. Leaning forward, he touched the protective-plate lightly with his fingertips.

<<Back off.>> It wasn't Grey's voice. Doyle leapt back, heading instinctively for the doorway, even as he was recognising it as the voice of the security-system. <<Keep your distance.>> The main systems were starting to power up. Stupid of him to forget about this function, even if he had never provoked it before. <<The technical details of this equipment are covered by the Official Secrets Act of 1971. The equipment is fitted with anti-tampering devices. The equipment is programmed to defend itself. This message is a warning required by law. Keep your distance.>>

Grey was moving, rising smoothly into a crouching position. He looked like a predator about to spring. The head turned in Doyle's direction, tilting backwards and forwards in a methodical scanning movement.

"Ray. What's happened?" Grey was getting rapidly to his feet. "Are you all right?" The mouth was still shielded.

Doyle stepped back into the room. "I'm fine. I just set off your security system by mistake." There was a squelching feeling under his right foot. He looked down. "And spilt my coffee. You took me by surprise."

"I'm sorry. I'll clean it up." The protective-plate was drawing back as he was speaking.

"No, I'll do it. Just prop yourself up in the

corner over there."

Doyle was squeezing the sponge out for the last time (he hoped), when Grey said, "I feel like a sultan."

He looked the part, stretched out among the cushions, relaxed arm resting on raised knee. They smiled at one another. "Bloody strange harem you've got, your highness."

"Bloody strange equipment, too." He cupped his left hand around the smooth curve of his groin.

"More like one of the eunuch guards." They said it simultaneously. Doyle clambered, laughing, onto the mattress, coffee stain instantly forgotten.

A minute or so later, he raised his head and said in a tone of curiosity, "Why did you switch to low-power when I was making the coffee anyway? You should have told me if the level on your pack was low."

"It's not that low. Twenty four percent. But I have a sub-system that monitors activity. If certain circuits have been idle for long enough, it switches me to low-power automatically. It happens quite often when I'm in my kennel."

"In other words, you fell asleep." Doyle was grinning.

"Shagged out, mate. Your fault. You get me so I can't think."

"Oh, you rotten, lying, sexy machine. Come here. I'll—" The pager sounded clearly from the pocket of Doyle's jacket. "Damn. Well, I'll save this till tomorrow."

"It already is tomorrow."

"You're not making things any easier for yourself, you know." Doyle made the threat from the doorway, then headed for the living room and the 'phone, reflecting on how rarely Grey showed his teeth.

[Early the next morning, they were nearly at the top of the basement stairs when Doyle stopped. "I've just remembered. We haven't watched the tape from last night."

"You said I didn't put a foot wrong."

"I know but I'd like to watch it anyway. Come on, let's go back and fit you with a blank."

As it turned out, the rec room was so quiet they left after twenty minutes and there really was nothing worth reviewing. Doyle left the new tape fitted and they used Doyle's adapted VCR to watch the recording of Cowley rather than watching it directly from Grey.

Doyle paused the tape during the cheese course. "I

should have discussed this team business with you first. I'm sorry."

Grey lifted his hands, palms upwards—his version of a shrug in the absence of flexible shoulders. "As you said, it's not as if I've got any career-plans."

"I was still thinking it through then. Meant to tell you in a few days. Then with the way that conversation went—" He gestured at the screen. "—it just seemed that the Cow was the perfect person to bounce the idea off. I am sorry."

"I was surprised."

"Surprised at what? At the idea itself, or that I was behaving like a prat?"

"At the idea, mostly."

"So you *expect* me to ignore you?"

Another shrug. "You had adjusted your behaviour in line with Major Cowley's. I could guess your reasons for doing that. I did not think you were being unfair to me."

"So what surprised you about the idea?"

"The fact that you had changed your mind about the potential of mechanoids. I have seen the reports you wrote on 5010-12 and 5020-1. Your arguments seemed sound."

"So you don't think it can work?"

"I have no experience of teamwork in CI5. I cannot form an opinion."

"Well, from my experience, I think we've got a good chance. We communicate well, don't we? Think how many times you've been able to guess what I'm thinking. And I'm usually on the right lines with you, aren't I?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't happen often between two people. Believe me. And when it does, it's a shame not to use it. That's why I think it can work. For us, at least."

"Is that why it worked with you and Bodie?"

"Yes. Though it took much longer for me and Bodie to get used to it. Not just a couple of months. Even then, we had rough patches. It's gonna be hard work. Might take years." He grinned. "You'll probably be obsolete by the time we're through."

He turned back to the screen and started the tape. Then he stopped it again after a few seconds. "I meant to ask...do you think you'd *enjoy* being partnered with me? What does your programming have to say?"

"Yes, I'd enjoy it. I enjoy having you as my Trainer."

"You do? In what way?"

"I am learning a great deal from you. I am de-

signed to enjoy learning. And you like me. I respond to that. If I was assigned to another Trainer or Handler, I'd..." He shrugged. "I'd miss you."

Doyle wanted to touch him, to kiss him. There was no line of sight into the office, the rest of the floor seemed to be empty... No. He'd put too much effort into cultivating prudence. Tonight. He'd make up for it tonight.

The next day they started putting together the proposal for Jensen, and for the next few weeks that was their main preoccupation. The meetings with the groups continued but Doyle frequently found himself losing track of the assigned theme—be it 'Encounters with the Police Force' or 'My Favourite Toy'—and scrutinising each remark for its potential as material or inspiration for the proposal. It was Grey who was really maintaining the momentum with the meetings-program.

They were so absorbed in the task that their first shopping-trip—which had been a major event with the other mechanoids—approached so quickly that Doyle didn't have a chance to decide on an attitude. He behaved exactly as he felt: like a man who's brought a friend along for advice on a significant purchase, and who hasn't got time for bullshit. It worked perfectly, as he realised later when they watched the recording. The spotty little gits were working *so* hard to pretend there was nothing unusual about Grey. Hilarious. A tape to keep.

Most of the work was done in the playroom, with about half an hour in Doyle's office each morning transferring the latest files from Grey to disk and then getting a printout. The real challenge was to devise a training-program for themselves, one ending in some pass-or-fail tests that had real relevance to the world of CI5 and, ideally, counterparts in the training for the other teams. That would be Jensen's main worry: using a team that couldn't be assessed by the existing techniques. Enough to make him dismiss the proposal out of hand. So the two of them had to think it all through in advance.

Of course, the training-program would only be the first stage. After that, they would need to learn how to work with the other teams, gain the trust of the rest of the squad. Maybe a year of low-grade work before Grey was accepted as just another agent and then they should be assigned to cases on their merits, as 3.7 and 4.5 had been. The proposal made some predictions as to what those merits might be, but they decided to keep the claims modest for the time being.

The proposal also tackled the issue of arming Grey, largely in anticipation of an outcry from the media. In Doyle's opinion, the approach to giving Grey a gun should be little different from the approach to giving him a driving licence: get him to prove that he had the skill and judgement to perform at least as well as a human, and then let him get on with it. The legal aspects of responsibility for the actions of mechanoids had been sorted out fairly smoothly back in 1987, and again, as Doyle read the rulings, it made no difference if the action was driving a car or firing a gun. But they were going to have to handle this one carefully.

When he'd first realised that the proposal was going to be a tactical necessity, Doyle had seen himself putting it together on his own—a chore, without a doubt. He'd involved Grey principally as secretarial support but of course Grey wasn't the type to just sit there and take dictation. During their most productive periods, they averaged three arguments an hour, and Doyle felt himself growing younger by the day.

The final proposal listed them as joint-authors, their names side-by-side on the cover. Doyle had insisted, over-ruling Grey's concerns that the readers would be alarmed at such a sign of a radical change in attitude towards mechanoids. However, they both agreed that Doyle should take the meeting with Jensen on his own.

“So you see there's no need to commit yourself to anything right now, sir. As things stand at the moment, Grey's still booked for another three months of training with me though he's actually well ahead of schedule. I'd just like to switch from the normal training-program to the teamwork-exercises. I've drawn up a time-table for reporting back to you on our progress and you can see from that that I assumed we need to give the other organisations involved in the mechanoid-program about a month's warning. So if in two months' time Grey and I haven't got to the stage shown in the time-table then we just drop the whole idea and no one's been inconvenienced.”

“Hmm. Why did you assume a month's warning?”

“I thought that would be sufficient time for CI5 to recruit a new Trainer if I'm going to be forming a team with Grey. My notice-period's a month, after all.”

“I see. Well, I can't give you an answer immedi-

ately, Doyle. I'll have to study this proposal— Huh. I see you've put the machine's 'name' on the cover. You'll be wanting a salary for it next. And the directors of the mechanoid-program will have to be consulted. They might have their own plans for...uh...'Grey'.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Still, it's an interesting idea. It sounds as if you've put a lot of work into this.” Jensen reached out and tapped the smartly-bound proposal. “I'll try to get back to you before the end of the week.”

“Thank you, sir.” Doyle rose and made for the door.

“6.1. You mentioned your notice-period. Was that your way of telling me that you'll resign if you're not allowed to form this team?”

Doyle was genuinely surprised. He was completely confident that the team would work—the experience of writing the proposal together left him with no doubts—and he never let himself think about the possibility of being separated from Grey. “I hadn't thought about it. I don't know. But I won't pretend that this *isn't* important to me, sir. I expect that will come across in the proposal.”

“Hmm.” Jensen drew the document towards him. “All right. Thank you, Doyle.” He was turning the first page when Doyle closed the door.

“What did he say?” Grey had been waiting in Doyle's office.

A shrug. “He'll get back to us before the end of the week. Probably.” Doyle sat down heavily. “I thought he'd want to meet you, at least. You were probably right about the cover. It seemed to put his back up. Made some crack about a salary for you.”

Silence. Doyle felt very deflated.

“If I had a salary, I'd treat you to lunch.”

“Yeah? Where?”

“Dunno. Somewhere in South Ken. Somewhere quiet.”

There had been a time when Doyle had eaten out a lot in South Kensington. A lot of colleges there. A lot of girls. A few double-dates. “OK, let's go. I know just the place. If it's still going, that is.”

The bistro had changed hands but the stuffed peacock was still there and the food seemed much the same. Grey sat with a bottle of beer and watched Doyle taking his time over his meal.

“Should I call Cowley now, do you think?”

“Are you that sure that Jensen's going to say no?”

“No, but it might be better if the Cow contacts him *before* he's said no. Or anything else. More diplomatic.

So the Cow can say that I just happened to mention that I was putting together this proposal. 'Maybe Mister Jensen would be interested in the opinion of someone who's seen Raymond Doyle working in a successful team before.' It'll look less like we're trying to twist Jensen's arm. Once he's said no, he's *really* not going to want to back down."

"That makes sense."

"Yeah. Why didn't *you* think of that, Grey? Why do I have to do all the work round here?"

"You're the one with the salary, master."

The next few days were tense. They went to their meetings but that was their limit for useful work. Otherwise, the working day was spent in Doyle's office watching videos, playing game upon game of 'Pass the Pigs' (which they both agreed had to be the most stupid game ever devised), and generally making a show of getting on one another's nerves.

The weather was good too. Doyle must have said about ten times, "Look at it. Probably our last chance this year to try out those bird-spotter books without risking you getting a short-circuit and we're stuck in here waiting for the 'phone to ring."

The call finally came shortly past ten on Friday morning. When Doyle returned to the office ten minutes later, his shoulders were slumped, his brows creased, and he was looking anywhere except at Grey. He slumped into his chair.

"I'm not falling for it, Ray. I heard you running up the stairs. When do we start?"

Laughing—well, practically giggling—Doyle launched himself across the room, to be caught by Grey's hands and nearly lifted off his feet. Still laughing, he clutched at Grey's shoulders until the ache in his finger-joints became distracting, then he ran his fingers repeatedly over Grey's chest and arms while he sobered himself enough to speak.

"Whenever we like. We can start whenever we like. I said we'd ease out of the meetings. Give them some warning and let them know that next week'll be the last one. God, I must thank Cowley. I should call him right now. And then let's get the hell out of here. Have lunch in a country pub."

Cowley refused to accept any thanks, said Jensen had been favourable to the idea from the start. "He was always odd about taking credit for things," Doyle said after he'd put the 'phone down. "Some Calvinist thing, I bet." He grinned. "I can't imagine being part of a team that the Cow didn't help put together. I must send him a bottle of malt. Two

bottles. Don't let me forget."

On Saturday they went shopping for malt whisky for Cowley and music and food for Doyle, then spent most of the afternoon at CI5's gym and at the shooting range. It was the most demanding physical exercise Doyle had had in months—apart from sex, of course—and he nodded off twice during that evening's film.

On Sunday morning, Doyle was early in arriving at the kennel. Grey seemed to be used to that by now, but had never asked Doyle if he should move his alarm forward.

"Hi, Ray."

"Morning. Not a *good* morning, mind you."

"What's the matter?" Grey was getting started at the basin.

"The weather's turned. Stormclouds. Nasty wind. D'you still want to go to Norfolk?"

Grey nodded. When his mouth was clear, he said, "Sure. If you do. We weren't planning on doing much walking, were we?"

"Mmm. I thought I'd take a thermos of coffee. Dunno what we'll find open on a Sunday. Don't shave."

Grey stood motionless, razor in his hand. "What? Why not?"

A shrug. "Fancy seeing you looking ruffled for a change. I like the feel of stubble once in a while."

"Fair enough." He put down the razor and started removing his breastplate while Doyle got a fresh day-pack. "Last time I saw your thermos it was in the car."

"Yeah, I found it. Coffee's already on in the rec room."

"You're keen to be off."

"Reckon we're due a holiday." Doyle had become very quick at locking a pack into place—especially since he'd given up ogling.

It still hadn't rained by the time they turned and started making their leisurely way back to town but the threat of it had kept the roads relatively clear. The threat was finally realised when they were about five miles north of Sizewell. "I think I'll stop for a coffee," said Doyle, who was driving. "See if it eases off."

He got them as close to the coast as he could, and they sat with the windscreen-wipers off, listening to the rain drumming on the roof. Doyle gestured with his coffee-cup: "If it wasn't pissing down, you'd be able to see the Sizewell nuclear reactor from here. It's impressive in its way. Huge."

“A nuclear reactor, eh.” A pout, a most definite wistful pout. “Maybe if I went for a swim out there I’d get lucky and grow a cock.”

Doyle sipped hot coffee over his hand and didn’t even notice, he was laughing so hard. Grey reached over and took the cup away from him and he barely noticed that. His ribs were aching sharply when he finally stopped.

“Grey. Oh, Grey.” A flurry of painful gasping. “I haven’t laughed like that for years. Wondered sometimes if I ever would. Since Bodie died.” He lay back for some minutes with his eyes closed, smiling. Something warm and hard nudged at the back of his hand and he turned his palm upwards to receive the cup, eyes still closed. “Thanks.” The rain was getting heavier, if anything.

When he opened his eyes, he turned to meet Grey’s gaze, then put the cup on the dashboard and twisted around so he was half-kneeling on his seat, all in one smooth, continuous movement. He slid his hand around the smooth, cool curve of Grey’s upper arm, seeking the inner surfaces with his fingertips.

“I love you, Grey. I’m in love with you.”

Grey bent forward, mouth opening, and Doyle eased past the steering-wheel and pressed himself to his lover’s chest. He could feel Grey’s stubble against his lips, the inside of Grey’s mouth hotter and softer in comparison.

“Did you know? Had you guessed?” A whisper.

A pause, possibly for reflection, possibly while Grey turned down the volume. “I wondered. Because of the way you looked at me sometimes.”

“What do you think? Do you think it’s strange? Does it worry you?”

“No. You can’t help who...or what you fall in love with, can you?”

“Is that in your programming?” Very soft, with a slight smile.

“No. It’s in all the books and films and songs you’ve shown me.” An answering smile, then another long kiss.

“But I hope that I will not disappoint you. I cannot love you. You know that, of course. And I am not Bodie.”

“I know.” He was sure he’d never told Grey that he’d loved Bodie. But it had probably become obvious. Maybe that meant it had been obvious to Bodie too. For the first time, he really felt hope that it had been. “I know. It’s you I love, Grey. It’s you I want.”

A deep kiss. He curled his arms around the

helmet, loving the feel of it against bare skin—by now, he would have been disconcerted to feel the flowing warmth of hair. Grey’s hands caressed his back, made their sure way down to his buttocks.

“Should we move to the back seat? Your back must be aching.” It was and more so by the second—the roof was too low to allow him to kneel upright.

Doyle only needed to think about it for a second. “No, let’s go home. We deserve better than the back seat of a Capri.” He clambered back into the driver’s seat with far less grace than when he’d left it, then wound the window down sufficiently to dispose of the coffee.

“That sounds like the voice of experience.”

Doyle laughed as he swung the car round. “Ah, but I was young and foolish then.” A pause. “And now of course I’m—”

“Old and foolish.”

“Grey.” A grin and a swift squeeze of an unyielding thigh. “I knew I could count on you.”

The radiator was only a few feet from the mattress and was on the highest setting but Doyle soon started shivering as his sweat cooled in the draught under the door—the rain had stopped well before they reached London, but the wind was high and gusting, and was rattling the fence that ran along the side of the house.

“I’m just getting my dressing-gown.” It was in the bedroom. He made a detour into the kitchen to pour himself a scotch and then turned the tape over before settling himself on the mattress.

After a few more minutes of listening to the wind, an idea struck him and he sat up and touched his fingers to the side of Grey’s mouth, careful to avoid the helmet. “I thought your skin might be cold. But I think you’re warmer than me.”

“Well, I’ve got this thick beard, haven’t I?”

Doyle chuckled and sat up further, running the backs of his fingernails over the stubble, then tracing the same path with his tongue and his lips. The taste of his semen was still to be found in Grey’s mouth.

“You’ve got some grey hairs in your moustache. And in your beard. Here, turn your head towards the light a bit more. Yeah, you have. Huh. How about that?”

“And here you thought you were seducing a minor.”

“My illusions shattered. How old are you, though, Grey? I mean, when were you made?”

“About thirty months ago, I think. That’s when I

was first switched on, anyway.”

“OK, so the meat’s probably not much older than that.”

“Maybe less. They only wired me up to it about fifteen months ago. Some time in August ‘87.”

“So what did you have before that?” Doyle had forgotten about the grey hairs, absorbed in this larger issue.

“Sight. Sound. My unrivalled mental capacity. Some pre-loaded data, but it was pretty basic.”

“But...no body? Nothing like that?”

“No.”

“What were you doing for the first fifteen months, then?”

“Watching videos, what else? I say watching—they fed them straight into my visual system. There were the life-histories and lessons on human culture and so on. General knowledge stuff. It started very simple. See Jack run, you know. Built up in stages.”

“Oh.” Doyle thought about it. “You told Cowley that they had to explain to you that the life-histories weren’t real. Does that mean that there was a time when you thought you were human?”

“I think I was confused for a while. But it wasn’t that long before I’d learned enough about humans to realise that what was happening to me wasn’t something that happened to humans. So when the lessons got round to computers I was pretty-much waiting for it. Not that they spelt it out at that point.”

“So when did they spell it out?”

“When I asked. When I’d been given the mouth and learned to speak well enough, that is. And then they explained the thinking behind the life-histories. How they’d written them, done them with computer graphics.”

Shaking his head, Doyle said, “That seems very cruel. Leaving you to work it out by yourself.”

“Why? Seems a good test to me.” Grey reached up to touch the side of Doyle’s face. “Complaining of cruel treatment to a machine, Ray. You’re getting soft in your old age.”

Doyle turned his head and kissed the latex palm, inhaling the smell of rubber with the pleasure he’d once reserved for Bodie’s lust-hot sweat. “Never been in love with a machine before, have I? I just— Well, it would have driven a human stark staring mad. I wouldn’t put anything through that, not even if it was just a bunch of circuit-boards and a camera stacked on a table. You have to be...missing something to do that.”

Grey was smiling, his sweetest smile. “You tell

’em, love.”

“Love?”

“Was that the wrong thing to say?”

“No. Oh, no.” Doyle felt the first intimations of excitement between his legs and knew that this one was going to be slow. He straddled Grey’s waist—a favourite position for this stage—and sat for a while gazing down, contemplating his good fortune. He’d decided after all not to mention his wilder day-dreams: the ambush in the corridor or the kitchen, his own extravagant protests, the implacable, inhuman demands. Another time, when the mood was more suitable. He took Grey’s hands and guided them to the cord of his dressing-gown.

To begin with, the other agents treated the probationary team as a joke—in public, anyway. In the first week, Doyle was taken aside three times and asked very seriously what point he was trying to make. “That it can be done.” Much shaking of heads and narrowing of eyes. In some faces—Lewis, Lucas, Murphy—he saw glimpses of something that looked very like pity.

Their practice bouts were popular spectator events. Doyle had foreseen this and had booked the Lambeth training hall for every available evening—he had no taste for looking like a fool.

The main challenge was Grey’s lack of speed: being able to reduce a villain’s bones to dust was of little use if you couldn’t catch the bugger. Grey had a talent for reading and using the local topography which meant that Doyle—who had designed and built the sets, goddamit—had to work harder each day. But it wasn’t going to be enough.

Grey really needed a projectile weapon. Ideally, several, giving him some choice on the degree of maiming—the NHS would buckle under the strain if Grey had no option but to use lead on every man who panicked at the prospect of a conversation with 5020-4. It was Macklin who suggested tranquiliser darts (for the street) and a paint-gun (for training). After that, everything started to fall into place. At HQ, they got fewer and fewer volunteers: it wasn’t so much Grey’s accuracy with the paint-gun (which just got boring after a while), but one experience of having Ray Doyle thrown at you seemed to be quite sufficient.

Macklin was intrigued by Grey. He’d stay on into the evenings at the training hall—sometimes joined by Towser and Jones—setting up situations for them, coming at one or the other or both, and always,

always trying to find out what it took to stop Grey. Doyle would watch, wincing at the blows, wondering what Edgely was going to say *this time* (“*Have you forgotten how much one of these panels costs?*”), but still cackling with exhilaration and pride.

“Well, 6.1, you’ve certainly come out of your shell since you palled up with the strongest boy in the class.”

Doyle laughed. “He’s great, isn’t he?”

“Watch you don’t get lazy.” Macklin continued studying him consideringly for some seconds—Doyle could make a guess at what was coming. “You know, I thought you were making a mistake when you came back. Understandable, maybe, but still a mistake. Saw no reason to change my mind until...” He nodded towards Grey, who was busy comparing scars with Towser. “Looks like you *can* step in the same river twice.”

“Yeah, everyone’s been saying that.” Even Murphy, just yesterday. “I think Bodie would have got a kick out of all this, don’t you?”

“Huh. No doubt about that. He’d be even more insufferable than you are these days.”

They’d just finished in the gym, with a free evening ahead for a change, and Doyle was taking a shower.

“Thanks.” He towelled the worst from his hair then glanced round the room. “Oh, Bourne’s gone, then.” Some days it was like having an entourage.

“Just came in to get his squash racquet. He said.”

“You know he’s gearing up to ask you for a date. Let him down gently, won’t you?” Half joke, half not. Poor Bourne.

“Hah. Hah. Fraughtfully amusing, old chep.”

“What?” Doyle had nearly dropped the towel.

A shrug. “Well, you’ve made it clear that I’m not to laugh.”

“Who’s been telling you about Bodie?”

“Everyone recently. What’s that got to do with Bourne?”

“It’s—” Doyle felt chilled. He rubbed vigorously at his damp skin but of course that made no difference. “I’ll tell you at home. This isn’t the place.”

Once in the door, Grey headed for the playroom, but Doyle called him back. “No. In here. Take the armchair.”

“I’m in disgrace, aren’t I? How many strokes, sir?” He held up his wrist like a schoolboy expecting the ruler. Where would he have seen that? Not *Grange Hill* surely. Not these days.

“No jokes, Grey. This is serious. That ‘old chep’

business. Someone must have told you that was a favourite routine of Bodie’s. Who? And how?”

Silence.

“Come on. You can’t have forgotten. Did you think it would be a special...*treat* for me?” His larynx jerked as he spat the word out.

“No one told me. I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t believe you. Was it your idea, then? You’re trying to protect whoever told you?”

“No one told me. Ray, I didn’t know. I am sorry. I’ll never do it again.”

Doyle was shaking his head. “You still think I want you to be Bodie. Well, of course I do. Anyone would. But not like that. Who told you?”

“No one. Ray, please listen to me.” Grey had got out of the armchair and was kneeling in front of the settee, one hand resting tentatively on Doyle’s knee. “I don’t know why I said it. My design uses random-association all the time. I’m sorry.” Doyle didn’t try to push him away, and Grey moved closer. “I’m sorry your Bodie died. I wish I could have met him. I wish I knew what to avoid.”

Doyle sat with his eyes closed for a long time, then let himself slump forward until he could put his arms about Grey’s shoulders and lean his head against the helmet. “So do I.”

They were very subdued for the rest of the evening and Grey was the one who suggested an early night. He apologised once more when they were in the kennel. Doyle said, “No need to go on about it. It’ll be sorted out by tomorrow.”

Random associations. Very neat. Very convenient. Very bloody meaningless.

No one—in Doyle’s experience—had done that mock-posh crap in quite the same way as Bodie. It was infectious, but only when Bodie was around, and since Bodie had died Doyle had never once felt the urge to try out any of those silly voices.

Someone had got to Grey. Somehow.

Maybe Grey really didn’t remember. Doyle was inclined to believe him. Why would he lie?

So did that mean that it was built into his programming, not something he’d been taught?

A machine programmed to behave like Bodie. Absently, he closed his book and pushed it away to the left side of the bed.

The jokes. “*I’m in disgrace, aren’t I?*” “*I feel like a sultan.*”

The showy driving.

The way he’d known so much about CI5.

The charm at work on Cowley.  
 The limits to his patience. “*Fuck off, Ray.*”  
 The effortless, near-instant communication.  
 The thrill of taking on the world together.  
 The feeling of falling in love. So quick. Almost  
 overnight. So familiar.

Why had he not seen it before?

Because it was crazy. Programming a machine to behave like Bodie. Come on, Doyle. You’re just seeing what you want to see. OK, you’re sick enough to fall for a lump of talking metal, but you’re not so sick you need to fool yourself *that* badly. He’s dead. He’s gone. I thought you were finally getting over it, getting on with your life. Like Macklin said. Like everyone’s been saying.

Ah. So that was it. Guilt. Survivor’s guilt. His psyche’s attempt at sabotage. He reached for the book again, found his place almost immediately.

||o. It was Bodie.

He sat up and switched on the bedside lamp. It was gone two in the morning and he hadn’t slept for an instant.

But why would they do it? How had they done it? And why now?

Cowley must have helped them. Bastard. Lying bastard. Doyle suddenly remembered the exact expression in Cowley’s eyes the first time he’d really looked Grey in the face. Yes. Oh, yes. Cowley and Grey went way back. The devious...

He must have talked to them for hours. Days. Shown them footage that even Doyle wasn’t allowed to see. Sessions with Ross. Every training exercise over ten years. Who knows what else. He and Bodie had always reckoned the only really safe place for them was their flats—and that sense of privacy was supported by weekly checks for bugs.

But why had he done it? Because he was told to? It was obvious that the mechanoid-program was championed by heads way, way above Cowley’s. Maybe they’d—oh, so subtly—dropped hints about his pension or about the future of CI5. He must have put up a fight, though. Bodie had been important to him. Everyone had known that.

So why had *they* done it? The mad scientists.

Maybe the program wasn’t going very well. Maybe every Trainer had been writing reports like Doyle’s. A change of tactic. Create a unit one particular Trainer would *want* to work with. Wind him up, shove him on, and see what happens. Doyle felt very angry, and more than a little frightened. Had they

known about the sex? About him and Bodie, about him and the other two? Was that another reason they’d chosen him?

No, they couldn’t have. That had started before he’d written his first report, before anyone had. And if it came to that, Grey had been made *long* before the first report, while Doyle was north of Aberdeen learning the secrets of damson sauce and mint-and-melon sorbet. So unless they had the power of clairvoyance along with their other talents...

But programs could be changed, couldn’t they? How long would it have taken them to research and write the Bodie-program? Well, Doyle had absolutely no idea, but compared to the miracle they’d achieved with the underlying mechanoid design it had to be a piece of piss. A few months? And Grey seemed to have a sub-conscious: an area where connections and decisions were made that he couldn’t explain. They probably added the program to his sub-conscious one night when he was on low-power and he didn’t even notice.

It made some sort of sense.

Doyle wasn’t sure how he felt about Grey now. Used. Obviously the team was finished. If only he and Grey *could* run away together. If only there was some version of reality that would let them have the time he had thought they were going to have. They’d barely managed a month—or maybe you could stretch it to two. What would Grey say? Poor Grey. Would they wipe his program? Make him into someone else’s dead partner? Oh, God. Poor Grey. Poor Doyle.

Of course, he wanted to expose the scientists. He’d been right that night—they had to be people with something missing. But what proof did he have? An “old chap” and a familiar feeling of having found the place he was born to occupy. He’d be laughed out of every newspaper editor’s office in the country...if he was lucky. These people had powerful, powerful friends. He’d worked for these friends—he *knew* his life-expectancy would be measurable in hours. Hell, even Cowley hadn’t managed to stand up to them.

Cowley. Yes. He wanted a word with Cowley. He wanted a confession. An apology. This was worse than any fucking Operation Susie. Not that he was going to use it as proof—use it for anything. No, he’d argued himself out of that. But he wanted someone to acknowledge the wreckage of his life. Tomorrow. He’d insist on seeing him tomorrow, or rather, later today.

And there was a ghastly, compulsive curiosity: just

what had Cowley showed them? Because Grey was such a convincing Bodie. In everything. In aspects of Bodie's behaviour that they'd both thought were private, safe. Maybe this was just the effects of Doyle's tutoring, but by now he even kissed like Bodie. So what the hell had Cowley showed them? You couldn't have done much better if you'd made a recording of Bodie's brainwave patterns—an instant snapshot, say, at the moment of his death.

"Fuck!" The violent jerk of his body sent the headboard thudding against the wall, made the lamp rock on its base. It wasn't the first time his mind had conjured visions of Bodie on the operating table, not by any means. But not like this. Not with all the gowned figures crowded around the head watching their miracle of science. Ignoring the exposed, faltering heart. Not even noticing when the last peak disappeared from the monitor.

Doyle's whole body had started to shake, not as violently as with that first shudder, but continuously and uncontrollably. The lamp moved millimetre by millimetre to the edge of the table and toppled off. Doyle, hands now covering his face, did not even notice the thud or the abrupt change in the lighting. His brain felt as if it was erupting inside him, tearing apart at fault-lines, seething and boiling. He lost control of his bladder and eventually he did notice that.

How long had they imagined they'd get away with it? How had they ever got away with it? How had he worked with the mechanoids for nearly a year and a half and never wondered—not even once—why there were crease-lines around the mouth if the meat was fresh from the vats and had never smiled before he'd taught it how?

They'd wanted to be fooled. He had, the whole nation had. It was such a sexy idea. The "great" put back in Great Britain. And by now they were so used to the idea of Britain's complete inability to make a commercial success of any of its inventions—hell, there was a certain aristocratic charm about it—that no one, not in any newspaper, not anywhere, had asked why they weren't taking this opportunity to hold the entire fucking world to technological ransom, why they were faffing around with these top-secret tin soldiers. Ah. D-Notice. Doyle of all people should not be forgetting who he was dealing with here.

It was all so obvious now. The story about the meat to give an excuse for including a life-support

system in the day-packs. The limited capacity of the packs, making it very awkward to try to use a mechanoid for 24 hours in a day—even now, Doyle was probably the only Trainer who'd ever seen a mechanoid asleep outside his kennel. The fanatical security—it was widely rumoured that there were only twenty people in the country who knew how to get into a mechanoid's helmet without finding themselves blown to pieces.

And the outrageous precocity of the achievement they'd claimed. A computer that could learn and deduce and guess like a human, that could understand slang and crack jokes and demand fair treatment and make perceptive remarks about your sexual quirks. Events in the development of computers: the transistor; the IBM PC; the Apple Macintosh; and four years later, the mechanoid. Outrageous.

Why couldn't they have been happy with their real achievements? Why couldn't they have been content to share those with the world? If you could bear to think about it objectively they were surely impressive, even magnificent: keeping a head alive and healthy, giving it control over a complex artificial body.

He couldn't bear to think about it, not in any way. But he had to. He knew now, and he had to act on that knowledge. Somehow. The images crowded in and he dragged his head from side to side in an effort to escape them which made the bones of his neck grate together. His breathing was long and laboured and he was close to weeping.

His first, partial guess had been right. Cowley had known. Right from the start. Cowley had worked with them, covered up for them. There must have been a medical team on permanent standby—a medical team with a helicopter. An order to route all calls for an ambulance to this team—an order given by Cowley. And Cowley at the hospital to intercept the partner or the family, lead them smoothly away the moment they asked to see the body.

The body.

To them it would have been an unwieldy item of trash. Something to be bundled out of sight then thrown away. Sent for disposal.

Did they make any attempt to save him?

A noisy, forceful exhalation. Doyle would have described it as a laugh—he genuinely had felt a twist of amusement that he was still capable of posing such a naive question. They must have started setting up the life-support the moment they had Bodie in the helicopter. But he'd give them the benefit of the doubt

and assume they'd waited until Bodie's heart had actually stopped beating before they started cutting his head off. Another laugh was torn from his chest, this one close to being a scream.

And Cowley had covered up for them. Cowley had arranged for Bodie to be delivered into the hands of enemies. To spend his last moments among people who wished him only harm.

Doyle's lips relaxed out of their snarl. Suddenly he felt almost calm. Eyes closed, he whispered, "George Cowley, I am going to kill you."

Of course he was. The thought that Cowley could commit such a betrayal and be allowed to live was not to be borne. Doyle didn't want to know what it had taken to persuade him, what arguments, what threats. Maybe almost nothing. He closed his eyes and it was many years ago and Cowley was putting him in his place. "*The department owns you. I own you. I can sell your body to science while you're still alive.*" Oh, yes.

It would be an execution on behalf of all of his men, because he had betrayed all of them. Any one of them could have been taken into that helicopter.

It could have been Doyle himself.

He uttered a small, indrawn gasp, in the grip of sheer terror. Frantic arithmetic and assumptions: Grey... Bodie had been released from the lab a year after the first mechanoids; so the program probably started—or expanded to CI5—some time in 1984. But that assumed that all of their victims were fit to be released. What did they do with the heads that went insane?

Months. He might only have escaped by months.

It was many minutes before he regained his capacity for coherent thought and then the first thing he was aware of was a sense of shame. He would have laid down his life for Bodie without hesitation, yet the glow of relief was unmistakable. It had not been him. If it had to happen to anyone, he was glad above all that it had not happened to him. He curled over his knees, fingers tangled in his hair like claws, and he wept.

He couldn't leave Bodie in that kennel. He couldn't. Not for a minute longer.

"You taking him on a night exercise, Ray?" It was Mason on the desk.

"Yeah. Time to try him out with his photomultiplier."

"Boy. I wish I had a toy with that many gadgets."

"Well, start saving those bottle-tops."

Grey was asleep, of course. Doyle used the password to wake him up. What did he go through when this happened to him? Was he waking up naturally? Or were they giving him a jolt?

The mouth. Well, of course it was Bodie's. "*You have a nice smile, Grey.*" Bodie's smile. They'd messed about with his teeth—so his dentist wouldn't have recognised him?—but then Bodie had hardly ever showed his teeth.

"Ray. What's wrong?" He sounded groggy. "What have I done?"

"Nothing. I thought we'd go out on a night exercise. D'you want to freshen up? I'll get your pack ready." He didn't want to give Bodie any more orders.

"So where are we going?" They were in the car. "Home."

"Oh, that kind of night exercise. You shouldn't have bundled me off so quickly, should you?"

Doyle managed a weak smile. He'd been doing his utmost not to think about the sex.

Again, Grey headed for the playroom, and again Doyle called him back to the living room.

"You want another talk. Please believe me, Ray, no one told me. It just happened. I'm sorry."

"I believe you. But it didn't just happen. You *are* Bodie. You didn't die. Not completely."

A long silence.

"Is this a test, Ray? If it is, I think I must have failed."

"No. It's not a test. You *are* Bodie. You have Bodie's head inside your helmet. You have Bodie's mouth. They let you die and they took your head. I should have seen it...right from the start."

"I'm a machine, Ray. There's nothing inside this helmet except wires and silicon. You know what's inside it. You've seen the pictures from the lab, haven't you? Your Bodie is dead. He's not coming back."

Everyone had seen those pictures when the first mechanoids had been unveiled. Doyle had forgotten about them and for over a minute he said nothing, thinking very hard. Then, decisively, "They were fakes. Think about it. They were just lying on the bench. They didn't speak. They didn't do anything complicated. They didn't do anything you couldn't rig up by remote control. You've not seen inside your *own* helmet, have you?"

Now it was Grey's turn to pause. His lower lip thrust forward: Bodie in intense concentration. Slowly, "But why would they do it? How? It doesn't

make sense, Ray.”

“No, it makes perfect sense. It’s the only proper explanation. Listen.” And he described the process of reasoning that he’d been following in the past hours.

“Are you starting to remember, now? Are you starting to remember being Bodie?”

“No. I’m a machine. That’s all I’ve ever been.”

“How can you say that? Show me. Show me where I’m wrong.”

“I can’t.”

“Is it a...a gut feel, then?”

“It’s just what I know.”

Doyle opened his mouth to argue further, then sat gaping as Grey sagged forward by degrees until his head was hanging in an attitude of utter despair. He’d expected... Well, he wasn’t sure. Anger, probably. Bodie’s white-lipped anger.

He knelt by the armchair, one hand on a metal thigh, the other just above an elbow. Very quietly, “Are you remembering now?”

“No.”

“Nothing?” Expecting the reply: there’s nothing to remember.

“It’s gone. They took it all.”

“You believe me, then?”

“I have to. I know I’m a machine. But I have to.”

Doyle wanted to cradle Bodie’s head, but couldn’t reach. He kept still, aware of the metal growing warm under his touch as if he’d never felt that before, as if the sensation hadn’t been a source of pleasure for months.

“How did they take my mouth away?”

“What?” The sudden utterance had startled Doyle.

“When...they switched me on. I didn’t have a mouth. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t feel. Nothing. And then a year later they brought it in to show me and then they put it back on my face. How did they do that, Ray?”

“Bodie. I don’t know. Did you ever see your face without it?”

“No. I never saw myself until I had the full body.” He raised his head then hit his thigh hard. “Like this.”

“It was probably on your face all the time. It was probably some other poor bastard’s mouth they showed you. They could have kept you pumped full of local anaesthetic. Or cut the nerves and then mended them later. Probably child’s-play for them. They must be geniuses with nerves.”

“Oh, yeah. Shit hot.”

Doyle even found himself smiling, briefly. “But

you still don’t remember? Do you not remember me at all? Even when I was— Even when I was making you suck me off?”

“I felt...I felt glad to be close to you like that. Surprised that first time. But pleased to be allowed into your life like that. Maybe that shows something. But not remembering. No.”

Suddenly Doyle experienced a vivid recollection. Urgently, he said, “When you were looking at the scars on my chest that time. You were transfixed. You were practically stumbling over your words. You *must* have been remembering what they looked like with the stitches in. At *some* level. What we did my first night out of hospital.”

Eventually Bodie said, “I knew they were important for some reason. They upset me. But I thought it was part of my programming. To protect my Trainer. It’s all gone, Ray. Long gone.”

“Could it come back, though? Every day you’ve been behaving more and more like— Like yourself. Maybe soon everything else will come back.”

No reply. Doyle waited, but there was no reply.

“Don’t you want that? Don’t you want to remember...what we had? Who you were?”

“No.”

“Why not? Does it seem so bad?” Doyle’s voice was starting to crack. “I loved you. More even than I loved Grey. You were—”

“Ray. Ray, don’t.” Gentle hands were cupped around his skull, fingertips pressing in a soothing rhythm. “I know what Bodie meant to you. It’s obvious.”

“Then why not?”

The hands released his skull, dropped to his shoulders, then away. “I couldn’t face it. I wouldn’t survive.”

“D’you think they’d kill you? Could they tell what was happening?”

“I don’t know. That wasn’t what I meant. Ray, I think I must have gone mad at some point. Don’t you think? Stark, staring. You said it yourself.”

Doyle’s gaze slid away and then he closed his eyes hard. He didn’t want to imagine it—not for himself, not for Bodie, not for anyone. “You seem all right now.”

“They must’ve had some shit-hot brainwashers on their team along with everything else. They broke me down and built me up again. That’s how it’s done. You know that’s how it’s done. They crammed my head so full with see Jack run and all those fake lives that there wasn’t any space for my old thoughts. Over

the months they must have crawled into a corner and died. And after that everything would have got so much easier for me. Once I'd accepted that I was a machine."

Doyle had been watching the movements of the mouth, throat tight with hatred for the designers of the speech-system—such words...in a machine's droning voice. A touch on his arm, and he lifted his gaze to the eye-slit. "I don't think I can come back, Ray. Not the way you want. I wouldn't survive the journey. I'm sorry."

"But how come there's—" His own tone of voice was all wrong: there was no place here now for arguments, for hope. Maybe he shouldn't even have told Bodie. For long moments, he looked away, trying to gather his thoughts. They did not want to be gathered. "I recognised you. With all they'd done, I recognised you. I don't know what that means, but..."

The hand stroked his arm, as awkward and sincere as Bodie's comfort had always been. "Maybe that's just how I behave when I'm allowed to behave like a human. When I'm with you. It might not have happened with another Trainer."

"Do you think they did do it on purpose? To see how we'd react."

"I doubt it. They probably forgot who I used to be almost immediately. Really thought of me as a machine. It's what you do in a job like that. It's what I'd do. Probably just had a checklist of things to include in my life-histories and my briefing. So there would be an easy answer if a human wondered how I knew so much about life in the Paras."

"They should all burn in hell." Very quiet.

"Well... But don't help put them there, eh. Who'll buy me beers if you're serving a life-sentence?"

"Oh, Bodie." Doyle swallowed hard. "But don't you feel... I thought you'd be bouncing off the walls."

A long pause, and then Bodie placed the back of his hand over Doyle's breastbone. "You need viscera, remember?" Slowly, "I don't think I really feel anything. The need to be near you, to please you. To have you be kind to me. I feel...lost when you're angry with me. But that's all. Everything else is just data. I'm a machine, Ray. A ghost. I can't come back. Forget your Bodie. It's the best way."

"What are we going to do?" A whispered plea, not directed at Bodie.

"What do you want to do? Do you want to kill them?"

"Yes, but— But I won't."

"Good lad. So we'll carry on as a team, then. Were we as good before?"

"Different. Same style, though. My brains, your brawn." An easy smile because he suddenly felt calm again—he'd had a moment's vision of the future, stretching before him, a clear, shining line. And under the calm, a tidal surge of love for this man who had hijacked his life. "Let's go through to the other room. It's about time we slept together, don't you reckon? After all these months."

Bodie knelt on the far side of the mattress. Doyle kicked his shoes off then stepped into the circle of the waiting arms. It was a long, tender embrace, but when Doyle raised his head, it was to say, "Just to sleep. Really. I'm too strung out. And you can't be much better."

He'd meant to be quiet, to let Bodie rest. But lying against him like this... Well, the question kept flexing itself in his mind, getting stronger and stronger.

"I raped you, didn't I? You and the other two."

"I told you, I didn't mind. I liked it."

"You're a special case."

"Not so special at the time. I was just another machine, fresh from the lab. It'd be the same for them. They wouldn't have minded. They'd have been glad of the contact. Glad to do another thing that humans do."

"I can't..." A deep sighing breath. "I can't imagine what it must have been like for them. But what I *can* imagine: what if one of them had a partner still alive? What if he'd found out what I was doing, how I was using his friend? If it had been another Trainer with you, I'd—I'd have killed him."

"Special case, Ray. I've a feeling you always were jealous as hell."

"Christ! That's not what I—" A firm hand on his jaw.

"I know. But it's done. Leave it. Get some sleep. It'll look better in the morning." Doyle nodded and the hand moved to his waist and held him in a loose grip.

A sudden thought. "Is there any way of disabling your security-system? Otherwise I'm likely to set it off when I turn over in my sleep."

"Turn off my self-defence. But I'd better not be holding you. Everything locks solid." The arm was lifted away and lowered to the bed.

"Will you be able to sleep like that? Can you close your eyes?"

"I can't. Don't think I've got any eyelids. I'll be OK if you turn off the light."

Doyle leaned over to see to the lamp then lay down so that their bodies were touching all along their length. "Fifty-twenty four. Guesstimate. Self-defence. Off." The red light must be blinking away, but he didn't raise his head to check. He pressed closer to his lover.

"Bodie?" A whisper.

After about fifteen seconds of waiting for a reply, he realised that he had no way of telling whether Bodie was asleep. If the jaw-plate had locked solid with everything else, then Bodie probably wouldn't be able to reply even if he was awake.

He lay quietly for a while, listening for any sign of life from Bodie, trying hard not to remember the time when the man had had a heartbeat, when he used to sigh eloquently in his sleep. Such thoughts felt like a betrayal of Grey, who so deserved a lover who could accept him as he was.

If he couldn't keep the thoughts away, then he wouldn't have them here, not with Bodie lying trustingly beside him. Carefully and quietly, he rolled away, then got to his feet and left the room. It was a bright night and he could see well enough to fetch a glass from the kitchen—an excuse, if Bodie asked later—and to make his way across the living room to the electric fire. The two bars whined as they started to glow.

Yes, he could think now.

But his mind had emptied, not knowing how to tackle a problem so large.

Have that drink after all? He got to his feet and went to the corner of the room to fetch the bottle of cheap scotch. Once there, his eyes were drawn to the shelf above, and in the dimness he could locate the perspex holder by the gleam of light on its edges.

Sitting cross-legged again by the fire, he slid the photograph out of the holder and studied it in the faint orange light. Bodie. Bodie, as he'd been remembering him for these three years, imagining him safely dead.

"*Safely dead.*" Jesus. How had it come to that?

His previous regrets of events following the gunshot had been burned away—such laughably cosy delusions he'd been allowing himself. It was no simple re-write of history now that would give him his hushed walk to the morgue, his last look. A new regret was emerging, with a new and terrible fantasy in its shadow: he should not have made that emergency-call to HQ. Then he would have been left in peace to kneel beside him on the cracked concrete.

Holding his hand. Stroking his hair. Waiting with him while he died. Their version of paradise.

And the...object lying in the other room? The object he loved, but which now terrified him. Because of what it was, and what it represented, and what it proved. *It could have been me.* Eyes squeezed shut, he mouthed the words, heart racing but icy cold.

It could have been any of them. It still could. That helicopter was waiting, somewhere in the city, right now.

And Doyle was the only one who could stop it claiming another. He should be in HQ right now, not sitting at home while the moments ticked by. But he had to think this through. He had to do it properly because they would make damn sure he had no second chance—they would order his death as soon as they saw his first move against them. And knowing that, everything else fell into place.

With care, he laid the photograph on the carpet by his side, where it became simply a dark rectangle against the lighter wool. Then he laid his palm over the face he could not see, and closed his eyes.

Murder.

That was what he was planning, and in the coldest blood. He was strong enough, brave enough not to hide from the word, not to take refuge behind some euphemism. Two murders, if his luck held out.

If only he could think of some method that could spare Bodie from suspecting, even for the last instant. Something with the day-pack that would make it like falling asleep. But he didn't know enough and was afraid that his enemies knew everything, had thought of everything: reserve power, an alarm signal, and the helicopter again, carrying him off—still alive—to some room that never saw daylight.

Bodie. One of the strongest men on earth, but utterly vulnerable to his enemies—they could paralyse him with a word. And were there other words that would do worse than paralyse? He had to put Bodie beyond all further harm. Simply had to. Even now, with two guns in the house, he couldn't give any real protection. What about tomorrow, or the day after, when they had disposed of Raymond Doyle?

He did not see that he had any choice. He would not allow Bodie to be diminished further. And he would not permit him to die once more among strangers. The jury might not understand—if his case ever got a public trial—but he thought another agent would.

Would the other agents understand the second

murder? Surely even more easily than the first, because few had been bound to a partner as he was to Bodie, whereas they had all trusted Cowley. Cowley had betrayed every one of them, and no jury would bring him to justice for that. Because what he'd done wasn't officially a crime. Yes, he'd lose the odd golf partner if it hit the papers, but he'd keep everything else. That could not be allowed.

He picked up the photograph again, and leant closer to the fire. Bodie's eyes could not be seen, those remarkable eyelashes a clear shadowing between the pallor of eyelid and cheek. Bodie at his most mysterious, when any honest observer must call him beautiful. Doyle willed him to lift his head, to step forward for an instant out of the past.

"Would you do it?" A whisper. "If it had been me, would you do it? Would you kill him?" But of all of them, Bodie was the one who might hesitate. Because he'd liked the old man, he really had. Sheer disbelief might stop him. It would be like himself with Barry Martin—oh, a long time ago, and a very different Ray Doyle. Faced with Cowley, Bodie would ask for an explanation, wanting to be convinced, and George Cowley might just manage to concoct one.

"That makes it worse, though. For me. That he could see this happen to you, and carry on."

Did it deserve the death penalty?

"Yes." Oh, yes. He put the photograph back in the holder, and then back on the shelf, knowing he would probably never look at it again.

Half an inch of scotch while he stared out at the night—possibly his last—and filled in the details of his plan. Cowley might yet escape him, but he was confident of his first two priorities: saving the other agents, and saving Bodie. Cowley depended on luck, and he was shorter on that than he'd thought, say, a week ago. He wouldn't worry about it.

A week ago. Doyle and Grey shaping up as CI5's best team. They could carry on with that. He could keep Grey, have Bodie back, if he could just ignore what he knew.

"Oh, God." Temptation. Such temptation. Things he would give his soul for.

But the only soul he was free to bargain with was his own. He'd known that from the start. So he couldn't buy a second chance for them with other men's lives, though he almost wished he could. He wished he could talk it through with Bodie, with the Bodie from the photograph. But they'd surely agree on this. *Esprit de corps*. It had meant something to Bodie.

That's right, it had. He remembered, now. A loyal man, his partner, and more sensitive to betrayal because of that. Bodie would have seen things the same way. And of course Bodie would have killed Cowley.

He felt calm again, and knew that this calm would last him until it was all over. He could return to Bodie and sleep beside him with a clear conscience. He turned off the fire and retraced his steps, leaving the glass in the kitchen. No sign of awareness as he shut the door, lay down on the mattress, and rolled close. The metal rapidly absorbed heat from him even through his clothes, but that did not keep him from sleep.

He woke around seven, restored Bodie's powers of movement immediately, and found himself pulled into a kiss.

"How you feeling now? Still strung out? 'cos I'm feeling fine."

"Not good enough to waste it on a quickie. I haven't got your stamina these days."

"Who says we have to hurry?"

"I told Mason I'd have you back by eight."

"Oh. Well, after our session with Macklin this evening, then."

"He can't make it. I meant to tell you. There was a message yesterday evening."

"We're not going to bother to go, just the two of us, are we?"

Doyle smiled. "No. Better things to do." He stood up, then picked at his shirt and grimaced. "I'm off for a shower."

In the car, he said, "We can't make a habit of...um...night exercises, you know. If they thought you were in the flat with me asleep they'd throw the book at me."

"Yeah. I know."

"I'm gonna have to leave you in your kennel for most of the day. Come back here saying I'm going to catch up on some sleep. I'm sorry. I hate to shut you in there. I never felt happy about it, but I hate it now."

"You'll get used to it. I'll just switch to low-power and have another kip."

Once on his own, Doyle collected a notepad and pencil from his office and went to the rec room. There were seven agents there, four of whom had known Bodie. After they'd disposed of the comments on Grey's absence, Doyle announced that he was planning on taking Grey on a tour of CI5 residences—part of some exercises they were doing on security

and defence of buildings—and he was making a list of current addresses. CI5 agents have very good memories for that type of information, and within minutes he had the list he wanted.

Macklin was in his office at the training-centre very early and readily accepted Doyle's excuse and suggestion of an indefinite postponement. It was likely that Cowley was still an early-riser, but Doyle thought it best to wait until gone nine before calling. The most difficult part was disagreeing with Cowley when he repeated his statement that he'd done nothing to deserve the scotch, though Doyle had expected that and even planned around it. "But if you feel you need to do something more to earn it, sir, I would appreciate some advice. Grey's test scores are... Well, they look inconsistent to me, but I was hoping you might be able to see some pattern. If I came around with them tonight, would you be able to spare me half an hour?" Cowley would, providing Doyle arrived after eight.

Back home, he composed the letter. It took several hours and the final version was the best report he'd written in all his days in CI5: clear, strictly factual, and (surely) chillingly convincing. The local library was around the corner and had a photocopier, and across the street was a post-office, and the newsagents' next door sold envelopes.

At two o'clock he started writing another letter—a note, really, not to be copied or posted. It was short, but it took a long time for him to write. When it was finished, he got everything ready in the playroom, and that seemed to take no time at all.

There was a post-box at the end of his street: with a collection at 3.45 and first-class stamps, some of his letters would probably get through the next morning. In the end, he'd done a copy for each of the quality newspapers—they might dismiss it as the ravings of a lunatic but he had nothing to lose.

Bodie was awake and waiting for him.

"Good kip?"

"Great. Raring to go. We'll be back to normal tomorrow, though, won't we?"

"Oh, yeah."

Doyle led him by the hand into the playroom, manoeuvred him easily into sitting among the cushions stacked in the corner—his sultan-position, they called it. Doyle knelt over him, caressing his mouth, his shoulders, his chest, concentrating on the heavy, liquid aching that was welling in his chest, spreading along his limbs, flowing from his fingertips as a distillation of worship.

"Oh, Bodie. My Bodie. I'd fall in love with you wherever I met you." He bent to open the smiling mouth with a kiss, his left hand cupped around the chin and the jaw-plate. That hand held the mouth open when he lifted his head away.

"Fifty-Twenty Four. Guesstimate. Self-defence. Off." His right hand was already raising the silenced Browning.

He was surprised to find himself still alive. Either the rumours about the anti-tampering devices were pure propaganda, or he'd found an oversight in the design. Or he'd been lucky.

The helmet had held. Not such a surprise. And he'd been lucky with the ricochet too—the bullet could easily have bounced straight back at his hand.

His hand. He refused to look, refused to let his gaze drop below the top of the visor. He had given a single violent shudder on realising that he had survived, come through to the other side—and his skin could still feel the warm, ticklish sliding, his ears still hear the slow dripping. The direct proof that the mechanoids were not made from silicon.

Without looking down, he placed the gun on the mattress, got to his feet, rubbed his hands together under running water at the kitchen sink for over five minutes. Then he stripped, dropped his clothes in the garbage, showered, and dressed again: a jacket this time, and under it his spare holster and his Walther.

He had put the letter and the note on the coffee-table in the living room, having to hope that they would be safe there from anything the anti-tampering system did to the playroom. The playroom would be better, though, and he found he could return there now, now that he was washed. He knelt to place the two envelopes next to the gun on the blood-spotted mattress, and then raised his head and faced what he had done.

The arms had not moved, and the right hand still showed the contours of Doyle's waist, the left of his knee. Doyle reached out to touch the tip of the right index finger, knowing his touch to be a defilement, knowing that if there was any virtue left in him he should not be permitting himself even this.

"*Please give him a burial. Please mark the place with a stone.*" The start of the note. The words circled in his brain like strangers, given a separate existence now he could see what the world would soon see. "*If you must take him apart, then please put him together again at the end, so that he goes into his grave with a human shape and not as something grotesque.*" Oh, but there would

still be sick, sick jokes—and inside his head it was Bodie's voice making them—and himself falling in love with that voice over and over again.

He drew his hand back and got to his feet. *Forgive me.* He could not speak. He suspected that he had not begun to understand all that he had done. *Can you forgive me? Will you let me fall in love with you in hell?*

He locked the door of the flat. It would be unlocked again soon enough: when he failed to respond to the paging, Mason would send someone round—send a team, he hoped, since no one should have to walk in upon that sight on their own.

It was just after six when he arrived at Little Chalfont. He parked a few streets away from Cowley's house—in the opposite direction to the main road, which should reduce the chances of Cowley seeing the car if he was driving home.

There was no car in the driveway. Interesting. Doyle concealed himself in the position he'd chosen in advance, and settled down to watch the house and to think. No sign of movement in there. Well, there wouldn't be if they were professionals, but would Cowley have access to such services these days? And if he'd asked for police protection, what would he have told them?

No, that was thinking far too far ahead—or to the side. Stick to basics. Assume that Cowley is waiting for something like this, has been ever since he heard that the teaming was going ahead, or maybe even since the visit. But assume also that waiting is going to be his main tactic—anything else would be an admission of guilt. And that should give Doyle the few seconds he needed, even if the house was crammed with agents as good as 3.7 and 4.5 had been.

Just a few seconds. He needed no confession now,

no apology. A few sentences to tell the man why this was happening, and then finish it. Any other assassin might find himself drawn into Cowley's world of triple-think, might stumble and fall in a battle of words. But not Doyle.

If Cowley was alone in the car, he'd get him then, outside. A blow to the back of the neck, drag him down the side-path out of sight of the house and the road. He'd brought cuffs to prevent a struggle, a dish-cloth to muffle cries for help. He was thorough. Cowley had trained him well.

Cowley's car pulled into the driveway shortly before half past seven. He was alone.

"This is an execution. This is for your betrayal of all of the men who trusted you, but especially for Bodie, who probably trusted you the most. You did what you said you could do: you sold us all to science while we were still alive. It should be Bodie doing this, but your scientists cut away so much of him that in the end he couldn't even remember what anger feels like."

As he returned the gun to its holster he found himself reflecting that, despite everything, he was still capable of the gentler emotions. Satisfaction. Even happiness. He smiled, and warmth flowed over him, then faded slowly to a neutral calm.

He reached into his jacket for the last envelope and placed it by the body, then waited, listening. 3.7 and 4.5 would have been out of the door by now. By now he would have been dead.

Again, he was still alive. Odd. The only thing he had made no plans for.

When would they catch up with him? Before he got back to the flat? In one of the basement-rooms of CI5? In his prison-cell?

Would he fight them? Would he try? Interesting question. He pondered it from time to time as he drove towards London.

—July 1995