

Her Majesty's Men

Marquesate

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First published in the United Kingdom in 2008 by Camouflage Press

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ISBN 978-0-9559880-0-4

Cover art by Marquesate
Photography by Ross Pierson

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Dedicated to my very own Majesty's Man

Goddammit!

Here he was again, under the shower and with none other than Staff Sergeant Alex Turner in the stall opposite. They were bloody Royal Engineers and couldn't even fix shower stalls with fucking doors?

And why on earth was he always carefully planning to avoid having a shower at the same time as that goddamned bastard when ultimately, it never worked out? Tom turned his back on the other man and listened with growing desperation to the whistling and humming from behind. Trying to drown out the sound of that deep voice with hot water pattering past his ears and drumming onto his short hair.

Goddamned motherfucking bastard!

Keeping his eyes scrunched shut, Tom reached blindly for the shower gel to sluice the caked mud off his skin, when the currently hated voice cut across the running water of a dozen shower stalls.

“Hey, Tom! Throw me your shampoo, will you? Just ran out and got to keep the mane clean.”

Tom groaned when the subsequent chuckle reached his ears. “Sure!”

If anyone noticed his strangled voice, he could always use the strenuous exercise as an excuse. A four hour endurance run in full gear across a natural terrain obstacle course was no walk in the park, even for him.

“Fuck!” Tom hissed, glad for the running water. Making a long show out of washing. Bad enough having to turn round in a moment. Of course that dickhead had to be in the opposite stall, the inconsiderate prick. Didn't matter that Alex was his best mate, getting regularly plastered together on Saturday nights in the pub round the corner.

Yeah. Fuck. Sure. Whatever.

“Are you blind and deaf or just piss-poor slow, Tom?” That voice again, this time with much more authority and a hint of laughter. Nice, loud, dark, resonating in the showers.

“Jesus, can't you let a guy wash the muck out of his own hair first?” Anger, that was good, worked wonders; stupid jokes did, too. Lots of shoulder clapping, arm wrestling and beer guzzling was equally useful. Getting smashed when off duty and drowning, killing, obliterating thoughts of *The Impossible*.

Tom employed his annoyance to great effect as he whirled around, soap suds clinging to his smooth skin. Not a scar worth mentioning, not a blemish that could be used for identification. Instead expanses of honey bronze over a muscular broad frame.

Tom looked good, the girls told him. He was positively devastating, gushed those who tried to get into his pants; he was a goddamned tease and useless prick they snarled later, when he left the nightclub without them. He would soon be running out of believable excuses.

“Here's the bloody shampoo and get going, Alex, I'll need it back.” Not looking, just not looking. Blessing the soap in his eyes, thankful for the hazy film before his vision.

“Cheers, mate.”

The blur in front of Tom's eyes moved closer and then the traitorous soap abandoned him, washed out of his eyes by a rogue stream of water. Deserted by the merciful filter, he was left defenceless and presented with a sight he could damn well do without.

As if he even needed to see Alex to know exactly what he looked like. A knowledge which instantly dried his mouth, constricted his throat and made swallowing near impossible. The rest of the physical reactions that followed without fail were too terrible to be considered.

Shit. Again. Yet a-fucking-gain.

The inevitable happened. He had to turn his back immediately or he'd race out of the room in terror at his hardening cock. He could hear the accusations in his mind.

Raving poofster. Screaming jag.

Turning as fast as he could, but too late to miss the crinkle-eyed blue-hued flashing grin, the deeply tanned skin, the white blond hair, the extraordinary body. Not a single man in their regiment was a physical match for Alex. Not even he himself.

Too tall, too broad, too muscled, too ... *Oh God!* Not turned fast enough. Already seen what killed him every time, going straight from his eyes to his brain and cock. Straight. What a lame joke.

Images reeled across his mind like an old jukebox that was stuck on the same fucking song, played over and over again.

Scars.

Evidence of torture at the hands of 'hostile entities' in a tea-towel sized country no one bothered to remember the name of, changing its tag as fast as it swapped its self-styled dictators.

Scars across the back, the chest; scars that Tom had seen before and caught sight of again. Visible amidst wiry blond hair and running down thighs, and, worst of all, reaching down to where he never dared

to look. Never. Not possibly. Not ever. Yet he could see in his mind the scars that crossed the base of Alex's cock. Scars that made him feel guilty for getting off by just thinking of them.

Being so sick, perverted and utterly debased that he jerked off at their memorised impression more often than he dared to admit even to himself. Imagining that broad back, running his hands over the irregular landscape of smooth skin, broken by pale ridges and craters of dead tissue.

“Yeah, cheers mate.” Whispering to himself, Tom's back remained turned to the room, facing the partly cracked white tiles, when he hung his head low. Water drummed in hot, hard streams onto his back, while desperately trying to will his cock to soften. To no avail. He knew the futility of the attempt, had been there too often in the past three years.

Time stretched. One minute. Two minutes. Movement from the opposite stall, which he could sense rather than hear or see, ensconced in his own world of relative safety amidst the stream of water. Soothing his sore muscles, but never washing away his guilt.

“Hey, fallen asleep?”

Tom pictured Alex standing there, towel wrapped around narrow hips, barely covering massive thighs. Exposing the scars while never giving answers to Tom's unspoken questions of what had happened on that failed mission.

All he knew was that Alex had got lost in 'hostile territory' as part of an operation that had been carefully kept away from public view; got rescued over six weeks later, when the pathetic figure of a small-scale dictator had run out of people to kill; had been in a military hospital for weeks, then returned home to his wife only to be divorced half a year after he'd been posted to the RSME in Brompton as Staff Sergeant.

Tom frowned, but he didn't turn round, merely stuck his head out of the spray. “Go ahead, just give me a minute, still bloody sore. Got to do an extra round of cardio from tomorrow onwards, fear I'm turning into a fat slob.”

Alex laughed, seemed to swallow the excuse, and then the almost empty shampoo bottle hit Tom between the shoulder blades. He could just see Alex's face before his eyes. Even if he tried *not* to see it.

He wouldn't turn though, no matter if a whole dispatch of REs pelted him with shampoo bottles. The evidence was still there, his body condemned him, and there was only one way to get rid of it.

“Wanker!” Was his half-hearted complaint, while Alex's laughter finally receded as he walked out of the room. Tom stood still for a

couple of minutes. Listening to the quiet, except for the drumming of the water, finally the only one left.

“Thank fuck.” Breathed out, Tom straightened up and peered around the partition. Empty, no one to witness his guilt. Picking up the shampoo, his movements turned fast and efficient.

How often had he done this? Uncountable times. Just like the nightly rituals, with moans muffled by pillows. Solitary indulgence while hiding in daylight who he truly was. Had joined the army at sixteen as a junior soldier, had never wanted to do anything else. Dragged himself through military school and ended up a Sergeant in the Royal Engineers.

Sixteen, and he hadn't had a clue; would have fucked any girl if they had let him.

Hadn't intended to grind himself at eighteen against another guy in breathless need, loaded to the gills with cheap lager, denims pulled down to his knees. Faceless, nameless, both equally horny. In a dark alley behind a tatty night club, their barely hidden corner stinking of piss and weeks old rubbish. From then on he'd always associated dumpsters with lust; his first true, intense, mind-blowing lust.

How charming.

Tom squirted shampoo into his palm, dropped the bottle, quickly lathered the gel into a thick foam between his hands. Turning once more to face the wall, left hand bracing against wet tiles, right one wrapped around his cock. He lowered his head, shutting his eyes tightly.

Stroking fast, without preambles. Delving right into the fantasy that would accompany his every waking moment if he didn't make sure he kept his mind thoroughly occupied. With every swift, near punishing stroke of his calloused hand he saw that back before his closed eyes. Felt himself plunging into the tightness of the muscular, unblemished arse, as if the torturers had made a statement that Tom couldn't quite grasp.

Always the same. Forever the fantasy of his cock buried within Alex's body, enveloped by yielding heat. Obsessed with fucking his mate; with using the great body with all the strength he had, knowing that Alex could take it, exceeding him in power and bulk. No restraints, he would just fuck that gorgeous arse until ...

“As fucking obsessed ...” Ground out beneath his ragged breath, another hard stroke, “with fucking him ...” eyes closed, his face a contorted grimace of empty, painful lust, “as a fucking chick!”

Images accelerated, getting rougher. He would palm, lick, bite into the writhing back beneath his hands. Tasting the testimony of the other's survival, caressing the remains of another's hell.

Faster, harder, closer. He wanted him, needed him, had to have him.

Would never get him.

Just. One. More. Stroke.

“Tom! Get your arse in gear!”

Alex hollered down the room and the voice crashed onto Tom like the water. Assaulting his senses and pushing him right over the edge the moment the fantasy image cried out beneath his hands, teeth and lips, while muscles clenched around his cock. He came with a badly stifled cry, praying while white splattered against wet tiles, that he had not betrayed his greatest, most feared secret.

Struggling to catch his breath as quickly as possible, pretending to be just fine.

“You alright, mate?” Alex was there, looking at him with concern. Dressed casually, with bare feet in flip-flops. Tom turned, managed not to give himself away this time.

“Yeah, sure.” Grinning wryly, he muttered his thanks for the towel that was being shoved into his hands.

“Fair enough, I thought I heard something.” Alex shrugged, while Tom dried himself as quickly and efficiently as he could. Deliberately avoiding to look at those tanned, sinewy feet. How the bleeding fuck even feet could turn him on, or hands, or eyes, or hair, or just about every goddamned part of this man, was completely beyond his grasp.

“Hurry up, Mary stops serving food at seven thirty.”

Tom succeeded in wrapping himself in the towel without further incidents. “Alright, just some clothes and off we go. Won't take a sec.”

Alex took the hint and turned to wander out of the showers.

Tom tried not to stare at the retreating back, knowing too terrifyingly well what was underneath the shirt.

Three years of consuming lust.

Needs, hidden away behind the mask of a best mate and comrade. Time, which had made living the white lie more and more difficult. Life, sliding towards the cliffs of self-destruction while his secret was getting increasingly difficult to hide.

He was laughing about Alex's same old jokes, told with a grin that turned lines around pale eyes into a crinkled frame for bone dry humour.

Tom groaned and rolled his eyes. "You should get yourself a new repertoire of jokes." The ale had smoothly rolled across his tongue and erected fortifications against the urge to tear, claw and shred the clothes off the other.

"What, not impressed? Damn!" Alex smirked, raised his pint and tipped his head back.

Tom stared. Transfixed. Watching the Adam's apple bob with every gulp of dark, potent beer.

Fuck.

Not enough yet, had to get far more drunk. "Fuckin' hell." Tom muttered before he drowned the sight in his own pint, burying the need in the flat brew.

Alex put the empty glass down, wiped those lips that seemed to mock Tom with their very existence, and leaned forward. Causing Tom's eyes to widen and he pulled back. Snake and snake charmer. Uncertain who was what. "Did you say anything?"

Why the fuck Alex always had to smile at him like that was beyond Tom's comprehension. Why couldn't the bastard just snarl or sulk or do whatever the fuck else, instead of *smiling* and showing those lined blue bright laughing goddamnedmotherfucking eyes. And those lips. Curved. Into a grin.

"Huh?" Tom played it safe.

"Never mind." Alex shrugged, flashed another grin and was about to start on the next sentence, when a handful of young squaddies turned up at their table.

Tom eyed the lads with well disguised relief.

"Good evening." The first one ventured forth. "We are off to the Quazar, care to join us, Sir?"

Ever smart, this one, even though Tom's eyeballs were hurting from the vile colour combination of retro wannabe 70s oranges, pinks, browns, reds and yellows. It had to be the daily camo that did it to those hapless boys. He kept his mouth shut, waiting for Alex to decide on the night's entertainment - getting pissed in the pub, or getting pissed in the night club. Worse beer and more expensive shots in the latter.

Wondering idly if any of the girls in the nightclub would see past the squaddies' gaudy shirts and recognise the treasures underneath. Bodies without an ounce of fat. Smooth. Hard. Young and characterless. Complete opposites to Alex's scars, which ...

Oh fuck!

He'd completely lost track of the conversation, when the lad repeated himself.

“Sir? What's your decision?”

Damn. Thrice be damned the constantly distracting horniness. Chances were Alex had opted for going out. He had stayed in the pub with Tom too many times before, doing nothing but sampling beer and whisky. Unlikely he'd want to do the same old thing yet again, for the umpteenth time. Should be safe to choose the more likely option and thus - against part of his will - get rid of him for the night.

“No, thanks. I'm knackered.” Looking up, Tom's eyes met with near drunken ones. He drew his brows together and produced a passable glare. “Don't you laugh, Stach! Remember my words when you're approaching thirty.”

“Sorry, Sir. Have a nice evening, Sergeants.” Five lads turned and scooted out of the pub, without Alex. Leaving Tom to gape after them. Shit. Typical. Bloody fucking typical. Had he just picked the dangerous option of staying in the pub together with Alex? As much as he wanted to, it was too much tonight. Didn't that man have a life?

“Tell me something.” Alex stood up, seemingly unaware of Tom's internal ranting, as he regarded him with unveiled curiosity.

“What?” Great. One syllable. He wasn't improving. How in the Holy-fucking-Ghost's name was he supposed to string together intelligent responses when being presented with that chest, which was barely and thinly disguised by a white t-shirt.

He knew what was beneath the fabric. It killed him. The knowledge was like a drill that bored deep down into his mind, lodged itself with poisoned barbs and if ever torn out, would leave a gaping wound that destroyed what remained of Sergeant Tom Warren.

“Flipping heck, do you ever listen to me? Seems that lately I've got to repeat every bloody thing twice.” Alex shook his head and Tom stared, transfixed, trying to collect that small bit of wit around him, that a few pints of beer and a seemingly perpetual semi-hard-on had left him.

“Just realised we've run out of beer.” Tom managed to lie. Well done, the success of his move was evident when Alex picked up the couple of empty pint glasses.

“My round.” Tom felt inordinately smug about his quick change of subject. “Remember?”

Alex sat back down, offering a shrug and a thankful smile.

Disaster avoided. Well done indeed, Sgt Warren.

A few minutes spent with small talk and jokes at the bar, exchanging words with landlord and regulars, Tom came trotting back. Dutifully laden with a couple of pints of real ale.

“So, before I forget it.”

Tom winced at the words. Would that motherfucker ever forget anything? Not likely. “Yeah?”

“As I said earlier, I meant to ask you something.”

Holy fuck. Alex would never give up. Ask what, eh? About his childhood, his parents, his goddamned bloody liking for blokes instead of bints? Right, why not, could be entertaining. Possibly for someone back in A & E when they came to piece his face back together.

The old mental dialogue returned, a constant source of sickening amusement.

'Mr Warren, when did you realise that you were a screaming fag?'

'Doctor, that must have been when I found myself splattered with sticky cum, sprawled across a dumpster after having humped and ground, pushed and pulled against another guy, until I came near shrieking. Back out in a dark, stinking alleyway.'

'Alright then. That's it for today, Mr Warren.'

It never failed to put the terror back into his bones, and, consequently, made him jerk back to reality. Tom sat down.

“Oh bloody hell, what is it then. Fire away.”

Why the fuck couldn't he just walk out of the pub and go back to the Mess? Because the alternative wasn't any better. Staring in helpless, morbid fascination at Alex and feeling his body inexorably drawn to the other, or jerking off in the narrow bunk in his room. Great alternative. It made him feel empty, and had made him curse himself and change sheets more often than he cared to remember.

Alex's glass came down onto the table mat with a muted thud, and his elbow landed beside it. “Whenever we go anywhere other than here you got a swarm of girls around you, each eager to get her brains fucked out, but you never take them up on any offer. Haven't ever seen you go with anyone.”

Tom stared into his beer. Holy Mother of God and the bleeding son stuff. Whoever they were, none of those deities was here to help. Why bother praying to those fucking useless pricks in the first place. “You don't, either.” Strangled. “At least not that I noticed.”

Don't ask - don't tell. Don't ask questions I cannot answer. If I did, I'd have your fist paint my face interesting shades of purple, red, black and blue.

“Yeah, that's right. I have a bloody good reason.” The matter was finished for Alex and he tilted his head back to drink his beer, creating more of those cherished and despised snapshots in Tom's ever agitated mind. Bastard.

“Well, and so do I.” Tom felt all too relieved at such a smooth ending to the terrifying interrogation.

“Touché.” Alex grinned, mellowed by a few pints of ale. “Still, it's odd, isn't it? Mr Model-Face and all you do is sit here and drink with same old me.”

That was it. Pint only half drunk, but mind overflowing, Tom had to get out of there. Alex was on a roll and wouldn't take his teeth back out of him, until he had killed his prey thrice over. Yeah, that's what made a good soldier, wasn't it?

Alex continued, unperturbed. “Can't say I remember you having a fling, let alone a girlfriend, in the past three years.”

Tom shrugged. “Just didn't feel like it.” Played dumb, trying to get out of the interrogation. Feeling the figurative light shining blindingly into his face, while the black-clad enemy officer tapped a riding crop against his shiny boots.

“Come on, don't give me that bullshit, mate.” Alex grinned. Too brightly. Leaned closer over the table. Too close.

Tom fought the violent urge to tilt backwards, to pull away from the scent he wanted to lick off the damaged skin. No question, now, who was the snake and who the charmer.

“We've been mates for three years. Go on, can't be that bad. You can trust me.” Alex smiled. Tom stared. The old spiel. “I'm just bloody curious because I don't get it. They are practically salivating over you. You could get laid all over the place.”

Tom snorted, rolled his eyes and shook his head. Muttered obscenities while searching for a retort. “If you didn't always have that air of utter boredom around you, I bet you'd be hit on a hell of a lot more. You just can't be bothered, can you?”

Attack was the best defence. First thing they learned in the Army.

“I said I have a good reason. Besides, I asked first.” Alex's smug grin vanished behind the beer glass, but his pale eyes remained fixed on Tom.

Who shrugged. Winced. Wondered and wanted right now nothing but to spill them. All of those beans. A & E be damned, who needed a

pretty face anyway. If only he didn't fear losing his friend, the man he simultaneously dreaded and wanted.

"It doesn't work like that." Tom used the refuge of raised brows and irritated look.

"No?" The beer came back down onto the table, almost empty now.

"No. Forget it. You first."

Blue eyes betrayed a smile. Lips curved, grinning, baring teeth until the smooth chuckle broke out again.

"Fair enough." Gone was the last sip of beer in the next second. "I bet you'd like to punch me for being so bloody curious."

No, Alex. You have no idea what I'd like to do to you.

Tom chose the PC version of his thoughts. "Bollocks."

But he wanted to fall. So badly. Lured by the need to just give in. Give up. Give all and take nothing in return. In some, unfortunately dominant, corner of his mind he wanted to spill the truth and be done and over with it, forever.

What held him back? Fear of losing Alex as a friend? No. It was hope. Stupid, ridiculous, annoying, utterly dismissible hope that there was the faintest scrap of a chance Alex would ever return his feelings.

How pathetic.

"I just don't get it why you're suddenly asking such stupid questions." Tom's fake grin felt passably natural. "Besides, I'm bloody knackered and hungry, and we missed Mary's cooking."

Alex grinned, pointed to Tom's unfinished ale and cocked his head. "Well, guess that's my fault, then. Let's go to the chippie."

Tom couldn't rise fast enough, knocked his shin on the table, welcoming the short sharp pain as distraction. "Your first good idea of the evening." Downed the last of his beer.

"Codfather?"

"Sure."

"Get cracking, I'm ravenous!"

"Less stupid questions, more fish'n chips, right?"

"Shut up."

"Up yours, too!"

Walking in companionable silence, they trekked down the hill past the barracks where Tom had his room in the Mess, heading towards the town centre. Air cool enough to half-huddle into their shirts.

"Going back to my question earlier, you never answered why you haven't bothered with girls since I've known you."

Tom exploded like a slow fuse that had been simmering for too many hours, if not days, weeks or months. He turned in the middle of the deserted High Street and shouted: “For fuck's sake! Can't you just leave me the fuck alone? It's none of your fucking business!”

He had done so well for so long, had believed until a moment ago he was off the hook, but no. It was too much and he'd come to the breaking point.

“Holy fuck! Lost your sense of humour or what?” Alex sounded bewildered and close to getting pissed off himself. “Forget about it, you're right, it *is* none of my business, but I thought with being mates, you wouldn't bite my head off.”

Tom wasn't placated, though. Three years of frustration and he felt the urge to deal a blow, completely uncalled for. He clenched his fists. “That's bullshit. You keep asking and asking and don't give a damn if I want to answer or not. Did you come up with one? No, you didn't. You want secrets? Great, I can give you secrets if you really want to, but I have no bloody interest in being interrogated!”

Furious, hair bristling at the back of his neck. Good, it was better than staring moonstruck and so horny he could lift a block of concrete with his cock.

“Jesus fucking Christ! What is your problem?” Alex's voice rose. “Right, I tell you.” Giving Tom a shove, Alex seemed to expect retaliation, but Tom merely stumbled backwards, away from the streetlights, into the alleyway behind the post office.

A dark alleyway, just a shame the dumpster was missing. Wouldn't it have been poetic.

“I can't stand that sort of women anymore because of my fucking wife. Came back and what was the first thing? She got all worked up how ugly I was. Damned scars. Goddamned fucking scars! She didn't want to touch me, you see? Fucking bitch!”

Holy. Shit. Bloody hell. Fuck fuck fuck fuck Fuck!

Scars.

Just what Tom needed. Throat dry, tongue darting out to swipe moisture over lips that felt suddenly chapped. Stood in silence, because any sound would betray his guilt. The terrible secret. The worst of the hidden knowledge of a whole lot of classified information about himself.

“Shit, I'm sorry.” Tom forced out at last. “Didn't realise. Never thought that ...” faltered, stumbled, “that” Tom saw the anger dissipate from Alex's eyes. “Never thought that your scars were ugly.”

He felt sick, beer turned into acid poison in his belly, while bile threatened to rise and spill out, along with the truth.

“No? Well, you're a bloke.” Alex shrugged, leaning against the post office gate, as he went back to his old self. Tossing a grin as if Tom were a wishing well. If only. “It's your turn now. I told you my reason, are you going to tell me yours? I trusted you, so go on, you can trust me.”

Yeah, but this was different, wasn't it? This was dangerous territory, A & E material. On the other hand, mates, for years.

“Don't think you want to know.” Stalling, but the deeply seated sense of guilt drove Tom on.

Truth, give him part of the truth and he won't ever find out about the scars, you sick bastard. Nothing but the truth, this goddamned fickle bitch.

“Try me.” Alex grinned, picture perfect, arms crossed over his broad chest, at ease.

“Alright.” Tom shrugged, felt sick. Shouldn't have drunk, nor eaten, nor in fact existed. Never intended to ... never ... hadn't known who he ... Shit. Too late. Load and Fire!

“I'm gay.”

Silence.

“What? You're taking the piss, aren't you?”

“No. I'm gay.”

Silence grew darker. Dangerous. The ease slipped out of Alex's stance, muscles tensing as he stood up straight. Grinning face morphing into a grimace of shock.

Shit, shit, shit, there was no way back now.

“I don't get it.” Alex's voice sounded mangled, distress in every feature. Staring at Tom as if those words, which had built an impenetrable wall between them in mere seconds, could vanish, if he just blinked slowly enough. “That's impossible. You always seemed *normal!*” Last word spit out.

Tom stood his ground, pale faced in the sickly neon-morgue street light. Progressively growing cold, laid bare on a slab with a bloodied tag on his toe.

“I am. I'm just gay.”

Alex's disbelief turned into a never before noticed malice that crawled to the surface, and his voice was tinged with something akin to revulsion. “You must be fucking joking! You can't tell me you're a freaking fag! That can't be true. You're not one of those poofers who could have dozens of girls but stick their cocks into the stinking arsehole of another guy instead? Tell me that it is a joke!”

Tom jerked. Nightmares were nothing compared to this. Trapped in a truth that seemed monstrous. He had come to terms with himself years ago, finding anonymous thrills in big cities, whenever the need got too great. Only now made into a monster by another's reaction. His best mate. His obsession.

Trust? My arse.

"It's the truth." Flat, why didn't he yell back and explode in anger at the bigoted wanker? It hurt. He'd never told the truth before, didn't know what to expect. Found himself paralysed into silence.

Passive. New experience - couldn't bear it.

Tom stood up straighter, watched how Alex took a step back while raising his hands as if Tom were contaminated.

"No, no no no no. That's just not true, it's disgusting! You're a fucking creep, you are. You're sick. Holy shit. Holy *fuck!* All that time in the showers, been eyeing up other guys? Even staring at *me?* I'm going to puke!"

Truth a cemetery and Tom had just seen his tombstone. It was ugly, smeared with faecal matter and came in the distorted, hating face of Alex.

"Fuck off." Tom didn't understand why his voice remained calm. Wondered abjectly, if he sounded defeated. Couldn't stand it if that were the case. "Just fuck the shit off!" Slightly raising his voice, but that was nothing compared to the growl of outrage that reached his ears.

"You can bet on that!" Alex shuddered. Disgust? Was revulsion really that powerful? "I was right, wasn't I? All that 'mates' bullshit, you've been checking me out all the time. That's just sick and perverted. Waiting for a chance to jump my bones?"

Alex's fury was met with Tom's silence. He couldn't say anything. Couldn't deny the truth. Worse, much worse, the guilt, when Alex hit the worst of the truth spot on.

"Just. Fuck. Off." Quietly. Tom stood with hands clenched into fists, grating each word out between locked teeth. Staring straight ahead, he didn't deny the truth, didn't verify it either. He had so many things to say, or shout, but not a single word came out. Nothing felt right.

"You Freak!" Alex snorted, nothing left of the handsome face. Ugly now. He turned, even his back transmitted the rage and betrayal. Betrayal of what, Tom didn't know. Their friendship?

Alex left without another word. Walked fast, precise, with every step part of the military machine.

Tom stood. Remained for as long as it took him to notice the chilled air. He hurt. Goddamned motherfucking bastard, he hurt.

Fuck Alex.

Anger rose to the surface of his mind. Betrayed? So was he. "Trust me, mate?"

"Wanker." Toneless, barely audible. "Bigoted, lying bastard." Louder, knuckles cracked when fists clenched.

"You bloody, lying, intolerant, son of a fucking bitch!" Tom shouted, swivelled around and punched the litter bin. Didn't give a damn about CCTV, it felt too good. Kicked the gate until steel rattled, soothing his frayed, bare self.

"Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, Alex!" Shouted, punched, slammed, kicked the gate, bins, lamp posts and walls.

He wasn't a victim. Wouldn't let himself get hurled into distress by one narrow-minded arsehole.

Sirens from afar, dogs barking and light coming on in several windows. Tom started to run, away from police, outraged citizens, cameras and destroyed council property. Ran through the deserted town, back up the hill, along the barracks. Ran at top speed, air burning in his lungs, driving out the pain and replacing it with fury. Sped through the army housing and fled along The Lines, to the war memorial at the top of the hill.

Finally, he stopped, overlooking the Medway. Taking in two, three, acidic gulps of air, he shook from cold and exhaustion, yelling at the top of his lungs. "Fuck *you* Alex, not me!"

Weeks.

Of blasting his brains out in every free minute with the most aggressive music Tom could find.

Working out his anger in a punishing routine of endless miles, running early morning and late night; circuit training and cardio until muscles failed; gruelling hours in the gym. Pushing his body beyond the limit and above the breaking point, using physical pain to kill the hurt.

Endless weeks.

Interrupted by weekends off duty, cruising clubs in anonymous cities. London first, then Manchester, Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool, back down to London. Nights spent seeking in greed what he'd never bothered too much about before. Prowling the grounds for sex, scoring a kill every time he went on a hunt. Nameless lust in abundance, safely slaked in back rooms, dark alleys, even public loos, but never in a bed.

Too many weeks.

Gossip abounded about the sudden hostility between two men who used to be best mates, inseparable at all times. Rumours across the barracks, but Tom ignored the curious stares, and refused to comment.

Alex, the motherfucker, got the same questioning looks.

Speculations like grapple hooks, trying to peel layers of silence off either man. To no avail.

Until one day the 'truth' came out. It was all about a girl, apparently.

Ironic, but useful. Alex was a bigoted bastard, but wouldn't blow the whistle. What the fuck held him back? Disgust? Fear of his association with a freaking pervert, if it ever came out? Or, however unlikely, a small scrap of decency.

Sick and perverted.

'One of those who stick their cocks into stinking arseholes'. Funny, though, Tom saw the irony even in that. He had never done much fucking, hadn't seen the attraction in that. Until Alex. Got obsessed with his arse, with burying himself into the large, scarred body.

Bloody irony twice over.

* * *

Training had been hard that day.

The Exercise had taken its toll and the squaddies were crawling up the hill, back to the barracks. It wasn't over for all of them, though.

The grounds were not to be deserted, constant guard duty was part of the three-day exercise.

“Staff Sergeant Turner and Sergeant Warren.” The sharp voice cut through the cold autumn night.

“Yes, Sir!” Precise, from two men, who avoided each other's sight.

“I want you on observation post tonight. Relief will come at twenty-four-hundred hours. Understood?”

Tom figured their CO was aware of the animosities and didn't approve of the ongoing hostilities. He frowned, but there was no way to refuse, least of all when the man sounded as irritated as he did.

“Yes, Sir!” Unison once more.

Shit. *Shit!* Fucking hell and bloody blasted fucking burning fucking hell and shitting fuck altogether! Tom cursed in mindless repetition. Alex really brought the 'best' out of him, and he wanted to paint his annoyance into the other's face with his fists.

He merely saluted their superior, though, once again in goddamned unison. They'd been soldiers for too long.

* * *

An open fronted hut provided the only shelter against the elements. Breath steamed in the frosty night air, and sleet was forecast to come down in the next hours.

Both men were freezing from exhaustion, even though layered in their combat kit, but the black berets didn't cover their ears, and their fingers, while gloved, had been curled around the rifles for too many hours.

“I'll check the other side of the area.” Alex's voice suddenly cut through the darkness.

Eyes never met, and Alex's haste to get away looked like escape to Tom. A male, unable to cope with another alpha male's presence. Primates or lions, intent on killing each other for their territory. Tom couldn't make out what bloody territory that was. Except one's virginal arse.

He wanted Alex to stay away, as far away as possible, or the burning anger would come back like bile rising in his throat. He'd hate him for all eternity for those words. Monster, yeah, right, monster and fag and creep and freak.

Fuck you Alex! Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!

Tom didn't realise he had gone back to the old litany. The same ritual of fuck and Alex and you and fuck again and I hate you, you fucking bastard.

Alone. At last.

One hour. Two hours. It grew colder. Tom stomped his feet, moved from one corner of the shelter to the next. Didn't see a glimpse of the other, thankful for small mercies.

Sleet started to come down in painful icicles, driving onto protective layers and bared skin. The weather used to be unpredictable in this corner of the freaking world, why the hell did it have to play out according to the forecast? Bloody typical.

Tom could see the tall, broad outline of that bastard of a man come back to the shelter. One more hour to go. Sixty flipping minutes standing beside that fuckwit?

But Alex remained silent. Thank fuck, it was bad enough to be aware of the close proximity. Noticing in his peripheral vision that Alex was as freezing cold as himself, and was trying just as hard not to pay attention. Tom could sense the annoyance radiating from the other man.

Dislike. Distrust. Disuse of friendship that Tom once believed in, or had it been a farce even then? He'd obsessed over the bloody bastard and Alex had ... yeah. What? Nothing.

Alex moved, catching Tom's attention despite attempts to ignore him. Forced to acknowledge motions in the corner of his eye. Gloves being stuffed into a pocket, fingers fumbling in another, the raspy sound of a zipper being pulled down, one bare hand slipping between camo layers.

Tom needed to occupy himself, pulled his own gloves off, and checked over his SA-80 with stiff, frozen fingers.

"Want a *fag*?" Out of the dark. A word as icily cutting as the sleet that drummed down onto the metal-roofed makeshift shelter.

Tom whirled round. "You fucking prick!" One bare fist clenched, the other still clutching the rifle to his chest.

"Oh no, you freak. It's not me who's the *fucking prick*." Sneered, Alex's face, that used to be Tom's nightly centrefold, was now twisted into an ugly mask of anger.

"Shut the fuck up or I'll beat the shit out of you!" Tom hissed. Rage, seething and simmering for weeks, about to erupt.

"Yeah? You and whose fucking army? Since when are sissies all manly? Go on, I'm trembling with fear, can hardly hold my rifle."

This time Tom yelled his reply. "Fuck you!"

Alex never managed to counter, when Tom's fist slammed into his jaw, cutting flesh across sharp teeth. Skin burst open like over-ripe fruit.

Blood coloured Tom's knuckles. Left hand still clutching his rifle, the right one shook in fury. The impact of flesh, bone and teeth on his fist made him feel so goddamned *good!*

Alex's hand flew to his bleeding lip, spitting out blood. He dropped the rifle in his fury, committing an unforgivable offence, which shocked Tom long enough that Alex's fist landed with a sickening sound on his temple.

"Fucker! Sick pervert! Fucking homo!" Alex shouted.

Tom stumbled backwards, words reached his mind through the dizzy mist of pain exploding behind his eyes. He lost his beret, ground into the icy mud beneath his boots, as he screamed in rage. Dropped his own rifle, another crime committed. Who gave a fuck! All that mattered was revenge. Killer instincts, both men trained to destroy. Two blood thirsty, howling beasts.

"You fucking bastard! I kill you. *I kill you!*" Tom found his footing and kicked. Black boots connected with bone. Alex's scream of pain satisfied him like nothing else.

Less than a second later, agony erupted in his own chest from the other's merciless fist. Doubling over, Tom failed to breathe, but threw his weight forward, crashing into Alex.

Both men's fists hit, connected with flesh and pounded onto bone. Tearing away at clothes and skin. Beating, punching, kicking. Boots, hands, knuckles bleeding, vision hazy from blood and fury. Breath expelled with animal noises, as the ice-cold air steamed with their grunts.

Both knew what they were doing. How to hurt and wreak damage, break bones, tear skin, bruise flesh.

Both knew, too, how to avoid the worst harm, thus drawing out the fight. One man as blood thirsty as the other.

Tom's fury had been unleashed. He'd kill him. Kill the bastard. Show the motherfucker what a fag could do. He wanted to destroy Alex, but got injured as much in return.

Alex's great weight crashed into him and Tom roared in pain and anger, as he stumbled to the ground. Clinging with scraped hands onto the other's open jacket. He lashed out and kicked as they fell, tried to force Alex off balance, to roll on top. Failed. Had the air knocked out of him when he hit the freezing ground. Muddy sludge seeped into his hair, running down his neck. Tom opened his mouth to scream, but

couldn't fill his lungs. Choking, he pushed and kicked, fighting the body on top of him.

But Alex fought back. Fists pounded into Tom's face and ribs, and Tom's vision was blinded by sleet and mud. No thoughts left but to hurt and *destroy!*

"Bastard!" Tom tried to shout, when air hissed back into his lungs. He pulled up his legs, while an inch shorter than Alex, he was fast and strong, and he threw himself to the side. He managed to slide out from under Alex, gaining enough leverage to kick his knee upwards and into the other's groin.

Seemed to have missed, because Alex's howl of pain was still too human. Hadn't caused as much agony as he wanted to. Won time though, scrambling back onto his knees. Blood ran into Tom's eyes, his face was splattered with mud, but nothing mattered. Nothing, except the instinct to kill, to maim, to *shut him up forever*, to make it stop. Stop the hurt now and once and forever. Never again the addiction, the need, the guilt.

Tom slammed his full body weight with renewed energy into Alex, who had moved up on his elbow, ready to attack once more, but lost his balance, fell onto his back, when Tom gained the upper hand.

Tom's fists pounded into the once handsome face, now caked with blood and mud, eyes veiled with hatred. His triumph changed into pained groans, when Alex took his slightly smaller body into a vice grip. Legs, arms, bodies entangled, Alex squeezed hard, until Tom screamed in agony, fought and failed, was thrown off and into the freezing mud. Ending on his back, Alex rolled with him, the heavier body once more on top, fists poised to pummel Tom's bruised ribs.

Both panting, Tom hurt like a motherfucker, but he'd given as good as he'd got and it wasn't over yet. Alex reared up, came back down immediately, grinding into the body beneath him. Face a mask of hatred, fury, pain, contorted extremes and ...

Stopped. World frozen in suspense.

Nothing.

Tom looked up.

Alex didn't make a sound, except laboured breathing. He had stalled as if shot, with a look of utter shock on his bruised face.

Realisation hit Tom.

Alex forced his hips down, blood trickling from a split lip. Face dirt streaked, bruise-mottled.

Hard cock grinding into Tom's.

Breathing. Heartbeat.

Then.

“Fuck!” Tom hissed between his teeth. Didn't care. Didn't give a damn about the consequences, had to seize the moment. Kill Alex. Fuck Alex. All the same. Wouldn't make a difference. Blind red fury turned into lust. Instantly.

Using the second of surprise, he threw his weight to the side. Arms locked, taking the greater body with him, rolling until he came on top. Grinding his hips into Alex's. Hard, brutal, as aggressive as the kicks and punches beforehand.

Disbelief lingered in Alex's body, trapped with his back on the muddy ground. Tom didn't understand nor cared nor wanted to know why there was still no reaction, only parted lips, harsh, near terror-struck shell-shocked breathing and wide eyed stare.

He came crashing down onto Alex's face with lips and teeth, biting and tearing at the other. Assaulted the mouth, but his tongue conquered unhindered. Didn't have to force himself inside the copper taste of hatred, anger, lust and pain. Sweeping unopposed into the heat, swallowing Alex's distressed groans.

Tom's blood smeared hands held onto broad shoulders. Forcing down, preventing resistance.

Which never came.

Riding the massive body; humping, grinding, wanting, needing, more more *more!* Own cock maddeningly hard. It had been three fucking years and the obsession had grown until it exploded in revulsion some weeks ago. Addicted greed, roughly and viciously taken.

Suddenly a harsh, guttural groan, terrifying in its primal need, when Alex jerked into violent action. Hands clutching, tearing, and Tom's body was abruptly taken, wrapped in strong limbs, held in the other's relentless grip.

Tom's hips bucked up, grinding brutally into Alex's, as he reciprocated in kind. Two men. Wild. Bruised. Bloodied. Hurting. Wanting.

Tom's brain imploded.

Breathing frantically, wretched sounds mixed with sharp pants from Alex, while the air steamed around their desperate bodies. Writhing, clutching at each other's jacket, tunic, belt. Mindlessly thrusting.

Ecstasy.

Alex's growls reverberated in Tom's head as tongue and teeth consumed him, swallowed him, split him open, while he tore the other raw in return. Tasting flesh and blood, icy cold, burning heat, mud, and sweat.

Tom felt strong hands clutching his hips. Was pulled closer, until hip bones and hard cock were forced against his own in the bruising, unforgiving grip. Losing whatever shreds of sanity had remained, when metallic heat filled Tom's mouth at a vicious bite. Swallowing Alex's beast-growls and blood alike.

Tom clawed at Alex's field jacket, fought his way beneath the outer layer, pulled at tunic and t-shirt. Nearly ripping camouflage into shreds while bucking downwards, upwards, legs entangled, knees sliding, grinding across ground, rolling once again.

Didn't matter who was on top, lost in the sensation of hardness and heat.

Tom screamed hoarsely. No meaning, just sounds from blood coated lips and bruised mouth, when final fulfilment invaded his senses in agonising intensity. Imprints, forever. Jolts of hot, white, shafts of lust sliced through his body and mind. Craving. Lust.

Scars!

Tom's hands pawed, pushed, slid over hot flesh, across smooth skin and hardened ridges alike. Animal need. Hard cocks and friction. Must. Have. Alex. Scars.

Scars and guilt and guilt and lust. Sex. Need.

Sounds, names, words, yes, no, what the fuck, yelled into Alex's mouth. Teeth clamped down onto skin, tearing at throat and jaw, Alex's answering scream blew Tom's mind apart. Blinded, lost, frenziedly humping. He had to feel more, tougher, more pain more strength more body more muscles more Alex. Clutching, bruising, tearing into flesh, skin, scars.

Now!

Coming. Hard, complete, everything. No words, unable. Lost. *Alex!*

Tom's head slammed back, hitting the metal wall. Bodies in almost unison spasming, staining combat trousers with cum, as Alex clung to him, forcing their hips tight, bodies crushed in the ferocious grip.

Panting, shallow. Frantic breath calming in cold air.

Shuddering.

Heartbeats racing, aftershocks blinding all thoughts.

Breath.

Slowing.

Oh God. Holy shit. Motherfucking son of a

Alex.

Tom's hands remained connected with heated flesh, trapped underneath Alex's uniform, whose eyes were shut, face blood and dirt

smear, breathing with short pants. When his eyes flew abruptly open, pale blue had turned blood shot.

Shock across the beaten face. Stunned terror. Disbelief. "Fuck!"

Tom didn't move. Didn't dare, didn't want to, couldn't. Frozen. Deer in fucking headlights, but he liked those bright lights, wouldn't mind them to be a head-on train.

Alex jerked away and Tom's hands slipped out of their glorious trap. He felt the loss keenly, as scraped fingers slid along ridged landscapes for the last time.

Alex scrambled onto his knees. Stared down. Lips moving silently, he swayed on his knees, the stricken expression never waned in the swollen face. Staring down at himself and the spreading stain on his crotch. Got to his feet, stumbled backwards, stuck in a silent horror film, while Tom watched, still with his back on the ground.

Alex groped blindly for his rifle, stiff fingers clutching the metal. Hands shaking, then turned. Just fled.

Duty be fucking damned.

Tom watched him vanish into the darkness. Had seen shock, terror, but no repulsion. Clung to this. Moving laboriously to his knees, he hurt so much, wondered how Alex could keep running. Looking at his hands, he shivered in the ice cold wind. They were still warm. Only moments ago they'd been on Alex's body. Uncomfortable dampness was rapidly turning into sticky, cold cum, reminding him of those maddening jolts of lust.

He should hate Alex even more now. Or himself. Best both. Licking his fingers instead that had touched Alex's skin.

"You bastard." Murmured.

It was almost midnight and relief would be here any minute. He'd deal with them; he'd think of an explanation, excuse, or simply the fractured truth. Which was?

Rage, hatred, exploding pain. Hurt, anger. Aggression that turned into lust.

Fulfilment.

Oh fuck.

MISSION IV: ARMISTICE

A week of silence, while purple turned to blue, then faded to green, dying in ochre on both their beaten faces.

They had each been subjected to disciplinary talks, but luckily no action. Their stories remained consistent, mainly by way of silence. What had happened on that duty was obvious for all to see, yet neither man admitted to it.

It seemed that things hadn't changed, until one lunchtime.

“Hey, Tom.”

Tom turned his head towards Alex's voice, disbelief flashing across his face.

“What.” Cold and curt. “What the fuck do you want?” Keeping his voice down, avoiding to draw attention.

“You coming for a pint with me?”

“What?”

“A pint, Tom. Would you?”

Alex's pale eyes didn't remain in one place, his gaze flickering from Tom's face to above his shoulder. Forwards and backwards, like his whole body, which couldn't stay still.

“Why would I want to?” Truth was, Tom didn't know what to say or feel. Except relief, but he refused to admit to that. He had been left alone with the impressions of a sleet-sated night. Imprinted via hands, teeth, taste into his deepest memory. A week, during which jolts of lust had struck like lightning, straight to his cock, whenever he remembered. Tactile memories of his hands digging, clawing, mapping skin and craters of pain. Landscapes of scars and heat. The taste of guilt and blood was sweeter than the cum-sticky release it had brought.

He stood now, confronted with the never-to-be-lost knowledge of what it truly felt like. To be granted what he had carelessly wished for. It left a void: bitter, dark, cold and disgustingly lonely.

Tom wanted to hate Alex. Even more now, than before the guard duty. Wanted to loathe him for creating a weakness: without Alex he would have never tasted the sickeningly saccharine, rotten-apple taste of dependency.

Neither would he have experienced the ecstasy of suddenly *knowing* what a three year long obsession felt like when consumed. Admitting this to himself, however, would be paying the devil his due before his time.

He stared. Eyes hard, full of growing exasperation. Anger felt like a blanket he could find comfort under. “Why the sudden invitation?”

Sarcasm dripped from each of his words. “Because of our last guard duty together? Is that it, Alex?”

Go on, tell me you are traumatized, self-loathing, despising me. For it was all my fault. The freaking fag. Make sure to weave in several times the words ‘poofster’, ‘shitstabber’, ‘pervert’ and ‘creep’.

“Please.” Just one word and Tom's brows shot up. Surprised, but waiting.

“I ...” Alex faltered.

Tom had never seen him at a loss for anything. Wondered if this was anything like the weeks of torture.

No! Don't go there. Dangerous territory. Mine fields that no sweeper would dare set foot on.

“I had time to think.”

Too calm. Alex didn't seem to suffer quite as much as Tom wanted him to. Not enough for what he had said that night. Never enough for making him feel weak and goddamned wanting again. And again.

“Tom, shit, I don't know how the fuck to beg. You want me to? Want me to beg you to listen to me?”

Tom stood, unflinching, studied the other and despised how he lost his hatred for Alex with every second ticking by. Far too easy.

“Just listen. Will you?”

Tom's lips set in a harsh line, unforgiving.

“Look, I want to apologise for the shit I said. And explain.”

Brows raised again. This was new, unexpected, and threatened to throw Tom off kilter.

“For the sake of having been best mates? Just listen to me. Will you?”

Tom finally moved, letting out an angry breath. “I reckon you can stuff your 'best mates' bullshit. Do the words freak, fag, creep, pervert, sicko, and a few other niceties ring any bells? Eh? Do they?” Tom took both hands out of his pockets and crossed them over his chest. The vulnerability that Alex showed turned the bastard back into a human. The human he'd always been, hated or not. Obsessed over or ... there was no 'not'. Obsession had never ceased.

“Yeah, shit.” Alex's answer was toneless. Eyes flickering to the grotesque Indian palace that stood in place of a Victorian building, housing their regimental museum. “I know.” A step forward brought Alex closer. Too close.

Once again Tom found himself slipping into the old, temporarily discarded skin of a snake. Stood transfixed. No, things hadn't really changed.

“I'm aware of how much of an asshole I was. I know.” Alex's voice dropped, fading. Intensity in the few words. “I am so very sorry.”

Emotion in long-missed eyes had found their mark, aimed well and truly at Tom, and he was caught.

Alex was sorry. It was as true as his own truth had been. Tom had no doubts and yet the wariness grew. Perhaps he was afraid to find out the reasons behind Alex's reaction. Maybe he would have to understand, to forgive, to accept, and then the obsession would grow into uncharted proportions.

It could only get worse.

“Listen to what I have to say. Just listen, Tom. No need to talk to me.”

“Alright.” Tom nodded once. “In the pub at seven.”

* * *

Punctual - they'd both been soldiers for too long - they nearly bumped into each other at the door. Flashes of tentative recognition, the usual corner was free and pints were soon bought and on the table.

“And?” Tom sat, brows raised, a line of beer-foam across his upper lip, wiped away the next moment. “Go on.” He wouldn't make it easy.

Alex looked up, stopped wincing, shifting, and just sat still. “Yeah, where to start.”

Large hands wrapped around the pint glass, fingertips touching. It didn't seem easy, but Alex didn't stall. His voice was quiet, careful not to be overheard. “First, I'm not as much of a dickhead as I seemed to be. It never used to bother me, you know, that gay stuff. I was a creep that night. Totally.”

Tom wasn't quite sure what Alex was talking about. The possibility of his former mate having lost his mind after the 'brief encounter' sounded quite likely by now, but then Alex continued.

“What I mean is, the bollocks that I spouted wasn't just plain fucking nasty. It wasn't even what I really think.”

Tom's brows rose even more, remaining silent behind the barrier of ale.

Alex seemed to realise he wasn't making any sense. He shook his head and dropped it down towards his pint. Staring at the increasingly stale brew. Once again those broad shoulders lifted, then sagged in a shrug.

“I'm total crap at talking, should be left to women. They're good at this shit. Fuck, I'm not getting anywhere.” His vacant stare grew in

emptiness as the silence stretched. Stalemate. Trenches dug deep and Alex's white flag hung limp in the dead calm.

Tom watched pitilessly, until the unbidden memories, jolts of lust and tactile impressions stormed to the forefront of his mind. Shit. He had to know. He really did need to know why the hell his erstwhile best mate had turned into the greatest asshole ever.

"I want to understand, alright?" He threw a life line. "I'm useless at that talking shit as well, at least you were married once, you have an advantage."

The blond head nodded. Once. The intake of breath announced a change in scene.

New beginnings with old faults.

"Alright." Alex concentrated on the glass in front of him. "I fucking hated you that moment, when you told me." Not looking up, talking to the beer. "I wanted to cut your fucking guts out for being able to get, take and have all those chicks, but you didn't want them. Weren't interested. That was a sucker punch. A fucking kick in the gut."

Tom's confusion grew, as bad in deciphering the unspoken, as Alex was in talking in subtleties. "But Alex, you could have more birds than you manage to fuck in a night, if you wanted them. I don't get it."

Alex's snort was sharp and angry, like razors scraping over stubble. "Yeah, I could, but what the fuck would I do with them?" Head lifting at last, his eyes turned dark, and Tom realised he had never before seen them like this, even in rage they had kept their luminosity. The retort was at the tip of his tongue, but comments were cut off when confronted with the dry and cynical tone of Alex's next words.

"My wife, that bitch, she didn't leave me for my scars. I told you only part of the truth." His voice had dropped, forcing Tom to lean forward. "Not just for those anyway." Not a hint of self-pity, only slow steps along a sharp knife blade. "No." Another corroded huff, "She left me because I couldn't satisfy her anymore."

"Uh ... what?" What the hell was Alex talking about? Sure, it was pretty obvious, but why? What? Where? What the hell had happened along the way?

"Yeah, you got it." Alex's voice was saturated with painful sarcasm. "I can't get it up anymore."

Closer, he had to lean closer. Tom's elbows slid onto the table, face so near to Alex's he could murmur without fear of being overheard. "That's bullshit. I remember, fuck, I do. You gave proof, plenty of it."

The blond head shook, eyes flashing in reply. “For fuck's sake, why do you think I was so shocked? Because I had just been beating the living crap out of you and having the holy shit beaten out of me, and then ended up rolling round the freezing dirt, getting off by humping you like a bitch in heat? Sorry mate, that's not enough to get me completely off kilter.”

Tom suddenly leaned back, exploded into hysterical laughter.

“What's so fucking funny?” Alex hissed, but Tom continued laughing. Unable to speak at first, bubbles of frenzied chuckles kept slipping past his defences. Alex had no idea, not a clue how bloody hilarious his little speech had just been. How freaking mad in its straightforward brilliance. 'Bitch in heat' holy shit, and what a bitch he was. Or, rather, a son of.

Tom's fingers could still feel the ridges and craters amongst heated skin. Imprinted in 3D and Dolby Surround into his tactile memory. “Sorry. Shit, I'm sorry.” Realising that if he didn't apologise now, it would be too late. Only one chance to hear the full story. “It just sounded sickeningly funny, that bitch stuff, heat, and all the humping business. Sorry. Really.”

“Yeah, guess it did.” Alex replied curtly.

Anger avoided, Tom let dark brown liquid run down his throat. Only now that the first, ugly spell was broken, did he understand that something was truly wrong with Alex. Something he'd never seen before. His empty pint glass thudded back onto the mat, some beer brand advertising on fluffy terry cloth. Rich colours, much warmer than those eyes. Warm like blood. Like flesh. Like fury and sex. “Why. Tell me why. You came back from hospital and were posted to here. That's right, yes?”

Just a nod, then a tilt, a wary look. “Yeah, right. Fucking right that is.”

Both beers were empty, but neither man felt like getting up, maybe to never return to the table again. Alex looked as if he wanted to run, but he remained rooted to the spot. Seemed he'd finish a war he'd started.

“Why?” Asked once more, as softly as Tom could make it. Not used to this type of communication. Not really wanting to venture any further into this talking business either. But he needed to know.

“Why?” Dry and brittle, Alex's voice was like a poisonous snake, coiling across the desert. “I'll tell you why. Because those fucking pygmy wankers of a fucking wannabe dictator in a fucking third rate

dump of a fucking country did something to my fucking brain!” Hissing out every word with suppressed violence.

Tom waited, didn't know what to say, yet realised there was more to come. Watching the white flag being shot to pieces in the artillery fire, and yet it still flew in a wind that had been picking up across the trenches.

“You know the scars.” Alex's voice was thick, words coming in staccato. “Those are not all. Some barely there. Others, invisible. They used steel, rope, fire, but also ...” a falter, for a mere heartbeat, “electricity.” His hand moved towards his chest, then dropped back onto the table. Mission aborted. One shoulder shrugged, the other tensed. “They used electrodes, like in B-rated action movie crap. Didn't know they also had them as metal spikes. Do now.”

Tom was still, leaned forward across the table, listening closely to the explanation. Right now, he didn't understand much at all. Not yet. Fearing a truth he didn't want to hear. Was this what it had been like for Alex? Hearing the truth that he, Tom, was gay, and not wanting to know?

“Where.” One word, encouragement and acceptance.

“My cock.”

Disbelief echoed through Tom's mind, words tonelessly spilling from bloodless lips. “On your *cock*? Holy fucking Christ!”

Alex's second shoulder tensed. Heartbeats suspended, pale gaze fixed. “No. Not on. In.”

Tom had no suitable reply. No words. None would fit. His ashen face conveyed all of his shock.

“Yeah, they fucked me right up.” Whispered. Tom had never heard Alex speak so softly.

Thoughts too horrific to think; images flashing, unbidden, unwanted. Tom waited, terrified of experiencing another spike of sick, guilty lust. But none came. He stared, dry mouthed, and shuddered. Felt cold tendrils of horror wrap around his mind. This was far too much. Too terrible and too impossible. No, he wasn't turned on by this confession. Felt only sick. Was angry, too, so bloody angry, he wanted to go shoot those bastards. Or kill them slowly. How they deserved it. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Would cut their balls off and stuff them down their throats.

This was Alex.

He used to be his best mate, was still a fellow soldier. This man was his comrade in arms. In peace and in war.

It was personal.

Tom's lips moved, but he brought out no sounds. The confession was beyond words, and Alex seemed to understand that silence was the greatest mark of respect Tom could possibly give. What would be the alternative? *'I'm so sorry to hear'?* Or *'Holy fuck, Alex, that's horrible.'* Pathetic attempts at conveying what he really felt. Not pity, not guilt for lust, not sadness, not even anger, but horror.

Tom gazed and the silence kept clinging to his skin.

Alex peeled it off, allowed it to settle, then finished to tell what he had never told anyone before. The army would have made him see a shrink, but he wouldn't have anyone poke in his mind. "Since then, it's how I told you. Couldn't get it up anymore for almost four fucking years." Grimaced. "Don't know what happened out there. With you. Not a goddamned clue." He seemed lost. "Am sorry for the shit I said. I don't give a damn if you're gay or straight. Can we be mates again?"

Thousands of things to reply, points to make, Tom wondered. *'Maybe you're a fag, too. Remember? A week ago ...'*, or *'you got it up alright, so maybe you are ...'*

Bollocks. This man wasn't lying. He really didn't know. Perhaps there were no answers. Forgiveness instead. Besides, he wanted nothing more than to have Alex back. As mate. As ... no, best not go there.

Obsession healed? Bullshit. Worse than ever. He was sick alright, just in different ways to those he had been accused of. He was addicted and he knew it.

"Yeah. Mates again." Tom's hand reached across the table, taken in Alex's firm grip.

That motherfucking smile was back.

MISSION V: GUERRILLA TACTICS

Drunk. Sloshed. Merrily pissed. Both still laughing about a stupid joke they wouldn't be able to retell later, while their voices echoed along the empty corridor. It was almost Christmas and Brompton Barracks was deserted except for a few remaining men.

Including Tom, who had nowhere better to be until Christmas Day, and Alex, who wouldn't visit his aging parents before Boxing Day.

Each man carried a four pack of Murphy's, and Tom fumbled clumsily in his pockets. Laughter turned into mumbled curses, until a helpful hand took the pack of cans out of his own.

"Must ... must have that damned key somewhere." Tom fished about, finally producing the item with a triumphant grin.

"Get on with it, there's 'Universal Soldier' and more beer waiting." Alex pushed into the room once the door was opened.

Bare necessities strung along the fairly short wall of Tom's room. Bed. Small table. Couple of chairs. Telly. DVD. Stereo. Not much to anyone else, but sufficient for a squaddie who had never had his own place. Straight from home into the army. Tom had never felt the need to have his 'own space', content with the room in the Mess. Fairly comfortable. A door, closed. A key, turned. Company if he wanted to. What else did he need?

Unlike Alex. He had been used to living in married quarters, then his own house, and he had stayed outside after his divorce. The biggest chunk of his pay went on the mortgage, the rest on car and motorbike.

"Looks like the evening's entertainment is all set." Alex grinned and dumped the cans onto the table, pulled a couple out of the poly-tops, when one dropped to the floor. "Clumsy idiot." Muttering to himself, Alex opened the first can, then stooped to pick up the one that he had dropped.

"What's up?" Tom was kneeling on the floor in front of the DVD player, right hand fiddling with the controls, left one reaching backwards to grab the can. Proving to no one in particular that even a man was capable of multitasking. Drinking beer. Searching for the disk. Pushing 'play' on the stereo.

Aggressive drum beats, guitar riffs and a harsh language abruptly filled the room.

Alex pulled the tab on the can. "Nothing, I just dropped the ... holy fuck!" Beer shot out in a fountain of foam, spraying onto his head, face, all over his t-shirt.

“Shit!” Alex laughed, drunk enough to find it funny, shaking his head like a wet dog. The can went back onto the table and while Tom turned to look at the commotion, Alex was already stripping out of the soaking wet t-shirt.

Out of his shirt and down to:

His scars.

Tom stared, transfixed as if he had been felled, poised in mid motion. Just knelt and was inexorably drawn to the body in front of him.

Alex pulled the shirt off his head without the slightest measure of self-consciousness and grinned drunkenly, muttering “Damn, and it's bloody cold out there.” He turned his attention towards Tom, who was still on the floor.

Alex seemed to catch the fixed gaze of absorption and came to an abrupt halt. Swayed, ran the hand, that held the soggy wet shirt, through his short hair, then let his arm drop back to dangle listlessly at his side. One hip thrust forward to counteract the gentle rock and roll caused by the booze, he had unknowingly taken on the stance of every ten-quid and glossy gay mag hustler. Cheap or otherwise.

Tom showed no reaction. Beer can hovering in deep-frozen stillness in his clenched hand, eyes glued to the scarred chest. Stared. Swallowed. Cursed beer, fate, life alike.

Cursed Alex. Himself.

Couldn't stop staring. Wanted so much, so hard, so very much at this moment.

Landscape of pain? That wasn't enough to convey the true impact of what he allowed himself to look at.

Un-but-ashamed.

He sat on his heels and gaped, aware of only one sensation beneath and above the visual assault: his treacherous cock pushing against the tight confines of his denims.

“Hey, Tom. Tom!” Alex visibly teetered, between hilarity and, what? Surprise? Curiosity?

A jerk and far-too-loud gulp, followed by the beer can hitting Tom's lips. Dark stout poured mostly down his throat. His eyes still fixed unwaveringly on the bare chest, even when his hand crumpled the now empty can. Threw it behind him, heard it clatter against the CD shelf and fall to the floor. Probably spilling drops of dark brown beer everywhere. Couldn't give a monkey's arse. Grimaced. Grinned, couldn't find the right balance between those two.

Pretending nothing had happened didn't work this time, the way Alex kept silently staring down at him while swaying on his feet. No, didn't work at all. Impossible, even if the pale eyes never dropped further down below, away from scrutinising Tom's face and towards his cock, where it was trapped beneath the row of painfully rigid metal buttons and goddamned noticeable. Even for a thoroughly smashed Alex. Would he care, though?

"Tom!" Alex's frown grew.

"Yeah?" Tom offered at last. Tentative, but the drunken attempt at subtlety showed too much wariness.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Alex didn't move, no matter how much Tom wished for it. Poked and prodded at the wound instead, by merely standing there.

Obsessed. Addicted. Like some pervert. Maybe Alex had been right after all.

"What do you mean?" Tom tried, but failed at playing dumb. Wanted, needed. No excuses, it had always been like that. He could fool Alex perhaps, but not himself.

Thick-as-shit Alex who never seemed to get the hints, or ... damn clever Alex who poignantly refused to see them. Who deliberately didn't react to Tom's desperate attempts to appear normal, who certainly didn't want him, and who wouldn't wish to remember that freezing night of heat, pain, anger and brutality.

And sex. And fulfilment.

"That look. The one you just gave me." Alex's hand flopped about in front of him, wet shirt waving like a flag. "It was ..." Alex continued, then trailed off, frowned and stooped to look into Tom's face. "Hungry. Bloody hungry."

Tom's vision blurred, proximity dangerously close, and he could focus on nothing but those eyes. Too blue, too intimate. And the body? It killed him.

"Like I was a steak and you were starving."

Beer spilt languidly to the floor from an angled beer can in Alex's hand. Drop after lazy drop. Alex didn't notice. Tom didn't give a damn.

"Why did you look at me like that?" Alex remained standing, bent low, close, radiating warmth without touching.

Touching. Heat. Mary Holy Mother of

Tom had tried that prayer before. Hadn't helped then, wouldn't now. He swallowed, another painful gulp of dried up saliva forced down a tight, constricted throat. Funny, he should be salivating instead.

“Hungry.” Tom repeated the one word, as if he could hit the rewind button of life and stall long enough for Alex to forget his question.

“Yeah, hungry.” Alex confirmed.

It wasn't to be rewound, then. Fast-forward instead, though Tom felt more like having been stuck on 'pause' for the past viscosly moving minutes. Time to stop playing the dumb moron and take the jump instead. What was it to be? Deep water and drowning, or shallow tides and breaking his neck? Either way he put his chances at nil.

Live fast, die young, and jerk off every night to the tune of AlexAlexAlex in your head.

“Why do you think? 'Coz I'm a fag, remember?” Adrenaline pumping, chasing the clouds away into painful clarity. That face. This body. Those scars. “A poofter. Gay.” A sharp intake of air. “Rings a bell?” Tom held his breath.

“Yeah ...” Alex didn't blink, just kept staring at Tom's face which had changed in the process. It was wary now. “Can you do that again?”

Tom frowned, figured Alex was beyond drunk, though he hadn't counted the pints. “Do what?”

“Look at me like that. That was ...” Alex searched for the right word, blinked into the distance, “Different. Do it again.”

“Fuck off.” Sudden temper boiled up from nowhere. Tom had forgotten for how long it had been simmering. Not anger, but frustration. Intrinsicly the same, the moment the valve opened and everything blew up.

“Stop taking the piss and get your fucking shirt back on!” Tom didn't know where his sudden shove upwards, against Alex's chest came from. The heat of skin touched his palms for a nanosecond, and he watched how the other stumbled backwards, sloshed beer all over the room, but still wouldn't let go of the can.

Alex caught himself and straightened back up. Tall and imposing in the small room despite the slight sway. Staring at Tom as if he were an alien life form. Something new and strange, studied under a fairly drunken and distorted microscope, which was slowly being adjusted back into focus. He raised his drink and finished the remainder of the ale. Crumpled the can in his hand while looking, silent.

Tom was transfixed, as always. Full of anger about himself, his weakness, and why he couldn't just up and go and kick Alex out. Remained instead sitting on his heels in front of the telly, looking up as if studying a priceless statue from antiquity.

“Can you do that again?” Alex asked once more, throwing Tom off balance.

“What? Do what? Stare? Do the hunger shit? *Or what?*”

His irritation had no visible effect upon Alex. None at all. The statue stood, scrutinising, studying the alien-bug and growing quieter with every passing breath. Time suspended, kept on the 'pause' button, until the next words were spoken with less precision than a sober man and more definition than a drunk one.

“Can you make me hard again?”

“Wha...?” Tom's turn to gape, falling backwards and onto his arse, he hit the mute telly screen behind him. He stared at Alex, decided he wasn't sober after all and all of this was some stupid pisstaking on his goddamned own behalf. “If that's a fucking joke I'm going to beat the shit out of you.”

“No, tell me. Can you?” Calm gaze tinged with curiosity and fascination. With something else as well. Something Tom didn't want to see because it gave him hope, and hope was cruel and dangerous.

He opened his mouth to spout out his curses.

Deflated. Sagged.

“I don't know. Doesn't depend on me, does it?” Tom took a deep breath, raised his hands and let them drop-dangle from his knees. Half-covering evidence between his legs that had already been exposed. Somehow he didn't even want to cover up. There had to be an end to all of this and the shallow waters hadn't smashed his bones yet. “In case you're wondering, I'd do anything right now to get my hands on you.” he grimaced. “Yeah, that's me. Sergeant Tom Warren, the needy slut.” A wry grin cut across his face in a semblance of pained humour.

Weaving on his feet, Alex frowned, then looked for the next can while idly rubbing the damp shirt across his chest, removing the last splashes of beer.

Movements that were followed by Tom's eyes. Drawn to the gesture, as he knew he would be.

"Cut the crap. Tell me why." Alex kept staring.

Tom let his head fall back against the shelves behind him, knocking DVD cases off. He closed his eyes and pictured a dilapidated swimming pool. Dry, no water, rusted railings, leaf-covered, cracked tiles and him standing at its edge. Three meters down, was that enough to break his neck? He had no choice, he had to answer. Would the truth be a killer once more?

“Your scars.” Eyes still closed, steeling himself against the inevitable outrage.

“They turn me on.” Felt, heard and saw bones breaking and splintering, impacting onto the pool ground. “I’m a sick bastard alright. Just not quite as straightforward as you thought I was.”

Alcohol helped to draw a faint fog across his mind, but Tom still would not open his eyes. Waited to hear footsteps that came indeed, only a few seconds before he could sense Alex standing close to him. No, he didn't want to see. Couldn't bear it. His secret, out at last and so goddamned un-spectacular. Just a few words in an entirely inappropriate setting.

What a fucking anti-climax.

“My scars?” Strange sound in Alex's voice, something spiky and jumping. “My bloody scars?”

Confusion tugged at Tom's blinded vision and at the corners of his deserted mind. Turning into fully fledged disbelief at the sudden outburst of Alex's laughter. Just as absurd as his own eruption of nonsensical hilarity had been, back in the pub.

Tom finally opened his eyes and saw Alex laughing, blond head thrown back.

“Fucking hell, my scars! Goddamned scars!” He chortled until Tom's eyes widened enough to stare in downright incredulity at the black clad legs in front of him, travelling up to the rest of the madman. What the fuck was going on here?

“Why, Tom, what is it about them? My ex-wife, the bitch, she hated them, never wanted to say so, but I knew. I just bloody well knew she that loathed them, was repulsed by them, wouldn't touch them. They're ugly, I know they are motherfucking ugly and disfiguring and I can't stand them, and you get horny seeing them?” Hysteria was turning into something sharp, dangerous.

Tom swallowed. No rest for the wicked. Imagined a concrete block smashing onto the splayed-out figure on dirt encrusted tiles, lying with broken legs at the bottom of the dried out pool.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do. Don't know why nor how, it just is. I know I'm a fucking pervert. Never meant to tell you. Jesus fucking Chris, Alex, forget about it, will you?”

“How could I.” Alex moved forward, his laughter fading. Cease fire across the trenches. “You get turned on by something I fucking hate. How can I forget that?” Lowering to his knees, he sat right in front of Tom, who just stared, as was his usual wont. A rabbit frozen in the approaching headlights. If he lifted one of his hands, he could touch Alex. Too close. One touch and it would most likely kill him. Scarred skin as effective as poison.

Alex's face was on almost the same level as Tom's, still clutching the damp shirt. "Do you want to know what it was like?" Quiet voice, yet audible across the battlefield. "I can't stand those scars, because they aren't just ugly. They remind me of my fear."

Tom stared, Alex raised a hand, silencing lips that did not dare speak.

"That's right, I was frightened. Of every moment, every footstep, every sound coming towards my cell. I knew what would happen when they came to take me out and I couldn't stop it. If I had known anything, had any secrets to tell, would I have blabbered? Fuck, yes! I would have told them everything. Just to make them stop. Looked real good for it all to end, to just finish, in any way shape or form. Ever thought of hell? Ever pictured it? Trust me, it's a lot more terrifying than you can imagine." Alex moved an inch closer, lowered his face to perfect level with Tom's. "Did you ever wonder if I thought about suicide? Hell, yeah, and guess what ..." His sentence trailed off, suspended in stillness.

Leaving Tom to freeze, fearing what would follow. Maybe he had been wrong all along about Alex..

"I didn't do it. Seems I fought to live, had too much stubbornness left. Though I doubt I would have succeeded anyway, they wouldn't have let me die. Still, I guess I fucking won in the end." Alex paused, looked straight into the widened eyes before him, "But I'd be fucked if it felt like that." Studying Tom's face, the slightly parted lips.

Guilt painted Tom's features. Dishonour from lust he could not help, nor stop, nor understand, but Alex smiled, inexplicably, and he dropped his voice to just above a whisper, quietly intensive. Each word held ten times more impact than a shout. "Is that what turns you on?"

Tom's mouth opened, closed again, silent mimicry of a fish on land. Bright-hot-red coloured his face, blood rushing into his head and yet remaining in equal parts in his arousal. Guilt. Shame and ever more shame, of being turned on, even now, while listening to the tale.

Turned on by what? The horror? The fear? The helplessness? The pain? The pure abject terror and dismal hell?

No!

"Yeah." Tom's bloodless lips spilled out the final remains of his secret. "Scars. Your ... what you survived. I'm ... I'm sorry. Shit." He was mortified that the damned hard-on was still condemning him, as if it would never again vanish, not with Alex so close, looming over him. Not with those mental images the other's words had conjured up.

But Alex grinned once more. Unexpectedly. Face splitting into a smirk, hitting Tom with its sheer unpredictability. Tom, who sat tense and crouched, watching in disbelief how the grin spread, widened, changed quality and turned feral, showing teeth.

“You're a sick bastard.” Alex stood back up, straightened and turned with a mere hint of drunken swaying.

Leaving Tom bereft of his presence and of the last vestiges of hope. Convinced that his final judgement had just been petered out. He sagged against the telly and closed his eyes with a groan. Surprised at the next, equally unexpected words and the sound of another beer being opened.

“What about that DVD, and I like that music. It's extreme. You're right about the aggressive beats.” Alex's comment was conversational, like one of the offhand remarks during their usual banter.

“What the fuck?” Tom mouthed in silence, refusing to turn his gaze towards Alex. He admitted defeat. He was lost and didn't know jack shit anymore. Unable to face the scarred back, he knew that even now, nothing had changed. Despite the confession. Beaten by his own inner enemy. Defenceless against his own lust. He was a soldier, but with a record of constant defeat on the battlefield of Alex's body.

He was a sick bastard.

Alex was straight.

He was gay.

He'd never get him.

Tom stood up slowly. Moved from a crouch to his knees, finally back up onto his feet. Wondered when the concrete had been lifted from the shattered carcass in his mind. He turned in a trance to fiddle with the DVD. Who gave a shit about the film now? Cranked up the volume on the stereo. Brutal beats pulsing into the small room, guitar riffs tearing on soul and mind, harsh, hard language roaring in unleashed aggression, hitting him right down there.

Where he didn't want to be.

Movements like an automaton. A puppet, jerking on Alex's strings.

Ten. Nine. *Insanity.*

Eight. Seven. *What the fuck.*

Six. Five. *Listening to drum beats.*

Four. Three. *Forgetting the hurt.*

Two. One. *Rustling behind, not wanting to see Alex put the damn shirt back on.*

Zero. *Fuck his stupid, traitorous, treacherous cock, sick mind and insane desires alike.*

Lift-off.

“Tom.” Alex's voice came out of the blue, shockingly close behind him. He had crept up, or maybe Tom had been lost in a blinding haze. Angry with Alex for, yeah, for what? For being himself, which made Tom want him. Badly, so goddamned painfully badly.

He swivelled round to face Alex. Stared open mouthed in utter shock, confronted with stark, blinding nudity.

“You want scars?” Alex reached for Tom's wrists, crushed them in a vice grip. He didn't meet with resistance, only with disbelief. A mirror image and mockery of Alex's own, a month ago, on an ice-cold sleet-filled night, filled with blood and aggression. “You can have scars.”

Tom's hands were forced against Alex's scarred chest. Palms connecting with tortured flesh and he let out a pained sound.

Floor, walls, room vibrating with violent drum beats, ears ringing with the shouting-singing voice, while Alex's heartbeat increased underneath Tom's hands.

“Make me hard again.” Demand. Request. Permission.

“What?” It took less than a second for Tom to explode. All dreams had just come true, but instead of throwing himself onto Alex, he fought and struggled violently to get away from him. “You think I'm your fucking whore or what? You think here I am, drooling after you, licking my own saliva off your fucking boots and ready any damned moment *you* might decide to throw the poor starving stupid dog a bone?”

He fought, but Alex had more bulk and while Tom was strong and angry, his hands were still pressed against that chest.

Alex said nothing. He just looked, his pale gaze scrutinising.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Tom shouted. So angry, angry, *angry* now. Angry with Alex, angry with ... with ... himself! More than anyone or anything else and he hated to be forced to admit this. “*Who* do you think you *are!*” He yelled into Alex's face, fuming, but shaking with desire, want, lust. Greedy to let go of the last scraps of his dignity and allow the need that had been building up all night long; that had been driving him increasingly insane in the last three and a half fucking years, and that no one, never, nowhere, was ever meant to know!

“I'm Alex.” The reply was too calm, too quiet, too composed.

He'd show that bastard, Tom swore, would force him to lose his composure, would make him writhe and scream and groan and pant again.

“Your best mate. Remember?”

And that meant what? Tom couldn't fight himself nor Alex, neither the offer nor his wants. Least of all the ever consuming knowledge of what it was all about, in the end.

Trust.

“Shit!” Forced out between clenched teeth, Tom's struggle ceased. All he wanted was right there, underneath his palms, holding him instead of pushing him away and he couldn't help it, couldn't fight it and just wanted it. So much. So goddamned much. “You bastard!”

Desperation, for knowing his weakness and realising there was nothing at all he was able to do. No way he could stop this, and with a growl Tom stepped forward. His teeth tore into muscles, scars, flesh and warm skin. Biting cruelly below the collarbone, satisfaction when Alex let out a deep, pained groan. But Alex didn't pull away, instead stepped even closer. No space now between one naked and one clothed body.

“Bastard!” Tom hissed against the rapidly bruising skin, “I'd do any-fucking-thing and you know it!”

No smug answer, no grin, just a moment of perfect passiveness, when Alex let his head fall back and presented his throat in the age old gesture since life on the planet began. Baring his neck for the kill. A moment, suspended in time, until he let go of Tom's wrists, growling low. “Yeah, I know.”

That was all it took. Realisation of what was important beyond Tom's fears and weaknesses. Of trust, of friendship, of not needing to be ashamed of being the dependant one. Alex was his right now. Tom didn't give a flying fuck anymore what that made him. Whore or idiot, friend or addict. Tom's teeth sunk into scarred flesh along the hard, pronounced chest. That was all that mattered. Fuck the consequences.

At last. His hands snatched forward to claw and tear at Alex, while he bit down hard into the scars over thick, heavy muscles, until Alex's husky groans were coloured with pain and growing aggression. Tom pushed forward, forced the naked body off balance until Alex stumbled, lost his balance despite holding onto Tom, but his calves hit the metal bed frame regardless.

Finally woken by pain, passiveness turned to aggression, action. Pushing back, stumbling across the small room with each man clinging onto the other's body, tearing at skin or cloth, crashing into chairs, then table.

Alex on top now, and Tom cried out in anger and lust. His foot connected with bone and Alex howled against the eardrum-splitting riot of guitars, drums and guttural shouting-singing voice alike.

Fighting. Like the first time. Memories of ice-cold-heat. Hatred now burnt away, replaced by carnal desire. Kicking, hitting, punching. Hands digging into skin, holding onto flexing muscles. Pushing away and forcing closer until cloth tore, giving access to Tom's smooth chest. Unblemished skin pressing into, then forced away from scarred landscapes of strength and survival. Only to be clutched tightly once more.

They stumbled, two bodies intertwined in mindless passion fuelled aggression. No hint of lovers, not even friends, but the guise of enemies. As much fighting for, as against the other.

Tom's cock still trapped in his denims, he ground against Alex's thigh, hips, groin, while sucking brutally on a nipple. Hunger! He didn't coax lust, didn't ask for it. Demanded it. Forced it from Alex.

Gained a sudden response.

Felt hardness against his own, rewarding him for his recklessness, his honesty, and the admission of his needs. Alex's lust as payment.

Tom tore at the buttons that trapped his cock, while crashing against furniture and walls, noise drowned out by the wild beating of music. Their cocks crushed against the other, and the contact shot vicious jolts of heat-stoked lust into Tom. A deep groan escaped Alex's chest, when Tom's hand wrapped in demanding certainty around both their cocks, grinding the combined hardness together. Creating unbearable friction and heat.

Alex scrunched his eyes shut, sweat beads gathering on his forehead. Grimacing as if in pain, pushing against Tom, who got caught in the half discarded denims, and they stumbled backwards. Both bodies lost balance. Never letting go of the other's arms, torso, legs, cock, muscles, and skin, they crashed against the bed frame.

Tongues, lips, teeth, each man consumed cries of pain from the other's mouth. Not letting go, even when they crashed together onto the floor. Prey and predator, both and each. Bruising, sending objects flying, unnoticed. Noise swallowed by music, which hammered and drilled into their minds along with the violent strokes to the rhythm of punishing guitar riffs.

Bodies crushed in blind aggression, forceful kissing, fierce grinding of hips. Rocking, pushing against and rubbing along their combined cocks in Tom's hand. Faster, harder. Men, as tough as their greed. Strength forcing lust. Closer, speeding up, towards the edge, teetering on the precipice of the final heat and demand and fulfilment and pain and ...

Alex reared back and screamed out in abandon. Long-lost ecstasy slammed into his body, struggling on the edge of ultimate pleasure, before mindlessly grinding into Tom. Clawing at the body, writhing on the floor, he came into Tom's hand, spilling cum across the smooth chest.

Tom's eyes were wide open, staring blindly, lips parted in a silent shout that never went beyond a strangled groan. Coming while bucking wildly into Alex, humping the other's cock with his own, adding to the mind-numbing overload of both their climaxes combined. Hearts hammering, arms clutching, bodies shuddering.

Alex. GodohGodohGod Alex! Tom's first thought when brain function slowly resumed. Lying panting on the floor, partly buried under the great weight, legs tangled in the trousers around his ankles.

Tasted, smelled, felt nothing but *Alex*.

Silence except for laboured breathing. Tom turned his head to focus on the face beside him. Saw the utterly satisfied look. He had never before seen Alex so completely relaxed.

Awkward, though.

Strange and new situation. Unlike the shell-shocked moments after the explosion of hatred, some weeks ago. Silence. Alex lay breathing, his face expressionless.

What. Now.

Tom moved, grunted something about sticky cum, tight denims, the need to wash. No reaction from Alex, only the heaviness of his limbs, pushed and pulled as Tom fought out from beneath the body-trap. Struggling out of the remaining clothes, his shirt was torn, hanging from his shoulders. Nudity was suddenly different and full of connotations. Never before had he felt out of his depth, but suddenly uncertain. Unknown. Unplanned. Un... No. Wanted. He had been wanted.

Alex. It would only get worse. Had him. Wanted him again. Right now. Tomorrow. Every day and night.

He would have to say something soon, but he couldn't right now. Running away from the scene of slaughter instead, where predator and prey had been lying entangled. Thankful for the music that kept beating insanity across the room, drowning out the sound of water from the wash basin, and the wet splash as the towel landed on Alex's cum splattered chest. Earning himself brief flashes of a non-committal smile and recognition in pale blue eyes that finally opened.

“Cheers.” Huskiness in Alex's voice, followed by movement on the floor as the towel removed the proof of lust. Mind shattering and hard fought for.

Tom was sore. Fresh bruises started to ache and he knew the following day they'd blossom on his skin. Reminders of Alex. His body, his scars, his lust, and most of all his hard cock.

Alex's voice startled Tom out of his thoughts.

“What's that music anyway? It's good, never heard anything that aggressive. That ‘singing’ sounds like someone is growling and shouting orders on a WWII battlefield.” Alex seemed just as ever. Nothing had happened. Not a thing. Just. Normal. Same old, same old. Chatting like mates.

Grinning tiredly, Alex rested with his back against the metal bed frame. Quite unabashedly naked.

Tom forced his eyes to fix on a spot above Alex's shoulder, or he wouldn't be able to answer the question.

“Rammstein. Look on the CD cover. They are German.” Tom pulled himself up onto the narrow bed, did a damn fine job of appearing just as normal as Alex, as if this were the most natural thing in the world and they hadn't just wiped their combined cum off their bodies. Pretending there wasn't a never-ending litany in his mind right now.

Alex. Alex. I had sex with Alex. Alex, holy shit, Alex!

“Shame I don't understand the lyrics, I was told they are sick, twisted and perverted.” Tom shrugged, forced himself to grin while beating the triumphant and greedy voice in his head down to near silence.

Alex! I had Alex! Want him again, must have him again.

“They are abso-fucking-lutely hot if you like that sort of arrogant bastards. Which I do like. Surprise, surprise.” Tom turned onto his side, watching the broad back, the strong neck and immediately wanted to bite hard and unforgivingly into the muscles that bunched, pulled and flattened again, when Alex craned his head backwards to look at Tom.

Relaxed, even amused, Alex seemed to completely ignore what had just happened, as if life had never derailed for an hour. Making conversation. “How the heck did you find out about them?”

Tom watched how Alex scratched idly at the vividly coloured bite just above his collarbone, and heat instantly pooled in the region of his groin. That wouldn't do. Deciding that some deflective action was in

order, he looked for his shorts. Rummaging around on the shelves beside the bed, he pulled one out of the neatly folded pile.

“Someone played it for me, got hooked after that.” Tom waved a negligent hand into Alex's direction, choosing to keep the full extent of information classified. How he had sat on the back seat of an old, jazzed-up Jag, trousers down, knees open, with the owner of the black car kneeling between the front and backseat, giving him one of the most remarkable blow-jobs of his life. It had been the music beating mercilessly into his brain, in the same rhythm as the violent sucking, which had burnt the memory so deeply into his mind.

Alex made a curious motion with his head, interpreted by Tom as a nod. “I got to go.”

“Yeah, it's late.” Tom's answer was equally non-committal, if Alex was to do the ignoring, he'd play the same tune. He couldn't bear to sound needy.

What a joke, because he was needing.

That voice in his head, the one that hadn't been silenced by exhaustion, nor by aches and bruises, that one kept repeating the same lines over and over, unwilling to let go.

Had him. Had Alex. Want Alex. Again and again. Going mad with wantingwantingwanting him!

Tom was glad he was wearing the shorts. Knowing, if he weren't so physically sated, he'd already be hard again.

Alex turned around along the side of the bed until he ended sitting on his hip, chin resting on the mattress.

“Hey, Tom.” He lifted his blond head, smiling tentatively. “You want me, I got that now.” He flashed a grin, but before Tom could roll his eyes or react in any way, shape or form, Alex went on. His grin turning back into a somewhat hesitant smile. “If I wanted you to want me again at some stage, would you want me then?”

Tom blinked, it took a moment for his well-satisfied mind, which still lingered on the vestiges of inebriation, to catch on. Fact was, Alex had just asked him if he'd be willing to do this again. There was no room for misinterpretation.

Tom's face morphed into a grin. He let himself fall back onto the mattress and laughed, not hiding the relief as tension fled. “Hell, yeah.”

The voice in his head was silent.

Tom hadn't felt so knackered and yet so highly strung in months. Every muscle in his body hurt. He wondered, while dragging himself across the tarmac towards the deserted museum building, how anyone less fit would feel.

The evening was dark and cold. Endurance training had taken all day and they'd just handed in their packs. Forty-five pounds for every soldier, consisting of complete webbing, bergan, rifle, personal arms and full ceramic-plated body armour, compo food rations, first aid medical kit and anything else they might need to survive on a mission during combat.

The shattering day was over at last but sweat still clung to Tom's body, his underwear drenched beneath the uniform, and he was hot despite the breath-steaming cold. Trying to get his field jacket off, he fumbled awkwardly with the zipper. His fingers ached, he had been clutching his weapon for seemingly endless miles, running across difficult terrain. Slipping the jacket off, he flung it over his shoulder, letting out a sigh of relief when the night air hit his damp tunic.

Tom spotted a tall, broad outline in the darkness, only a few yards in front of him. The silhouette belonged to Alex, he'd know him anywhere and in any given, even adverse, situation. Comrades in arms. Comrades, too, in close-combat of a more unusual type. For one year now, there had been times when Alex wanted Tom to want him, and Tom obliged, leaping at any chance for sex.

One year of getting to know Alex and his fucked-up mind when it came to fucking. After all these months, Tom was convinced he knew him better than Alex knew himself.

"Hey." Tom called out when he got closer, catching a whiff of fresh sweat, body heat and the unique scent of Alex. His exhaustion immediately gave way to something else.

Alex stopped, waited for Tom to catch up, though he hadn't been anywhere near his usual stride to start with.

They were heading towards the rear of the museum building, to take the shortest route through the guarded back-gate. Every step a step too many, but they had to get to a shower, food and bed. If it were up to Tom, not necessarily in that order. Food didn't even figure in the equation. Shower would still come first, then sleep. Unless ... Alex's

body heat and musky scent became too intense the longer he walked beside him.

Tom's thoughts veered off for the span of the next dozen steps.

Tom had learned a few secrets in the past year about Alex's impotence, but he wouldn't tell him, not in a million years. The situations Alex got hard despite his screwed mind?

Passiveness.

After the last time they'd had sex both men had been wearing the bruises and feeling the aches, scrapes and bites for days afterwards. Reminders of Alex's need to fight and ultimately to surrender, and of Tom's willingness to be predator and prey alike.

Neither admitted to how this happened, though.

Alex had submitted to Tom's greed and never-sated desire. Had stood, frozen for a second, before Tom closed in, took what he wanted, inflicted pain and fed violent hunger, emphasising how much he wanted Alex and how non-negotiable his demands were.

Then, and only then, had Alex reacted, his body preparing for the fight, muscles tensing, and his cock hardening to return Tom's demand with beast-like growls and brutal strength. They'd been fighting for supremacy, and only after each man had fought - lost and won - did they come.

A survivor's submission, but Tom would never tell.

“Damn black tonight, no moon.” Alex’s tired voice carried an odd timbre. The pale eyes luminous in the darkness.

“Yeah, new moon.” Tom answered, walking side by side. Two men, fatigue and dull pain like a suffocating blanket over their aching bodies. Nevertheless, Tom began to steer them closer towards the building. Soreness and exhaustion, in combination with the strong scent of pure Alex – sweat, blood and heat - were toxic, addictive and made Tom's mind spin towards the only possible thought: Sex.

They were entering the furthest shadows of darkness behind the building. The path was worn, but deserted tonight. Chances for anyone passing were slim, though never impossible.

“You doing anything tonight or just crash?” Alex's voice gave proof to his struggle to simply keep walking.

“Crash, definitely. I’m pretty beat.” Tom was painfully aware of the scent of sweat, the sensation of body-heat, and the proximity of the man beside him. He took another step and then another. His gaze flicked to the side, noticing how Alex nodded with a grunt.

No sounds to be heard except their own breathing, quiet voices and weary footsteps. No one around, at least not right now. Tom felt a surge of images and ideas hit his brain, travelling in lightning-speed to his groin and taking possession of his thoughts.

He had been jerking off to the tune of Alex, lust, Alex, blood, Alex, taste, Alex, need, Alex, pain, Alex, want-so-goddamned-much, whenever he had not been wanted to want him. Too many times he'd imagined Alex in uniform, on duty, willingly under his hands. Picturing the massive body lost in ecstasy, while the threat of exposure was hanging over their heads like the sword of Damocles. Danger as aphrodisiac.

Only a few more steps and they'd be leaving the darkest area. He'd have to act quickly. It was his turn to play the tune now, instead of simply dancing along with it. Here. Now. Sweat-drenched. Exhausted.

Tom hurled himself to the side, into Alex, and was rewarded with a grunt of surprise and a muffled shout of protest, when first Alex's shoulder, then his back hit the brick wall hard, slammed into the building.

“What the fuck?”

No time for explanations. Tom's body followed, crashed into Alex's the very next moment. Whispering in a husky voice. “Just shut up, you don't want to draw attention. Right, mate?”

Tom's assertiveness stunned Alex into silence and stillness. Enough time for Tom to force aching, stiff fingers to open the zipper and velcro of Alex's field jacket, his own already on the ground behind him.

His breath was steaming in the cold air, coiling against camo patterned high-tech material. Managing to yank tunic and t-shirt out of trousers and pants, before Alex reacted at last and demanded, keeping his voice low: “What the fuck are you doing?”

Yet Alex remained where he was, back pressed against the cold bricks. He could have easily pushed Tom away, do something, anything, but merely stood. Passive. For another moment frozen in the tell-tale stillness of his never-mentioned but needed submission. Allowing the other to tear on cloth and pull open button and zipper of his trouser fly.

No erection, not yet, but Tom knew with absolute clarity what he was doing. Realisation had hit him at last, and he'd find the point of no return, the one that forced Alex to react.

“I said, shut up!” Tom's voice was low, but intense. His stubbly cheek rubbed against Alex lips, feeling the sharp intake of the other's breath more than hearing it. The scent of sweat and musk and simply

man so strong he could come from just that. “Let me.” Reiterated command. “Be silent.”

No reaction, when Tom's hands pushed tunic and shirt higher up, exposing scarred, damp skin. Still nothing, not even when Tom's hand slipped deep into Alex's open trousers. Finally, when he squeezed hard between Alex's legs, a groan, jolt and strangled hiss. “Jesus. Fuck. Tom!”

Tom didn't answer, honing straight in for the kill. Lowering to one knee, head lifting, he swiped his tongue across the ridges of scars and smooth skin alike, tasting the salty essence of physical exertion. Licking sweat off the muscular chest, bent on forcing lust out of the great body and fucked-up mind alike. His hand moved again, fingers closing around Alex's cock, and Alex thumped his head back against the wall while muttering curses underneath his breath. Shuddering in a seemingly endless succession of ache and stimulation, while Tom's tongue laved skin, alternating with teeth scraping scars, then suddenly sucking and chewing hard on a nipple. Causing pain and demanding lust in return. Not asking, always insisting.

Alex reacted at last. It was sudden and violent.

Pushing Tom's beret out of the way, Alex's fingers tightened in the short hair, and he pulled Tom's head off the maltreated nipple. Dragging him upwards to stand, before diving into his own assault. A hungry, aggressive kiss. Fear of detection, exhaustion, desperate need for rest, Tom's demanding hunger, their sore bodies drenched in sweat, all of this combined into a potent aphrodisiac.

Tom was grinding against Alex's massive thigh, while his hands forced lust from the body that always reacted a hundred times more violently and intensely than any other man Tom had ever encountered. Their teeth, tongues, lips were once more attacking. Devouring in insatiable hunger, leaving bruises and cuts, while stubble scaped against skin.

Tom suddenly pulled back. “Who's the sick bastard now?” He whispered huskily, grinning, his heart racing in the same speed with which his desire mounted. He needed something new now, something he'd wanted for a long time, but never felt appropriate. Never dared to do for fear Alex would look at him with contempt. What an idiot he had been.

He didn't leave Alex the time nor space to react except for a choked “Oh shit!” when he slid along the shuddering body, once more onto his knees, pulling trousers downwards to expose the coveted,

finally hard cock. Cursing himself for having been so abysmally stupid before.

If that's what he wanted, then that's what he'd have. Salivating at the perfect size, shape and proportion in front of his eyes. Smooth and blood-veined, the hardness a heady price. Alex's erection was for him. Caused by him, only him, and he took what was his, after inhaling the sharp musky scent with a beast-like growl.

"Mine!" He needed to taste and feel. All his desires crystallised into one object: Alex's cock. This essential part of him that Tom craved to taste, his cum, wanting to swallow the essence of the other. This would make him far more into the 'fag' than anything else he'd done with Alex all year long. And he didn't give a flying fuck.

Tom moved in for the first taste and lick, dragging his tongue down the whole length, feeling Alex tremble at his touch. Revelling in the reaction while his hand was firmly wrapped around the base. Didn't give a toss about what the craving, needing, the utter absolute *want* for this cock made him into. It didn't matter. It only mattered what he wanted, and that was to suck Alex's cock as far deep down into his throat as he could.

To worship it.

Tom felt a jolt of lust slam into his stomach, contracting to a tight, burning knot. He groaned and moved his head forward to take in, take down, taste to the beyond-bearable.

He heard and felt Alex jerk violently, knees buckling for a moment, expletives forced out under his breath. Obvious disbelief at the tight heat, the intense friction and depth. Alex's hand flexed harder into Tom's short hair and small pain spiked along the vast horizon of Tom's large scale lust. His head wasn't guided, but held in a vice grip. Possessiveness above and below.

Mine. His. Holyfuckingshit. Alex!

Tom pulled back, only to slam his head down again, onto the craved-for, the needed and wanted cock. Not giving a damn anymore about what the fuck Alex might think. Forcing the cock deep down his throat. Blind greed, his mind drowning in sensations.

Alex's great body was shuddering, trembling and equally wanting. Overwhelmed.

Tom's left hand dug hard into Alex's hips, the right one remained curled around the base of the cock. Abruptly speeding up his stroking-suction, mercilessly forcing lust. He was suddenly overcome by such a thought-eradicating fixation, that his entire being was centred in the cock down his throat. Lips firmly closed around the intrusion, tongue

moving, flattening, working, sucking. Scents assaulting his senses with musk, heat, Alex. So male, so motherfucking *male*, no man had ever hit the same base animal instinct to devour, take, own, as Alex had.

Movement from above, Alex's hand tightened surreptitiously in Tom's short hair, painfully tugging on his scalp, making him groan in desperate greed against the cock in his throat.

Tom felt more than heard how sounds tried to escape Alex's throat, saw him shove his fist between his teeth to muffle the sounds. Tom's hand dropped to his own fly, fumbled, found, took and stroked. Desperate, punishing strokes of his own cock in time with sucking the other's.

Deeper. Harder. Forcing.

Owning. Possession.

Owning.

His!

Tom strained to push the cock faster and deeper down his throat, fighting the gagging reflex. His hand replaced by lips, when he got his head further down than he'd believed possible. It was never enough, he needed more. Tighter friction, harder sucking, until he felt tremors turn to violent shudders, wrecking Alex's body that tensed against the wall. Tom stroked himself so fast and violently, pain became lust, and lust wanted ever more pain.

Suddenly assaulted by the tightening hand in his hair, pulling hard. His cry was muffled by the cock, sending shock waves through his body.

Sounds of rapid, desperate breathing from above and Alex bit down hard onto his fist, slammed his hips forward in the mindless, fulfilling moment of total abandonment, overwhelmed by his orgasm. Alex's suppressed groans and long drawn whimpers made him sound like an animal in distress, not a man in lust.

Tom once, twice more stroked himself, before his throat constricted in helpless, yet wanted tightness around the invading cock. Coming himself, he was choking, desperately swallowing while spasming, pushing even further down onto Alex's cock in his greed, his cum splattered against the brick wall, onto Alex's boots and camouflage clad legs.

He shuddered around the still-hard flesh, until he was forced to pull back to breathe. Tremors of aftershocks and triumph hit his body. He had wanted to suck that cock and swallow that cum. And that's what he'd got.

Alex clearly didn't expect his next move, slumped against the wall as he was, moaning in protest when the throat's tight heat left him, even though immediately replaced by a hand. Tom's fingers curled around the spent, saliva slicked organ. Holding, shielding against the cold, firmly squeezing, feeling how hardness began to soften as Alex's heartbeat returned to normal.

Tom gave him no time to think, nor to try and understand what had happened, when he stood up, pressing his full length against Alex's, crushing his hand and both their exposed cocks between their bodies.

"Ever wondered what you taste like?" Barely above a whisper, Tom's voice was hoarse from the willing abuse of his throat. Pushing his tongue against Alex's lips that opened readily despite the surprise, allowing him into the breathless heat. Tom felt how Alex tensed at first and caught a glimpse of eyes opening wider, before the kiss turned heated and undeniably passionate. The cold winter air was suddenly tinted with Alex's moan that rang quietly desiring through the still night.

Bitter.

Bittersweet.

The essence of Alex.

The kiss was returned with ardour. Tongues intertwining, heads tilted to gain greater access in ever-greedy passion.

Tom's free hand clutched at Alex's pushed up shirt; Alex in return pressed Tom to himself. Sharing body-heat, two men creating a single bulk of sharp angles.

Suddenly noise.

Tom jerked at the intruding sound, but Alex hadn't noticed yet.

Footsteps. Coming closer, quite fast.

"Anyone there? Identify yourselves." The faintly nervous voice of one of the young sappers on duty. Dangerously close.

"Shit!" Tom pulled back, hissed the frantic expletive, already bereft of Alex's taste and heat, his all-invading physical presence. "Fuck." He was trying to suppress the growing hysteria that threatened to overcome him with manic chuckles. If they got caught now, the consequences could be beyond their imagination.

Alex was silent at first, frozen for a moment, until the touch of Tom's hand on his spent cock, trying to pull Alex's trousers back up, made him jump into action the next moment.

“Stop laughing, you sick bastard.” Alex hissed between his teeth. The situation, though, was too bizarre. Desperately struggling to zip up trousers and close the brass buckle of the maroon-blue-striped belt.

The sapper's voice was even closer now, more demanding. “I said, identify yourself!”

They heard the tell-tale sign of the safety being clicked off while Tom's cum-slippery fingers missed a button and nearly broke the zipper in his rush. His jacket still on the ground behind him, he swivelled, stooped to retract it and was met with a rifle almost shoved into his face, a mere couple of feet away.

It was so dark that only Alex's voice, coming just in time, gave enough reassurance to the nervous sentinel, to stop him from making a fatal mistake. “Staff Sergeant Turner and Sergeant Warren. We'd just come back from endurance training and we thought we heard something back here. But everything seems to be alright, so we're turning in now.”

Tom tried furtively to wipe the cooling evidence of spilt lust off his hand. A sudden thought occurred to him that caused another onslaught of near-hysteria. He had come onto Alex's boots and trousers. Would it be visible in the dark if the young squaddie came too close? And did he still happen to have a drop somewhere at the corner of his own lips or had the kissing taken care of that? Praying that the moonless night did not allow the sapper to see their flushed faces with their berets Fuck! His own had to be somewhere on the ground. Where the fuck was the damned thing? Tom was frantically looking around, until he finally found it right beside the spot he'd been kneeling in.

Best to deflect attention.

“No need for concern.” Tom managed to sound relatively normal, though he was certain Alex noticed the strain in his voice. He snatched the beret off the ground and swiftly put it back on. Pushing it to the correct angle, hoping it hadn't been soiled. It was one thing to 'lose' one's beret and another to find it splattered with cum. “Glad to see you so alert. Good work, Sapper.”

Expecting the young soldier to salute, which he promptly did, not daring to question the circumstances. Those two men were his superiors, after all. Nor did he check the clothing. Nor the faces. Nor indeed the fact that even though they were outside and the night air was cold, it was still smelling strongly of sex. Sweat and musk and cum. Undetected, because something like this could never happen. Not in the British Army, and least of all right there in camp. Out in the open.

The sentinel left and both Tom and Alex turned as swiftly away from him as their aching bodies allowed, crossing the last part of the barracks ground to make it to the gate. Walking in silence until they were out on the public road and back in the sickly yellow light of the street lamps.

Alex let out an audible breath. "I definitely need a shower and food. I'm bloody hungry all of a sudden. Couple cans of beer wouldn't go amiss either." He sounded equal parts amused, exhausted and satisfied, with that special air of sated calm he always had about him after sex.

Tom grinned silently to himself and nodded.

"My place?" Alex continued. Reluctant, it seemed, to part yet.

"Sure." Just one word, a shrug and Tom felt his step lighten and his pace quicken. Turning his head he looked at Alex, who appeared flushed in the street light, while they made their way towards the army housing. His eyes were met with a similar gaze, and suddenly both of them broke into a grin.

"Tell you what," Alex chuckled quietly, "seems you bring the 'best' out of me. I will finally admit to being a sick bastard, too. Well, at least on occasion." He lifted his hand and glanced at the angry red teeth marks. Pale eyes glittering in the yellow light. "I don't know how you did what you did, but if I'd known a blow-job could be like that, I'd gone to my knees and begged for it earlier."

Tom grinned. Openly smug. Secretly relieved.

Alex glanced at his boot, detected the trace of cum on top of the mud encrusted black leather and smirked. "You're still a sicker bastard than I am, though."

Tom raised a question brow. "Why?"

"You started it."

Tom threw his head back and laughed.

MISSION VI : RECONNAISSANCE

It was the first time in two years they'd ended up in a bed together.

Alex was asleep, lying on his side, while Tom watched the calmly breathing back, like a goddamned lovesick puppy. Funny, really, he didn't feel like that at all. Convinced their relationship was a friendship of a different kind. A friendship, where Tom felt like Alex's rent-boy on occasion. Ever at the ready, but never able to insist on anything in return.

Bullshit!

Alex had never demanded a single thing from him. Expected, yes, because he knew that Tom salivated at the mere hint of a chance to get his hands, tongue, teeth onto Alex's body. Nothing but the simple truth.

The usual scenario went like this: Alex got drunk, hinted at sex, grinned, said 'jump' and Tom tore clothes off, assaulted that body and was mauled in return while groaning 'how high'.

Tom didn't mind. For the last two years, he had been getting what he wanted. Everything else he searched for, found, slaughtered and consumed in ever-changing night clubs of an obvious nature. It didn't happen that often anymore, though. Satisfied with what he got irregularly, but without fail, every few weeks at least.

Resting on his side, head pillowed on an arm, Tom contentedly studied the broad expanse of Alex's back, which was entirely different to his own, not merely because of the scars. One year ago Tom had taken a couple of weeks off duty while Alex was on holiday and had his body transformed from anonymous, smoothly tanned perfection, to a recognisable representation of his self. Literally imprinted into his skin.

Alex's landscapes of pain stood in stark contrast to Tom's large, black, tribal tattoo. Sharp lines and powerful angular shapes followed muscles, sinews and bones from biceps over shoulders to meet in the back of his neck. The pain had been worth it; when Alex gasped out 'Oh fuck!', coming back from holiday and ending – predictably – drunk and horny in Tom's ever-wanting arms, it had been the icing on the cake.

Tom knew every ridge and crater of Alex's mutilated skin, and he could map the different types of scars without touching: fire; down across, slightly above the waist, a branding. Steel; up there to the left and underneath the neck, a sharp blade. Rope; deeply burnt friction at

front and back of Alex's throat and around his waist. Cable; ragged lines diagonally across and below the shoulder blade, whiplashes.

Tom grinned into the day-bright room, blinking against a beam of sunlight that came through a gap in the curtains. Somehow Alex had remembered to draw them. Luckily, because the daylight porn show that had rampaged across hallway, front room, staircase and finally bedroom, wouldn't have been suitable for the neighbourhood on a quiet Sunday afternoon.

They had celebrated a mate's birthday in the pub and drunk to Tom's latest successfully passed course. He was looking into gaining his parachutist qualification.

Tom loved nothing better than an adrenaline rush.

Alex, on the other hand, was up for promotion to WOII, but the jump into the lofty ranks of commissioned Officer remained a far-off possibility. They were both getting a chance to prove themselves soon, when they deployed on Operation Loki the following week. Today was their last chance for privacy of any kind, let alone intimacy.

Tom's grin got even bigger as he stretched slowly. Still watching that back. he propped himself up on his elbow. Holy shit, when they created Alex's body they had to have had another man's appreciation in mind to recognize the value of this perfection. Sheer strength without the slightest indication of softness except for the areas of unblemished skin, arms covered in remarkably fine hair that shimmered golden in the curtain-muted sunlight. Alex lay naked on top of the covers and he couldn't let the opportunity go to waste, presented to him like a feast on a silver plate. Tom's gaze travelled down to that coveted arse and its smooth skin that beckoned to be touched. He already knew what it felt like under his lips. Soft, warm, silken even, entirely too addictive. Tongue, lips and teeth marked the muscular terrain as his, and yet it would forever be off limits.

He still had his obsession with fucking Alex's glorious arse. Some things never bloody changed.

Tom was inexorably drawn to the body before him and his hand reached out, tracing a sharply angled scar that had held a hook which had torn flesh deeper than any of the others. Shuddering at the mental images, endlessly supplied. He leaned forward, had to taste again what he was more familiar with than Alex ever would be: the blemishes that Alex had once hated. Since Tom's confession regarding them with growing acceptance and tolerating detachment.

Letting his hand trail along his favourite scar, which curled from the left hip snake-like up towards the spine, he scooted closer, until his tongue laved the ragged, raised line.

“You really are obsessed.” Alex's sleep sated voice murmured out of the blue. “Did I ever tell you that you're a sick bastard?”

Tom pictured how those lips curved into a grin and he chuckled, warm breath puffing against Alex's back. “Yeah, repeatedly, and what are you going to do about it?”

Alex's arm moved, stretched, then returned to his side, before flopping down in front of him. Tanned skin across plain white bed sheets. The seductive sight of smooth-sharp angles of muscled elevations, recesses and planes. “Never said I wanted to do anything about it.” Alex's turn to chuckle now. “It's far too convenient.”

Tom clenched a lazy fist and thumped the other's shoulder, hard enough to make Alex roll forward until he lay prone, arm dangling off the edge of the bed while quietly shaking with laughter. Slow, sated, sun-filled contented amusement. Companionship was one thing that Tom valued even higher than sex with Alex. He would trust Alex with his life. On duty, under fire. Off duty, keeping secrets.

“Yeah, I am bloody convenient. Sergeant Tom Warren, always at the ready.” Tom came up in one swift movement and straddled Alex's hips. Sitting on the unblemished, far too perfect arse, he jostled bed and man alike when he saluted crisply. “Sir! Yes Sir! One blow-job, Sir!”

Alex turned his head, craning it as far back as he could. Pale blue eyes glittering with amusement.

Tom felt the vibrations of silent laughter. Tremors too similar to those of aftershocks of lust, and he immediately wanted more. Again. Could never get enough, but Alex knew that. Grinning, until he saw a shift in Alex's facial expression. Surprised to observe how the laughter faded to a smile, ending in a quite serious expression. He had always pegged his best mate as a self-centred, but likable dickhead, with too much wry charm for his own good. Astonished that right now Alex was regarding him with an oddly querying and intense look.

“You do know that I'd never demand anything of you, don't you?”

Tom was taken aback, letting his saluting hand drop from the temple onto a smooth thigh. “Yeah, I do. If I didn't, I'd still be beating the crap out of you and not 'standing' at the ready whenever you get drunk and it takes your fancy.” He noticed an odd little wince in Alex's face, distorted by the prone position.

“Alright, you think I'm a prick.”

Tom leaned forward to take a closer look. Managing to stay away from taking in too many visuals of the scars, or he'd be pressing something hard and wanting into the backside beneath him. Wondered half-way seriously if Alex would mind. Figured he might not, actually. Could be worth a try.

"Well, I'd say that depends." Tom was encouraged to go on, when Alex raised a curious brow. One eye looking up, the other pressed into the sheets. Short blond hair sticking up in a tousled mess.

"Depends on what?" Alex mumbled.

Tom grinned wolfishly. "Depends on if you answer me a question or not. Truthfully. Without bullshitting."

Alex groaned. "Can't you leave a man alone? What's the point in fucking around with a guy when he wants to talk deep and meaningful like a woman?"

Tom's mocking laughter jostled both of them. "Can't say I consider myself very female, but if you don't grant me one question, I won't do what I intended to do."

"Depends." Alex's echoing reply sounded comically wary. "What was it you intended to do apart from blackmailing me?"

Tom's grin turned devilish. He might be forever obsessed with Alex's scarred body, reminiscing that lovesick puppy after all, but he knew his best mate well enough to play him like an instrument. He was thoroughly enjoying himself, with Alex trapped beneath him and gazing up warily. What else could a man ask for.

"I intended to do *this*." Tom reached for the bottle of good old Dr Johnson's baby oil. One of the things he had converted Alex to in no time whatsoever. Squeezing a good portion onto the broad expanse of the back before him, he sniggered when Alex jerked and cursed.

Cold oil. Warm skin.

"You bastard!" Alex hissed. Half amused, half annoyed, thumping a fist onto the rumpled sheets.

"I take that as a compliment." Tom grinned, flexed his fingers, dove without further delay into the muscles beneath him. Alex shut up with immediate effect except for heartfelt groans, as he closed his eyes and moaned, "Oh bloody hell, yes, ouch ..." turning to, "yeah ... there, ow, shit, bastard, yes!"

Tom laughed, enjoying himself. More than Alex would ever be able to understand. He was playing tug-of-war with his own greed for the body that made him so goddamned horny every time he touched, licked, bit it.

“Right, then.” Tom's strong hands were kneading deeply into overused muscles. “My question. Tell me, what's it like to have sex with a man while not being gay. You don't fancy me, I'm damn sure, but you're not repulsed either. So what do you do when I'm sucking or jerking you off, imagine a woman?” Tom grinned when the body beneath him tensed and Alex let out a deep groan.

“Holy shit, Warren, you had to find the most annoying question of all. What the fuck do you want me to answer?”

Tom's laughter turned a notch huskier while leaning over the broad back, to delve into neck muscles, massaging roped cords of tension. His effort elicited a strangled groan from Alex, a mixture of pain and pleasure.

“The truth. Go on, tell me, I'm bloody curious. What's it like? You know that I am salivating at every opportunity you give me. One drunken Alex Turner - one offer, one grin, and I'm right there and ready. Isn't like that with you, I'm pretty damn sure you're not drooling when you see my body.”

Grunts were the answer, non committal for a while, fading under the strength of Tom's hands and the slippery oil. Skin flushed under the digging fingers and muscles relaxed. Eyes closed, Alex seemed to think. Patience was not one of Tom's virtues, but this time he was too determined to hear the answer, careful not to spoil it. He knew that the trigger was usually the booze, because Alex would never come to him without its fortifications and the subsequent loss of inhibitions. Sometimes, if Tom took the initiative and the situation was just right, it didn't have to be alcohol. The kink of danger and the aphrodisiac of possible detection made Alex want Tom to want him.

“It's true that you don't turn me on.” Alex finally spoke and Tom saw him wince straight away. Possibly at the hand that dug particularly hard into a deltoid. “Fuck, that sounded wrong.”

Wasn't the kneading hand, then, that had made Alex cringe. Tom said nothing, continued to work the scarred back while taking no heed of his growing arousal. After all, he was used to it. Ignoring came easy.

“I mean, I don't look at you and go 'Whoa!' as I do with some women.” Words added tentatively, “that's not right actually. I don't do that anymore either, which is strange. Guess that's because I know I can't do anything about it. I tried, a year or so ago, told you about it.”

Tom nodded and grunted his agreement. He remembered far too well and with perfect clarity. Alex had been particularly drunk late that night and in a state neither man ever talked about again. Nor did they mention the physical condition both of them had been in the day after.

Tom's hands were soothing now, fingers curling out and palms firmly running along the sculpted flesh, when Alex continued.

“Guess I don't have an aversion to the male body.” Alex's shrug looked awkward and made Tom's hands jump on top of the shoulder blades. “Just because I prefer women, or would, yeah, at least would, doesn't mean I have to be repulsed by men, I guess.”

Another shrug, Tom got used to the motion and dug his palms into the craters and ridges, now heated from his handy work. Dragging both hands up towards the neck, along each side of Alex's spine.

“Women used to turn me on and I still think they're beautiful. I've never had the hots for men and I still don't, but then you manage to turn me on, because, shit, you're the only one who can.”

Tom felt sympathy, but he strangely enjoyed watching his mate struggle. Almost as if he couldn't stop himself to make Alex pay with a little discomfort for his usual self-centredness. Only for a short while, only this once. At the moment, he felt like a fisherman, not ready yet to let go of his haul. The hook was digging deeper into its catch, just like Tom's hands, and by now his cock too, which pressed against Alex's backside. He shouldn't be torturing himself by seeking the friction and heat of the body beneath him. He knew it. He would want too much. Always the same, greedy for what he'd never get, and what wouldn't he give. Obsessions came costly.

“Oh, what the fuck!” Alex's outburst came out of the blue and Tom lost his balance. He was thrown onto his side when Alex turned with sudden vehemence. Their legs entangled, hands were sliding across slippery terrain of skin, flesh and muscle. “I don't know how the hell to explain!”

But Tom didn't listen anymore. One of his legs ended up underneath Alex's, who'd landed on his side as well. Too agitated to protest having Tom's cock press into the smooth swell of his arse. Tom felt trapped in more ways than just his body beneath Alex's.

“It just works, isn't that enough? You want me and sometimes, damn, bloody often, I want you to want me. Isn't that enough? Isn't it, Tom?” Still on his side, Alex's head craned backwards, presented with the well known part desperate, part pained, part hungry, most part let-me-fuck-you-touch-you-taste-you look on Tom.

“Yeah.” Tom didn't care, would have agreed to anything right now. Alex selling him a used car? Sure. Telling him to go eat a live frog? Anytime. Pledging his soul to the devil? Where's the knife, the quill, the parchment and his blood for ink. He was spooning Alex, without even trying. Accidents did happen. On a sunny Sunday afternoon. Not

drunk anymore. Sober, horny and he hadn't been thrown out of the bed yet.

“Do you have any idea what you just agreed to?” Alex's voice had turned unexpectedly low and smooth, which didn't help. It only made Tom press even harder against the muscled, taut ... shit! That arse had just moved. Bloody hell, he could die right now, there and then!

“Urgh ... no.” Tom gasped. Pissed off with himself, because of this constant need, but why not give up and into it, as he always did in the end. His arm slid up and a hand dug into Alex's narrow hip. “I'd agree to anything right now and you bloody well know it!” Desperation tinged Tom's voice.

Took, like, what, five seconds to get him going this time?

Muscles clenched again and this time he took the bait, grabbed the hipbone hard, bruising skin, knew Alex never minded, quite the contrary. Alex's touch would be unforgiving, inviting aggression in return. Near violence in their mating, no such thing as 'lovemaking'.

They'd never kissed for the sake of kissing.

“Thought so.” Alex's answer came strangely calm.

“Alex ...” Tom forced out between his teeth. Sometimes he wished he wasn't addicted that much, craved independence from his obsession. He ground against the arse that he coveted more than anything, pulling Alex's hips backwards and into himself. Compelled to press his cock even harder against the body. Expected resistance, which never came. Met instead with an unexpected willingness. He didn't understand why Alex allowed himself to be handled, but didn't care either. Neither of them was drunk and nothing else mattered than the white-hot-jolts of lust, slicing once again through his brain and cock.

“Can I ... ask you something?” Tom kept moving against Alex's body, finding a smooth rhythm that felt frighteningly natural. Alex didn't seek another man's body, he just happened to be ... yeah, well, what?

Convenient?

“A favour ... Alex?”

Alex nodded and Tom took heart. He could be thrown out of bed and kicked about the room if the worst happened, but even that could well turn into a wrestling match that led to sex.

“First off ...” teeth gritted, “I'm not going to ask if I can fuck you. Alright?”

But, I want to, want to, want to!

“Cause I'd like to keep my life and I'm rather attached to my cock.” Tom wasn't sure if he heard a chuckle, but the vibrations beneath his

hands and against the full length of his body indicated a certain amount of amusement.

“What else. Go on.” Alex asked.

Tom was fully aware there wouldn't be an erection if he dropped his hand towards Alex's groin. He had learned the body's signs and breathing patterns until he knew them better than his own.

“I want to come between your thighs.”

Silence, except for Alex's breathing growing slightly erratic.

Tom realised that it needed more explanation than that, but his brain didn't function anymore, short-circuited by just thinking about his request. He jerked and pushed his cock against the firm muscles. He would beg. It wasn't beneath him.

“How? How the fuck that's going to work?” Alex asked eventually, his body tensing when the obvious erection pushed against his arse.

Tom groaned. “Just like this.” He was pleading without a second thought. “Please!”

Stillness and tension, he could feel the large body resist his slow rhythm for a moment and his heart sank. Had he asked too much? Could well be, this was different to anything else they'd done. More intimate and far more obvious that they were indeed two men. Most of all, it would turn Alex into the passive facilitator of Tom's lust.

“Yeah.” The answer came at last. Somewhat subdued, definitely unexpected, but fervently prayed for. Tentative at first, until the second affirmation. “OK. Tell me what you want me to do.” Alex seemed to force his body to relax, losing the tension in fractions, even moving back into Tom, and that moment he knew he had won.

It had always been Tom who had actively given lust. It was his hand that jerked Alex off or stroked both their cocks in his fist. It was his lips, tongue, teeth and throat that forced lust from Alex, and it was he who worshipped the scarred body with laving tongue and biting kisses.

“Just lie on your side.” Talking became increasingly difficult and finding a single coherent thought while the firm flesh of that smooth arse was pressed against his cock was near impossible.

It didn't take more than a small adjustment of positions and Tom shifted as close as he could, slipping one arm underneath Alex's shoulders, the other firmly gripping the lean hips.

Holy shit! To wrap his own arms around the body, to truly hold, to lie together, not lost in wild lust and fighting. Tom had never felt that before. It made his stomach clench and knot into an almost painful pool of heat.

“Give me ...” Tom was hesitant for a moment, but then Alex's body shifted back into his own and a helpless groan was forced out of him, when pressure increased against his trapped cock. He knew what he wanted and had to stop being bloody careful about things. He was fucking gay. He was a man and Alex was one, too. If his best mate hadn't realised that by now, he was a brainless amoeba and not an SNCO.

“Oil ... in my hand.” Tom didn't receive an answer except for a sudden sharp intake of breath, followed by compliance with his request. Holding his hand out, a generous measure was poured into it, then the sound of a bottle top being flipped closed.

Alex was tense, but pushed back into him. A strange mixture, part of it seemed unnatural, as if Alex forced himself to do this, and Tom wondered if it was caused by a sense of guilt. He couldn't be selfless though, wouldn't tell Alex that there was no reason to feel guilty, that he shouldn't do something he might not want to, just to please him.

“Lift your leg. Move ... let me ... oil ...” Talking, damn, he had to stop trying to string words together. Too difficult in the spaced-out place he found himself in and that only Alex managed to take him to. All he wanted was to grunt like a caveman while rutting against the other's body.

Once again Alex complied in silence, and while Tom slicked his own cock before rubbing oil between Alex's massive thighs, he suddenly realised what made it all different.

Alex was sober.

He had no excuse, no haze, no shield, nothing to remove his inhibitions and he'd remember this with perfect clarity. No buffer to keep reality at bay. This was it, he was having a hand rub oil so bloody close to his precious arse that he could well be wondering if he was going to get fucked after all.

To Alex's credit, he didn't flinch, and only took in another sharp breath, but his muscles tensed once more.

Delicious, this movement, creating additional friction. Sending electric sparks into Tom's groin and travelling straight to his brain. All thoughts stopped, when he pushed his cock between the solid thighs, groaning helplessly.

“Oh God ...” Barely managing to get the next few words out. “Your leg. Backwards. Hook it around mine.” He grabbed hold of Alex's leg and tried to show him what he meant. Pulling the limb with an oil slicked hand to where he wanted it, Alex's ankle hooked around

his own leg to create an unbearably tight and slippery-heated sheath that came so close to the real thing. Reducing Tom to mindless groans.

“Holy shit fucking ... bloody hell!” Toms expletives turned into inarticulate moans. His body shuddered violently against Alex’s back, resulting in a tightening of thigh muscles, causing Tom to grunt senselessly in another wrecking tremor. Muscled thighs controlling, domineering, restraining, managing his lust.

Alex drew in another sharp breath and Tom felt the body shudder under his hands. He couldn't care anymore, could only draw back and close his eyes. He groaned, letting out a needy, embarrassing whimper when he pushed back into the tight friction.

“Holy shit ... Fuck, oh fuck.” All Tom could feel was the sensation of his arms wrapped around Alex; his body pressed against Alex; his cock trapped between Alex's thighs; enveloped in Alex's scent; Alex's taste on his lips and tongue, as he kissed and licked the back of his neck, biting into the tensed muscle between neck and shoulder.

He wanted to scream out this addiction, this drug that coursed through his body, until it settled in his mind and gave him the greatest heights and lows. He'd only ever allowed himself to admit the extent of his addiction when alone in bed, at night, wanting Alex so goddamned much, the pain was like going cold turkey. He always wanted more. Finally, he got a taste, a piece of what he wanted. He truly felt Alex, held Alex, was given lust by Alex.

“Fuck ... Christ!” Muffled groans, bitten into a broad shoulder. Tom's arms tightened around Alex's body. No response, except for a rising tide of surreptitiously clenching thighs. Falling into sync with Tom's rhythmic thrusts, as if Alex tested the waters first. Once deemed safe, he was smoothly tuning into the ebb and flow, the thrust and withdrawal of the other's tide.

Tom drove into the slippery heat while his fingers dug into smooth and scarred flesh alike. He held and clutched, nearly crawled into the great body, seeking to devour and possess.

He was too far gone, and missed the subtle change. Drowning in sensations of holding Alex as if he were truly desired by him. Make-believe of the most addictive kind. It made him bury his teeth into the scarred skin of a shoulder, made him bruise flesh across the taut abdomen and the chiselled chest. Overwhelmed by passion and heat, not realising what he created.

Tom missed the change in the other's breathing, barely registering the stronger movements. Tension and discomfort, but the situation was now turning into something very different. Alex's hips rocked back

harder, pushing against him, thighs and buttocks rhythmically clenching and relaxing. Tom's body reacted, but his mind did not catch on. Maddening jolts of lust sped up Tom's hunger in near-painful spirals towards that one precious, torturous, yearned for and elusive moment of no return. A desperate groan was torn out of him, when another forceful backwards push increased the friction of muscles that tightened in sync with his own thrusts, while clutching Alex in mindless need.

"Tom." Alex's strangled voice. Half-way lost, startled, disbelieving. A plea, but Tom was too far gone, unable to reply. His name was nothing but a distant ringing in his ears. Alex did it again, the rhythm of tensing muscles and grinding hips, and Tom whimpered helplessly. So close, too close, pawing greedily at the great body, printing his whole self onto Alex's fractured skin.

"Tom!" Alex's voice again, as he let out a shuddering moan, followed by a violent backwards shove against the hips that were pushing into him with sharp-angled bones and oil-slicked cock alike. His hand reached for Tom's flank, fingers digging into flesh and ribs, muscles and skin and Tom cried out at the sudden painful assault, torn from his lust-lost drowning.

"Fuck! Jerk me off, Tom!" Alex shouted, and Tom finally heard. At last reacting, and immediately complying. An order, a command and even now, unthinking, his mind caught on, did exactly as told.

Obedied. Anytime. Anywhere. Obedied to Alex's body. Alex's needs. Alex's voice.

To Alex.

His hand moved, closed around the coveted cock, revelling in the feel of the smooth hardness in his fist, while speeding up his race towards the final moment. Pain and lust, want and greed. Addiction, on many more levels than he'd ever understand. Far more than just physical desire, but Tom refused to acknowledge what he felt.

Two equal bodies formed an entangled mass of limbs and hands, oil and heat, friction and tightness, sheathed cock and stroked erection. Panting breaths, heartbeats hammering, while hips were pushing and grinding.

Too close, too intense.

Tom's hand stroked as hard and furiously as the rhythm of his violent thrusts. Biting into neck and shoulder muscles, he drew protesting cries out of Alex, who never fought against the pain. Tom could picture the striking features in the throes of lust.

Orgasm came crashing upon them with unbearable force, sweat mixed with saliva, cum mingled with oil, flesh bruised against bones and forceful spasms were countered by fierce shudders.

Tom cried out in fulfilment, coming between Alex's thighs, and Alex let out a hoarse cry, violently thrashing against Tom's cock, while thrusting into the tight fist. They panted, moaned. Lost in tremors, their hands still clutching at each other's bodies. Two men, creating one single entity of lust.

Long moments of calming down followed. Alex's body remained enveloped by Tom's, whose cock softened between Alex's thighs, sliding out of oil and friction. Silence, but the awkwardness never came. Not anymore. Not after two years of trust.

Tom finally regained his senses and reluctantly let go. Rolling onto his back, he lay sprawled, one arm across his chest, another dangling off the bed. Struggling to return to a semblance of normality, where mind and body functioned, instead of floating in the sated haze of aftermath.

"I know the answer now." Alex's voice came unexpected and oddly charged. "It's simple. It's not your body. It doesn't turn me on."

Alex turned onto his side to face Tom, while Tom gazed up, remembering his question at last.

"It's what you do, Tom." Alex repeated. "It's you."

MISSION VII: FORLORN HOPE

Heat clung to Tom's skin with sticky dampness. His fingers slipped off wires, cables and firing circuits, making the demolition charge difficult to handle.

“Hurry up! Get that bloody thing going!” Alex's voice sounded sharp in Tom's radio headset. If he lifted his head, he would be able to see his commander standing on the back of the camouflaged Land Rover, guarding the terrain, together with the three other members of their field squad. Scanning the area for possible threats to their comrade out there, who was working with all the speed he could muster. Haste, but never panic. Nerves had to hold in any situation.

This mission should have been a piece of cake, and they were supposed to be back at base camp by now, but nothing had worked out smoothly and they had only plain old bad luck to blame.

Tom noticed sounds from the thick vegetation surrounding the clearing at the bridgehead, but he ignored them, trusting in his abilities as explosives specialist. It was too important to destroy this bridge, which was a mere rickety structure, but the main transport route for the rebels, who were still holding out somewhere in parts of the jungle that none of the Forces had access to yet.

“We got to get out of here.” Alex was tense, his pale eyes squinting against the blinding sun. All four men alert and on guard, holding their positions to protect Tom.

Sweat ran into Tom's eyes while he was working with finger-flying speed on that detonator that was far below par. Something wasn't right, he had to splint the cables again. Reaching into one of the rear pouches of his webbing, he flicked a knife blade open that caught a bright gleam of sunlight, the beam jolting into the green thickets.

“Just a sec. Hold on. Got to blow up this damned thing!” Tom replied, utterly focussed. He relied on his comrades, while he lay on the ground, trusting them, in the very literal sense, with his life.

“Shit!” Tom hissed.

The noise increased from across, where the road led into the jungle. A potholed dirt track, overgrown with vegetation: part swamp, part desert, fully jungle.

“Get out! That's an order! Now!” Alex shouted when the sound of engines and the telltale crack and thunder of vegetation being smashed was heard.

“Got it!” Tom shouted triumphantly that very moment. His voice cut into the sudden racket of noise. Detonator in hand, he pushed himself off the ground and sprinted towards the Land Rover, rifle slung over his shoulder.

Alex and the three soldiers in the Lannie were ready to fight if they had to, aiming their rifles and mounted machine gun at the sounds. The driver sat poised to tear away the moment their comrade reached the vehicle.

Tom's face was a grimace of exertion, running towards safety, the detonator clutched in his fingers. Only a few feet more, when a blast of noise burst from the woods, coming from the overgrown path behind Tom. A pick-up truck crashed onto the bridgehead, joined by two battered jeeps breaking through from the sides.

Adrenaline exploded in all of the men at the sudden staccato of machine gun fire. They dove for cover and Alex yelled, “Open fire!” Releasing a hail of bullets onto the approaching guerrillas. They knew their remit: to save their comrade, who was still running, now only ten feet away.

Laying down rapid fire from their rifles and the machine gun, pelting a blanket of bullets above Tom's head and into the rebel vehicles behind him.

Fractions of seconds, before a scream ripped through the ear splitting staccato of guns. Tom's left hand flew up into the air, losing the detonator, and the other hand dropped to his thigh, fingers instantly covered in blood. The projectile had hit from the back and his leg gave away instantly. The bullet came out in the front, tearing a gaping exit wound of gore and blood into the flesh.

Alex was drawn to the terror before his eyes, while firing at the approaching rebels. Tom's open mouth. The deafening scream. Flesh and blood exploding from his leg, as he stumbled and crashed to the ground.

Tom was barely five feet away from the safety of the Land Rover, but the bridge still stood between the rebels and the squad of Commando Engineers. Their chance of escape was getting slimmer with every second.

The pick-up and the two jeeps were racing at top speed towards Tom, who was writhing on the ground. Despite the pain and shock, he was still scrambling frantically for the detonator. He was almost there, fingers touching:

His life, or that of his squad. He had made his decision.

Alex was making his, too.

“Get the fuck out of here!” Alex shouted into his mouthpiece to the driver and the rest of their squad. He stopped shooting, slung the rifle over his shoulder and jumped onto the road, right in front of the approaching rebels.

The three soldiers had heard the order but nothing would make them leave the scene of engagement. The situation seemed hopeless, but if they abandoned their comrades, they'd be branded cowards.

Order was order, no matter what, but loyalty and courage stood above all.

Tom lay helplessly in the middle of the road, face distorted in pain, but his hand closed around the detonator, fingers pushing the button. The very same moment Alex threw himself onto him, the impact pushed both to the side and out of the way, rolling down the embankment. Tom screamed when his leg hit the bottom of the ditch, before they were deafened by an almighty explosion that rocked the ground.

The bridge blew up in blinding fire, smoke, and crashing thunder. Blazing inferno of man-made earthquake, swallowing the screams of several rebels, when the first jeep piled right into the fire ball, racing onto a bridge that was no more. Brakes screeched, but too late, the second jeep slammed into the first. Disaster multiplied by several explosions, petrol tanks catching fire, men howling in pain when the blaze caught hold of their clothes, burning them alive. Metal was crashing, shrieking, torn apart on impact with rocks and water.

The slower pick-up truck was braking with smoking tyres and the stench of burnt rubber added to the inferno. They had been caught out by the detonation, faced with a wall of fire, struggling to get out of it, while the British soldiers were still fighting, engulfed in heat, until the smoke got too thick and the danger too great.

The rebel truck managed to stop at the very last moment, in front of the gaping drop. The driver slammed into reverse gear to escape the firestorm, while the British Army Lannie raced away to safety, behind the wall of black smoke. Vanishing into the distance on the other side, to save their comrades by alerting the camp.

Down in the ravine, Alex had ended up partly on top of his injured friend. While he tried to get his bearings, Tom's shallow, frantic breathing was close to his ear. Hands suddenly batted at him, Tom was fighting Alex off, to get away from the weight on top of him. His leg a mass of gore and blood, a miracle that no major vessels had been torn, and a miracle that he hadn't bled to death within seconds.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!” Tom gasped out a mantra of agony, his blood drenched hands gripping his thigh. The entry wound appeared small and insignificant, but the exit was torn. The bullet had splintered parts of the bone, now stuck in his flesh.

Down in the ditch they were safe from the flames, but screams, acrid smoke and curses were coming from above. Voices yelling words in a strange language Alex couldn't understand. He ripped open the pouch in Tom's webbing, which held the field dressings. Shouting at his friend to get through the blinding agony. “Hold still!” He tore the wrapping, pulled out the pressure bandage and leaned close over Tom who stilled, eyes wide open, teeth biting into his lower lip, trying to combat pain with pain. Alex realised that only Tom's iron will kept him still, while all Tom seemed to want was to writhe and scream in agony.

No matter what they had been told about adrenaline and sudden numbing shock, it was bullshit.

“Fuck!” Alex pressed out, clinging to the faint hope that the guerrilla fighters had been caught in the explosion, but he feared the worst and knew that every second counted. He pushed Tom's hands to the side before wrapping the bandage around the wide open wound. Forcing the flow back once the pressure was applied, but blood started to seep through the edges within seconds. Alex pulled out another bandage, added more sterile dressing, ignoring for a moment longer the angry voices that came nearer. Hope died the moment he realised that at least one of the vehicles had made it through the explosions, and that the bastards had somehow climbed down into the gorge.

Wrapping the second bandage over the first, the edges sealed at last, while Tom clenched his jaw and bit his lips. Suppressing pained whimpers, his fist thudded repeatedly onto the ground.

“They got us.” Alex gritted out between his teeth. His movements were effective, concentrating on the task. Whatever the rebels would do, if he didn't keep Tom from bleeding to death, everything would have been in vain.

He pulled on the thin chain around Tom's neck, ripping the morphine syrette off, while the furious yelling was getting louder. The only words he could understand were 'British' and a bastardised 'soldiers' but all Alex cared about was slamming the syrette into Tom's good thigh.

The guerrillas were sliding down the ditch with their battered Kalashnikovs raised, and he swiftly lifted his bloodied hands high over his head. No time to throw away the rifle, he kept kneeling on the ground beside Tom, who had calmed since the morphine dose.

“Don't shoot! Don't shoot!” Alex shouted, didn't move, praying they would listen. He had been there before, and the memory crashed into him like a seven ton truck. He knew that even just one jerk could have deadly consequences. “Don't shoot!”

Staring at AKs that were pointed at both of them. Everything seemed to slow down into freeze frame. If the rebels fired now, that would be it. The end of his life. The end of Tom, friendship, breathing, everything.

“Don't shoot.” Alex repeated over and over again as hands tore at his rifle, cutting the strap that held it over his shoulder. His eyes never left the guerrillas, witnessing how one of the rebels kicked his helpless friend. Tom clutched at his leg with a hoarse scream and tried to curl up, while the man laughed with a face distorted into a grimace of hatred and anger.

Alex roared in rage despite his better knowledge. “He can't do a fucking thing! He's not a threat!” He didn't know if they even understood, but Tom cried out again when they were roughly stripped off their weapons, body armour, webbing, helmet, and belt kit, down to their uniform, except for the morphine syrette that remained around Alex's neck. One of the guerrilla fighters grabbed the chain, looked at the syrette, shrugged, and left it hanging where it was. Everything else was taken away, down to the basics of trousers, belt, tunic and boots. They manhandled Alex, and from Tom's agonised sounds it was obvious he wasn't treated with any greater care.

“Jesus Christ, you fucking arseholes!” Alex burst out. He was kneeling with his arms up, hands interlinked behind his head.

A sudden, vicious kick into his kidneys made him double over with pain that took his breath. He fell forward, face into the dirt and gasping for air, as undignified as a fish flapping out its life.

“Fuckers.” Alex gasped out, while trying to get onto his knees, but a hand grabbed his chin from behind, brutally pulling him back up.

“It's you who's fucked now. British swine.” The voice in Alex's back spoke surprisingly good English, though heavily accented. He couldn't see the man, even though his head was pulled far back into his neck. All that remained in his vision was Tom on the ground before him, almost passed out. At least the morphine had kicked in fully.

“Alright, alright.” Alex forced out, eyes darting around him. The heat was still engulfing them, fire ablaze at the top of the ditch, consuming the blown up remains of bridge and jeeps alike. He had to comply to survive. “Alright, you got us. I won't move and he can't. OK. Alright. Alright!”

Alex felt the muzzle of a rifle shoved into the back of his neck, right beneath his interlaced hands. The steel was still warm from the firing. Only one tiny movement of the rebel's finger and he'd be dead. Either his brain splattered on the ground before him, or his windpipe blasted out, leaving a ghastly hole where his throat and face had been.

He didn't want to die. He had to live, think, gamble and act now. Not only for his own life, but for Tom's as well.

"We could be useful to you," Alex hastily brought out, trying desperately to think of a reason why the rebels should keep them alive. The steel in his neck dug harder against the soft spot where his skull connected to the spine, and his breathing came in shallow gasps. His heartbeat raced, painfully hammering in his chest. He remembered what it was like to stare into death's face and he knew that something existed which was far worse than death: living while wishing to be dead.

They must believe we could be useful. Somehow. Somewhat. Something.

"If you kill us, you lose the chance for negotiations, for exchange. Money, prisoners. Weapons, yes, weapons. You need weapons, ammunition, don't you?"

Silence.

Alex prayed.

The rebels surrounded them, their faces showed nothing but burning rage. It seemed that only their leader's authority kept them from killing their captives. Alex's eyes remained blank, giving nothing away of his real thoughts, despite his desperate situation. His self-centred, pig-headed, cynical and hardened self was serving him well now.

Alex Turner, the man who had once used the army to gain attention, status and admiration, was now presenting a surface that showed nothing except for what he wanted the guerrillas to see: a frightened man, desperately begging for his life and that of his comrade.

Several Kalashnikovs lifted an inch, threatening the enemy soldier, to taste his terror that made them feel invincible. Some feet shifted, eyes flickering from the captive to the rebel leader, who had the Brit completely in control with the rifle pressed against the back of Alex's skull.

Death, embodied in one single pressure point, and Alex breathed against the fear, while rivulets of cold sweat ran into his collar, pooling around the steel of the muzzle.

"No."

Alex suddenly heard the voice behind his back. The leader answered in English first, before repeating the words in their native language.

“You will pay. No negotiations, but weapons, yes. First you will pay for blowing up bridge and killing our comrades.”

Alex tasted relief, despite the threats but showed nothing but fear. If they were to pay, they had to be kept alive for now. Every hour of living meant another hour of finding a way to escape. Unless ... No. Not thinking, not getting into the headspace of memories. This was not another torture camp, it was different. It had to be.

Memories, capable of blowing fear out of all proportion, because Alex knew. He knew and remembered. Successfully fighting against the memories that threatened to suck him into the darkness. Victorious, like so many times before. Every year, month, day and hour since his release, except for the nights. Sometimes he still woke up screaming.

But not now.

“Get up you pig!” The rebel leader delivered the words with another kick of steel toed boots into Alex's kidneys, and again he doubled over. Gasping in pain, he scrunched his eyes shut and bit his lip to stop himself from making any sound. He was alive. Still.

Alex did his best to scramble onto his knees, but apparently not fast enough, because rifles impatiently prodded him, feet kicked, and fists lashed out at the tall, blond man to get him to hurry up. His hands were grabbed and pulled back. Alex didn't fight, he wasn't a gung-ho idiot anymore who had something to prove. No, all he had to do was to live and keep Tom alive.

Tom, who cried out when he was lifted and carried up the steep slopes. They didn't bother restraining him, he was in no fit state to fight anything or anyone, but Alex's hands were tightly bound behind his back. The rope cut into his wrists, but he still didn't make any sound. He was once more stoic, not reacting, even though he could hear Tom's scream when they loaded him into the back of the Toyota pickup truck. The morphine worked, but the handling was rough. Alex's anger rose like bile, yet he forced it down this time, swallowing the fury.

Alex struggled upwards, out of the ditch and up the slope. Jabbed by guns, punched and kicked to make him walk faster. A difficult task to get up the slippery embankment without his hands for balance. Twice he stumbled, once he fell, hearing cruel laughter whenever he lost his footing. Words like 'pig' and 'enemy', 'swine', and 'English bastard' reached his ear.

It didn't matter though, because Tom's survival was the only thing of importance and Alex focussed on it. He was responsible for his friend's life, and nothing would keep him from doing all he could.

They shoved him into the back of the truck, and he hit his shin and ribs on some metal. His eyes were blindfolded once he crouched against the back of the rusty cab and he wanted to curse the guerrillas, but he kept quiet. He still had an ace up his sleeve. At the beginning of his career in the Royal Engineers, Alex had specialised in the geographic field, surveying, mapping and the lot. If anyone was going to find their way out of this shit, it was him.

He sat blinded, feeling his leg bump against something warm and solid. Leaning forward, he tried to ask Tom how he felt, but a fist slammed into his jaw and the pain stopped him short. He pulled back, seething with anger, but he had to suppress his fury. Settling back best he could, he tried his hardest to get an idea of how much time was passing. Counting slowly, he continued to occupy his mind with the task of keeping track of time to estimate how far they were driving into the jungle. His counting estimated over four hours before they stopped.

Alex was disoriented and thirsty, he didn't dare imagine in what state Tom had to be in. A slight pressure against his own leg during the ride had been the only reassurance of his friend's presence.

They were forced out of the truck and Alex couldn't bear hearing Tom's barely suppressed sounds of pain, while he himself was treated with punches and kicks. They kept him blindfolded so that he stumbled forward when they dragged him across open space. His journey ended with a brutal kick into his back and he lost balance, crashing onto his knees with a sickening sound. Hands still bound, his face hit the surface.

He tasted dirt. They were outside.

Filth, blood, tears and sweat.

No time for memories. The cold steel of a knife blade was slipped between his wrists and Alex stilled completely. One wrong movement, and the rebel would undoubtedly enjoy slicing more than the rope. Once his hands were freed he got another kick into his ribs and then they left. Alex heard the telltale sound of metal slamming against metal before he managed to take the blindfold off.

A large cage. No, more a cell. He knew what a cage looked like. He had lived in one. Wrong. He had existed like a beaten dog in it. If only he had merely been beaten back then.

Looking around, Alex spotted a plastic bottle with water. His next discovery was more important. He found Tom, lying against the wall towards the back of the cell, half curled up and trying to deal with the pain that seemed to be coming through the drugged haze. How bad was it going to be when the morphine wore off?

Alex knew what pain was, but he had never been injured as seriously as that. His torturers had taken care to space out the sessions. Electric shocks were so much more efficient, they did not leave gaping, bleeding wounds like a gunshot did.

“Tom?” Alex called out quietly. He scrambled to his feet, picked up the bottle and took a swallow. Stale, but drinkable. Kneeling beside Tom, he saw him stir. “Hey Tom, they left some water.”

Tom was barely able to open his eyes and Alex hated to see this. Helplessness and weakness were something he did not and could not deal with. He remembered the terror that had torn him apart and left a man in its wake who was nothing like he had once been. And he despised that man.

“Come on, drink something.”

Tom barely nodded, too drugged to string words together, though the analgesic would wear off far too soon. They only had one syrette left. The wound was still bleeding profusely, the leg of his uniform trousers was saturated with blood and the bandages were a red, wet mess.

“Here.” Alex's voice was quiet, carefully helping Tom to lift his head to avoid choking on the water. He patiently watched him swallow sip after slow sip, until Tom seemed to fall asleep against his thigh and only then did he allow himself the remaining few gulps of water.

Alex sat down on the ground with his back against the wall. He had to find a way, needed to devise a plan. If he didn't get Tom out of here soon and to medical care, he would die. He didn't know nor cared how many hours he sat motionless, thinking. His mind somewhere else. Not in the nightmarish space of past torture, but in the present. It wouldn't do to dwell on what had happened once, he had to focus on how to escape.

The rebels wouldn't give a shit if Tom died. He had to come up with a plan.

More hours trickled by, and Alex mulled every possibility over until he returned again and again to one single plan, the only one, and it was not allowed to fail.

One chance. One life.

You are not one, you are a team.

What did he remember from his fascination with the SAS?

'Never leave a comrade unless he is already dead.'

Tom was still alive and Alex would do anything to keep it that way.

Time passed until dusk settled rapidly and the day turned into night. Alex sensed stirring beside him. The erratic movements could only mean that the morphine had worn off. He turned to look at Tom, shocked to see the grimace of pain that stared up at him.

Fuck! The blood was now pooling on the floor beneath Tom's leg. He had to act and act fast.

Do something! The one thing, not just anything.

Alex crouched beside Tom on the hard dirt-floor, busying himself with the bandaged thigh and cursing the bastards who had taken their webbing, and stripped them of everything, except for the morphine syrette. What the fuck they had thought it was, was beyond his imagination. An amulet maybe. How fitting, a liquid talisman that would keep Tom from going insane with pain. All he could do was try to keep the edges sealed and the blood flow stemmed, but he mostly failed.

"I've got a plan."

Alex could see that Tom was trying to stay focussed, desperately fixing blood shot eyes onto Alex.

"Yeah? You got ... a plan?" Tom managed to get out, forced through teeth that were as tightly clenched as his fists. Obviously fighting to remain as still as he could. "Is it a cunning one?"

Tom's attempt at humour was weak, but they both knew what would happen if Tom didn't get medical attention soon. Alex's hands stilled on the rearranged bandages, fingers once more sticky with Tom's blood. Looking down at the distorted face in the gloomy darkness, he almost shuddered at the eerie shine of pale, clammy skin and cold sweat, visible in the blue-dead light of the moon that shone onto the clearing.

"Yes, a bloody cunning plan." Alex said quietly, but firmly. He'd be damned if he told Tom what that plan entailed.

"Is it ..." Tom fought on, one fist suddenly slamming into his good thigh, as if one pain could take away some of the agony of the other, "... that cunning ... if you put a tail on, you could ..." He gasped and arched up, staring into Alex's face, "... you could call it a weasel?"

Alex looked uncomprehendingly at him for a moment, until the words suddenly made sense and he had to grin despite the situation. "Yeah, that cunning a plan, Mr Blackadder." Leaning closer, he kept his

voice low but intense. "I'll get you out of here. I give you my word. I'll get you out of this shit-hole alive. Trust me, Tom. I promise."

Alex pulled the syrette from his neck and took the plastic cap off. His hand on Tom's good thigh, he found the largest muscle by touch. He kept the depressor poised over the soiled camo cloth for another moment.

"I'll get you out." Alex whispered again and Tom nodded jerkily.

"Yeah, shit, I ... believe you. You're ... insane enough ... to manage."

Alex flashed a grin, before he slammed the syrette into the muscle. He needed Tom out of it, or he wouldn't be able to follow through with his plan.

"Damn right." He murmured, watching how his friend's eyes slowly unfocussed and his body relaxed as the morphine took hold of him.

He had a plan, but it frightened him to the core. He had tried to find another solution, but everything boiled down to the same basic fact: Tom had to get to medical care as soon as possible, or he would die. Tom's life was worth his fear. His pain. His worst nightmare coming true.

He could do it, Alex forced himself to believe, had to trust his strength. He would succeed, make it through, get them to do exactly what he wanted, so he could execute his plan.

He could do it. He would get Tom out of here.

Alex moved away from the wall, crossed the cell and stood at the heavy steel bars. A cage, how bloody charming, why the hell did they always have to incarcerate them like animals. Just like then. He'd never forget those six weeks. Couldn't forget the stench of his own excrements, his vomit, sweat, blood, burnt flesh, desperation and fear. Most of all the fear. He could still smell it. Woke up at night with the acrid stench in his nostrils.

Alex glanced at the shape on the floor. The morphine would only last throughout the night. He took a deep breath and steeled himself, hands closing around the iron bars. "Hey! You wankers! Get us out of here or our chums will rip you bunch of sad rebel fuckers a new asshole!" Hollering at the top of his lungs, across the open space towards the half circle of huts.

"You fucking losers! What do you think you achieve with this? They're out to get you, and my comrades will blow your ant-sized brains out of your sorry motherfucking hides, just like your friends were blown up! Losers! Cunts! Fuck you all!"

Night had settled in, but the tall figure of the British soldier with his short blond hair was still faintly visible in the moonlight. Alex rattled the iron bars for effect, making a racket while hurling abuse. His voice cut through the darkness, reaching each of the rickety dwellings and those rebels, whose English was good enough to understand that they were being insulted to the worst degree.

That's what Alex counted on.

“Listen to me, you fucking cowards! You'll have your guts blown out in no time! I'll fucking laugh when they spill your stinking brains across the dirt!” His arrogance was the greatest insult to the guerrilla fighters. Acting convincingly, he recalled how it tasted and what it felt like. Remembering who he had once been.

Something stirred, he heard angry shouting from the hut opposite, and Alex's eyes narrowed. Now or never. Tom was more or less unconscious, he had to act now or he could stuff his plan.

“Are you listening to me, you fucking dickheads? You're never going to get any weapons or ammunition if you don't exchange us! My comrades are going to shoot your bloody stupid heads off. They'll get us out and riddle your filthy carcasses with bullets! Or they just cut you down with a machete, you're not worth wasting bullets on, stinking rebel scum! I will dance on your fucking graves and rip your bones apart!”

That got them.

Alex had his hands wrapped tightly around the steel bars, as if he could tear them apart. Ignoring the hammering of his heartbeat, the cold sweat. Fear. Motherfucking fear, but he'd do it. Had to. No other way. He stood, did not budge. Not even when angry men came running, shouting their own abuse, reaching the cell and the barrels of their assault rifles slammed against the steel bars.

Alex finally moved when fists punched through the bars, but the muzzle of one of the battered Kalashnikovs was rammed into his guts. The steel shoved hard into his stomach, and he doubled over but pulled himself back up. Fighting the terror, because he knew too damn well what was going to happen.

This was only the beginning.

He sneered, ugly, arrogantly, convincingly, once he had regained his breath. He'd never known he could act so well. “Yeah what, fuckers? Think I'm going to tell you anything? I am going to laugh my arse off over your fucking corpses.”

Another AK was rammed with even greater force into his stomach and Alex doubled over from the pain, coughing, but still laughing,

though breathless and forced. “Is that all you can do? Fuck off, wankers!”

They yelled back in rage, fists grabbed him through the bars, steel and boots slammed into every available part of his body while they tried to drag him out in their anger, determined to pummel mindlessly into the hated enemy soldier, who was insulting them and their cause.

All of a sudden a voice cut sharply through the ruckus. “No! That's what he wants, you idiots!”

Alex recognised the man's voice immediately, repeating everything in English, to make sure the loathed prisoner understood that they were superior to him.

“Get him out, we make him talk! The asshole gave himself away! He knows where depot is, we'll get idiot to tell us.”

Cheers were the answer and Alex remained silent. Stomach knotting, clenching in anticipation, because he understood too well.

He knew.

He knew exactly what would happen, what it would feel like, and what it would do to him. The knowledge doubled, tripled and exponentially increased the fear. The memories. The knowledge, the taste and smell and feel. And yet, he was going to do it. He even gloated, in the back of his mind. His plan was beginning to work, from now on he just had to convince them. Persuading the rebels to believe his lies, wrapped up in half-truths to look like the real thing.

Men rushed inside the small cell, ignoring Tom's limp body that lay against the wall. Brutally grabbing Alex, he realised that his fear would only add to it. Real emotions, false reactions.

“I'll never tell you anything, you dickheads. Motherfuckers! Morons!” He shouted while being dragged out, gun barrels pushing into his body. Boots kicked him forward, fists pounded to make him move faster. They laughed when he stumbled to the ground. Alex fought back, just enough to walk along the edge of serious struggle and make-believe.

He had to make it real.

Pain exploded in his ribs at a barrage of kicks, forcing him to the ground. Blood coated his tongue when a punch slammed straight into his face, splitting his lip. Tasting dirt when fists battered his body, painting his face purple and black beneath the soil. Coats of sweat, blood and trampled dust obscured his features, baked into his blond hair, creating a camouflage of pain on his body.

Alex ended up curled in the dirt, protecting his head best he could, but all that mattered was that they believed, trusted the lie, and that he

could still use his body when they were done. They had to swallow his bait, with the sharp hook anchored deeply in their flesh.

That's when he would get Tom out.

Thoughts ended the very moment that steel was slammed into his head. Blood red fire exploded behind his eyes and then it went dark. He knew nothing anymore. Time ceased to exist. Even his purpose was lost in the mirror-smooth sea of unconsciousness.

When Alex woke, he was disoriented. Memories of another country, other men, different faces. Same weapons and equal hatred. Life-like pictures of the past, supplied with deceiving reality, but he fought against the pull of rotting fear.

He was alone, surfacing to pain and blurry vision. Hanging from manacles, his head hurt like hell from the blows. His ribs, face and any other part of his body that they had caught with fists and boots were numbingly sore. There was smoke in the air, and he could smell the fire, the coal, the steel heating in it, until he had the stench of his own burnt flesh in his nostrils.

It felt too familiar.

He was frightened. They would come back, like they always had. They would return for more agony and horror, excruciating pain beyond words nor senses. Mind-shattering, soul destroying, smashing his self into razor-sharp shards.

No!

Alex lifted his head and forced himself to move his hands, toes, feet, anything he could, until he was satisfied that despite the throbbing cacophony of pain, not a bone in his body was broken. He was still functional, just had to calm his frantic breathing.

He knew this time why he was here. It was different now.

His best friend. Not dead yet. He had to focus on his comrade's survival. He had a reason this time, it wasn't an operation gone wrong, stranding a Commando Engineer where a team of SAS soldiers should have been.

Back then, he had not understood what was going on, why they tortured him, why he'd been systematically destroyed until he had discovered the true depths of terror. He had wanted to die when the pain got so unbearable that he couldn't even remember his name nor rank. It had been then, curled up in a cage, trembling and whimpering like a beaten animal, covered in wounds and festering lesions, that he learned to fight for the last scraps of his existence. Understanding how precious life was: there was nothing above and beyond the simple task of drawing in another breath.

Nothing was more valuable than life. Tom's life.

Six weeks were a long time. He had barely made it through. When they finally rescued him, the man they had carried out of the cell was more dead than alive. His body a husk of the confident man who had gone on that mission. When he'd come out of hospital, none of his former comrades recognised the withdrawn, sarcastic man, who refused to speak if he could help it. No longer the braggart who took bets, just to prove he was the best. Better than anyone. More drinks. Louder voice, dirtier jokes, more fucks to boast about.

He had wanted to join the SAS, had passed the first part of selection, jumping at the chance to gain jungle experience. Getting used to the climate would have been an advantage before he learned to survive, travel and fight in the humid heat of the murderous terrain. He had gone as a Royal Engineer to prove he could make it into the SAS.

He had passed the involuntary pre-test.

Barely.

The danger-addicted, arrogant dickhead had died screaming in a hot and humid cell; stretched taut between chains while fighting the urge to choke on his own vomit. That man had perished with the stench of sweat, blood and burnt flesh in his nose and the taste of his own tears in his mouth.

The new Alex Turner had acquired shades of grey and a dimension of depth, wrapped in silence, until he met his new comrade, Tom Warren.

And now, Tom had to survive, or Alex would have ultimately failed.

He knew, while hanging from those goddamned manacles, that nothing was like it had been during those six weeks in hell.

His best friend, dying in that damned cell made all the difference. He'd make them believe. The pain, tonight, was *his* choice. He was no victim. He would manipulate the others.

Alex lifted his head, took in a deep breath despite the burn in his aching lungs and with recovered resolve shouted into the gloom. "Bored already?"

A single lamp had been placed behind him and there was only darkness in front of him.

"Think you fuckers can soften me up by letting me enjoy a night of leisure, hanging from your piss-poor ceiling? Fuck off, you wankers! You'll never get me to talk. We are superior, you understand? We have culture and money and power and you, you are *nothing!*"

The answering roar of anger was satisfying, but the smell of burning coals got stronger in his nostrils, and he wasn't sure if it was reality or a deceit of his senses.

Shapes of men peeled out of the shadows, turning into distinguishable individuals once they stood close. Alex recognised the leader. The gap toothed, lopsided grin of the man was maliciously cruel, as his fist flew straight into Alex's jaw, landing on an already bruised spot. Alex's head flew back with a pained groan, tasting blood on his tongue. Another scar, his lip split a second time, but it did not matter.

"Pig! You less sure of yourself now, are you?" The leader snarled in anger.

Alex was almost thankful for the viciously spouted hatred. It brought him back to reality when the too familiar taste of blood threatened to pull him under, and into the clutches of the past.

"Fuck you." Alex spit out, together with blood and saliva, straight into the guerrilla's face.

The answer was an angry growl, but to his surprise, he wasn't hit again. Instead, the leader wiped his face with a grubby sleeve, turning to another man who stood beside him. They talked, a few words in a sharp and short exchange that Alex could not understand. The second man nodded, laughing with gold glittering front teeth and a hate filled look.

The leader turned back to face Alex, his voice laced with spiteful amusement. "Fuck us? You wrong, swine. You're ours and we make you pay. You talk, you understand? *Talk!* You tell us where weapons are. If not, we'll tear your skin off in strips."

Laughter erupted once more in the darkness of the room before the gold-toothed man reappeared out of the shadows, putting a kerosene lamp down, which brought the interior of the bare room into Alex's view. The man stood grinning beside a burning brazier, and Alex could smell the telltale scent of white hot coals, and hear the hiss of oxygen eating into the glow. His stomach tightened into a hard knot: he knew too well what it meant.

"Talk, or you'll regret the day you were born."

Alex's throat went dry. "Empty threats," he managed to snarl. He stood still, even when his uniform tunic was unbuttoned, the t-shirt beneath cut open and pushed apart to bare his chest in the gloomy light. Exposing the scars he had received at another time.

The last time. The first time. The worst time.

"What the fuck!" The leader recoiled and took a step back, staring at him, and Alex felt a strange sense of satisfaction when he recognised the shock.

“You wankers thought you can make me talk with some threats and a bit of hot iron? You have to do better than that. I will never tell you where the weapons are. So fuck off and let us go, losers. Tossers! Useless, brainless, stupid fuckwits!”

The leader's anger at those words was nothing compared to the roar of fury that came from the other man, over in the dark corner.

Alex had no time to brace himself. The man came rushing forward, brandishing a broken iron rod, its tip glowing white-hot.

“Bastard!” The rebel shouted, leaving Alex with nothing but a split second of horror. His eyes riveted onto the glowing metal, before it impacted onto his skin. Tearing away his resolve and forcing its way deep into each and every of his senses. There was nothing left but pain. Sharp, intense, as burning as the iron, and the sound of flesh sizzling, skin being destroyed, when the glowing poker was pressed into his sweat gleaming chest.

Alex screamed and jerked in the chains. He didn't have to pretend this time. The pain was too real, raw, comparing itself unbidden with the agony from his memory. His mind retreated into the dark abyss he kept falling into during the worst hours of his nightmares. He forced himself to breathe, but his lungs refused, struck by the impact of pain.

“Fuck you, wankers!” Alex pressed out, his voice pained, sweat dripping from his face into the collar of his open tunic.

Another scar.

“Don't think so.” The leader smirked and clapped the torturer's shoulder in congratulation for a job well done.

Alex could see the gold glittering teeth in the bastard's mouth through the blur of tears and salt-biting sweat in his eyes. He wanted to cave them in, to feel the lips split beneath his fist and hear the teeth crack, breaking them out of their sockets. He would listen to the screams with the same abandon, with which Tom to his favourite band.

“It's us who fuck with *you*, pig!” It was the iron-wielding bastard who laughed while moving his hand almost casually across Alex's chest. Choosing an unblemished strip of skin, right above the left nipple. The man grinned maliciously as he pushed the still glowing iron deeply into the tensed muscle.

Alex howled this time, tearing on the manacles. Too much, it was too much to bear and yet he knew it might only be the beginning, though this bunch of guerrillas was crude, they couldn't go on forever like the others had.

Alex's jaws flexed in a desperate attempt to deal with the agony. He'd have to make it through at least another assault to make it look

real. One more, and he could spill the beans, could break down and tell them all they wanted to know: and make them believe his lies.

He'd survived it once. He would this time, too. Survive and more. He was ready to start giving them what they wanted.

The leader crossed his arms over his chest. "Begging to tell us?"

The iron was turned in the torturer's hand and swirled in front of Alex's face. He had to concentrate hard to refrain from following its movements with his eyes, focussing on the laughing asshole instead.

"No! Fuck off." Alex gasped out, shuddering. Shit, it hurt, he had known it would and even how deep and intense the pain would be, but when it happened, the pain threatened to rob his senses and steal away his sanity. "I don't know anything!" Alex insisted, needing to make them believe he tried another tactic. The more he fought, the more they'd trust.

The torturer smirked, stepped back and shoved the iron into the fire to reheat it. Leaving the stage to the other.

"Really? You were boasting, weren't you, pig? I bet now you ready to sob and wail!" The leader stood in front of Alex, who concentrated his eyes onto a crack in the opposite wall. His thoughts focussed on something else entirely. Tom.

"Fuck you. I don't know anything." Alex's response sounded weaker. He acted convincingly. because he knew what it was like when agony took over.

The torturer moved forward, the iron back in his hand. Both men's ugly smirking faces made Alex wish he'd get the chance to smash their skulls or break their necks.

"You lying." The leader grinned, "and we know it. Go on," with a gesture to the other, "there's nice scar already, this will make it better."

Pointing to Alex's abs, low down, just above the blue-maroon striped belt that held his uniform trousers barely above his hips. His muscles tensed involuntarily into steely ropes. Oh God, he remembered. The further down, the more intense, the more unbearable the pain.

"No!" Alex sounded desperate. "No!" He jerked in the chains, causing laughter in the other men, followed by a sudden blur of movements.

The next thing he knew was pain he only remembered in nightmares, coming back now to haunt him in nauseating reality. The stench was sickening, the agony blinding, and he screamed and jolted, not even feeling how he sheared the skin off his wrists.

“You still can't remember, British swine?” The leader grinned with satisfaction at this display of anguish, while staring right into Alex's sweating face. “If you don't, I tell Jose to burn off nipples next. That will be fun, will it?”

The other man grinned, nodding with sickening enjoyment.

“After that we'll burn your balls off, it's not that you need them anymore, once we are done with you. Then we cut off your cock. We'll turn you into a girl and make you our bitch until you talk.”

Alex had no doubts that they would do what they threatened, they were crude enough for that. He had them exactly where he wanted them. His pain was real, but his words were not.

“No! Not that.” Alex shuddered and lifted his head. He seemed broken, deeply frightened and willing to talk. Ready to humiliate himself in any way necessary, just to make the pain stop and stay alive. “OK, OK, I talk. Just not that.”

The others laughed. “Told you, sobbing now, he wants to spill beans, I bet he'd crawl on floor for us.”

The leader took Alex's chin into his dirty fist, forcing his head up. “Would you crawl, English pig?”

Alex trembled violently when a finger poked right into the latest brand. He tried to grit his teeth, but the scream tore itself through the barriers of clenched jaws and he howled in pain. “Yes!”

Yes. He would. He knew it.

Been there. Done that. Ate the dirt.

“Then talk!”

Alex's chin was released and he glared at his tormentors, presenting a last show of defiance. “The depot is a three hours ride to the West. In the valley of the turtles.”

“Turtle valley.” The leader's smirk grew disproportionately. “I was right! I always expected it to be there.” He thumped the other man on the shoulder, grinning triumphantly, “I was right again! That why I'm leader, Jose. I always right.”

Alex couldn't believe his luck. Perhaps some divine intervention was taking place after all. His lie went down like undiluted truth. In reality, he didn't have a clue where those goddamned weapons were, his security clearance did not cover that. One thing he was sure of, the weapons could not be where'd he'd told them they were. It was the most unlikely place he could think of, in the opposite direction of the British Forces camp.

Alex yanked at the chains to gain attention. “What else do you want? Get your weapons and let us go!”

“Letting you and friend out?” The torturer snarled, “more fun watch man kick bucket, die scream, later.”

Alex shouted, and the genuine rage made the lie appear even more believable. “Fuck you! I told you what you wanted, now let us go, you bastards!”

They laughed, but before the torturer turned to leave, he swung the branding iron, cooled but heavy, and struck it across Alex's temple.

The blackness was immediate, he was out cold. Again.

* * *

Alex woke from the pain in his chest. Nothing covered the damaged skin, the t-shirt was in shreds and the tunic hung wide open. His head pounded with a sudden assault of nausea as he tried to move and it took him a while to orient himself in the darkness. Where the fuck was he? It was quiet. Too quiet, it almost felt as if he had been dumped in the middle of nowhere.

A sound then, to his side, and when he slowly moved his aching head, he could make out a shape lying close to him on the ground. Alex pulled himself up onto his knees, fighting the sickness and pain. It wouldn't do to give in to weakness. His fingers trembled when working stiffly to close the buttons of the tunic. Whatever happened, Tom wasn't allowed to know what lay beneath the blood and dirt encrusted garment. He turned and crawled the short distance towards his friend. Checking him over without waking, Alex hoped the morphine had knocked Tom out enough that he hadn't heard him screaming.

It took him a while to get back onto his feet. The world around him was dark, the little he could make out swayed before his eyes. His body hurt, not just the burn wounds, the beating and kicking too.

He shuffled towards the steel bars, then pressed himself as close as possible against them without crying out in pain when metal touched wounds. Peering into the darkness, the camp seemed deserted, he couldn't see any of the vehicles.

“Hey!” Alex shouted, but received no answer. A grim smile crept onto his face despite the pain. They had swallowed his lie. He shouted again, testing the stillness of the night. “I need water!”

Surely the prisoners hadn't been left to their own devices. Even for those idiots that would be careless beyond mere stupidity. He heard some noise at last, to the left of the huts, and the voice that yelled back sounded drunk.

“You bastards,” Alex yelled, “come here! I need water, I have more to tell but if I don't get anything to drink I'm going to fucking die! Get over here!”

More noise erupted, an angry voice shouted from the opposite direction, answered by the earlier one. Two men, that was it, then. Only two rebels left in the whole camp. Alex heard steps, listening carefully to the sound of someone crossing the open space in the middle of the half-circle of huts. A moving shadow emerged out of the darkness, weakly illuminated by the moon. Only the faintest of light was still clinging to the small hours of the night.

“What you want?” The rebel was angry, drunk, unsteady on his feet and seemed pissed off he had been left in the camp while the others had gone to retrieve the weapons.

Alex leaned heavily against the bars, half slumped, as if he could hardly keep himself upright. A pitiful figure, obviously in great pain. It wasn't even an act. “I can't understand you. Come closer. I have more to tell, if you give me water.”

The guard shook his head drunkenly. “Not give fuck if you live or die.”

“I could tell you secrets. I know a lot about our army. The information would help you in your fight.” Alex moaned in pain, begged. “Please. Water. Give me some water. I'll be useful to you.”

“Like see you beg. Pretty man begging.” The rebel smirked. Pulling a flask from his belt he shook it, taunting the prisoner with the sound of a mouthful of liquid sloshing against the metal walls of the bottle, holding the water tantalisingly close. “Beg more. I like it. Beg on knees. Pig.”

Alex leaned even closer, pressed himself against the bars, and ignored the agony that flared through his body.

Just a little closer, a bit more, not much.

“What do you want me to do? I'll do it, but I can't hear you. They beat me so badly and I fucking hurt. Come closer. Give me the water. Go on, give it to me, I do anything in return.” His scraped and dirt encrusted hands were curled around the iron bars. The distance between the steel was just enough to suit his purpose.

“You on knees. Eat dirt. Lick my boots.” The drunken guard laughed, enjoying himself while shaking the water. He stepped towards the bars to taunt the British soldier more, laughing into Alex's face. “Go Pig. Strip. Kneel. Show me arse like dog. Then water.”

He came even closer, so near his hips touched the steel when he made some lewd gestures, making it unerringly obvious how he was going to humiliate the prisoner.

Alex leaned weakly against the bars, moaning in pain, until he felt the other's body brush against his own, only the iron between them. "I can't. I just can't do that. Don't make me do it. No, please."

The rebel laughed, a cold, drunken sound, full of hatred and spite. "Too late. No water. You strip and kneel later." The man turned, leaning with his back against the iron bars, never realising what was coming, when Alex's hands snatched out towards his neck and head.

Alex's right hand grabbed the guerrilla's chin, covering his mouth to prevent any sounds. His left pressed against the back of his neck. Arms moving in unexpected speed, one pulled the man's chin abruptly towards the right side and up, the other pushed the neck forward. The crack of bones broke the silence, followed by a faint gurgle, as the rebel's neck snapped.

"No. I really don't think so." Alex uttered quietly. The corpse twitched, then hung limp in his hands, and he pulled it close against the bars. The flask fell out of listless fingers, rolled over the ground and disappeared into a crop of withering plants.

Some things Alex would never forget. How to silently take a life was one of them. Yet he felt nothing. No satisfaction, no remorse, neither triumph. Nothing, except for a faint memory of the man he had once been.

With one hand searching swiftly for the keys, he grunted softly to himself when hitting jackpot, pulling the keys out of the breast pocket before dropping the dead body. He had to be quick, there was another man in camp, who would most likely be investigating soon.

Alex hurried to the door, fumbled to get his aching hands through the bars, ignoring his wrists that had been torn raw. Faster! He had to get this damned door open before the other guard found out what had happened. The lock finally opened with a click.

"Fuckwits." Muttered under his breath, he heard faint stirring and a pained moan behind him. He knew it was Tom, but he had no time to check up on him right now. Stepping outside, Alex lowered himself to the ground, crawling towards the corpse in front of the cell, when he came to an abrupt halt at the sudden angry shouts from across the open space. He couldn't understand a word, but he remembered that voice with a stab of hatred. The torturing bastard. He would recognise this voice anywhere. It sounded drunk, and it told him where the second man was.

Pulling the AK out of the corpse's lifeless fingers, Alex stayed down in the crouch, rifle in his hands. Crawling along the deep shadows in front of the huts was safer. He had barely made it to the first building, when he froze into position at the sound of heavy footsteps, right beside the open door.

The man shouted again as he stepped through the door, standing in the rectangle of light. Hollering towards the cell, Alex sensed the unease growing around the torturer.

Just another moment, just ...

He turned the weapon slowly over in his hands, gripping the barrel. The weight of blackened steel promised to wreak havoc.

"Where are English pigs!" The rebel bellowed while taking another step forward, about to cross the open space and check for himself, when Alex forced his battered body to comply and jumped out of the shadows. He swung the rifle and hit the bastard across the face. The noise of breaking bones was sickening and yet the sweetest sound he had heard in a long time.

The man fell, clutching his face. The screams of pain were muffled beneath blood soaked hands. Writhing senselessly in the dirt, Alex watched him, standing mercilessly over him. Looking down at the dark, thrashing shape that was squirming on the soil amidst dust and dirt.

"That hurts, doesn't it?" Alex's voice was devoid of emotion, but something inside him screamed in triumph this time.

The torturous bastard clutched at his smashed face, swallowing blood and splinters of bone. For Alex, he suffered in place of all of those who had once destroyed Sergeant Alexander Turner.

The rebel tried to scramble back up onto his knees to get to his weapons, and Alex didn't even attempt to stop him. "Pain is a motherfucking bastard, isn't it? I bet you wish it would just go away."

He couldn't understand the answer, even basic English seemed to have left the pain-crazed guerrilla, who was reaching for his knife or pistol. Alex didn't care, he only saw how the other fumbled at his belt.

"No answer?" Alex snarled, raised the rifle, not having bothered to turn it back round. His arms came down in a powerful blow, striking right across the rebel's throat, crashing bone, smashing cartilage, crushing the windpipe. No screams anymore, only choking. Horrifying sounds from the man who was clutching his throat, bleeding face forgotten. Writhing and twitching in the dirt. If Alex had any saliva left he'd spit on the living corpse, but as it was, he shouldered the rifle and turned, refusing to grant a second look, and stepped inside the hut in

search of their stolen equipment and anything else that could be salvaged.

He needed a map, compass, water and supplies to get Tom out of here.

He'd forgotten about the dying man the moment he entered the makeshift building. Time was all important now, it would make or break their escape. Alex rushed through the room, turned every available corner, searched for a possible storage place where the captured weapons and accessories might be kept. He had to find something, it was madness and certain death to get out into the jungle without at least some sort of provision. Stupidity, like failure, was not an option, either. He pocketed a torch, switching the flick to test it, satisfied at its fairly strong light. It would have to do, lighting step after step in the blackness of the jungle.

Alex turned to hurry out of the hut, not even hesitating when he stepped over the corpse of the man who only moments ago had been writhing in pain. Now he lay still.

Swiftly searching each of the huts in the light of the torch, he was finally successful in the third one, turning up parts of one of their belt kits. Although the webbing had been raided, several pouches were still attached and contained the additional morphine syrettes, compass, smoke flare, water bottle, map and bandages. Even some of the emergency food rations. He fastened the webbing, spotted some water and filled his own bottle, letting out a satisfied grunt when he found additional ammo.

He ran across the open space, lit only by the milky moon that cast a cold blue light onto the clearing. The cell door was still open, and the first man lay as distorted as he had been when Alex dropped him.

Kneeling beside Tom, Alex tried to rouse him while pulling the bandages out of the utility belt.

"Tom, hey Tom! Wake up, listen to me, we got to leave. I'll carry you. You hear me?"

The answer came at last in an unintelligible moan.

"Alright. It's almost time for another shot." Alex murmured, wrapping a new bandage over the old ones to seal the edges and stop the blood best he could.

"Alex?"

He lifted his head at the croaked sound of his name. Tom looked drug hazed and lost in a world of agony that Alex remembered far too well. Torment. Fear. Pain and pain again.

“Yeah, it's alright.” Alex took the time to reassure, placing his hand on the other's shoulder once he had bandaged Tom's thigh. “The cunning plan worked so far and we are going to get out of here. I have a few more morphine shots for you, bandages and water. I'll pick you up now. I warn you, it'll hurt like a motherfucker.”

“Alex ...” Tom's anguish was contained in the two syllables. Alex's stomach clenched at the sound of his name.

“It's OK. We'll make it. I am going to get you out of here.” His own body would conquer him with pain soon, but for now it still submitted to the adrenaline rush.

“Alex ... you ... are insane ...” Tom's voice was saturated with pain. The slow blink of his eyes the only sluggish movement in his face.

“I know.” Alex answered, “let's give you some more morphine first. You'll need it.”

Tom nodded his head almost imperceptibly, whispering, “OK.”

Alex prepared the first of the remaining three syrettes and the needle plunged into Tom's muscled thigh. He waited for a few moments to let the drug do its work, before he went to sit on his heels, slipping his arms underneath Tom's body to roll him onto the uninjured side. Picking him up, he moved the weight onto his back in a fireman's lift. Alex tightened his grip, hesitating for a heartbeat before the final effort of lifting, knowing damn well the state his own body was in. Numb or not, adrenaline high or not, the burn wounds under his tunic were hot, as if fire and heat continued to eat their way into his flesh.

Before the final movement, Alex looked down at his friend, knowing with absolute clarity why and what he was doing. “I know that I am insane, but that's all we got right now and you just have to trust me on this one.”

The voice that came in reply was forced, so drug hazed that Alex could barely make out its meaning. “OK.”

Alex repositioned the rifle, then bent forward to pick up his friend. Lightning strikes of excruciating pain pierced through his body when he lifted Tom's heavy weight across his back. He staggered onto his feet with a groan, teetering for a moment before he managed to straighten his knees. Once the weight was settled he would march on. He had to.

Failure was not an option. Had not been, was not now and would never be.

Alex checked the map with a memory refreshing glance. Their best chance was to head into the direction of the British base, without

taking the direct route. They had to be out of the rebel camp and as far away as possible before the guerrillas returned. No doubt they'd be furious from the ruse, itching to kill them. His knees threatened to buckle, but he started to walk, using the torch and compass as guidance. Moving roughly into the opposite direction to where he had sent the guerrillas and trusting his skills to find a track that led past the destroyed bridge, towards the British Forces camp.

Step after heavy step, Alex forced his body to settle into the fastest rhythm he could manage, making his way through the treacherous darkness, only guided by the torchlight. Dawn was approaching soon and the rebels would be back in camp, screaming out for his blood.

The morning came and Alex was still walking. Slower then, staggering, the weight across his back forcing him to stoop. The burn wounds and bruises were drowning his body in a quicksand of pain, threatening to drag him under, to force him to give up and break down, but he would not allow it.

Morning turned into the damp heat of midday, and Tom moaned on his back. Alex realised it would be time for another shot soon. Only two syrettes left. The bleeding, too, was worse, blood crept once again out from under the bandages, staining Alex's uniform.

His throat was dry, parched from thirst, but he couldn't take any of the precious water for himself, needing to keep every drop for Tom, whose blood loss made him slip increasingly towards life threatening unconsciousness.

Alex was forced to stop when the midday heat got to him and his steps became unstable. Stumbling over roots, staggering forwards, so slowly, he feared he would never make it. He had to take the longer route to avoid the blown up bridge. He couldn't get near any streams either, if the rebels were following them, this would be the first place they'd search.

He gave some water to Tom, who barely managed to drink. Alex shot him up with the second to last dose of morphine, tried to get him to swallow some of the compo ration, but to no avail. He allowed himself a few bites of the chocolate bar while taking a short break.

When ready to move on, he bent down once more, teetering precariously on his feet as he lifted the unconscious weight across his shoulders.

He took step after step, torturously slow, unsteady by the time dusk began to settle, threatening him with darkness that would reduce his speed even further. Still he stumbled on, hour after agonising hour in

the dark, until he did not know anymore who or where or what he was. The only knowledge still lodged in his mind was that of life and death.

He had to make it. Where to? He couldn't remember.

The night wore on, but Alex refused himself a break, despite the near impossible progress by the torch light. Fearing that if he stopped, not only would he lose time, but he might never get up again. He had to continue walking until he reached his goal, didn't he?

Dawn was still an hour away when the torch finally gave out and Alex stumbled at the next step, catching his foot in a root and with a sound of pain, he broke down onto his knees. It was his own body that kept Tom from crashing onto the ground, cushioning the fall. Alex was buried beneath Tom, cursing tonelessly his throat too dry for sounds.

He lay still, struggling to breathe and to summon the energy he did not have anymore. Finally fighting his way out from under his friend, who regained consciousness, moaning in pain.

"Alex?" The whisper was faint, but Alex was at Tom's side, forgotten his knees, bruises, the beating and the torture. He unshouldered the rifle, then reached for the remains of the water and the last syrette. Forcing his voice to comply.

"Hey Tom, we're making it. Don't worry, I got you out and we'll make it back." He busied himself with getting his stiff fingers to uncap the water bottle. Only a few mouthfuls were left and he had no intention to take a drop of the life saving liquid. Tom's skin was worryingly cold beneath his hand when he helped him lift his head.

Tom swallowed in slow, laboured gulps, spilling some of the precious water down his chin and Alex battled the urge, drawn by thirst, to lick the few drops off the camouflage smudged, stubbly skin. Recapping the empty water bottle, he kept it, in case he found fresh water along the way, however unlikely.

He could not see Tom clearly in the darkness, but he hated his friend's weakness, those slow-motion responses. This wasn't Tom. Where was the laughter, the stupid jokes, the sheer physicality of the man, who ran every day at least once, for the joy of movement rather than fitness; who head-banged and danced like a lunatic to his brain-blasting music; who eagerly took on each and every challenge he was presented with – at sports, during training, at leisure, on duty, in combat.

A hand tugged feebly on Alex's uniform, pulling him back out of thoughts that would lead to nothing but desperation.

"Hang on, just a sec. Let me get your shot and we'll continue walking when light dawns. Got to hurry to get you out of here." Alex

wasn't sure if he was talking for his own benefit or for Tom's. Fumbling with too much effort with the syrette, managing to take the small cap off at last. He slammed the final batch of morphine into Tom's thigh, who didn't react anymore, not even with a flinch.

"No." Tom whispered and Alex frowned in the darkness. "You ... won't make it ... too heavy ... you got ... leave me ... save yourself ..."

Alex surprised himself with his sudden fury. "Forget it! Shut up, I'll never leave you, what the fuck is this sudden melodramatic self sacrificing bullshit all about? Fuck you Tom! Fuck you for even suggesting it! You're my goddamned comrade and I'm going to get you out of this motherfucking jungle. You get me? Do you understand me?"

He found his face suddenly so close to Tom's, he hadn't realised he was glowering over him, barely two inches away, but his rage, the sudden surge of adrenaline and energy, ebbed away at the feeble, drugged smile that confronted him. Just that, and Tom's eyes closed.

Just like that.

"OK, Alex." Tom's frail whisper trailed off and his head rolled to the side, the moment he got those words over his cracked lips.

Alex stared down at him, wanting to curse fate, the gods, the army and anyone or anything who could possibly have a hand in this, but all he managed was a toneless murmur. "Besides, I outrank you, soldier. It's an order. You'll live."

There was no reaction, no indication that Tom had even heard.

"You have to live." Alex repeated, unable to keep the desperation out of his raspy voice, but he was too exhausted to stumble on in the dark, and the torch had run out.

Dawn took its time before it finally arrived and Alex grew restless waiting for it. He lay on his side, trying to give some warmth to the still body beside him by carefully pulling Tom close against his chest, while keeping the rifle at the ready. He was still sweating in the humidity of the jungle night, but Tom's body was cool. At least he was able to feel his friend's slow, shallow heartbeat. He didn't dare to sleep, lest he couldn't wake soon enough, or Tom needed his help.

As long as Tom lived there was hope, and Alex was not willing to give up. He could not, would not. He had to go on and refuse to give in.

Light finally arrived at the top of the trees, far above their heads, and he used the dim glow of a new day to check his map, adjusting his torturous way according to the compass. He was not as fast as he had

hoped and would only get slower as time went on. The British camp seemed further away than ever and the route he'd been forced to take took twice as long as the original one, but it was their only chance. He had to avoid anything close to paths or even dirt tracks, or the rebels, without doubt following them to gain revenge, would find them. Perhaps they were already there, watching him and laughing, waiting for him to finally break down, so they could swoop onto them like carrion devouring the carcass of the living dead.

It didn't matter. He had to go on.

The effort it took to get up once more was beyond anything he had ever known. He moved his stiff, aching body to kneel, slipping his hands underneath the dead weight. Tom hadn't woken up since the last shot and even now there was no sign of consciousness. Forcing himself back onto his feet was pure torture and Alex cried out, staggering like a drunken man, waving to and fro. The weight across his back was heavier than ever before, and even the rifle was too much. It pulled him down, but he slung it over his shoulder and managed to straighten his legs nevertheless.

The moment daylight was bright enough, he continued his journey across hell.

He forced one foot in front of the other, and all thought ceased after another hour of dragging himself and his precious load through the jungle, towards the sanctuary of the British base. Search and rescue teams had to be looking for them, he was certain that his own squad had made it back, perhaps they would find them soon. The clearing that he'd spotted on the map could not be that much further away.

There was still hope.

Painful step after painful step. His breath came in short, agonised gusts when the sun rose and the jungle turned into a steaming hell. The burn wounds on his chest and abs stuck to the fabric of his soiled uniform, and Alex screamed at himself in his head. Yelled and ranted to go on, move further, take another step, to never give up.

He fought the urge to give in to weakness. Choking on his parched throat, he was weak from lack of water, but he still moved and walked on. An automaton, whose steps became unsure and whose vision had turned into a blur of green-brown-black-rust-blood-pain.

One step. Another.

Who was he?

Another step.

Staff Sergeant Alexander Turner.

One more step.

Why was he doing this?

Yet another impossible step.

Sergeant Thomas Christopher Warren.

One more, just one more and another. Always another.

Dying.

More steps. One. Two. Another.

No!

Alex broke down with the next torturous step.

He lost his footing, unable to keep his balance, let alone carry the body. Alex's knees buckled and he fell onto the ground, without letting go of Tom. Not even when he slumped forward and crashed face first into rotting leaves. He was buried underneath the dead weight. Tom did not move. Nothing. No reaction, and Alex felt a terrible knot of panic in his stomach that threatened to overcome him.

He couldn't anymore.

That was it, he was unable to move. His body had reached its absolute, utter limit, not a step further, nothing. But he had to breathe, was forced to struggle out from under Tom. Alex managed to get onto all fours, crawling a few inches on his hands and knees in the dirt, until he collapsed beside the still body.

This was it.

He had reached the end and he had lost. Lost his best mate, lost Tom to death, to the goddamned jungle and his own body that couldn't go on anymore. Two nights and days, walking relentlessly without sleep and little rest. Forcing his way through thick vegetation and staggering on, as fast as he could with Tom on his back.

“No!” He didn't manage to clench his fist, his dirt smeared face wet with tears of exhaustion. Alex couldn't remember what it was like to cry, but now the wrenching sobs were torn out of his body, a body that had never failed him before. Not even under the torture. Never, until now.

This is the end.

He couldn't bear to turn his head to look at Tom. Had it all been in vain? It wasn't enough. Not enough to survive. Fuck it! Fuck the army, fuck the enemy, his past, the torture, these goddamned wankers of rebel fuckwits and fuck himself! He would have screamed it out if he could, but he had no energy left. No breath, no voice, no nothing.

Alex had reached the limit and he knew it. His arms gave in and buckled underneath him, leaving his face in the dirt again, still on his knees, where he felt he belonged, because he had failed.

Failed Tom.

His body was shaking with exhaustion. He could not see anymore, could not bear knowing that he had abandoned his vow and broken the promise to his friend.

“I promised you.” The forced out words were choked from tears that he couldn't stop crying, precious moisture he should retain, though what good would it do? He could not move anymore, just couldn't. “I'm so sorry Tom. So fucking sorry.” Alex let go and fell onto the side, while shuddering violently. His eyes closed, but he forced them back open. He had to check on Tom. At least that.

He'd failed him, miserably; had believed he could do it against all odds, had thought his plan was the best there was, but he had been wrong. Had fooled himself and gambled away Tom's life. It was too late. He could barely drag his hand towards the other's. Tom's hand lay immobile, no reaction when Alex's bloodied and scraped fingers touched his friend's.

They were still warm. Tom wasn't dead yet. He was dying, but not dead yet.

“I can't anymore.” Alex whispered. “I just can't.”

Then the hatred came, caused by his own words. The self-loathing, the nausea at the despicable taste of failure, of giving up, of ceasing to fight to the very end.

“Fuck.” Alex tried to wipe at his tear smeared face, dragging himself closer to the still body, frantically searching for signs of breathing. Relief flooded and battled despair, when he saw a faint, shallow rising of Tom's chest.

“I'm a fucking loser.” Alex cursed himself, rallying strength he did not have left. Striving to find resources he was certain he had already used up many hours ago. The effort of pulling himself up once again onto his knees was inhuman, leaving him unsteady and swaying as he looked down at Tom.

His friend was unconscious, deadly pale beneath the grime. How many hours did Tom have left? He didn't know, didn't dare to guess, but he'd sign a pact with the devil right now. But maybe he had already entered the contract back in that cage, before they had found and freed him.

His hand trembled with exhaustion when he forced it to move towards Tom's face. Touching the dirt smeared features. “I promised to get you out of here.” Alex was so thirsty, he barely managed to swallow. “You were right, weren't you? I can't make it.” His tongue was swollen from lack of water. He had given every single drop to his best

mate, not kept any for himself, but now he needed to drink, to keep the other alive. How ironic.

“I can't fucking make it.” Pain lanced through his chest when his tunic pulled on festering burn wounds. Skin and cloth, caked together. He and his 'cunning plan'.

Still breathing. Perhaps a few more hours. A few more fucking hours! What until then? Until Tom stopped breathing? What the fuck was he to do? Was he to skulk across the dirt and watch him die? Was he really to just give up and watch his friend stop breathing and finally bleed to death?

Was he to fucking crawl on his knees and watch Tom *die*?

“No.” Whispered, his shaking hand touched the pale face again. Fuck, fuck, fuck! He missed the stupid-ass grin and the bickering, the fights, the laughter. The goddamned bad jokes and the sharing of more than he could count.

He missed Tom.

“No!” Alex repeated, wiped his tear-streaked, dirty and bruised face with his sleeve. He shook his head while his fingers went back to Tom. “Fuck, no. I'm not going to watch you die.”

He leaned closer, felt like letting go, giving in and falling down onto the other's body to bury his desperation into Tom's skin. Instead he stared at the face he knew so well in every possible expression. Angry. Laughing. Horny. Amused. Curious. Pissed off. Chuckling. Coming. Stressed. Screaming. Smirking. Breathless. Shouting. Grinning. Sweating. Smiling.

Alex realised he didn't know what Tom looked like when sleeping. Nor kissing. There was only one expression left that he didn't know either. He wouldn't allow himself to see the last one.

Dead.

“No. Just bloody no.” He barely brought out as he pulled himself to his knees, reaching to slip trembling arms underneath the still body, to force himself with unbelievable willpower to hoist the unconscious weight onto his back for the last time. Alex shook, almost broke down and nearly lost his balance completely, but he found a tree trunk to steady himself on. Beginning the impossible task of pulling himself upwards, back onto his feet.

One way or another. Life or death, but he couldn't give up. This was Tom. His best friend. His mate. His ...

His ...

With a hoarse cry of pain he finally dragged himself up, and Alex staggered with bent knees for a moment. Nearly breaking back down

under the great weight across his shoulders, when he reached for the rifle, hardly able to close his hand around it, and pick it up once more.

“I won't fucking watch you die.” His mantra. Once whispered, stuck silently in his head in never-ending repeat as he stumbled on. One step. Another step. Pure agony, but he walked. Had not failed yet. Had not given up. He couldn't feel his body anymore nor knew his name, rank, existence except for 'I will not watch you die'.

He moved. Managed one step, then another. And another. Slowly, but he walked for an eternity, until he saw a clearing come up in front of him. Staggering towards the light, he heard the hoped for sound at last, for which he had waited so long. The distant thud-thud-thud of air being chopped by rotor blades. He'd know this sound anywhere. Helicopter. The British Forces. Had to be. At last!

Stumbling on, he tried to speed up, frantically trying to reach the clearing before it was too late and the search and rescue patrol left again. One step, two, a few more, and the rumble of the helicopter was coming closer. This time, when he reached the edge of the clearing and broke to his knees, he managed to let Tom down to the ground without being buried beneath him.

Once on his knees, Alex didn't feel the agony of his body anymore. Perfect numbness. He was beyond pain, unable to feel his body. Running on some sort of internal drug he hadn't known his body or brain could produce.

Desperately searching with stiff fingers for the smoke flare in his webbing, any moment anticipating to see the rotor blades appear over the crowns of the trees that surrounded the clearing.

Alex cursed himself when the flare fell out of the pocket, hectically grabbing for it. If he was too late that would be it. He would not be given another chance. He hardly managed to hold the tubular device, but forced his fingers to cooperate a last time when they refused to bend, pointing the lifesaver up towards the small piece of sky.

He pulled the release and the flare shot off, producing clearly visible, bright red smoke, the very moment the rotor blades became visible. Mere slivers of darkness in a sun bright sky against the fluttering green of massive tree tops. The helicopter seemed to hover where it was, not getting any closer and Alex prayed, one flare was all he had. One chance. One life. “Come on, for fuck's sake, come on!” He whispered from split lips, his heart suspending a beat. “Come on!”

Nothing. No movement, hovering still, and then the rotor blades vanished from view. The sound of air being churned moved further away and Alex curled in on himself in desperation, slamming his fists

into the ground. Although he screamed in rage, anguish and final defeat, only a broken sound came out.

That was it, he'd lost. He'd failed his friend, after all. Why the fuck hadn't they seen his distress signal? Sunlight? Trees? Visual glare? Or just plain bad luck? His body shook when he finally gave into his own agony and exhaustion. If he had strength for tears left, he'd be sobbing. So close. Yet too late. Too far. Gone. Over.

"I'm sorry." Murmured, he did not feel anything anymore. Not the sun. Nor the humid heat. Neither the pain. The only thing coming through to him was the dreaded sound of vehicles getting closer. The sound he'd feared hearing since the night of their breakout. Not sure, at first, if his imagination was playing a cruel joke.

His lips moved tonelessly, shaking his head to no one. Alex stared down at Tom, but he didn't really see his friend. Lost in a world of failure, nightmares, memories and helplessness. The sound of branches being torn off trees, the cracking of thickets and tearing of bushes; the revving of an engine and the angry shouts meant nothing compared to the terrible knowledge that pervaded his thoughts.

He had ultimately failed Tom.

He did not notice the burst of air that exploded into noise when the helicopter returned above his head. All he heard was the sound of a pickup truck, forcing its way through the jungle. Lifting his left hand, Alex placed it onto Tom's chest, keeping his gaze lowered, then reached blindly for the rifle over his shoulder. Only when the familiar metal lay in his hands, did he raise his head.

Deaf to the noise of the rotor blades above; blind to the shadow of the helicopter behind him.

All Alex saw was the truck breaking through the undergrowth, as if in slow-motion and without sound. Machine guns being aimed at him, mouths of furious, raging rebels opened to yell and scream, but he did not hear them. Deaf to anything except for the blood stream in his body, pumping through his system what little life remained for another few seconds. He finally did not know fear anymore, as he aimed at the approaching vehicle. He would die now, and so would Tom, but he'd die fighting, even though he was on his knees.

The moment Alex pulled the trigger an almighty scream ripped through the air, coming from the guerrilla truck before him. The air was torn into shreds by bullets smashing through metal, car, engine, steel, human flesh and bones.

The rebels were riddled with bullets by the two gunners in the helicopter above, before a mighty explosion from the mounted rocket

launcher tore the vehicle to shreds. Alex didn't realise what was happening, simply allowed the rifle to fall to the ground, when he couldn't hold it anymore. He stared at the scenario before him, but could hear nothing. Uncomprehending and unbelieving, lost in a world that no one would ever set foot into.

He was still kneeling on the ground, an eternity later, when every last rebel in the truck was dead and the Toyota a mangled piece of scrap metal. He didn't realise that the helicopter was coming further down, didn't notice the humid air being blasted towards him. He didn't react when the far side door gunner slid down a rope, securing the area, closely followed by the three men of the medical rescue team, carrying their equipment. Alex was blind to the sight of the other gunner in the open door, who remained in the chopper, scanning the grounds, swivelling the heavy machine gun on its bipod.

“Are you injured?” The Medical Officer shouted at Alex over the sound of the rotor blades, but Alex didn't react, kept staring into nothing. The void beckoned too sweetly. Oblivion, unthinking. Unfeeling. The agony was gone, exhaustion had taken over body and soul. Too much. Finally.

“Answer, man!” The Officer shouted again, but he gained no response. The immobile, blind stare continued while Alex knelt on the ground, his hand protectively on Tom's chest, assuring himself that he could still feel a faint rise and fall. He didn't know that he was sweat drenched and dirty to the point of being unrecognisable. The name tag on his uniform was encrusted with gore, unreadable, while his bruised face was covered with remaining traces of camouflage, sweat, stubble, dried blood and grime. His short hair coated with dirt, baked hard from the sun. His hands blackened and torn, his uniform so soiled, the camo pattern had reinvented itself.

He barely felt how his hand was pushed aside by the medical team, that started working on Tom.

The Officer took one glance at his unit's work, then let them get on with the stabilisation of the casualty, and turned towards the kneeling man. The soldier had shot an AK at his attackers, but there was no reaction now. The Officer's voice rose to a harsh sharpness, issuing commands that did not allow for any hesitation. “Pull yourself together, man!” He stood tall in front of Alex, barking out, “Report, soldier!”

Alex's head snapped up.

His deadened mind reacted to the order. No matter the situation, the pain, the exhaustion. He was a soldier, had been obeying orders for many years.

How he managed to stand, Alex never knew. Something somehow forced his body upright, until he staggered onto his feet in a display of mind over matter, his willpower conquering the shattered body. Alex's pale eyes attempted to focus, but they kept sliding off into the beyond, until he opened his mouth and obeyed the command in a hoarse voice.

“Turner, Alexander, Staff Sergeant, Royal Engineers, 3 Commando Brigade, 59 Independent Commando Squadron, deployed on Operation Loki. Captured together with Sergeant Warren off Tall-hill bridge, three days ago. Held prisoners in a guerrilla camp. Been walking East for approximately thirty-six hours.” Alex's words came out, before his brain had engaged. “Warren, Thomas Christopher, Sergeant.” He pointed at Tom, “Gunshot to the left thigh, during capture. Pressure bandages, water, five morphine shots since then.”

The medics were strapping Tom's unconscious body into the rescue sling. Bags with fluids held high above him, Tom looked pale and lifeless, almost unrecognisable.

Alex, though, still functioned. He didn't know how.

The medical officer gave an affirmative nod. “Staff Sergeant Turner, we were looking for you and Sergeant Warren. Can you walk?”

Alex nodded. Walk. Yes, sure. He knew how. Turning his head, he watched them lift the sling back into the helicopter. Tom would live, had to live. “Yes. Yes I can walk.” Couldn't be that difficult. Just up and move one step after the other, he'd done it for endless hours. Pain. Everywhere. Agony. Move Alex, move. Foot. Step. Body. Shuffle and one and two.

Alex reached the helicopter without any recollection of how he got there. He was slow, the last man to arrive at the aircraft, and they let down a sling to pull him in. He managed to get into it, somehow, then looked up, stared into the face of the second gunner, who was reaching out with his hand. Alex took it, marvelled at the movement of the man's lips, not understanding what he said. The noise was deafening, but the thud of the rotor blades remained the most hoped for, longed for sound he could ever remember. Except for Tom's voice.

He found himself inside, scrambling further into the darkness of the helicopter, when a hand tugged on the blood stained sleeve of his tunic. His eyes barely focussed on the man before him, finally making out the uniformed, helmet wearing outline of one of the medics. Alex managed to figure out the words by reading them from lips that moved

behind the mouthpiece of the PRR. No, he didn't want help. He wasn't in pain. It was no lie, he couldn't feel his body anymore. He was numb. Dead to the agony.

He was a wreck.

"I'm alright. Just need water." Alex believed it himself. The medic nodded with something akin to relief, it would mean a casualty less to work on during the flight. Every hand was needed for Tom, whose life was slipping away beneath their fingers. The medic turned and said something to one of the soldiers that Alex couldn't understand.

"Right. Here, mate." The second gunner handed a water bottle to him. Crawling deeper into the helicopter, Alex crouched against the wall in the darkest corner, far away from the door, and watched the frantic movement that took place in the light. Clutching the water bottle in his torn hands, he was thankful that the cap came off easily. He needed both hands, desperately curled around the bottle, to lift it towards his cracked lips. Shaking with the effort, his head tilted backwards to rest against the chopper. The precious water dribbled mostly down his chin with his tremors, but enough of it made it into his mouth. The blissful sensation of water running down his throat, wetting his parched mouth and dried lips, was beyond anything he had ever consciously experienced before.

Water was spilling down his front, drenching his torn uniform, cooling the areas where cloth had bonded with festering skin. Alex shuddered, forced a moan of pain back down, before pouring the remaining water over his chest. Shivering at the relief of tepid liquid on blistered, destroyed skin.

Scars upon scars.

Would Tom obsess even more over his body from now on?

Would Tom live?

Would Tom goddamnedmotherfucking breathe and speak and move and stay alive?

The empty bottle fell from Alex's limp hands as he sat crouched, his knees pulled up towards his chest but not touching, holding them in place with his arms locked around them. His lips moved, but he didn't know what he was trying to say. He stared with red shot eyes onto the hasty, but controlled action around the man on the floor.

His friend.

They were working on Tom, and Alex watched how injections were prepared, slammed into skin that had been swiftly laid bare from soiled camo cloth. Glistening metal and liquid filled bags, held up by one of the medical technicians, while another checked the oxygen mask over

Tom's face. The medical officer applied another pressure bandage around the blood drenched one, before going on to prepare implements and items that made no sense to Alex. He merely watched the team while cowering in his state of numbness, wanting to be forgotten about, unable to cope with attention while all of his own concentration was on the action in front of him. Fighting to keep his eyes open, that threatened to shut with exhaustion.

The two door gunners were scanning the terrain beneath them, their GMPGs swivelling slowly on the bipods, alert and ready to open fire in the event of another attack from the ground, while the rocket launchers remained at the ready.

There was more movement towards the front, Alex caught a glance of the pilot and co-pilot gesturing and communicating, before the co-pilot turned round to relay some information to the medical officer. The motions before his eyes were a blur of green, black, white, red and all he was aware of was a rectangle of light that lit up one of Tom's hands, curled into a half fist, dirty with dried blood, clutching at nothing, even in unconsciousness. This hand was Alex's anchor and he kept staring at it. Watching the still fingers in the patch of light.

The helicopter ride seemed to drag on forever. He wanted to pass out, but he did not dare to take his burning eyes off that still hand. As if his fixed gaze could will Tom to live.

The landing came all of a sudden and Alex felt as if he were torn out of a nightmarish daydream, trapped between sleeping and waking, unable to move. But he did. Forced himself upwards, trying to keep from shaking so badly that the bulk of his body slammed against the helicopter. One of the medics glanced at him while working on Tom, but when asked, Alex shook his head and refused help.

He was alright, wasn't he? He was only trembling with exhaustion.

'You... won't make it... too heavy... leave me.'

Fuck you, Tom. Fuck your sacrifice.

Alex moved slowly, staying in the shadows of the helicopter, away from the team that was busy with Tom. Medics came running from the field hospital, rushing towards the helicopter, then ducking to avoid the rotor blades. Hands reached inside to take the casualty out on the stretcher, without jostling too much and keeping the drips in place. Uniformed men and women stood outside in the bright sun, but all Alex noticed, when they took Tom out of the helicopter, was how his friend's limp hand was being carefully laid on top of the blood drenched body, where it curled into itself.

He suddenly realised he had to leave as well, had to get out of the helicopter. One step after the other.

He was the second to last one and everyone outside was focussed on the seriously injured casualty, running across the landing pad towards the dark green shapes of the field hospital tents.

Alex dragged himself towards the door and stared out into the blinding sunlight. How the fuck was he to get down? Oh, right. Step. Or better even, jump. He was focussing so deeply onto the arduous task of trying to get his body down onto the ground that he neither noticed nor heard the first gunner.

“Are you alright?”

Alex didn't answer and the soldier moved towards him. Too late. Alex had already decided he'd take that step now and it couldn't be all that difficult. After all, he was still on his feet and conscious. That was the last thing he remembered. Alex crashed onto the track, passing out on impact. Quietly and unspectacularly collapsing into a heap, lying with his limbs entangled, half on his back, his torn tunic gaping open and revealing the mess of blistering burn wounds and dark bruises underneath.

“Shit!” The gunner yelled in surprise and jumped out of the helicopter while shouting into the mouthpiece of his PRR.

Alex floated, it was good where he was and he only half-woke to gaze in disbelief at the pretty face of a female medic. He felt as if he were wrapped in thick cotton wool while his arms and legs were rearranged and he was lifted.

Funny, he thought before he succumbed to final blackout, he could have sworn the devil, coming to demand his part of the pact, would be male.

* * *

The smell of disinfectant was strong enough to pervade Alex's senses before he was awake. Vaguely aware of the hum of the air conditioning that crossed the quiet, separate tent in thick, white tubes, creating the blissful comfort of a cooling breeze. The next sensation was that of tightness across his chest.

Slowly wiggling his toes, Alex groaned, the ache was travelling up his body to pool and centre in his chest. His feet were sore and it took him a while to realise that they were bandaged. He couldn't remember cutting them?

Oh. The walking. Almost two nights and days of stumbling across hostile terrain, carrying the weight on his back.

Weight? Tom. Carrying Tom.

Tom?

Alex woke with a start, managed to tear his eyes open, forcing himself to take in the surroundings and to drag himself out of the drug induced haze. He groaned again, this time with an overwhelming feeling of nausea, when everything before his vision moved in a blur.

“Shit.” Surprised at the sound of his own voice. Hoarse, broken, and far too quiet. What the fuck had happened to his throat? Right, they had probably shoved something down it. Alex closed his eyes again, fighting down the urge to be sick.

He noticed the pain in his bruised face, chest and abdomen was duller than he remembered. Daring to open his eyes again after a while, he moved his arms a little and caught the blinding white of bandages, taped around his wrists, with patches of plasters on his hands. Wondering if the pleasant floating feeling came from the different fluids that were dripping into his veins. He didn't like those tubes, needles gave him the creeps. How ironic.

“I'm pleased to see that you're awake, Sir.”

Alex was disoriented at first, unsure where the female voice came from, but when he slowly turned his head, he could make out a nurse, smiling down at him.

Alright, it hadn't been the devil then, not yet anyway.

“Tom?” He croaked.

“Sergeant Warren?”

Alex nodded, amazed at the intensity of his relief when he saw her smile in reply.

“Sergeant Warren is alive and fairly stable. He will be flown back to Britain to have surgery on his leg as soon as his condition allows.” She smiled again and Alex's tired eyes were fixed onto the blurry face in his vision. They wouldn't lie, it had to be the truth.

“I did it.” He whispered and closed his eyes again to avoid the nausea. “I kept my promise.”

“Your Commanding Officer will be here later for the debriefing, after you have rested. The full reports will be taken when you are feeling stronger.” She smiled and leaned down. “Try and get more sleep. Water is beside your bed if you want some. For anything else just call me. I'll be at the desk in front, only a few steps away. The painkillers will probably make you drowsy.”

Alex didn't open his eyes and just smiled a little. Tom was alive. He could rest now.

He fell asleep before the nurse, in her practical uniform of camo trousers and t-shirt, left the bed with the medical reports under her arm.

* * *

Alex slept longer than he'd believed possible and it was not before the next morning that he was deemed fit enough to be debriefed by his Commanding Officer and questioned about the mission. For once, his CO showed a rare and remarkable patience. Alex had to speak slowly, in a sore, rough voice, drinking water whenever this throat threatened to give in completely, and he tired quickly. He gave an account of what had happened, though his version was far more concise than reality had been. Reluctant to admit to which lengths he had gone to save his comrade's life.

In return, all Alex wanted to know from his superior and the medical staff was how Sergeant Warren was faring. Tom. His best mate. If he was going to be alright, if his leg could be saved, and when he would be flown back to Britain for surgery.

If he could see him.

He asked the last question again and again until it turned into a nagging request and the senior medical officer finally agreed to it. For a few moments, no more. The next day, a couple of minutes, three tops.

It was all he wanted.

Questions were asked about the initial attack and Alex explained how Sergeant Warren had risked his own life to fulfil the mission. He described how he himself had jumped off the Land Rover to aid his injured comrade, that he had ordered the remaining men to return to base but they had valiantly refused, yet managed to escape after all, as the officer knew.

No matter how much he tried to avoid it, in the end he had to tell of the beating, his plan, the torture. Their breakout and how he had been carrying Tom through the jungle. He gave an account of the two nights and two days of marching, until he reached the final struggle, the helicopter sighting, the smoke flare and the attack by the rebels, before they were taken to safety.

Questions and answers, all of them coming to only one result: to the acknowledgement that he had shown 'Bravery in the face of

Adversity'. His CO praised him with a hint of a smile, determined to advocate his courage to the Queen.

'For his act of greatest heroism or of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme danger.'

The Colonel was going to recommend him for the George Cross.

He said he was a hero.

Strange.

Alex didn't feel like one.

MISSION VIII: GROUND ZERO

“Hey, mate.” Alex gazed down at the still figure on the bed, that didn't look anything like Tom.

Monitors, machines, tubes, subcutaneous needles, bags with clear saline solution and others with blood and plasma. Bottles filled with liquid, steadily dripping into veins. A mask covered the lower part of Tom's face, amidst the sound of monitors bleeping and the constant hiss of oxygen.

Pale skin, wherever it was visible. Glimpses of the tribal tattoo in stark contrast of black ink against ashen skin. Grey, unreal compared to the bright white of some of the sheets and the muted green of others.

Tom should be tanned, that's what he had always looked like.

Most of the body concealed, swathed, covered, caged. Metal construction over the left leg, hiding the gory mess of the shot leg beneath a thin cover of smooth cotton. Now cleaned and set up with drainage. Fluid seeping through a tube, yellow-reddened, forcing Alex to look away quickly.

Stabilised, but by no means recuperating. Not yet. Tom was safe at last, though, about to be flown back to Britain for extensive surgery.

Alex's gaze wandered back to the eyes, the only uncovered part of the face. They were open and at least still looked like Tom's, albeit sluggish and dazed.

“They'll ship you back off to Old Blighty tomorrow morning.”

The art of making conversation with a pain-drugged man who'd just dodged the grim reaper hadn't been in any of the army manuals.

Looking for a chair, Alex needed to take the weight off his feet. His body ached all over, he was stiff and hardly able to move, and felt weak, unlike himself. The nurse hadn't exaggerated when she warned him. Still, they had allowed him to walk on his own, while wheeling the stand with the drips beside him.

He was about to sit down but stopped in mid-slow-motion at a sluggish blink of those dazed eyes.

Alex watched how beneath the perspex oxygen mask lips, glistening with salve, curved very slowly into a faint smile. Recognition, despite Tom's system being shot full of enough analgesics to fell an elephant.

“Hey, Tom!” Alex repeated his greeting, personalised this time. His own smile grew until it tugged on barely healed, blistered lips, moving bruises that were still discolouring his face. He didn't give a damn about the ache that smile caused.

Tom blinked again, eyes slightly clearer this time. Alex could see how his lips moved weakly beneath the mask. Imagined words being whispered, along the lines of *'You stubborn bastard, you got what you wanted!'* or *'your cunning plan worked out in the end, smartass.'* Or indeed *'I'm alive and you won the bet. You son of a ...'*

Alex grinned. Forgot about needing to sit down, he leaned stiffly forward despite his patched-up body and the pain of the wounds. Placed his hand over the still, unusually cool one, he covered the back of Tom's hand and fingers.

Gazing down, Alex felt surprised. He'd never dreamt that anything so simple could ever feel so right. To see and know that Tom was alive. "Your leg's going to be alright they say. You'll be pieced back together with the aid of half a hardware shop."

The mist covered mask allowed glimpses of a smile. Fully fledged for a moment, but tired. Fading soon.

"They'll chuck me out any second. Only got in here because I charmed the nurse." Alex grinned, taking comfort in talking familiar bullshit and bantering, while deeply revelling in the very basic, all else surpassing knowledge that Tom would be alright.

Alive.

"I'll see you back in Old Blighty."

Those cool fingers nudged weakly against his own and Alex's careful squeeze of the still hand was the most tender gesture he had ever made.

The door opened behind him, he could feel eyes resting on his back and anticipated the words that would follow any moment, ordering him back out.

He had nothing more to say right now anyway.

They'd be mates again, drinking ale in the pub and eating Mary's cooking, watching DVDs, racing their bikes, playing computer games against each other, beast their bodies in the gym, getting drunk in the Mess bar, running along the Great Lines, competing in sports, and having sex.

Where the hell had that last one come from?

"See you soon, mate. You'll be alright."

Tom's tired, hazy eyes blinked once more, rapidly fading when Alex removed his hand, to turn and be taken out of the room.

Holy shit. He'd thought of sex.

With Tom.

She was standing at the open door that led into the ward, in which her brother was currently the only patient. One eye on her daughters, the other with curiosity on the tall, blond man who had just entered the room and was walking purposefully towards the single occupied bed. She wondered who he was, as she watched how that broad-shouldered man bent over the bed and put a bag into her brother's hands.

When he moved out of the way she was taken aback at the sight of Tom's face. He was smiling in a way she had never seen before - not even with his nieces, not even ... No, not ever. His face was alight, and he was looking up at the other man in utter joy. Happiness. Adoration? No, but something else, something ...

She gasped.

It couldn't be. It was impossible, wasn't it? It was

It made perfect sense.

It all came together in one split second. Nothing had ever made more sense, and the clarity was frightening.

"Oh, Tom," she whispered to herself. What she saw right now would explain her brother's life better than anything he'd ever said – or *hadn't* said, and everything she'd witnessed. If she were honest with herself, she had long been wondering, without ever acknowledging her thoughts.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she murmured under her breath, slowly becoming aware of her daughters, who were skipping along the hallway, hurrying back to their uncle's room.

She watched how the tall man took a chair, pulled it very close to the bed and sat down with stiff movements and a slightly strange angle of his upper body. Her brother was still beaming. Completely captivated, oblivious to anything but the man who sat beside him.

"Yes, it has to be ..." she whispered to herself, but was abruptly jostled out of her thoughts when her youngest daughter slipped her hand into hers.

"Mummy! Who's that man with uncle Tom?" Katrina, her oldest daughter asked.

She turned to smile at her child, ruffling the dark blonde hair. "I don't know, but let's go and find out."

Katrina reached her uncle's bed first, barely leaving Alex enough time to stand up and turn around to face the newcomers, when someone else beat him to the introduction.

"I am Eva, who are you?" The younger girl piped up, planting herself right in front of the ever-so tall man. She raised onto her tiptoes while gazing up at him. "Oh ...". Her mouth formed a perfect 'O', oblivious to her mother's embarrassment.

Tom was grinning, seemingly enjoying himself more than a well-behaved uncle should.

"You're so big!" Eva's outburst made her mother wince. "You're bigger than my daddy and even bigger than my uncle!"

Tom smirked, and Alex had to laugh in a low chuckle, before he replied. "Big? To answer your question, I'm Alex. I assume you are Tom's niece?"

He didn't manage to add any more, and neither did Eva get a chance to reply, because Katrina almost fell over her own feet as she scooted closer. Mum and uncle forgotten, tugging wildly on Alex's hand, as little a victim of shyness as her younger sister.

"Alex? You're Alex? Uncle Tom told us all about you. You saved his life, didn't you? Did you?" Words like a waterfall, bubbling over, tumbling under, while her mother's eyes grew wide, glancing at her brother who paid no attention to her at all, nor to his nieces. Tom's eyes were once more focused on his friend, who was smiling at the kids.

"Yes, I'm that Alex, your uncle's friend."

'Friends', Susan thought. 'So that's what it was. Lifesaver. Friend. Just friend?'

Eva pulled on Alex's other hand, making a kissie face, which made Tom clutch the sheets around his legs, as he tried not to burst into laughter. She tugged insistently until Alex seemed to get the hint, looking for approval and Susan nodded in return, before he stooped to lift the little girl into his arms. He did it slowly though, and somewhat awkwardly, wincing when Eva promptly attacked him. Small arms wrapped around his broad neck, she planted wet kisses onto his face, which left him grinning in surprise.

"Thank you, uncle Alex! Thanks for saving uncle Tom, you made mum very happy, and us, too, because uncle Tom gives the very bestest presents!"

Between sloppy kisses, which Alex couldn't escape, and Tom shaking with badly suppressed laughter, and Susan blushing furiously while trying to shepherd her daughters back and away from that beleaguered man, they created a commotion that turned the heads of several passers-by.

Eva stopped her kisses to grin into Alex's face. "Want to see what uncle Tom got me for my birthday?"

Susan swiftly came to the rescue, prying her daughter out of Alex's arms, conscious that her brother's lifesaver deserved better than her daughter's enthusiastic chatter. "Not now, Eva, my sweet."

Before she could stop her older daughter, though, Katrina grabbed Alex's right hand between her small ones and shook it vehemently, resulting in another masked wince, until Susan gently stopped the child. She couldn't help but notice in her peripheral vision how her brother's eyes were on his friend, without fail and with a look on his face that could be classed as ...

Starving?

"I'd like to thank you," Susan smiled, trying to keep Katrina from mauling Alex, since he was obviously in discomfort. Restraining both of her daughters at last, she was finally free to thank him herself. "With all my heart, because my brother means a lot to me."

Tom mockingly waved one of his crutches in front of her face, which caused the two girls to try and catch the stick. "Don't spill the beans! I'm a roughie toughie squaddie, remember?" Tom grinned, but Susan just shrugged and carried on, holding her hand out to Alex.

"I'm Susan, Tom's younger sister, and in case he's ever talked about me, it was probably under the nickname of 'Suze!'"

Alex nodded, taking her hand while she continued. "I have to apologise for the over-enthusiasm of my daughters, Eva and Katrina. You see, they are just as happy as I am, that Tom is back."

Shaking the large hand with a firm grip, she looked up into Alex's tentative smile. What a fascinating man. No wonder that Tom was ... what? She could only guess.

"Thank you," Alex answered, shaking her hand. "That's very kind of you, but really not necessary. Anybody else would have done the same."

Tom's brows rose, and Susan saw her brother shake his head in silence.

"Everyone?" Susan smiled. "I don't think that's quite true." She let go of Alex's hand to gather her daughters close to her. "I'm very glad to meet you, because we know what you've done and we will never be able to thank you enough for saving Tom's life and bringing him back to us."

Susan noticed that her brother had a strange expression on his face that she'd never seen before, while Alex seemed unsure what to say or where to look. "I'll leave you now. We have to go back to Kent

tomorrow, and I promised these two gannets that they'd get fish and chips in one of the famous seaside chippies, and a tour along the coast with a visit to the smugglers' caves."

The girls whooped with excitement, giving her a convenient excuse for a swift exit. Quite glad to avoid the atmosphere of unease that seemed to have settled onto Tom's friend, ever since she'd thanked him.

Alex smiled politely. "It was nice meeting you."

"You, too." She smiled and took the proffered hand, shaking it once more. "I hope to see you again soon."

Tom watched the exchange in silence until Susan turned towards him, while Eva and Katrina came close to the bed and smooched their uncle bye-bye.

"I'll come for a quick visit tomorrow. The girls will be at the adventure park with my friend Lisa and her son, so I'll come along around mid-morning, alright?"

Tom grinned and nodded, waving to the girls before pulling Eva's favourite silly face that always made her giggle. "Yeah, Suze, thanks for that. Looking forward to annoying you a bit more tomorrow. Might help alleviate the boredom." He grinned at her.

Taking her daughters by the hands, Susan was ready to leave. "Don't complain, Tom, if you do, you'll be kept even busier with therapy."

He laughed, and she smiled at both her brother and his friend. "Goodbye, Alex. I recommend the chocolate pudding in the cafeteria, if you have a sweet tooth. My daughters swear on it and my brother could do with a few extra pounds." She swiftly turned her back before Tom could pelt her with a grape from the bedside table.

Alex watched her leave until all three ladies had disappeared through the door. "Nice kids," he said at last, looking at Tom, who grinned in return and shrugged.

"Told you so." He fingered the bag with Alex's gift, hadn't had the chance to unpack it yet.

Alex didn't reply, a strange silence settling between them, as both men looked at each other in a moment of awkwardness.

Friends. Best mates. Fuck-buddies on occasion.

Alex's hand suddenly moved in front of Tom's eyes, gesturing towards the bag. "Go on, open it. I didn't get stuck in traffic on the A1 for nothing. I want to know if you like it." His lips curled into a peculiar half-smile, diffusing the silence.

Tom smiled, slipped his hand into the bag, but hesitated a moment.

“Go on,” Alex urged, leaning back against the chair that seemed too small for his large frame.

“Okay. As if I could wait any longer, anyway,” Tom grinned, producing a cardboard box with a well-known logo on it. He stared at the item in his lap without saying a word before opening the package to pull out a metal-cased item. “A new generation iPod?” Tom gaped at the small rectangular device in his hands. “Alex, they’re still bloody expensive!”

Alex shrugged and bent stiffly forwards. “You told me on the phone that you were bored. I figured you'd be stir crazy by now, and frankly, you're useless when you're going insane. So what's a few quid spent on keeping your mental health in order, right?”

Tom looked at him, until he finally nodded, when it all appeared to make sense to him. “That’s alright then.” He settled back into the pillows, grinning like a fool at the iPod. “Now I just need to get internet access to download some stuff to ensure that I won't go mad.” The grin was still plastered across his face. “Seems I can't stop thanking you for everything you have done. First my life, now an iPod.”

Alex spoke again after a moment of uncomfortable hesitation, but when he looked up, his eyes did not meet Tom's. Pale blue sliding off their target. “No need to, just yet. I downloaded all of the CDs I borrowed from you. Your entire Rammstein collection is on there.”

Tom beamed, lifted his head away from the polished item in his hands. “That's fucking brilliant, and now that my sis got the new lappie for me as well, I'm not going to be dead bored anymore.” He let the metal rectangle twirl in his hand, headphones dangling and curling around his fingers. “You got to tell me, what the hell really happened in that goddamned jungle? Everyone goes on about something different. I know that you carried me all that way ... and then the George Cross - Jesus fucking Christ, I still can't believe it! You're a goddamned hero, and I'm so bloody proud of you. My life, shit, Alex, you saved my life!”

Tom's eyes sparkled, seemingly oblivious to any signs of discomfort from Alex, whose fists clenched with every over-enthusiastic sentence that came out of Tom's mouth.

“Tell me more, Alex! I know you were wounded, someone said something about burn wounds, but what the hell really happened? Is that why you sit so stiffly? Does it still hurt? Are your injuries healing all right and ...” he barely stopped to draw in a breath before he burst out, “Fuck, Alex, I still can't bloody believe it, the George Cross!” Tom shook his head and grinned, leaning forward while trying to catch Alex's eyes. “Tell me how you saved my life. Tell me what it feels like.”

Tom was still talking when Alex finally reacted. The explosion was violent, he jumped onto his feet, the chair wobbling precariously.

“No!” Alex shouted. “Stop it! Stop talking about all this crap. It's bullshit! Forget about the bloody medal, I don't deserve it!” He glowered down at Tom with his fists clenched, body tense.

Tom stared at Alex, wide eyed. “Why?” His question came calmly, despite Alex's aggression.

“*Why?*” Alex spat out. “I'll tell you why! I almost gave up, you understand? I would have let you die, maybe even tried to save my sorry hide, because I couldn't go on any more. Heroes don't eat dirt nor crawl on their knees, but I did. I fucking cried! Sobbing on the fucking ground and ready to give up!” Alex shook with tension and suppressed fury. It had been increasing and gathering momentum since the day his CO had commended him for his bravery. The commendation had forced him to remember those moments, when he had given up.

“But you didn't.” Tom's reply was calm. He looked at Alex, whose brows furrowed even more. With his lips set in a thin line, he didn't answer, thus Tom repeated his simple statement.

“You didn't give up.” Tom fixed Alex with an intense look, unwavering.

Yet Alex remained silent, tense, his fists so tightly clenched, the knuckles turned white.

“You didn't give up, did you?” Tom repeated, and Alex shouted angrily:

“No! I didn't give up.”

Tom smiled. “Why?”

Alex was taken aback by that one syllable as he stood and wavered, blinking. His answer was tentative at first, as if finding his way through a maze of anger and frustration. He'd been told to feel pride, for something he'd seen as defeat, until now.

“Because I couldn't watch you die.” The answer was as profound as it was simple, and Alex's anger dissolved as the tension gradually eased from his body.

Tom nodded once, and Alex's fists relaxed in fractions, calming in tiny increments. His gaze shifted towards Tom, whose smile widened a fraction.

“This is why.”

Alex shook his head in confusion, brows drawing. “What?”

Tom used both his hands to shift the injured leg to the side, then eased back into the pillows and looked at Alex, who was aware how

Tom studied his face with its razor-sharp cheekbones, and the pale blue eyes. "This is why you are a hero. Despite everything, even in adversity, you didn't give up. No matter what."

Alex stared, swallowed, the last remaining tension left him, and he slumped onto the chair beside the bed, deflated. He didn't know what to say, but he realised that there was only one simple truth: All that mattered in the end was that Tom was alive.

"When you receive the George Cross, do you know what this means to me?" Tom asked into the quiet, still smiling and looking questioningly at Alex, who shook his head in silence.

"It means that, somehow, my life is worth more than I ever thought. I sit here, thinking 'I am worth the George Cross, my *life* is worth it'. That's what it feels like. As if I were special. Silly, eh?"

Alex took a deep breath, once more shaking his head, this time with careful consideration. "No. Not silly."

His voice was calm when he stood up, leaning awkwardly over the bed until he was close to Tom. Fingertips touching the smooth sheets that were loosely draped over his friend's legs. Small dots of warmth, seeping through cloth onto skin and back again, creating a strong connection. Re-asserting their bond of comradeship. "I will be very proud to receive the George Cross." Alex's smile turned from hesitant to warm. "Very proud indeed."

* * *

The following day brought some rare mild weather, and a pleasant afternoon that was balmy for the time of year up north. Giving the chance to enjoy the short reprieve from the blustery winds and the grey skies while it lasted.

Tom had just about managed to make it out onto the first bench, right beside the patio doors, and was sitting in the milky sun like an old age pensioner, clutching his crutches. His injured leg propped up on a stool, he leaned back with a sigh, eyes closed, face tilted towards the pallid yellow disk in the hazy sky.

No matter how friendly he was with the staff, everyone knew he was going stir-crazy in rehab, subjected to examinations, tests, physiotherapy, water therapy, walk therapy, lie therapy, sit therapy and goodness-knows-what-else therapy. Though he was making remarkable progress, it drove him mad that he had to stay for several more weeks.

He looked up when Susan sat down beside him, pressing a can of Coke into his hand.

“Here you go.” She stretched out as well, watching how her brother peered at her through slitted eyes, grinning.

Tom nodded his thanks and took a good long swallow from the can. “Damn, wish it were beer,” he mumbled and she laughed, poking into his ribs, which she could feel far too clearly through the layer of thick jacket, long-armed t-shirt and bulky sweat pants.

Susan knew that it was now or never. She had to ask the question that had been on her mind since she’d met Tom’s saviour and friend, but she kept stalling. It was a difficult thing to ask, but she had to do it. The look on Tom’s face when his friend had come to visit was imprinted onto her memory. Pure joy, absolute happiness, and something more. Something she’d only seen on very few people. People who were in love, or at least smitten.

“Tom? Can I ask you something? It’s personal.” Not the cleverest way to start the ‘interrogation’, but she didn’t know any other. Taking a sip from her can as she watched him.

“Personal?” He grinned, opening his eyes to look at her, shifting on the bench so the weight was on the good thigh. “As in *very* personal?”

She nodded. “Very, very personal. The sort you’d punch me for if we were twenty years younger,” she smiled back.

Tom rolled his eyes, sniggering. “What, you mean more personal than the one time when you asked me how to kiss with tongues - which I did refuse to tell you, as I hope you kindly remember ...”

Susan blushed furiously, cringing. “I was thirteen!” she protested. “I didn’t know who to ask.”

“Yes ...” Tom smirked and took another sip of the Coke. “Then perhaps you mean as personal as the time you asked me to explain how it felt to get a blow-job and sadly I didn’t know, eh?”

Susan laughed, hitting him gently over the head, but Tom ducked, chuckling, until he winced a little and was forced to shift again on the hard bench.

“Worse, Tom. Much worse. Something very, really, truly, honestly, personal.”

He raised his brows, curiosity piqued. “Go on then, I wonder what you’ll come up with this time. Maybe I should have a word with my nieces to get them to stop their mum from embarrassing her older bro.”

He grinned, but Susan didn’t take the bait, trying to find the right words, hesitating for a moment, but like her brother, she believed in straightforwardness and battling on. “You know I love you to bits and if I am completely wrong, please don’t be angry with me, alright?” She

looked at him pleadingly, with that expression he had never been able to refuse. "Promise?"

Nodding, Tom smiled. "Promise. Now go ahead, we don't have forever. This bloody bench is a fucking nightmare on my arse."

Susan took a deep breath and lowered her voice after making sure that no one was listening. "I saw you yesterday from the doorway, when your friend Alex arrived. You looked ... well, very happy. I was thinking then, that, uhm, with the lack of girlfriends and stuff, you know ..."

She faltered when he sat up straighter, clearly alarmed. The atmosphere had changed immediately, charged with sharpness and electricity that was about to spark. Susan prayed fervently that she wasn't wrong. The confirmation would explain everything.

"Are you gay, Tom?" she suddenly blurted out, instantly met with a stare of absolute horror. She quickly added, "It would explain a lot."

Tom gaped at her, eyes wide. Silence, and Susan figured she already knew the answer. She felt bad for seeing her brother frozen in shock, as if staring into the muzzle of an enemy's rifle.

He opened his mouth, closed it again, while she held her breath. He cleared his throat before he answered. "Is it ..." his voice sounded dry. "Is it that obvious?"

He was clearly frightened, and Susan felt terrible, leaning forward to put her hand onto one of his.

"No," she said quietly. "That's not what it is. I would have never known," she cautiously avoided using a word like 'guessed', because she obviously had, "if I didn't know you so well and hadn't watched you with Alex. You looked so ... happy."

Once again carefully choosing her words. She was convinced that what she had observed was someone in love. Simply and truly. She'd never speak it out loud, though, wouldn't dare use those words. She knew her brother better than that. "So, is it true?" she hesitantly asked again.

Tom nodded silently, unable to answer.

Susan tried to calm her brother. "It's only because I know you so well. We've been close all our lives, there's no need to worry, really. It's just, well, I know you don't have a girlfriend and it doesn't seem that you're interested in acquiring one."

Tom nodded again and drew in a deep breath. "Shit. Yeah. It's true." He looked down at his leg, as if he didn't dare to look at her. "I'm sorry," he murmured, "so very sorry."

Susan jerked as if slapped. Her voice remained low but took on a cutting sharpness. "For what? For being who you are? Bullshit!"

Her sudden outburst startled Tom.

"You should, however, be sorry for not telling me. Do you really think I would be upset? Judge you? You should know me better than that! Didn't you trust me?"

Tom raised his hand and grabbed hers, squeezing with too much strength, but she didn't wince. "That wasn't the reason, believe me. I didn't tell you, because you'd be the only one - you'd have to carry the burden." He added quickly, "but Alex and I aren't, you know, well. Not really. He's not gay, he's ... he's my best mate, and ..."

He trailed off helplessly with a shrug, but Susan just smiled. A strangely sad half-smile.

"Tom, I want you to understand what it was like when I heard you were injured. When the Welfare Officer rang our doorbell I thought my heart stopped. I remember staring at the woman, uncomprehending what the hell she was telling me, because all I could hear was that you were badly wounded. Very badly. And all I could think was: my big bro might die."

Tom was silent, visibly swallowing hard.

"I let them inside, but I can't remember how. All I remember is the patch of sunshine in the garden, as I stared out at the wilting daffodils. She told me you were in a critical condition, that you'd been shot and that they'd fly you back home for surgery."

Susan took her brother's hands. "The woman left, trying to reassure me that all that was possible would be done, but I just sat there, crying, waiting for Richard to come home. I remember the blue and white pattern of the tablecloth on the kitchen table, but nothing else. It struck me for the very first time ever, that your job was not like any other job. That we could lose you, and that I didn't know how to cope with that."

She squeezed his hands. "Do you have any idea what you mean to me? You're my brother. I don't give a damn if you have sex with cows, sheep, men, women or aliens. I don't care, Tom. I don't."

Susan's face moved closer, and her voice took on a vibrating intensity, as she swore, a rare occurrence. "I don't give a flying fuck if you are straight, gay, bi, or nothing. All that counts for me, Tom, is that you are alive. Knowing you are around somewhere, the guy your family loves so very much. All of us, mum and dad, your nieces, even your brother in law. You're a generous, funny person with a great heart, and

even though you're an equally great prick at times, I would miss you insanely."

Tom swallowed again, even harder, and his eyes were red-rimmed.

"So, you're gay. Despite what you say, I believe that you are completely smitten with your best friend, but it's not my business." Susan smiled crookedly, "Tom, I don't care if you want to make love to him or fuck him senseless or hold his hand or just slap him on the back all buddy-like. I. Don't. Care. You get it, bro? I don't. I only want you to be alive and happy. You understand?"

Tom nodded, clearing his throat. "Yeah," he croaked. "I'm sorry, Suze, I'm so sorry. I was an idiot."

She looked at her brother and smiled, before leaning closer to embrace him, gentle to avoid hurting, but tight enough to show her affection.

"Yes, that you are. You really are an idiot and I love you to bits."

The downstairs phone kept ringing incessantly. There was no escaping from the annoying noise, no matter how deeply Alex burrowed his head into the pillows.

“Jesus Fucking Christ, leave me alone!” He groaned, but the grating sound wouldn't stop. Finally giving up, he threw the duvet off, climbed out of bed and rubbed a hand over his short cropped hair. After bleary-eyed negotiation of the stairs, Alex stalked stark naked towards the phone in the front room. If only he'd replaced the cordless one .

He was bloody tired. He'd only come back from visiting Tom at 1 AM. Stuck in road works on the M25, and sitting for hours in a car was still uncomfortable.

Alex snatched up the receiver. “Yes!” he growled into the phone. The voice at the other end did not lift his mood in the slightest. His ex-wife. Damn. He'd rather crawl over red-hot coals than talk to her right now. “What the hell do you want?”

He was worn out, grumpy and sore in addition to growing more and more bored. Just like Tom. Ironic, really. Alex frowned, ignoring the voice at the other end of the phone, too groggy to pay attention. He was ready to admit that he was looking forward to getting back to duty. His days lacked their regulated purpose and timing.

Most of all, though, did he miss his best friend's company. Plenty of men in the Mess bar for a pint, but it was never as good as spending time with Tom. Not the same jokes, the stupid banter, and neither the companionable silence. Not the same chance to end up ... Jesus. He'd thought about Tom and sex in the same sentence again. Was he turning into a fag after all?

Holy fuck.

Yet when he'd made himself have a good look along the shower stalls in the gym, not a single one of the men had interested him. They did nothing for him, none of those nude, buff bodies. Not even Tom's body 'did' anything for him. He wasn't turned on by it, yet Tom made him come, and at the same he couldn't get hard with a woman. Least of all the one who was currently on the phone.

Missing a friend wasn't a bad thing, was it? Missing a body? No.

Missing what Tom did with that body.

“What did you say? Meet me?” Alex was abruptly torn out of his thoughts when he caught the last shreds of a disturbing sentence, as he frantically tried to catch up with the conversation. Fortunately, she didn't seem to have noticed how one sided it had been until now.

“Why? Alright, you won't tell me on the phone.” Alex shrugged into the empty room, scratching his groin while staring blindly outside. Oblivious to the woman who was walking her dog, gaping through the front room window at the naked man.

“If I have to, yeah. Am on leave for a few more days. Doc says I'm not fully fit yet, despite what they initially thought, and I'm only on light duties. Something about the existing scar tissue.” He shrugged again, pushing away the unbidden memory of Tom's leg, a mess of torn flesh, gore, and blood. “You heard, I assume?” Alex continued.

The voice at the other end went on and on about that she had heard, how she was impressed, proud, etc. He sighed and listened with forced patience to her verbal diarrhoea.

George Cross. My arse.

Glancing outside while letting her talk until he managed to cut her off. He didn't want to talk. Hated talking, disliked it so intensely, he wished Tom was back and they could just sit, watch DVDs, have a pint, or go out for a run, when Tom's leg had healed.

“OK. Tonight, then.” Nodding towards the phone when she finally came to a halt. Alex scratched his butt while rolling his eyes. Why weren't thirty seconds enough for a bloody phone call. Never with a woman, definitely not with this one, and to think he'd married her ten years ago. “Yeah, you too. Bye.”

Putting the phone down, Alex was surprised that he felt relatively little aggression. Strange. He wasn't as pissed off with her right now as he had been since before the divorce, and a new and small voice in his head made him wonder if he had made her a scapegoat. But he really didn't want to listen to that voice right now.

He passed the day in the gym, working out as much as the healing injuries allowed, then watched telly and had lunch in the pub. Yet another slow, boring day signed mostly off duty. Something missing. Someone. The friendship with Tom was damn good. Too good.

Evening came and his promise to meet his ex-wife drew closer, dreading to talk to her about whatever she didn't want to tell him on the phone. Even though, all things considered, he should probably be thankful to her. She hadn't wanted any maintenance, never fought for part of his future pension and had never really bothered him since the day he had seen her last in court. As divorces went, his had been an exceedingly smooth and easy one. Yet she reminded him of the past, and he couldn't bear remembering what had happened to him.

Back when he had returned from the jungle, she hadn't been able to understand that he didn't want to talk. Couldn't. The shrink had been

bad enough, trying to get him to “open up” and talk, but he'd stoically refused, claiming he was fine. In the end they had to concede and declare him fit for duty, without ever recognising his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And that was exactly what he had wanted. Bugger the past, and screw the nightmares that followed. Fuck her insistence that he should talk to her.

Couldn't anyone understand? Talking about what had been done to him, would turn him into a victim once more. It would make it worse, and make it impossible to ever let go, while all he wanted was to get on with his life and leave the past behind. He'd learned to ignore his scars, after all, except when he couldn't cover up and was stared at as a freak.

All he wanted was to live, to get on with his life, and anything that reminded him of the past and the torture was unbearable. Laden with associations he could not deal with.

Hadn't quite worked out that way, had it?

* * *

Alex stood at the door of his ex-wife's house, ringing the bell once while looking over the immaculate front lawn and the colourful flower tubs. He hated gardening, she had always loved it.

He hadn't seen Marita since the divorce and the woman who opened the door and greeted him hadn't changed all that much, except that she looked more radiant than he could remember. The tentative though welcoming smile that she wore was somehow infectious and Alex's irritable face was lightened by the ghost of an honest smile in reply, surprising himself.

“Hi Marita. You look good.” He surprised himself further, where the hell had that last bit come from?

She seemed to think something similar, letting out a huff of laughter, while ushering him in. “Thanks for the compliment. Is this a case of 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers'?” She closed the door behind him. “But whatever it is, I gladly return it. You don't look too bad yourself, especially considering the circumstances, and it's good to see you again.”

Alex grimaced slightly but nodded. She did have a point, but to agree was going too far. He walked into the front room where she led him to a comfortable looking settee and gestured for him to sit down.

“Beer or G&T?” She stood and gazed down at him.

“Beer, I haven't changed all that much in the past two years.” He scrutinised her, surprising himself once more, when he realised he hadn't added the usual 'since you left me'.

She smiled and turned quickly. “Give me a moment, it's in the fridge.”

Alex looked over the stylish furniture. The house itself was big and perfectly decorated, very much unlike any of the buildings they'd ever been billed in, both in married quarters and the house they'd bought in Brompton. Wherever she was getting the money from, it had to be substantial, and that meant she was no longer alone. He noticed with strange detachment that the realisation did not hurt at all. He felt nothing, except for an odd sense of relief.

“Here you are.” She came back, handing a beer can to him, before she sat down in the opposite chair, a glass of something transparent and carbonated in her hand. When she crossed her legs in the pencil skirt, Alex's eyes were drawn to the movement, and he noticed they were still rather lovely. Once again he felt nothing, except for a curiously detached sense of pleasure, as if she were a painting or an object of art.

“Cheers.” He took a few gulps of the beer before settling back into the settee, barely managing to fold his long legs underneath the low, marble-topped table. He felt oddly out of place in the finely furnished, detached house. He was a soldier, would always be one, and after all these years in service, he hardly knew what to make of these surroundings. Taking another mouthful from the can, he broke the silence. “You wanted to tell me something. I'm all ears.” Straight to the bone, loathe to waste any more time than necessary. Even though he was no longer aggressive, she was still a symbol of his past, and that hurt.

Marita nodded. “Yes, of course, I really shouldn't keep you longer than necessary.” She smiled, “but I'd like to thank you for coming. We haven't been getting along well in the past, and so I do appreciate very much that you came today.”

Alex shrugged, taking another sip. Surprising himself with the absence of any remarks along the lines of 'wasn't my fault' or 'who's here talking'. He remained silent, and Marita continued, “Can I also tell you that I felt proud when I heard what you had done?”

Alex sat up straighter. “Why?”

She continued to smile and shook her head, taking a sip of her drink before setting it down onto a finely decorated coaster. “We were married for only five years and we have been divorced for a while, but

that doesn't mean that I don't care anymore about what happens to you.”

He blinked at her and let out a soft snort, shaking his head. “That's rich, but you know what's the worst?” His pale gaze did not miss how her face morphed from amusement to tension, and Alex broke into a half-grin. “The worst is, that I actually believe you.”

She laughed and he was astonished at the relief in her voice. Maybe, just maybe, he had been too harsh, too angry and too quick at blaming her for everything. Maybe. And maybe he shouldn't have fucked every willing bird while he was married.

“Well, that's good then.” She seemed far more relaxed. “I am proud to know you, you are a hero.”

Alex grimaced, shaking his head violently. “That's bullshit. I'm not a hero, I just did what anyone else would have done. Should I have watched my best mate die? No bloody way.”

Marita tilted her head, wisely changing the subject immediately. “How is he? Your friend, I mean.”

Alex lifted his hand, but he aborted the gesture, discarding the hand on a denim clad thigh. “Tom's doing fine. It'll take a few more weeks before they let him out of rehab and physio. The muscles have to build back up and he needs to re-learn walking. His left leg was a mess, I can tell you, they had to screw a metal rod along the thigh bone.”

“I'm glad to hear he's recuperating.” She smiled.

“Thanks.” Finishing his beer, Alex put the empty can onto the table. “If that's all, I better get going.”

“No, wait.” Marita leaned forward, “if you don't mind, can I ask you something else?”

Wariness crept into Alex's eyes, he knew a question that started like this would invariably end up with something he did not want to answer. “I want to say no, but you'd ask anyway.”

She smiled a little. “I know this is a personal question, but in the light of having been married for a few years, and the fact that I do still care about you, I'd love to know if you've found someone?”

Alex closed his eyes in exasperation. Did she always have to use a multitude of sentences where one would suffice? He was about to barge out 'no', when the word got stuck in his throat. He hadn't 'found someone', had he? No. Not what she meant, but what was Tom? Yeah, what the fuck was Tom?

Alex's mouth opened before his brain engaged. “Kind of,” he heard himself say and his eyes widened in surprise at his own words. *Kind of?* Where the hell had that come from?

Marita genuinely smiled. “Oh, I'm glad!”

Strangely, he had no doubts about her sincerity, but then she destroyed it all by leaning forward and asking another question. She could never leave anything well alone. “I trust that it means you have found a remedy for your problem?”

Mistake. Alex immediately sat ramrod straight. About to snarl that it wasn't her fucking business, after all, she had left him over his failure, but then he stopped. Again. Another tirade stuck in his throat. He had 'found a remedy', hadn't he? If he lied now, would he not betray the friendship? “Yeah.” Alex's one-syllable answer and rigid stance forbade further probing. If she asked anymore questions, he'd bolt out of the door.

Marita seemed to get the message, and her smile turned cautious, her voice softening, “I am glad. I really am.”

“Yeah,” Alex's eyes flicked towards the window, watching a car go by. “I guess you are. Probably feeling less guilty now, is that right?”

“Guilty?” She looked at him, eyes narrowed, but then she visibly relaxed once more and she smiled a little, making a negligent gesture with her hand. “Doesn't matter, it's been a long time.”

“Yeah.” He said no more, but the ‘maybe’ from before was creeping back into his thoughts. Maybe it hadn't been all her fault, and maybe it hadn't been about his scars and his inability to function, and maybe ... maybe he'd behaved like an utter asshole to her. Alex looked at the opposite wall, allowing a stilted silence to settle in the room. He finally broke the uncomfortable quiet. “Tell me why you asked me to come. Any other reasons than interrogating me?”

He was dangerously close to the old aggression, but Marita steered away from the edge with a warm smile. Genuine or fake, it did the trick of calming Alex down. “Yes, sorry, I'll come to the point now. As you might have guessed, I'm not living alone. I've found a new partner and I just wanted to tell you that we marry in a couple of months. I'm a few weeks pregnant.”

Alex looked at her for a long while, realising eventually, that her expression was worried. Did she wonder if she'd made a mistake by telling him? Why had she felt the need, then? Why did she bother and why should he care? But something had changed, the old anger and accusations were gone, and he took a deep breath, raising his empty beer can in a salute. “Congrats, I know you always wanted a loving husband, children, and a nice home. Nothing wrong with that, and ...” he hesitated, but somehow it was time to tell her he'd learned a few

truths himself. “That was never me, and I'm glad you found what you need.”

She broke into a smile and raised her own drink, leaning over the table until can and glass connected. “Thank you, I wish you the very same.”

She drained her glass and leaned back, but Alex wasn't done yet. “Explain one thing to me, why did you have to tell me? Wasn't that rather selfish?”

Her astonishment was genuine. “Selfish? Maybe, if you think so, but I honestly just wanted you to know, because I was hoping you might ...” she trailed off, seemingly looking for the right words, but never finished the sentence. “We were married, Alex, I really did love you back then, how could you mean nothing to me now? Despite what you might think, I never hated you, and you never ...” once again she trailed off, this time with a hesitant smile. “I want you to be well, and perhaps that is easy for me to wish now, that I found happiness, but I do mean it. However, I am sure you agree we are better off leading separate lives. I was never enough for you, and while I won't ask the dreaded question 'how many', I was not stupid. Well, maybe I was, for a long time, because I had been aware of your cheating well before you were sent on that fateful Operational Tour. No, Alex, I did not file for divorce because of how you'd changed when you came back, even though living with you and your silence was impossible. We wouldn't have stayed together anyway, whatever might or might *not* have happened.”

She fell silent, looking at him, and Alex did not answer for a long time. Too much truth, and the 'maybes' were turning into definites in his mind. He finally let out a gruff reply. “Yeah, whatever. I don't want to talk about it. It's in the past. What happened, happened. Let it drop. You are right and I agree, is that enough? We are better off divorced.” He shook his head briefly, cutting her off before she could say anything. “No, really.” Taking a deep breath, the old anger never came, and he felt weariness instead. “I see you are happy and it's great. Drop the subject once and for all, can you do that?” Alex added one word that made her brows shoot up in astonishment, “please.”

“Yes. Of course.” Marita smiled tentatively. “I'll leave it be. Sorry.”

Silence settled for an uncomfortable moment until Alex cleared his throat. “I better get going.”

Marita nodded. “Of course. It was nice of you to come and it was good to talk to you.”

He flashed a tired grin. “You mean talking 'civilly', yes?”

For a second she looked confused, but then she smiled back. “Civilly, indeed. Your new partner must be one hell of an amazing person. You have mellowed, Alex.”

He was about to stand up, but stopped dead in his tracks. 'A hell of an amazing person'? Shit, yes. Would be a lie to deny it. Best friend. Yes. Would trust Tom with his life and vice versa, he had proven it. Comradeship. Loyalty. Depths he had never managed before. With no one, except Tom. “Yeah,” Alex smiled faintly, “amazing', that's right, I guess.”

“Don't screw it up!” She leaned forward, smiling, but with an intense look in her eyes. “Trust me, we only get so many chances in life. If you've found someone who is good for you and fits the bill, then don't be a selfish prick.”

She looked mortified at the last bit, but Alex merely frowned. What the fuck was all of that about? He shook his head and stood up, wincing at the movement, which caused her to look at him with concern.

“Are you alright?”

“I will be.” Alex offered. “Not quite healed yet.”

Standing up, she smoothed her slim skirt down to her knees. “I'm sorry that you're still in pain.” Offering a smile, “and I've kept you far too long already. I wouldn't be surprised if you'd rather go back to your 'other half'.” She smiled fully now, unaware of the strange look on her ex-husband's face.

'Other half.' Shit. That was going too bloody far.

Alex frowned but said nothing. Best to let her believe whatever she wanted, or he'd never get out.

Marita walked him to the door. “It was good to see you, and to have an actual conversation.” She smiled, “thank you, Alex.”

Alex shrugged, she had hit too close to home, and right now it was all getting too much. “Alright.” He wasn't going to offer anything else. Ready to leave, goddamned ready in fact. “I wish you all the best.”

She was still smiling when he opened the door and stepped outside, lifting his hand in a gesture of farewell. “Thanks for the drink.”

“You're welcome.” She waved after him and then the door closed.

Alex was already sitting in his car, seatbelt buckled, key in the ignition and turning, before he finally allowed himself the thought that it had actually been almost pleasant to see her. And no, he wasn't going to screw it up. He'd be damned if he did.

Neither was he going to think anymore about the reason why it was of such utmost importance not to screw up.

It just was.

* * *

A month later, and after weeks of paper shuffling on light duties, which had bored him out of his skull, Alex's burn wounds had finally healed completely. The medical centre had signed him fit for full duties, and he was back to his old routine with its daily challenges.

Tom was due to return to Brompton barracks that same week, to get checked in and checked out at the medical centre in camp. Without doubt to get signed off for goodness how much longer, doomed to die of boredom on light duties, just as Alex had.

The Army being what it was, they didn't provide for Tom's transport, but organised train fare for him. Ignorantly sending him off on two crutches, to hobble and hop all the way from Newcastle onto one of the Great North Eastern trains and across London in the tube, all the way from King's Cross St Pancras down to Victoria and onwards with the local commuter trains to Gillingham, to manage the last leg of the journey in a taxi.

Alex had lost it on the phone when he'd heard about the plan. He'd declared the treatment as ludicrous in an impressive bout of angry abuse at the obvious lack of care, and promised to organise transport. Unable to pick Tom up himself, he had arranged for a mate to do the journey up North, in exchange for Alex taking over one of his weekend duties.

Smudge had left camp in the early hours of Friday morning, before the worst of the usual weekend traffic congestion hit the roads. They were scheduled to return before lunchtime, so that Tom could check in with the medical centre sometime around 1300 hours. It was anybody's guess when he'd finish, though Alex reckoned that mid afternoon was most likely, and he took his time after knocking off at lunchtime, when PT had parade. Squeezing in some additional exercise in the gym to get himself back to his physical standards.

It was early afternoon, and Alex was crouching on the bathroom floor, his head in the cupboard under the wash basin, and his arms stuck inside, fiddling with the pipes that were dripping cold water onto him. He cursed profusely, when the door bell rang.

In the attempt to sit up, he bashed his head against the wash basin and followed the short, sharp stab of pain with a volley of extremely colourful swearing, ending in a heartfelt: "Who the fuck is there?" Shouted, as if the person at the door downstairs could hear him.

Tom couldn't be back yet, too early. Besides, if it was him, why the hell hadn't he phoned or sent a text? He should know that Alex hated surprises. He grabbed a towel, quickly dried his hands and got up, rubbing the back of his head with a wince. Hurrying down the stairs, he hollered towards the front door, "Hang on for fuck's sake!" when the bell rang a second time. He was cursing Tom, realising that only he would be so annoyingly impatient to ring that goddamned bell *again*, before he had managed to cross the hallway in a few rushed strides.

When Alex opened the door, he was presented with a broadly grinning Tom, supported on two crutches, the army bergan on his back. "I didn't expect such an effort." Tom smirked, looking Alex up and down, then pointing with his chin at the wet t-shirt. "It's appreciated, mate. I take what I can get." He laughed, staring pointedly at what Alex realised had to be his nipples, visible against the wet fabric and reacting to the cool breeze outside.

Alex groaned and shook his head in mock exasperation. "You're not even for one minute back in Brompton and you already manage to be an obnoxious, horny, leering bastard." He couldn't help his smile, though, too pleased to see Tom, and see him so well. "You should have called, I was fixing the washbasin."

Tom grinned at him, as annoyingly infectious as ever. "Are you letting me in, or are you going to continue staring at me? It's nice out here, but I think you'll catch a cold in that wet shirt, even though I'd vote for you any time in a contest." He raised his brows and kept staring at the chest in front of him.

Alex rolled his eyes and stepped aside. "Shut up, Warren, and come in. Any more of that wet t-shirt contest bollocks and I'll slam the door in your face."

Tom laughed, both knowing there was no chance in hell that that would ever happen. Showing off his agility on the crutches, he hobbled more or less gracefully inside. "Kitchen?"

"Yeah." Alex closed the door behind him, and allowed his facial expression to morph from fake grump to pleased grin in Tom's back. His mate was alive. Definitely alive. Bloody hell, he'd never thought he could be so glad to watch this particular back vanish down the hallway.

In the kitchen, Tom leaned on his crutches by keeping both in one hand, wiggling out of the bergan to drop the heavy pack onto the table. He swayed for a moment, precariously supporting himself, while opening the frayed flap and rummaging one-handed in the bag, to lift out a couple of six-packs of beer. He dropped them onto the table and,

hopping on the good leg, turned and grinned at Alex, who was holding a chair in his hands.

“What do you intend to do with that? Clobber me over the head?” Tom moved the crutches back into both hands and rested on the cushioned handles, looking remarkably at ease.

Alex lifted his eyes to stare in mock exasperation at the ceiling. “No, but if you don't sit down ASAP, trust me, I will ponder that option.”

Tom shrugged and hopped backwards to comply. It took some doing before he managed to sit down, but soon the crutches lay across his lap, and he looked expectantly up at Alex. “And now what?”

Alex had to grin. It was good to feel that nothing had changed between them - even though everything had changed. Their friendship was as easy-going as it had always been, no matter what had happened in that jungle. “You're as insufferable as ever.” Alex placed the chair right in front of Tom before taking hold of the crutches to lean them against the kitchen unit. “Put your leg up, and that's an order.”

Tom grimaced but complied. “Since when did you turn into Nursey?” He fiddled for a moment with the black track suit bottoms that stretched over his tightly bandaged thigh, but Alex noticed a smile that had lit up Tom's face.

“I turned into 'Nursey' since you managed to get your leg shot to pieces.” Alex decided to stick to the light-hearted banter. “Just don't get any stupid ideas about a nurse uniform, is that clear?”

“Yeah, cheers, mate.” Tom smirked and wagged his eyebrows suggestively. “Fortunately for me you're not actually Nursey, but He-Man, who had great fun lugging me across the jungle.”

Alex laughed, deep and resonating. Only a moment, but this was all it took to change the atmosphere instantly from mocking fun to something else entirely. Tom's smirk turned into a smile, a look that Alex recognised immediately, having learned to decipher the unspoken. Reading the undisguised *Want* and decoding the open *Need*, he immediately translated the shift from banter to seriousness. Studying the face before him, he wondered how that expression could touch him on levels he had never expected to respond to.

'Don't screw it up, Alex'. The memory of his ex-wife's warning came unbidden into his mind.

Tom leaned forward, pulling one of the six-packs of beer onto his lap, ready to break a couple of cans off their plastic rings. “Hey, let's get pissed.” He looked up, grinning expectantly and the *want* was joined by hope, so painfully obvious, Alex suddenly knew what he had to do.

“No,” Alex shook his head, “I don't want to get drunk.” He took the cans back out of his mate's hand, placing them onto the table.

Tom's face fell. “Ok.” He tried to grin, failed, and took a deep breath.

Alex felt almost cruel, but only for a moment. Taking a step forward, he stood so close, he nearly touched Tom's good leg. With a sudden move, he stepped over Tom's leg, straddling his thighs. He was met with surprise, but before Tom could say anything, Alex placed his hands onto his friend's shoulders and lowered his head until he was face to face.

“For once I don't want to get pissed. In fact, I think I want to be perfectly sober, because there is something I have missed seeing so far.” The look of confusion was priceless in Tom's wide open eyes. Alex grinned. He would have never believed he was going to do what he was about to do, but the sense of power was downright heady. His traitorous mind might not allow his body to react, but he didn't care. The sensations were new, exciting, and different from what he remembered about sex.

“I don't want to blur my vision.” This, here, was strange, almost scary. He'd never taken the lead before, had always refused to acknowledge fully that he was touching and kissing a man. Not any longer. No more lying to himself. No chance to pretend.

A man.

He was scared to take that next step.

Tom.

When Alex's lips finally touched Tom's, they were not met with any reaction at all. Tom had stilled, deer in headlights, and Alex smiled, lips curving against his friend's. He'd never imagined how arousing it could be to take the initiative, and to give what Tom wanted, needed and clearly deserved. He moved in closer, his tongue pushing against unyielding lips, but suddenly there was the familiar heat, the taste he had almost forgotten. So different to any of the women he could faintly remember.

His eyes open, Alex leaned in even closer, inner thighs touching Tom's, watchful not to jostle or hurt the injury. Touch, taste and kiss deepening, there was no mistaking that Tom reacted, when a suppressed sound escaped Tom's throat, the moment Alex let his hands travel up t-shirt clad biceps towards shoulders and neck. Moving over Tom's skin, up the buzzing rasp of short-shaved hair, his fingertips tangled lightly into short dark-blond strands.

Alex's vision was blurry from closeness, yet he noticed for the first time how long and dark Tom's eyelashes were. Watching how they fluttered downwards, slow-motion movements until they feathered below closed eyes, creating half-circles of shadows. He felt the rasp of stubble beneath his lips, tiny pricks when he moved along, meeting skin above and below, telling him unmistakably that this was a *man* he was kissing. He opened his eyes wider, concentrating on the sight of skin so close, he had to squint one eye to see clearly. Distracted by the sharpness of a cheekbone, he moved down the cut-angled plane and towards the pronounced jaw line, until Tom moved his head to get closer, feel more. He let out another sound, deep in his throat, that filled Alex's stomach with a sudden rush of heat. Not lust. No erection, but an unexpected onslaught of emotions that made him want to hear that sound again.

'Don't screw it up, Alex'. No, he wouldn't. Not this time, not with Tom. He knew he was kissing a man, touched a male body and opened his lips to allow in the tongue that searched for entrance. Snake-like deliberations within ever increasing heat until he had to draw back a fraction for air, only to move in once more, even closer. He could feel Tom's shudder beneath his hands, a reaction he had never before encountered so intensely.

He was sure he was not gay. But what was he, then? If no longer straight, and neither gay, then what the fuck was he? Tomsexual? What did it matter. No chance, now, to lie to himself, and he didn't want to. His fingertips moved from the back of Tom's neck to stroke the face, feeling stubble and warmth, and the movement of their entwined tongues inside. Caressing with the unhurried purpose of someone who knew exactly what he was doing. Not the insanity of lust, no sweaty groping; not trying to get off on the other's body with greedy need in a haze of booze and unthinking lust. Not this time. Alex moved his head once more, so close to Tom's face, all he could see was alternating light and darkness.

Finally another sound: throaty, needing, grateful and wanting. Not a sound he had ever heard before. Tom's arms went up and around Alex, pressing into shoulder and chest, fingers curling desperately around his ribs, pulling him closer and asking for more. And Alex knew what to do, aware of himself, remembered; aware of his own body, even though it had failed him for years. He slipped his hand between Tom's waistband and skin, suddenly wanting and willing to give lust where he'd always only taken before. Searching and finding Tom's cock, hard,

like it would have been at the slightest incentive; like it always was, when Alex conceded.

The full extend of this power suddenly hit him with breathtaking force. Pushing trousers down, fabric out of the way, aside, no matter, his fingers curled around hard flesh. Silencing Tom, swallowing his breathless cries at the demanding stroking.

Clawed at, frantic for contact, Tom's hand was holding so tightly onto Alex's neck, he could feel the exquisite pain radiate down his spine and across his shoulders, making him stroke harder and faster. Wanting to sense and hear, smell and taste every tiniest detail in all clarity, and without booze and its mellow fog of intoxication. He needed to do this, give lust, make Tom come.

Alex pushed forward, stroked faster, and Tom moved his hips rhythmically while pulling him down at the same time with an ever more desperate grip, until the chair toppled backwards. Tom lost balance, crashing onto the floor, and Alex only managed to keep him from the worst.

“Fuck! Sorry. Damn.” Alex was angry with himself, shouldn't have been so careless, shouldn't have ...

“Forget it.” Tom breathlessly replied. “Not important, fuck the leg. Just don't stop, Alex, don't stop!” Pulling Alex down onto the floor, trying to get the hand back onto his cock, and the demanding need swept Alex away in an overpowering realisation: he owned Tom's lust right now. He'd never tasted this poison before. Power, control of a new kind, entirely addictive.

Alex's eyes remained fixed on Tom's face. Watching the parted lips, closed eyes, noting the ragged breath. Dark lashes over shadowed cheekbones, shaved hours ago, now raspy once more. Something so goddamned sexy about the sharp-angled face, he was right now willing to call himself a poof, because that face was fucking beautiful.

What the hell was he doing? The scent of male unmistakable, fresh sweat, no blandly showered neutrality. Touching damp skin, his hand got trapped in the twisted t-shirt at the back of Tom's neck. Taste of male, when he lowered his head again and his tongue was sucked in deeply. Heat and aggressive demand, as dangerously obsessive as the surge of adrenaline on any battlefield had ever been.

Tom was his. So goddamned his, each stroke of his hand, every grip, firm touch, demanding movement, was taking possession by giving lust. Stroking hard flesh, just like his own, but where he did not function, Tom became an extension of his own cock, his sexuality, and his very own masculinity.

Damn it all, he felt like a man right now.

Sex. Control. Power. Male territories, staking claims.

Tom was his.

The body shuddered beneath Alex's hands, and Tom's face changed. Alex could sense the pressure building in the other's body, knew it wouldn't take much longer. He pulled away, severing the greedy kiss, and ignored the cry of loss. He had to watch Tom; had to fulfil his vow.

Tom's face distorted into a grimace of intense strain, but Alex tightened his grip even further, and stroked faster. Disentangling his hand from bunched up fabric, it slid down Tom's sweaty back, didn't care about the bodyweight that crushed his knuckles into the floor.

Tom's head pressed back against the kitchen lino, eyes crunched shut, erratically breathing with an open mouth. Alex moved his free hand between Tom's thighs, and fuelled by the desperate gasps and moans, he took hold of the shaved balls, kneaded flesh while stroking the cock with aggression. Tom suddenly arched upwards, his face in an expression of pain, fighting, struggling, straining towards the final release. Cruel moments until Alex pushed him over with a few brutal strokes. Tom cried out, tried to arch higher, but Alex kept him down, forced him to remain on the floor, while Tom came over Alex's hands and his own chest.

Alex couldn't and wouldn't take his eyes off, fascinated by every expression and sound, until Tom stilled, muttering breathless words of "Holy Shit" and "Bloody Hell" and "Fuck, Alex!" His eyes opened at last, when Alex cleaned his hands on Tom's splattered t-shirt.

"Holy shit ..." Tom managed to bring out after clearing his throat. Husky, completely shattered.

Alex grinned with a weird sense of triumph and pride. He felt like a man. Goddammit, he did. It didn't matter jack shit if he could get hard or not, nor did it matter a damn if he was totally fucked up. Ridiculously pleased with himself, Alex smirked at Tom. "Get yourself upstairs and take a nap. I'm not going to have you conk out on my kitchen floor."

"Huh?" Tom protested, but yawned so big, it almost split his face, "since when are you nurse, medic and expert wanker in one person?"

Alex laughed, leaned forward and grabbed Tom under the shoulders. "I am all of the above since you splattered my kitchen floor with your cum, have a bandage around that shot-up leg of yours, and look a right mess that should shut up, listen to his superior and go to sleep." He carefully pulled Tom up, but there was still some wincing

before he managed to get Tom onto his good leg, tracksuit bottoms halfway down his legs.

Alex handed the crutches over, leaving Tom to wrangle with his trousers. “And if you don't obey, remember I carried you across a jungle, I can carry you upstairs.”

Tom rolled his eyes. “OK, then, just a few winks. It was a long journey and I'm shagged out. Not that I complain, mind you!”

Alex grinned, turned and pointed with an imperial gesture at the kitchen door and towards the stairs. “Sergeant Warren, I order you upstairs, into bed and asleep. I will check on you, if you are not asleep in five minutes, there will be repercussions.”

Tom chuckled while making his way towards the door. He turned his head before leaving the room and flashed a toothy grin. “Damned bully!”

Alex smiled in return, watching the broad back slowly disappear through the doorframe.

Ten minutes later, Alex made his way upstairs. He hadn't been serious, hadn't meant to check on Tom, and he didn't quite know why on earth he was taking a look, but he did anyway. The door to the bedroom was open and he stopped to glance inside.

The still body was draped across the bed, the injured leg propped up on a couple of pillows. Tom wasn't a complete stranger in that bed, but he'd only been in it once before, the last day before their fateful deployment on Operation Loki.

“So, that's what you look like when you are asleep.” Alex's quiet words drifted into the room. He noticed a few goose bumps on Tom's naked body and stepped into the room to pull the duvet up without thinking, letting it drop over him. Familiar with that body, and the look on Tom's face of surprise, joy, lust and something else he'd rather not think about, had been worth everything.

“I'll try not to screw it up this time.”

Alex turned to leave Tom to his sleep.

She was standing at her brand new kitchen work top, looking out of the window and over the garden, gazing at the spring-ripe plants that were bursting with colour.

Mrs Marita Rowstone, formerly Turner, went back to perusing the bi-monthly 'Sapper' magazine, the RE publication that she still received. Once again studying the large print of a photo.

Brilliant colours, taken in sunshine and showing two men.

One of them was her ex-husband. A soon-to-be decorated hero for saving his comrade's life 'under circumstances of extreme danger', who in return had almost given his own for ensuring the success of the mission.

Heroes? She wondered.

She knew the story, of course, had been told by old friends who were still in the army, and had spoken to her ex-husband not long ago. No, not long at all.

The feature article told of Staff Sergeant Turner's bravery and of his investiture, which would take place in Buckingham palace the following month. The George Cross, highest award for acts of conspicuous gallantry performed by men or women when not in the face of the enemy. She would debate the latter. Rebels or not.

The picture showed him in all his impressive height, dressed in combat uniform, beret at the perfect angle on the blond hair, smiling into the camera, while standing in front of the regimental museum. His arm around his best mate's shoulders, who was dressed in the same uniform, but without the crown above the three stripes on his sleeve. This was the man he had carried through the jungle to safety. Enduring torture and taking risks, the biggest of them his own life: betting on chances and refusing to watch a man die without trying anything to save him.

According to the caption, that man was Sgt Tom Warren, nearly as blonde and evidently just as handsome, if not more so. The Sergeant was smiling, even brighter. His arm around her ex-husband's waist for support, the injured leg still looking stiff.

No one would suspect anything.

Not a single soul would understand. She was convinced only she could read this photo, and she was certain she was correct.

Marita smiled, slightly melancholic and yet gently amused, as she tapped with a manicured fingertip on the tanned face of the man she had fallen in love with, twelve years ago. Back then she had believed he

loved her, without realising, that he had only ever truly loved another: The Forces. The Army. The 'Club'. The job that was his life.

“Kind of, Alex?” Her voice was quiet, disturbed only by the ticking of the kitchen clock on the wall above the open door. She could decipher this picture as clearly as if her ex-husband had told her more than he actually had.

Both men stood a fraction too close.

Their hips were touching, where most men's wouldn't.

Her ex-husband's fingers were curling into his friend's shoulder, instead of merely lying on top.

Each man glanced slightly towards the other, a mere tilt of heads and an indication of eyes not quite fully on the photographer.

Sgt Warren's arm was wrapped so firmly around her ex-husband's waist, she could see the tension in the lower arm. Holding onto, or just holding?

She smiled.

She had got to know Alex well during the short years of their marriage, far better than he believed, and after he came back from capture and hospitalisation, he had changed. A different man, clearly suffering from PTSD, who would not let her close, not even physically, and one who alternated between bouts of irrational aggression and numb depression.

The marriage had already been shaky, he'd been unfaithful for a long time, she knew that, and the divorce was the logical step. Yet she had taken the blame, feeling guilty for being unable to deal with a man who screamed at night, then jumped up and left their bed. Leaving her sleepless, worried, and crying for what they had lost - or never had in the first place.

Touching the picture once more, she couldn't remember the last time she had seen her ex-husband so content, even happy.

“So, you have found a way to heal.” She was far less surprised than she would have expected. It almost seemed to her as if this discovery was merely a logical development of something she couldn't quite grasp. An extension of the job that was his life, perhaps.

Her eyes flickered out to the garden again, when she heard her husband's footsteps upstairs, making his way back down to her. There was no bitterness anymore, and no pain. On the contrary.

She picked up the magazine once more. No one would ever be able to read the photo like she was, and not a soul ever should. She closed the colourful magazine, and slipped it into the bottom drawer.

Good luck, Alex.

