

## Down Time

Johnny watched his reflection in the darkened carriage window. Trees leaped through it like lively ghosts, flashes of water skirled briefly around the outlines and were gone. He saw sudden snatches of life beyond the glass; a cow standing up to its knees in a pond, turning dull eyes to the passing train, a studding of lights fixing a village in the landscape – all were there for a second and then dragged away. He refocused, allowing himself to become real.

Ah, yes. There he was. Eyes laced with red veins and shadowed not just with the darkness outside, but with lack of rest, driven into hollows beneath brows which bore more wrinkles and creases than he remembered. Cheeks pencilled with stubble; he raised a hand – when had he last shaved? He couldn't remember; Christ, but life inside had aged him... Fifteen years. Maybe fifteen years caused these kinds of changes in everyone's faces, maybe all his old mates also now had lines and puckering between their eyes... he was willing to bet that wasn't the case. That the bastards who'd put him away still had complexions smooth as babies', still drove around in their Mercs and their Beamers instead of having to travel by stinking fucking public transport, with skin made coarse and aged by the petty everyday frets of life under the same roof as a bunch of wankers who'd slit you up for a fresh bar of soap.

Beneath his feet the train jerked and juddered, throwing him into the seat nearest the window, his heart twitching in his chest. He ought to keep calm, he knew it, keep cool, not blow it, *breathe, Johnny, breathe*. Nothing to be afraid of. It's just the big, old, wide world out there, the same one you left. Nothing's changed; a bit of tricky technology, few more cars, more people – not that you'd know that from the view from this train. He turned his head and looked out of the window again, trying not to catch his own eye. Yep. Just fields and trees and darkness, the rattling of wheels and a passing hum of wind, the bleak little light within the carriage not even up to throwing a few shadows.

He settled himself further in the seat, pushing a hand into the pocket of his jeans to stop the letter from crackling against his hip. Allowed himself a moment's indulgence, running a finger along the creased edges. It was his ticket, his passport, his key to a new life, one where his unique talents would be appreciated, nurtured, not forced to run underground and shamed like plague rats. You're an *artiste*, man, he told himself, a creator. And this...he fingered again at the paper... this *proves* it. He wouldn't call for a no fucking hoper or a loser, no, this guy... he wants the *best*. And that's you, Johnny, that's you.

Using the black-backed window as a mirror, Johnny pulled down the eyelid on his right eye and pushed a fingernail against the quivering pink-threaded mass inside. Bright lights sliced across his vision as his eyeball danced away from the pressure, rolling skittishly in the socket as he dug the nail to and fro until a trickle of blood wound its way from beneath it. You've still got it, Johnny-boy, he told himself, still the hardest man on the block; he'd seen grown men cough up their last meal when he'd shown them that trick on 'J' Wing. Men who'd not hesitated to tie fireworks to the family cat, or break the arm of their teenaged sons had recoiled and gagged at some of the things Johnny could do and it had given him a reputation he'd been glad

to live up to - some skank taken advantage, dissed you up, called your daughter a whore or your missus a pro? Send for Johnny of 'J Wing'. They'll never know how, and they'll never know when, but sooner or later...

He let the lower lid flap back up to cover the injured eye and rubbed at it thoughtfully. Blood smeared across his pupil for a second, outlines grew hazy and wavered, his surroundings turned grey and he had to blink hard against the pain to clear it. One of the lads inside had told him that you saw the truth when you looked through blood, mind you, the guy had been a poncy little thing, given to sayings like that. Ended up as Inky's bitch, last he'd heard. He'd put him right anyway. Only thing you see when you look through blood, is someone else bleeding, mate.

Johnny settled back in his seat. He remembered riding in compartments like this with his mother and brother; of course, he'd been someone else back then, his name hadn't been Johnny. They'd changed his name after what happened, once he'd 'rehabilitated'; after all he'd only been a child; hadn't known what he was doing, couldn't be held to blame. 'Below the age of criminal responsibility' they'd said. And of course, he'd kept his mouth shut, buried the knife in the garden while the adults argued indoors about what to do with him, used words like 'disturbed' and 'psychiatric help'. Fucking tossers. They wouldn't have known a special gift if it came wrapped in ribbon with a card...

Fifteen years. What a fucking waste of time. Just long enough to ensure that the clothes he'd been wearing when they'd sent him down had come back into fashion again. Johnny looked down at the faded denims and creased sweatshirt and worked on his grin. He'd practised it in the little hand-mirror he'd kept hidden in his cell, got pretty good at it in fifteen years, got a reputation for being a friendly kind of a guy among the screws, which only went to show, he thought, what complete twat-heads prison officers were. Christ but he'd had a quiet laugh about that at night, under his pillow. But the grin... the grin said 'trust me', it said 'I'm a decent guy. I won't hurt you...' It carried on saying that, right up to the moment when he pushed the blade in. Some people didn't even realise they'd been cut, he was that good, until he was long gone. And then they stuttered and stammered and bled beautifully, flooding their clothes with the damp, warm stickiness. He liked doing the women best, liked hanging around to see how they turned out; it was the way their mouths went slack and their eyes clouded over, better than making them come was cutting them.

Jesus, it was making him horny, just thinking about it. He wriggled on the seat, adjusting himself, pulling the sweatshirt low over his lap in case anyone passing in the corridor looked in. Even if it was only some old guy on his way for a slash, sooner or later someone was going to walk through, and he didn't want them catching him sitting there, hot and happening.

Shit. Think about something else.

His shifting about against the worn velveteen of the seat made the letter crumple in his pocket again and, glad of the distraction, he pulled it free. Yeah, think about this, Johnny-boy.

He'd been put up in a cell originally meant for one prisoner, so, when the door had been pulled open and a guy shoved inside, Johnny hadn't been best pleased, to put it mildly. He'd settled himself down in that cell over the years, got a nice vibe going, with his tasteful pin-ups and his books all laid out how he liked them, didn't want some greasy little git banged up alongside him, wanking all night and crying all day about how he shouldn't be in there. So Johnny had been all prepared to make Charlie's life shit, until...

He couldn't quite remember how it happened. They only spent the one day banged up together, those were hard days; some of the lads got jiggy, there were two knife fights and a suicide, all on 'J' Wing. All this going down around them, but Charlie... he just sat in the corner and stared at Johnny. He had big, blue eyes and a load of blond hair all tied up, like a girl, and Johnny wondered what he was going to do. If the guy touched his cock, he was fucking *dead*, man; but Charlie just sat. And then he talked.

And he told Johnny... oh such things! About the evils of the world, and how the truly wicked would inherit the earth; how heaven was a myth and hell was a reality and the only place to be, where the blood flowed hot and the women were hotter. Made Johnny promise that he'd never lose sight of what he really was and, fuck, if Johnny wasn't getting hard again at the thought of that conversation... Then one of the screws had come for Johnny, to fetch him somewhere, he'd forgotten where, and when he'd come back, Charlie was gone.

He'd asked, nonchalant-like, didn't want anyone thinking he was a fucking poof, where Charlie was, but no-one seemed to remember or care and, over the years, Johnny had got to thinking that maybe Charlie had been a mirage. A little, rippling reflection of something far away, sent to give him some kind of hope. So he'd kept that hope, and now... he flipped the letter open and glanced at it again. Charlie had sent for him. He'd remembered, and sent for him. Had something, or so he said, that he needed Johnny for.

Even now, in his dreams, Johnny could remember those sky-blue eyes and that soft voice, gently counting down to the end of the world, laying out for Johnny all the wonders and splendours that would be his, if he never forgot the blood and the pain and the suffering.

Johnny looked again at the letter, realising that Charlie hadn't said where the train would be stopping, the faded smears of ink on the page simply informed Johnny that Charlie wanted him, and would meet him from the train. Presumably Charlie knew where and when that would be? Johnny rubbed his hand over his face again, palms working at his cheeks, trying to rub free a memory. When had he got on this train? He must have been completely wasted, he had no remembrance of buying a ticket, although he did have the fleetest idea that he'd spent his pay-off money on drink... he grabbed at the thought and tried to hold it, but it fled beneath the weight of his concentration like a dream; something about money and a fight, some kind of noise inside his head when he'd fallen? Shit, he must be tired if he couldn't even remember that.

But, fuck, what did that matter now? Charlie wanted him. Charlie would have the answers.

Johnny relaxed and let his good eye stare out of the window again. The other eye had crusted shut, with blood along the lower rim, decorating the lashes, Johnny thought about wiping it clean but decided that it would give Charlie the right image when he saw him, the right *ambience*. He'd got that word from his creative writing class. That, and a sharpened biro which he'd used to give a little demonstration of self-tattooing, three guys had fainted that day, one of his proudest moments.

It wasn't any darker outside yet, shapes and images indistinct, but still visible; a cow standing up to its knees in a pond, turning dull eyes to the passing train, a studding of lights fixing a village in the landscape...

Without warning the train slowed and stopped. Johnny continued to stare out of the window, as his wounded eye began to crack and drip fresh blood down his cheek. Further down the train a door opened, a momentary spill of light illuminated a slice of landscape alongside the track and, at last, Johnny closed his eyes as Something climbed on board.