

Some guy on tranquilisers coming over the public address system, asking everyone to please make their way slowly to their relevant firepoints. Sounding like he was reading out the full-time results on a Saturday afternoon.

*This-is-not-a-drill, three. Please-evacuate-the-building, nil.*

Meanwhile the alarms instilled in staff and visitors alike a bored state of panic Primo saw only as inbred fatalism. Only when he burst into the Coma Recovery Unit did he see the organised chaos he'd envisaged in planning.

This was much more like it. No need to intimidate uppity doctors to get what he wanted the hard way. The moment he entered the ward, a harassed doctor in a pink shirt and garish tie rushed over and directed him straight to Euan Ker's bed, started giving him detailed instructions. Primo listening with only one ear, nodding in the right places, picking up the patient's chart and pretending to study it, all the while clocking the activity in the rest of the ward, then with a flick of his head dispatching Morris to check through the back. Looking up from the chart to find the nametagged consultant Joel E Warner staring at him expectantly, waiting for an answer to a question Primo hadn't even registered.

"You what?" Primo said.

"I said you're new here, aren't you? Haven't seen you before."

"Hardly the time for introductions, wouldn't you say?" Primo affecting his poshest accent, one that rubs off easily after twenty years catering to the perversions of judges and aristocrats. "You have an instruction manual?"

Warner frowned. "I'm sorry?"

"For him." Primo nodded at the vegetable, all the machines he was connected to. "You know, like comes with a VCR, tells you which button does what?"

Primo could see the sudden reservations piling up behind the doctor's eyes. There goes the the easy way, he thought. But emergencies are no place for doubts, you work with what you've got, and the besieged consultant must have reached the same conclusion. Already looking over Primo's shoulder, he said distractedly, "Do the best you can," and strode away to oversee the evacuation of the three remaining patients.

Primo watched them for a moment, noting which machines they unplugged, which ones remained on the trollies, how they arranged all the tubes and drips, then summoned Morris and Mackie and set them to work.

"You think he can hear us, boss?" Morris asked, peering into Euan Ker's eyes.

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Talk to a vegetable? No thanks."

"If it's good enough for the Prince of Wales..." Primo said.