

Psi's Suit

Sam was contemplating buying a new suit.

He stepped out of the changing room and turned towards me, his arms held out slightly. We had been on our way to lunch when he had pulled me into a small arcade boutique of the type I only ever entered in his company. The place was just about large to hold the two of us and the sales assistant.

"What do you think, Adam?" Sam asked with obvious uncertainty. Had his suit been gold lamé with diamante buttons the concern might have been understandable, but since it was cut conservatively from rather harmless dark plum worsted his doubt was pointless.

"It's fine," I said. He did not look convinced. "It's better than fine."

When Sam had been assigned to the position with the Counter Corruption Unit he had decided he needed to look the part and had taken to wearing formal suits. His first choices had been black and so near-black it made no odds, and his look had veered between lawyer and undertaker. Within a couple of months he had suddenly turned more adventurous to the extent of branching out into charcoal and dark grey. I had always assumed the change had been due to pressure from his partner Morgan, but that was something he refused to acknowledge. The plum, while still sombre, was at least another step forward.

"I don't know," he said, inspecting himself in the mirror. He turned to the sales assistant. "Maybe the grey would be better."

The assistant nodded. "Perhaps," he agreed. He was going to get his commission off Sam whatever the colour of the suit.

"No, no," I said. "This one is good."

"But maybe just not for work."

"For work," I insisted. "You need all types of clothes in all types of colour for all types of situations." I was not exactly sure what I meant, but it sounded as if I did.

"You don't think it's too ... bold?"

"Sam, Ruth wears sequins and rainbows. Stephen wears tartan shirts. I think you can get away with a plum-coloured suit, or whatever that is."

"Aubergine," the sales assistant said reverently.

Sam nearly changed his mind twice before paying the money over for the suit. He bought some ivory shirts to go with it, but ignored tray after tray of jewel-coloured shirt clasps in favour of boring cream ones. I had the feeling the suit was going to spend most of its life in his wardrobe.

He took me out of the boutique and two doors down to an equally small deli with a minute café on the upper floor. Sam rather liked small places, where there would be few people round him. We ordered tomato soup with rosemary bread and something described on the menu as a single estate tea.

"So how is work?" I asked.

"It's fine." He took off his gloves and spent longer than necessary folding them and placing them to one side where they were out of the way but still safely within reach.

"Good-fine or OK-fine?"

"Good fine."

"So that story about you being abandoned out in Princetown isn't true?"

Sam pulled a face, no doubt wondering just how far the story had spread.

"What happened?"

"It was nothing," Sam dismissed. "Simple joshing."

"What happened?"

He squirmed a bit. God, he was easy to read.

"What happened, Sam?"

He sighed. "Jill and I had to go out to Princetown to interview some-one," he said, looking away. "Blinky Winn needed to see some-one in the same building so we booked out a velo and went together. Jill and I finished first, so I went for a quick look round since we were in the Mutual Insurance building with all that artwork in the lobby. When I came back they had gone. Jill explained what happened: when Blinky had finished whatever he had been doing, he came across Jill first, and they just started talking about his case. They were used to working together, and that, and the fact they were so deeply involved in their discussion ... well, they just forgot about me. Jill apologized to me back at C.C.U."

"Did they come back for you?"

The silence lasted just a little too long. "When I called them up, they were too far away to make it worthwhile returning."

Princetown was in one of the outer domes of the stead. Getting from there to the C.C.U. offices using M.T. would have been both time-consuming and a bore. I said nothing.

"Jill did apologize."

Our food arrived and we sorted out cutlery, napkins and salt and pepper. The food was made on the premises by some aspiring chef and consisted of thick soup with big chunks of tomato and mock-rustic, rough-crust bread, but despite its pretensions it was good.

"Your Inspector Morgan has been in contact with the Institute," I said after we had tasted and praised the food.

"Oh?"

"She said she was concerned about your mental state."

"Ah," Sam said with a frown. "Hence lunch."

"Naturally," I replied. "And before you get annoyed at me, consider the fact that we could be doing this formally sitting in some boring office at the Institute."

Sam moved from incipient irritation to amusement. Yup, he was easy to read.

"So is it true it took you three days to prepare yourself for a psi-interview?" I asked.

He smiled. "Yeah."

"And yet you don't seem especially upset about it."

"I was fine."

"Three days?"

"Jill was being annoying."

I shook my head. "The pair of you are acting like children."

"She started it."

It was good to see Sam happy; I was just not sure this was something he should be happy about.

I moved on. "So, have you had to do many psi-interviews recently?"

"Five in the last week."

"Five?" Five was high.

"A group of security officers taking protection money. They'd set up a sort of band-of-brothers code-of-silence thing, and none of them broke, so Jill had me do them all. Got the lot of them. Two of them thought they knew how to block me using smoke-screen images. Thought I could be distracted by dirty pictures, only their idea of sexy wasn't exactly the same as mine. A third tried the same thing, only he didn't really believe it was going to work. And it didn't. It was rather amusing, though."

"Does Inspector Morgan get you to do a lot of psi-interviews?"

"I earn my keep."

"Her words?"

He added more pepper to his soup and tried to change the direction of the conversation. "Did an interesting one two weeks back. Some-one with no empathy, probably a psychopathic personality. While I was interviewing him he showed no stress, and I could read

this unbelievable confidence in his abilities whilst not the slightest inclination to take responsibility for his mistakes. He only thought about his staff in so far as to how he could use them, and saw nothing wrong with getting rid of any-one who did not share his world view. He was a high level executive who 'got things done', and 'did what had to be done', according to his boss. Who probably had psychopathic tendencies himself. It was a fascinating interview."

"How did he take to having to submit to a psi-interview?"

"Oh, he was all charm. He thought he could manipulate me like he did every-one else."

I knew I shouldn't ask, but couldn't stop myself. "What was the outcome?"

"He's no doubt unpleasant to work for, but he'd not broken any laws. No doubt he would have been more than happy to do so, had it served his purpose, but so far he hadn't felt the need. He's still in place."

"Was Inspector Morgan happy with that?"

Sam reached for another slice of bread. "Inspector Morgan was not happy."

"Is Inspector Morgan ever happy?"

"We got a corrupt manager out at Three. She was happy with that. We were there to investigate irregularities in the accounts system at one of the state-run hotels, and I discovered the manager was planning to siphon off the entire takings of a tiki week-end and wedding fair and blame it on some poor accountant."

Sam smiled at the memory, but I happened to know Morgan hadn't been entirely happy at the time. She had complained to her bosses at C.C.U. about Sam being a prima donna when he had insisted on changing his room at their hotel, and she had made sure they had separate travel reservations on the rail so she didn't have to sit next to him.

"Your partnership with Inspector Morgan. D'you think it's going to work out?"

"Yes," he said shortly. "Do you want some more bread?" When he wouldn't talk about their partnership, it usually meant things weren't going well.

Morgan had not been forced to have a psi as a partner; she had agreed openly to it. And yet it was not working out. I had not been able to decide if it was a genuine personality clash, or if the reality of working with a psi was not what she had expected, or whether she was running some play where she could say in all honesty she had tried to work with a psi and it just hadn't worked out in order to retire honourably from the field and refuse to work with one ever again.

I waited through Neville asking for more bread, its arrival, a little chat with the waitress, fussing about offering it to me and then finding a place on the small table for the extra plate.

I was not about to be distracted by a slice of bread, however pleasant it was. "I'm not sure it's going so well," I said. Neville looked up blankly, realised I was still on the same topic, and returned his gaze to his soup. "I think you need to think seriously about whether you should continue."

"Start again with some-one else, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Blinky Winn, perhaps?"

"I'm sure we can find some-one else."

"I'm not going to be the one who gives up first."

"It's not 'giving up'; it's being realistic. It simply hasn't worked out. These things happen."

"I'm not going to do it."

I knew better than to press him. But I had planted the idea in his head, and he wouldn't be able to shake the thought, and eventually when he came to see it was the partnership that had failed, not him, he might accept it more philosophically.

We moved on to talk about other things, unrelated to work. Neville could talk on just about any topic under the sun, having both an inquisitive mind and a retentive memory. Both good and bad traits, when dealing with murderers, rapists, psychopaths and sadists.

We were onto sport, and whether you had to go to a live match to be considered a true fan, when we left the deli and walked back down the arcade. Neville slowed as we passed the suit shop, and I for a moment I thought he was contemplating taking the suit back already but I was wronging him, as his interest was fixed on the display in the window of the shop next door. It was a sports shop of the type catering for people who did activities out at Stead Three along the lines of sailing, climbing or snow-boarding, and who needed all the correct, brightly coloured, gear to do so.

“Do you mind ...?” Neville asked, and so in we went. He made directly for a stand of sunglasses, column after column of them in all shapes and colours of frames and lenses. They were square and rectangular, drop-shaped and wrap-around, with lenses of black and orange and pink and metallic and mirror. Neville studied them with his usual intensity and then started to try them on. He must have tried just about every pair on the stand.

“Have you got a holiday booked, then?” I asked.

He turned to face me wearing a pair with heavy grey frames, the labels hanging down against his cheek. “No.”

“OK.” I watched him try on some others. At least he seemed to be favouring those with black or grey lenses. “So why do you need a pair of sunglasses?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Just fancied some.”

An evasive answer if ever I heard one. I wondered if his reason was any concern of mine, and thought probably not, so I left him to it. He eventually settled on subdued black wrap-arounds. He bought those while I bought a cycling top for a nephew who found enjoyment in riding round and round a velodrome at high speed.

Once out of the shop Neville turned back towards the boutique, so I took his arm and pointed him in the other direction. “I’m happy to close this session and say that I have no concerns about you,” I announced. “Only don’t get in a position where the Inspector can play the mental health card again, OK? And I want you to have a serious think about whether you want to keep her as your partner.”

“I do.”

“Well, just have a think about it.”

We stepped out of the arcade into the street and Neville paused. He dipped into his bag and fished out his new shades, and began to pull off all the tags and labels.

“Will you?” I asked.

“Will I what?”

“Have a think about it.”

“Fine.”

He put the shades on and began to look up, down and round to see what vision he had, and I had one of those ‘uh-oh’ moments.

He began walking again. “You know,” he said. “I might wear these for work.”