

Special Forces: Mercenaries I

Vashtan/Aleksandr Voinov and Marquesate

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A new, updated version (Vashtan's Preferred Text) is being published at www.aleksandrvoinov.com/

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About Special Forces:

Special Forces is an epic work of military gay erotic fiction, which is available for free online. The three cycles *Soldiers*, *Mercenaries*, and *Veterans* were written between April 2006 and November 2008 and have 70 chapters in total, comprising around one million words (the equivalent of around 15 full-sized novels). It is only suitable for an adult audience.

This is the epic story of a Soviet Spetsnaz soldier and a Scottish SAS soldier. Vadim Krasnorada and Dan McFadyen are two enemies who meet in the line of duty during the early days of the Soviet Union's last war in Afghanistan. Behind enemy lines respect and finally love grow...but that's only the official version.

The reality of these two men is dark, brutal, fuelled by aggression and insane lust. Steeped in pain and killing, with death as their shoulder companion, these Special Forces soldiers meet in 1980. Their intense hatred caused by rape, revenge and torture turns into fucked-up lust and years of secret encounters in the rat-infested labyrinth of Kabul and the Afghan mountains. Time, despair and desolation smoothing down the sharpness of hatred, its venom drained with each physical encounter, the lust helping to form an understanding only two men of the same kind can share. Enemy Mine and Brothers in Arms—on two different sides.

This novel spans across over twenty-five years of their lives. It's harsh and violent, but life is cruel and they just do what they need to survive.

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1989—1990 Chapter XX—Touché

1989—Moscow, 19th February

The bag over his face started to dry. Vadim could almost breathe normally again. Thought he could smell the lingering terror of whatever poor bastard had worn this before. Sweat, tears, a rank smell like dried vomit. Hands tied behind his back. They made him walk. ‘They’ were a group of men that had been with him since he had regained consciousness. His mind kept working, kept to survival routines. Determine number of aggressors, angle of attack; learn what he could about them and their tactics in dealing with him.

He smelled cigarette smoke when they lit up, and could feel their fingers on the restraint, checking whether he had conjured up some Spetsnaz magic that would enable him to flee.

He didn’t even know where he was. Or when. No way of keeping time, it was dark, he could hear them talk, but they were guarded. The plane could have landed anywhere. The car could have gone anywhere. They could have marched him anywhere.

Wherever this place was, it was cold. And they poured water over the bag, every now and then, just to keep him on his toes. No real torture. They were just being unpleasant. Vadim didn’t allow any other thought while they were close. Focused his mind and senses on the present, on every movement, every word. They were obviously military—Interior Ministry, so, strictly, comrades.

And smart and disciplined enough to not give him any clues. Disorientation was a factor. They wanted to keep him guessing, and that meant he had to discipline his mind; rationale against chaos. He remained cold, focused on keeping his body running and not allowing panic to set in. He’d be tougher than they’d anticipated. He wasn’t Spetsnaz for nothing, and an officer on top.

He could still feel Dan, though. Could still taste him, feel the echo on his body. Inside. The burn from the cut was the clearest sensory input he had, and that was where his mind focused.

Walking, breathing, listening to the boots of his captors, and his own steps. Down stairs, a door was opened, he was pushed inside. The door was closed. Kept him in that room, standing.

Time passed, an hour, maybe more, reminding him of the random cruelty in the barracks.

Disorientation.

Dan.

Something crawled up from inside, something dark and bitter. Wasted opportunity. They hadn't made it, after all. The stolen time, the secret emotions, the vows and pledges...had changed nothing. He just couldn't escape. He'd tried, and it all had hinged on some fat-ass bureaucrat who had dug out that visit to London and the suspicious killing. Not that it mattered, not that he'd do that again, but maybe he had raised his own profile by meeting the man from the Foreign Office. Maybe that was the missing link, maybe that had come up in their search. Maybe he had acted suspicious.

He should have run away—vanished. He'd been trained to survive hundreds of miles behind enemy lines. He could have found a way into Europe, could have found a way into Britain—the coast was long and ragged, people had even swum the distance. But to live like a criminal on the run, always hunted, always with the fear he was wanted for murder, or as a Soviet spy? There was KGB in Great Britain. He couldn't meet another Russian without fearing to be sold. And he wasn't easily mistaken. Not because of the remaining token fame, but the fact he didn't really fit in, drew too much attention. They'd recognise him, and then hunt him down. He just didn't want to live like an insect scurrying under a rock every time something moved. Had dared to hope for a clean cut, a new start, honesty and honour—well, as much honour as he could preserve in all this.

If he could only work out where the mistake had been. Had they been too careless in trying to have a little normality? The Colonel? And if they'd known—why strike now? Only to make it as painful as possible? Had something the Baroness had done stirred up interest and drawn the KGB's baleful attention?

It could even be an inter-agency thing. The KGB didn't like the GRU. A political manoeuvre, one bureaucrat saying “fuck you” to another.

The usual doublethink did not apply, did not yield results. He had no idea why, or how, or when, or what next. He had worked too long towards this one slim chance, had dared to imagine that other life, and seeing it now vanish into nothing, there was no replacement. He'd thrown away the life he'd had, trusting on Dan to

reel him in, pull him in, secure and anchor him. The rope was severed, and he was hurtling into the void. Disoriented, aching in too many places, memories.

The door opened again, and men entered.

The atmosphere changed at once. No word was spoken, nothing, but Vadim tensed and felt a punch just below the solar plexus, a vicious, insanely painful hit. He doubled over, thankful it hadn't been to the groin, and amused at that thought while his stomach seemed to want to spill everything he'd not eaten in the last hours, or day. As if that had been some kind of signal, there were more punches and kicks, while Vadim collapsed, desperate to breathe and not vomit, the pain sharp enough to forbid every memory.

It was called 'warming up'. Soften the prisoner up for interrogation.

"Don't be too gentle, the cunt's Spetsnaz. They can take a lot."

Pain, and more pain, but not repetitive, every kind of pain different, sharp, pounding, tearing, blunt, crushing. Dark red and lightning coloured, unable to say from where the next impact would come. Vadim was tensing only to pit the remaining strength of his muscles against theirs, knowing which side would win, but focussed on keeping as much of himself intact as possible. He screamed with what breath he had left, sobbed, allowed them to hear the pain—it didn't cause them to stop, but maybe misled them about his real state. He needed to keep his wits together, despite the raging pain. Fighting a silent fight to preserve the core.

Eventually, it stopped, like they'd lost interest. Random, completely random. Disorientation. Surprise, and excessive, determined force. And, above all, cunning. The three principles on which the might of the Soviet Union was based.

The door opened again, and hands grabbed him and forced him to stand. Vadim swayed, feet seemed to have to find a position where he wouldn't stumble, which took a while as his body's least concern was balance now. He was coughing, every breath made his ribs hurt worse, and there seemed nothing he could do to ease the pain or to not cause pain to flare up. His ears rang, breath heaving, fighting nausea, swallowing bile.

"Now that that is settled, I think it's time for the paperwork," said a man. Vadim turned towards the voice. At least nobody he knew. Not the Colonel. A stranger. KGB? He had no idea who'd deal with his case.

Somebody loosened the rope or whatever kept the bag close to his throat, and pulled it off.

No uniform, a suit. Dark hair, some grey in it, he estimated the man to be in his fifties. Bad news. That meant he had plenty of experience. Eyes the colour of dark amber. A trick of the light.

And the man was standing too close. Vadim looked away first, to appear meek and intimidated, and to not provoke the bastard into believing he wasn't 'warmed up' enough.

"As you are most likely aware, there are several ways we can proceed from here, Vadim Petrovich." The man pointed towards the desk behind him, where an open file rested.

How long had the man been in the room? Had he really just arrived, or merely opened and closed the door to mislead him?

Vadim looked up again, and gave a nod to acknowledge he listened. He wanted to ask questions, but he knew he wouldn't get any answers, and by showing them what he wanted to know, he'd open himself for an attack. Be stone, be wood, be no longer human. No curiosity, no fear, no worries. No guessing.

"It is my task to make you sign a full confession. The question is, how we will arrive at that point." The man gave a self-ironic smile, as he let the other sentence hang in the air. Not when, not if. How. "This is meant to tell you you are directly responsible for that road. It is your choice—and you will have time to make a good, solid, tactical as well as human decision. We'll give you enough time to think about it."

The silence invited a question. Oddly, Vadim felt himself slip into the same kind of irony. Odd, to share that with the man who was set to break him. And even odder to appear civilized while he could hardly stand up straight. His lower back hurt. The quads shook from the effort and the bruising, not to mention the ribs. Nothing broken, but bruised in too many places. "Why the beating then?"

"Call it a rite of initiation," said the interrogator with a smile. "There is a lot of anger about your treason. Certain elements would rather not bother with the questioning and confession and shoot you while you make an escape attempt."

Vadim's eyes narrowed. He didn't like that irony, nor the way the man spoke. Too smart, too academic. What had he expected? A beginner? Dan had tortured him on instinct, used a few effective tricks of the trade, which eventually worked, on a younger man, one that had had something to lose. Of course he'd broken, and he assumed he'd break again. But oddly, he wasn't scared. Now that

the pieces were on the table, and decisions were made, all he really had to do was somehow get through it. It was not the terror of not knowing, not the humiliation of begging. This was their set of rules, and they'd play the game according to them. There was nothing he had to do, and nothing he could do. No alternatives. It was inevitable.

"You've cost the state dearly. You are a traitor, and you will confess to it. When we present you to the judge, you will be very different from what you are now. We will have turned you from the inside out. These ruffians behind you can't wait to beat you up again, but that is a very crude method, and you are physically in prime shape. Wearing you down will take time. Of course, there are other methods, and it is, admittedly, a challenge to break a masochist."

Vadim's jaw muscles tensed. He wasn't quite sure what the man was playing at. He assumed he was just prodding and checking for something that betrayed a weakness, a soft spot, to put a dagger in. Tried to open him up, gauge reactions. Nothing but probing.

"I've had time to prepare, and I've seen the evidence. Don't deny it, we both know you enjoy pain."

What evidence? Anything in his file? No. The hotel room had been bugged. That was the only logical explanation. Masochist. There were too many kinds of pain to answer that question conclusively. And it was just an insult, casual, and meant to humiliate.

"Now, I could use more force than you can withstand, and break through the physical threshold. But we both know your mind is more fragile than your body, and that is where I will get you. I will break you in ways you cannot defend against and will be unable to repair. I will kill the man that lives inside the flesh. You'll be walking and breathing dead. And you will never forget what I did to you."

His mind. Drugs? Fear? What was that method? Dan had focused on his body, breaking his ability to resist, and compromising his ability to survive and make it back to his unit. "Why?"

The interrogator smiled. "This is also about revenge for the damage you did, but the main reason is to get you to confess. Once you are ready, there will be the trial, and then we will execute you. You can choose to end your own suffering at any time. Just tell me you'll sign, and it will all end."

Treason. That was punishable by death. “I meant...why are you telling me this?”

“You are an intelligent man—well above average, as expected of course. I am only making sure you are aware of all your options.” Pause. “This is not something the British spy had.”

Vadim tensed, a betraying motion that came from somewhere inside his body, and reignited the pain, taking his breath for several long moments. Dan. The man looked at him with all the emotion of a piranha. “To satisfy your curiosity, Daniel McFadyen died on the way to the British embassy. He was shot by a sniper. Headshot. Instantly dead. He didn’t suffer. Unlike you.”

Sniper. If they’d been able to pick him up from the hotel, they were perfectly capable to place another ambush. It was likely. Dan. Dead. Vadim’s body filled with cold, heavy metal, sapping his strength. And he had felt fucking pity for himself while Dan was dead. His opportunities, his life, when Dan had been slaughtered. His heart raced and the nausea came back full force, rolling through him in waves.

I need to see his body.

He shook his head, remembered the agonizing wait after the car bomb, the despair and pain.

I need to see the body.

The interrogator was lying. He’d attempt to inflict pain. Attack his mind. Begin destroying him. And Dan was an obvious angle. If it hadn’t been for the doubt that was creeping under his skin. It was likely. Possible.

The interrogator nodded to the men standing at the door. “Bring him to his cell.” He took a few steps back, all the time meeting his gaze. “Remember, you can end it any time.”

1989—Kabul, 19th February

“Dan,” the Baroness stood in front of Dan’s chair. “What happened, the KGB took Major Krasnorada? Are you sure?”

He sat crouched and in pain, a mess, despite having been cleaned and bandaged up. Some of the injuries had to be stitched, others were held together

with butterfly clips. The worst was the headache, his forehead bruised and the skin split, it made it hard to think, while all he could think of anyway was the sight of Vadim being bundled into the car.

“Aye, Ma’am, there is no other explanation. Vadim is Spetsnaz, and he admitted to being part of the Interior Ministry. Who else would have kidnapped him? They were Soviets, their uniforms just like the troops that had been sent to kill me.”

She pulled a chair closer before taking a pad of writing paper from the desk, together with her fountain pen. Sitting opposite to him, she leant forward. Clear eyes narrowed, fully concentrated on every word he said. “Tell me all that happened, Dan, from start, to finish. Tell me about last night and this morning, and tell me all you believe has been of importance since you met Major Krasnorada. The more I know the better will I be able to ascertain the situation.” She nodded at him, but Dan glanced warily at her paper and pen, while holding his aching head. The painkillers hardly touched his sore body. “Do not worry,” she added, “all you tell me now will remain between us. I give you my word I will help you, as I promised before. I will help you as much as I can.”

Dan thought he had never seen her face so determined and fierce. “No one is trying to kill one of mine, Dan, without me retaliating. Not even the KGB.”

And despite the pain he was in, he sat and talked for hours, telling her everything, except for the one truth: how it all started. No one would ever know about a night in Kabul, nine years ago.

1989—Moscow, 13th December, ten months later

Again, the door opened, and the fear came back. Startled like a wild animal, Vadim didn’t resist as the guards took his arms, forced him against the wall, tied his hands back, and put the sackcloth over his head. It was so he wouldn’t recognize any other prisoners, he assumed. Always the same. A year or two, or thereabouts, he didn’t know. Keeping track of time was too difficult, it had felt like an eternity. Often, he was too exhausted to keep his calendar. Lately, he didn’t remember to. Couldn’t remember whether he had marked the day down already or not. Felt they screwed with the times when the light was on at the end of the

corridor, with the rhythm of what were supposed to be his meals. No steady rhythm to his sleep, his awakening, no rhythm his body could remember or hold on to. Didn't know whether he woke up from something outside disturbing him, or from the usual five o' clock routine. Had no way of telling. It felt like there had never been anything else but this in his life.

They pushed him down the corridor, back into the room. Not a word was spoken. Nobody ever spoke a word. There were no signals from any neighbouring cells. He was alone in that hole, alone. Cold. The darkness and numbing silence only torn when they interrupted his sleep, when they emptied a bucket of water over him, to wake him and to increase the misery. He spent days tied down, chained up like a dog, for no other reason but to make life miserable and not allow a dulling of the discomfort. Sleep deprivation. Hunger. Cold. He knew the methods, but they still cut to the bone.

When they dragged him out for a beating—the cell was too small for more than two or three men, and hardly offered enough room to kick a prone figure—he was usually blinded as well. He found he hungered for a human face, a human voice.

But that was denied.

Vadim didn't resist, didn't fight, couldn't, it seemed he was standing beside himself, with only rudimentary control over that body. Things happened to him. He didn't care much—it was all cold, hunger, pain, fear, but even the fear was dulling into a nameless, leaden dread that felt completely impersonal. Those were not his emotions. And they were of no consequences. They reached the room. Any room. Pushed him inside, somebody kicked him in the legs, and Vadim collapsed onto his knees, fell onto his side, and it took focus to try and get upright again. His sense of balance was fucked. They removed the sackcloth. The light was too bright. He wasn't used to light any more. It hurt his eyes. Nothing that didn't hurt.

He felt a hand touch his neck, and felt grateful for the touch, a moment of warmth, a moment of non-pain. Felt the warmth of another body close, and leaned forward, head resting against what had to be a leg.

"I think we're almost there," murmured the interrogator. The only human voice he heard that was not a memory or his own voice. Vadim didn't quite believe it, but his memories and dreams were washed out these days, had lost all colour, all strength, didn't have anything left. Reality wasn't much better. The hole had taken

all strength, all memories, and left nothing but the dread. He knew he'd been stripped of all that, but didn't actually know what 'it' was or signified, knew it had been important.

The hand was still there, a surreal touch. Vadim had no idea what it meant, only that he wanted it to stay. He knew this man had him brought here, and he'd been hoping it would be this man and not the beating, and he wanted the man to talk to him, whatever he said, whatever insult, whatever cruelty, this world had become so small this man more than filled it out.

"I understand it was a long, hard way for you, my friend," murmured the man, the voice came closer as the man crouched in front of him, hand still there.

Vadim carefully opened his eyes. The brightness of the lamp was partially blocked by the body. A small mercy.

Brown eyes looked into his, concerned, it seemed, and Vadim felt vague regret at that concern, but didn't know why. Studied the man's features, the clean shaven cheeks and chin, without taking anything in. He couldn't concentrate on any thought, couldn't make sense of anything, felt afloat and removed. Couldn't hold that gaze.

"I think you're easily ready to sign the confession now."

Vadim didn't understand. "What."

"Do you want to rest? You look tired, my friend. Tired and worn. All this can end, and you will never be cold, or hungry, or afraid."

That would be good, thought Vadim.

"You only have to sign this. Come, I'll help you." The man helped him up and steadied him, and helped him walk towards the desk. There was a thick file on it, and Vadim felt a distant echo of something good inside. His hands were freed, and he steadied himself against the desk, as the man gave him a pen. "Just sign your full name."

Vadim took it, saw his hand with the pen shake so hard the tip made small noises against the paper. He knew this was important, but he didn't understand what it had been important for. If this meant it all would stop, good. No more hole, no more pain. Sounded like bliss.

He tried to concentrate, his name was long, and he hadn't used it for a long time. Not important. He wasn't sure about the spelling.

“Vadim Petrovich...that’s it. Krasnorada,” said the man, and seemed pleased and friendly. “So much hard work. You’ll soon be able to rest.” The man took the pen from his hand and turned him around at the shoulder, again looking into his eyes. “You’re almost there. Aren’t you glad?”

Vadim nodded. “No more...” Faltering. Found words almost as difficult as thoughts. Wasn’t sure what he’d said aloud and what he had thought, or whether there was, in fact, any difference.

“No. No more of any of this.” The man smiled at him, kind, it seemed.

“Good. I’m very tired.” It was easy to feel relief. He remembered to have missed something, books, people, voices, sleep, food, but it was all good now. He’d be able to rest, and that was the one remaining thing he still wanted. He looked into the man’s eyes and felt a strange gratitude for enabling that, for taking care of him, for the touch.

The man shuffled the paper into the file and closed it neatly. “Take him to the new cell. He has to be presentable.”

1990—Dubai, 12th January

“Dan, I need to talk to you.” Baroness de Vilde’s voice and face were grave, and Dan felt a sucker punch to his guts at the seriousness of her tone.

He nodded, undoing the zipper of his light jacket. He’d finished the recce according to his maxim that no protection was as valuable as the recce beforehand. “Of course, Ma’am. Will you give me a few minutes?”

“Certainly,” she nodded, “I shall see you in my private study.”

Dan watched her leave, frozen to the spot. He knew; didn’t want to know. The dread was settling into his bones as if flash-frozen. Forcing himself to finish undressing, before washing face and hands in the small bathroom adjacent to his room. He felt like throwing up as he stood over the sink, hands gripping the cool porcelain, unable to look into the mirror. That was it, then. It had to be.

One year, almost one year later. Eleven months, and they’d fought for Vadim’s release, with the Baroness doing most of the work. Proposed exchange of political prisoners, covert offers of bribery—money, advantages, anything they could possibly offer, but it had either not been enough, or the hatred had run too

deep. The KGB hadn't let go of Vadim, no matter what the Ambassador and her contacts had tried, and regardless of the crumbling state of the Soviet Union. The vast empire was pulling itself apart, torn into pieces by a force from within its own bowels.

Eleven months, and the Baroness had given him information about the Lubyanka, the treatment of prisoners by the Interior Ministry, to make him understand what was probably being done to Vadim and what psychological changes that would cause, but he'd found much of it too difficult to read, too painful. Unable to deal with the unknown and the helplessness, wishing nothing more than a chance to fight the grey men that kept their hold on Vadim. She never ceased to keep Dan updated of anything that was going on. Progress or not—and mostly the latter.

The Ambassador had been called away from Afghanistan during those months, to move to the United Arab Emirates, residing in the embassy in Dubai, taking Dan and all of her core staff with her.

He had been doing his job in the air conditioned rooms of embassies and offices, or outside in the heat. Clinging to his duties, pushing his fitness, while his mind was unable to cope with anything but the memory of Vadim. Even jerking off had become impossible, the oppressiveness of not-knowing too great, and the pain of hope unbearable—amongst the growing hopelessness.

Almost a year, and she had done all she could, using contacts, attempting negotiations, but in the end all efforts were reduced to the sick feeling in Dan's guts and the fear this was it: the worst. The final. The end.

A few minutes later Dan was knocking at the door of the Baroness' study. A small affair, this room. Warm wood and polished brass, the complete opposite to the vast, cold magnificence of her public office.

She was looking at him for a moment, with that calm and unwavering gaze, once he had sat down in front of her desk. When she spoke, her voice was quiet. "I have received a fax from my contact in Moscow, it is the copy of an official document."

Dan stared at her face, not at the paper in her hands. He couldn't bear it. The cold fist in his stomach was twisting his guts because he knew deep down what the document said, had always known it. All she did now was verifying what

he had refused to accept. Too late. He'd run out of time, reality was right there, in her hands.

She gently pushed the fax towards him, across her desk. "I believe you can read it. It is in Cyrillic."

Dan shook his head, refused to take the paper. "Please, no." Defeated, he had no choice. Putting up a façade of bravado? Not any more. "Do you know what it says?"

She nodded, folding her hands on top of the edge of the paper, which hung limply over the desk. "Yes, my contact supplied a summary in English."

"What does it say." The words tasted of death and ashes in Dan's mouth. She inhaled, no more than a minor pause, before she inclined her head in a measured nod that told him she understood, and would take on the task. Placing the reading spectacles that hung on a gold chain around her neck onto the bridge of her nose, she pulled another piece of paper close and began to read.

"Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada has been sentenced to death for the crime of High Treason to the Soviet Union. He has signed the confession of having delivered sensitive information to a British subject and member of the British Special Forces, whilst in the employ and confidence of the Soviet Army. Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada will be executed at 0500 hrs on February 7th 1990."

She put one hand over the paper, palm down, and took the specs off her nose, looking at Dan. Her voice never wavered, but it was low and soft. "I am sorry, Dan."

"This is not true." Dan's own voice had lost all inflexion.

She leant forward, gently, as if talking to a disturbed child, without sounding patronising. "Dan, it *is* true. It is official. He will be executed."

"No." Dan shook his head, jumped out of the chair, which wobbled precariously. "It is not true that he was a traitor. The confession is a lie!" Pacing away from the desk, then back again, hands behind his back in fists, felt as if they were bound, wrists crossed. "He never told me anything, and neither did I. Never!" Spinning around to face her once more, agitated. "Do you understand, Ma'am? It is a lie, he never betrayed his country." Closer, until his thighs hit the edge of her desk and the fax went tumbling to the floor.

She didn't flinch, silently looking up and into his face, steadfast.

"Do you believe me, Ma'am? Do you believe the confession is a lie?"

“Yes.” She nodded once, calmly. “Yes, I do believe you, I have no doubt.” Her voice was firm, the softness gone, yet the warmth still lingered. “A confession under torture is not permissible in court.” She, too, stood up, hardly reaching the height of Dan’s shoulders. “But, Dan, the Soviet Union is not Britain, and the KGB is not Scotland Yard. The Soviet state is a crumbling empire, torn and ravaged, unsure of itself and frightened to the core. A false confession extracted by the KGB is the least of its bothers.”

“But they can’t do this! What about your connections, the bribes, politics, diplomacy, promises from the West?” He was desperate, and he knew it. Knew, too, it was hopeless and knew the answer before he heard it from her mouth.

“They can do it, Dan, and they will.”

Pain clenched his heart in a vice grip, squeezing until blood rushed in his ears, drowning everything but the need to rage and scream, wreak havoc on what came into his hands, smell blood and taste destruction.

“No! It cannot be, they can’t do this!” Shaking his head violently. “I cannot let go. If I did, Vadim would die twice. I can’t let go, Ma’am. Not yet. Not as long as he is still alive.” His eyes wild, fists slamming onto her desks, towering over her, but she never flinched. “I was taught to never leave a comrade behind!”

Dan opened his mouth wide as if to scream obscenities, the only way to let out the anger and anguish, and...suddenly deflated. Nothing. No sound.

Shoulders sagging, he lowered his gaze. “I know.” Dan’s voice was once more ashen. The burning rage had died, flames suffocated by that pain for which he had no name. A vacuum inside of him, sucking him dry of all his strength and energy, expended throughout the last year, fighting for Vadim’s survival.

“I know, Ma’am.” Repeated, Dan stood, rejected.

She didn’t say anything for a long time, until she stepped away from the desk and came to stand in front of Dan.

“If there is anything I can do for you,” her cool, elegant hand found its way to his shoulder. Resting there for a moment, “anything at all, Dan, please tell me.”

No, there was nothing, and he shook his head. Nothing at all anymore, it was over. Nothing he could do nor say, nor...his head came suddenly up, looking at her, unblinking.

“Yes, there is. Ma’am, there is one last thing I need to do.” His face expressionless. “Can you get me the address of Vadim’s ex-wife? I tried to verify the address he gave me, but she appears to have moved.”

Her brows raised merely a fraction, but she did not query his request. “I will.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” He turned, hands once more in fists behind his back, leaving the room.

1990—Moscow, 9th January

“Do you understand what I am saying, Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada?”

He stood there, looked at the judge’s face, knew the guards were there to punish him for any seeming disrespect. The interrogator was there, too, sat close, like an attorney, maybe to make sure he didn’t make a mistake. Vadim looked at the man, who gave him one of those reassuring smiles. Vadim looked at the judge again. “Forgive me. I am...”

I’m not here. I’m beside myself. I have no idea what you are saying, but I’m trying so hard. His face twitched, and he looked straight ahead at the man. The judge. Show respect.

“You are...?”

“I am sorry, Sir.”

The judge stabbed the paper with a long bony finger. “You signed this confession?”

“Yes, I did.”

“So you did disgrace yourself with a British subject?”

British subject. A man. A silhouette in the darkness of a cave. Breath misting, joining.

“I repeat the question: “Did you or did you not disgrace yourself with a British subject?”

Vadim looked up again, felt his hands twitch, tension coming up from his chest as he stared wide-eyed at the man in front of him, suddenly saw the interrogator stand and lean towards him. “Vadim. Don’t worry, you’ll be safe. I know it’s hard, but we have to get through this.”

“Is there anything wrong with him, comrade Konstantinov?”

The interrogator shook his head. “Despite comrade Krasnorada’s many failings, he’s still Afghantsy. They often bring...certain conditions with them when they return.”

“But he is fit to stand trial?”

“Certainly. It is a temporary, if recurring condition.”

“Well then. Did you understand my question?”

“He’s asking whether you disgraced yourself with Daniel Ewan McFadyen while serving in Afghanistan,” said the interrogator to help him.

Daniel Ewan McFadyen. I didn’t know he had a second name, Vadim thought, and felt his shoulders tense, his body shaken from something inside, something powerful, like an earthquake. Dark eyes. Huffed laughter. That man’s body close to his, moving, holding him, reaching inside, opening him up and making him whole.

“I...I did not.”

“What did you just say?” The judge leaned forward, there was an alarmed flutter of unrest in the court room. The interrogator looked at Vadim with all the intensity of some of their talks, suddenly awake and sharp.

“I did not disgrace myself with that man.” Every word felt like it had to be pushed out.

“You’re saying you didn’t have...a physical relationship with that man?”

“I did.”

“You are contradicting yourself,” said the interrogator near his ear. “That is not appreciated.”

Vadim looked at the judge. It didn’t matter. The sentence was set, and there was no use fighting, but that lie, that couldn’t remain in the room. “I did...have sex with that man. But it was not...a disgrace.”

“Linguistics,” huffed the judge, and went on with proceedings.

Dan McFadyen. He’d hated to be called Daniel. He’d tell all these men here to fuck off and leave them in peace. Vadim felt a small smile tug at the corner of his lips. I never had that brand of courage. I wish I had. I just have to get through this, and then it’s over.

He answered “yes I did,” whenever the judge looked at him. The confession was long, exhaustive. Rape, murder, collaboration, sabotage, weapons trafficking to rebels, conspiracy, whatever. High treason, yes, that, on top.

Nothing touched him anymore. He couldn't focus, and it was of no importance. That one thing had been, but it just slipped away. The sentence was as expected, and they brought him away, to the cell, not the hole. They didn't wake him from his sleep, and the beatings had stopped, too. There were voices on the corridor, but Vadim found it too hard to focus on any of the words. It wasn't about him.

1990—Hungary, 27th January

Dan got out of the taxi, thankful for the small mercy almost everyone seemed to speak at least some words of English. He could get along well in a few major European languages, fluently in Russian, even in Pashto and Arabic, but he'd never learned Hungarian and sure as hell had no incentive to do so.

It was strange to see the country in sunshine, Dan felt the weather should have been dreary grey with blankets of dirty snow, but this January had turned out to be a freak month in Budapest. How apt. Still cold, though, growing rapidly colder now the sun was setting. Both hands in his jeans pockets, he pulled his shoulders up to his ears, not used to winter anymore.

After active service in Afghanistan he'd been working for the Baroness in a country that burnt with heat. Focussed on nothing but Vadim's survival, and now...this. It would be over. No more future, no more fight nor focus. He looked at a piece of paper, checked the address before putting it back into his pocket, feeling the familiar smoothness of the lapis lazuli beads against his fingers, warmed by his body. Dan lifted his head with a deep breath into the crispy air and stepped into the magnificent building with its fading beauty, that served as the training complex. The entrance was deserted, whoever was meant to be manning the desk nowhere to be seen, thus he walked unhindered around the corner and found himself in front of a double door.

One of them stood open, allowing the view into a large rectangular room with golden brown wooden floor, shining with polish, and several tall windows all

along the wall, mirroring the inside against the falling darkness. Dan stepped inside, saw two slender white-clad figures with fencing masks work miracles of elegance and deadly skill into the air. One of them could only be her.

Another beep sound from the electric system, the green light lit up on the box at the floor they were both connected to, as Katya's epee impacted, and both fencers straightened and took a step back. Taking off the masks one-handed, they faced each other on the *piste* and both lowered their blades, masks tugged under the arm. Then shook hands with the bare hand. "Good one."

Rubbing the inside of her elbow, where he had scored a point.

She disconnected the electric system and put the epee down. She was dying to get out of that heavy white jacket, damp with sweat. Pulled the glove off first and stuffed it into the mask, set both down on the bench and pulled the zipper down to her chest to take the cable off. She spied a movement near the entrance, Szandor noticed her glance and turned as well, wiping his face with a towel.

Dan stood near the entrance, tension residing in his stomach. He feared his request was asking too much, but he had to try it. Less than two weeks now. Ten days, and seven hours, to be precise. He could probably make out the minutes, if he checked his watch. When the mask came off the female, recognition hit him immediately. He'd seen the photo, the wife, the children. He'd been right, it was her. Hands still in his pockets, he crossed the room with measured steps.

To Katya, he looked like a tourist. "This is not open to the public," she said in English. "But I am sure you can see the 18th century stucco if you find the caretaker and pay for his tea."

Szandor looked at the tourist as he stepped closer, and she could just see Szandor would give him the full guided tour just because of his looks. Dark handsome strangers with an interest in his hometown, and Szandor was in love. Like Szandor was in love at the drop of a hat. They had shared a fencing career, and they had shared Vadim. The basis for a life-long friendship.

Dan swallowed hard, then shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. I'm not here for the stucco." He glanced over at the man, wary. They were both carrying weapons, but he could take them down. No threat, not against a killer.

He took the right hand out of the pocket, but the left one remained. He'd found it best with civilians to hide the scarred hand for a while. Often the one in his face was too much, causing at least some morbid curiosity, but he didn't expect

this one to bother. Acknowledging the man with a lance, he came closer, stopped in safe distance, looked at the woman again. Yes. No doubt. It was her.

His only chance.

“I believe I am looking for you. Katya...” didn’t know what name she might have taken on now. Had she kept the old one or assumed another?

“Krasnorada?” Even speaking the name out loud hurt. Hurt so deep inside, it made him shudder.

She kept looking at him, then a glance at her training partner. “Thanks for the play, Szandor.” In English, cool enough to work as a bucket of ice water even after an excellent bout.

She waited till the Hungarian had left, and kept looking at the man. “Somehow I do not believe you are a reporter writing about the Olympics at Montreal, and you do not look like you want to take private lessons. Or do you?”

Not the way he favoured that leg, an imbalance or an old injury.

Dan shook his head at her question. “You are correct and I am neither.” No, woman, I am the man who came here to beg. “I came here...” faltered, took another breath, wondered if that horror inside would quieten eventually, “I came here to ask you a favour.”

He felt the lapis lazuli beads against the fingers of his left hand, while the other brushed a strand of hair out of his face. “I am Dan McFadyen.” He missed his knife, cursed airport security and lack of diplomatic baggage. Its comforting presence no longer near his wrist. Bare. Naked to a truth and its consequences. “I am your ex-husband’s lover.”

She took a step back, as fluid as was to be expected. Only sign of shock was the way the blood left her flushed face in an instant.

“You are the one they caught him with?” They had said it was an enemy. That name sounded American, or English. “The trap they set for him?” Eyes narrowed. She reached for the epee again, which, even blunt, was still a piece of steel. People had died when it slipped past the mask and went through the throat.

Dan watched her reaction, the expression of shock, the narrowing of eyes, the signs of anger. And more. She had no chance, but he could see she would try. Formidably so.

She-wolf. Lioness.

“Aye.” His arm hung loose at his side, the other had never left the pocket.
“I am that man.” What else to say? To beg, already? He would.

She stared at him, face pale with anger, eyes dark blue, blond hair tied back still for the fencing. “You can be proud then, to have destroyed a man I thought was indestructible.” Teeth bared, another step back. “You found the one weakness he had and cut his throat with it. Good work. And tell the CIA or whoever you are working for, I am disgusted by the way you did this.”

Dan flinched visibly. Her words more deadly than the epee could have been. Felt like a dog, crouching in the dirt, head down, tail between the legs, enduring the kicking and beating. “I understand,” he did, hated her for it, “but *you* don’t. No CIA, no MI5, no ulterior motive.”

Cut his throat. Destroyed. Disgusted. Would Vadim hate him?

“I have known Vadim since 1980.” Dan realised it would make no difference, except for making it worse, but the truth was not a whore and could not be bought.

“My ex-husband was deployed in Afghanistan in that year.” As if that alone made it impossible. “I cannot see in what other capacity you could have met. He did possess sensitive operational information. You imply it was a personal matter, which is highly unlikely. Do you follow me?”

Nothing but the truth, and how he wished that truth would prostitute itself: elusive, brutal, beloved and hated. “I was his enemy and he was mine, aye.”

His gaze dropped once to her hand on the hilt, then back to her eyes, unwavering. “There was hatred, but it changed. I’d tell you I was sorry if I were, but I’m not. Not for anything throughout the last ten years.”

She shook her head, pressed her lips together, and refused to say anymore. A hint of pain showing. Then, voice cold: “He had a brilliant career in front of him. Granted, now that it all changed and was squandered away...He could be a powerful man now, and you exposed him to the world. I don’t believe for a moment he committed treason, but they do, and they will kill him for it, just as a signal.” A deep, calm breath. “I know he had his ‘bitches’ in the army. I am not stupid, and women talk.”

Every word a slap, each sentence a knife cutting deeper than his own blade had ever cut Vadim. Then the last word. That...misunderstanding. Not of who was who and who did what but of what they had. “*Bitch?* You think I am his bitch?”

Not 'was', no, not yet. Refusing to accept the inevitable before it was time in ten days and...six hours.

She took another half-step away and was within fencing distance. "I don't believe for a moment you were anything else. Anybody else would not have destroyed him like you did."

Dan looked at her, square on, did not flinch. He could kill her, right now. Epee or not, but he only shook his head. "It doesn't matter what you think. Whatever." He didn't believe she could hurt him any more than this. "Will you do me a favour? He does not know if I am alive. They had KGB killers...Spetsnaz set on me." Why would she care. Why indeed.

Her gaze did not change. "What kind of favour?" Jaw muscles tightened.

"To get a secret message to him. Via his father." Asking, too much, but he had to ask. His jaws worked while he stalled, touching the beads in his pocket. Fierce pride of survival. "To let him know before he dies I nailed the fuckers. To tell him I love him." Would she understand the importance? And what good would the message do? Love. Death. He should have owned Vadim's death; should have slit with a blade or pulled the trigger back in Kabul.

She blinked, opened her lips to say something, then, frowning, moved to the side, leaving the *piste*, the epee still in her hand. As if to mull over what he had said.

"You believe I am still in touch with Pyotr? After his son has broken my arm?" She looked up, pulling the zipper of the jacket fully down, fiddled around with the d-strap that held the jacket, and pulled it off, revealing a white plastic chest protector on top of a white t-shirt. Took off the plastron that only protected her left shoulder and side, then the protector and wrapped everything into a thick roll.

"Aye. I do believe you are." Dan stood still but his eyes followed her every movement. "After all, you got out of Russia just in time." His gaze had gained an edge, but his voice remained the same.

"'Just in time'. That is one way of putting it." She slipped into a light sweater. "Pyotr is heartbroken. His only son. The mother is dead. And Vadim...convicted of these things. I imagine the KGB talked to him as well. Can you imagine what that means to an old man? Do you have a family, Mr McFadyen? Can you even for a moment imagine what you did to us?"

Dan's brows rose. Attack, fire, near-defeat, not even a counter attack.

"What *I* did? Do you believe Vadim fell victim to *me*?" But then she thinks you are his 'bitch'. Too resigned to fight the notion, but the mere thought that what he felt—this motherfucking love that would not stop—was nothing but a 'butch' and his 'bitch', that thought was cutting deeper with every minute.

"In a manner of speaking." She pulled the sweater down, reached for loose dark training trousers and pulled them over the white shoes, sock and britches she still wore. "Intentions are one thing, the outcome something else entirely." She glanced up. "But maybe you want to tell me about your intentions?" She stuffed the kit and weapon into a long bag and zipped it up.

His intentions. Dan looked at his hand, the right one. If only he knew. To tell Vadim, to try and let him know, to...hurt him in the process? To make waiting for death even more painful? He shook his head, said nothing.

"Or maybe tell me about Vadim in Afghanistan. He didn't speak about it. He said he didn't want to scare me." A smile, measured. "I am not easily scared."

"You want to know what Vadim was like in Afghanistan? What he did?" Dan looked up, studying her. What an insane notion. What was he going to tell her? 'I met your ex-husband that night he raped me. I wasn't impressed.' Or, 'I saw him splatter children's brains over the dead bodies of their mothers, he is a good sniper.' Or perhaps, 'he begged for a soldier's death after I tortured him and he broke down, sobbing. He begged, because of you, his wife, you and your children. His family.'

Or, perhaps, about the man he then became? The man who had cried at his hospital bed and with whom he had shared a life nearly like lovers?

"No," Dan shook his head once more, eyes narrowed for a moment. What a fucked-up situation. Perhaps he had been wrong all along, perhaps he should just fuck off and never return and forget about the whole thing. Perhaps it was an insane wish to tell Vadim he was alive and he loved him; had fought for him, would forever fight, if only he could. "If he did not tell you about the war himself, then I would betray him if I told you." He stood his ground, yet he would beg. Beg like Vadim had, ten years ago.

"Your intentions, then?"

"My intentions? For him to know before he dies I love him, always will, and I am alive and will continue to fight for him as long as there is anything to

fight for. I would do anything,” Dan’s dark eyes became more intense, “anything at all for him.”

For he is all I have. My home, my life, my sanity. Without him, I merely function, kept in check by a dangerous job and a woman’s authority. Duties. Nothing beyond duties. No life, just existing, but you wouldn’t understand how empty I am inside.

Her eyes grew speculative, thoughtful, and she remained silent for long moments. “I would much prefer to continue this conversation somewhere else. Besides, I need a shower.”

Dan nodded. What else? He’d follow her like a dog on a leash, hoping for a scrap of mercy.

They left the training room and she led him outside, crossed the old-fashioned courtyard, and headed up narrow stairs. This part of the building was currently under repair, everything covered with thick plastic foil to prevent snow or rain from creeping in. She stepped into a corridor that smelled of paint, and opened a door.

Dan followed, walking behind her in silence, both hands in his pockets. Beggars couldn’t be choosers, he’d follow her anywhere as long as he had a reason to hope she might accept his plea.

The entrance was painted white, narrow, too many shoes, fencing shoes for teenagers in a pile. She picked up a small bunch of letters, then lowered her bag as if this was much more important, looked at him and proceeded into a small living room that had a view on the other side of the court, where she fenced.

“Do you have tea or coffee?” She went into the kitchen to stuff the fencing gear into the washing machine, added detergent, and started a programme.

“Coffee.” He was looking around, took in the shoes. Vadim’s children. Strange, so difficult to imagine that woman and his lover. Still standing, she hadn’t asked him to sit and he felt unwanted, unwelcome and uncomfortable in her home.

She went through the motions to take the coffee machine from a cupboard, wiped it down quickly, added coffee powder from a glass jug, water from the tap, switched the button, then looked at him again, quizzically. “Please, have a seat.” Either remembering her manners, or hospitality. “I need that shower.”

She headed off down the corridor, in an afterthought took the letters with her. Locked the door and a few moments later, the sound of water.

Dan sat down at the table, awkward, tense. Wondered what in the flat spoke of Vadim, if anything at all. Needed a cigarette badly, craving the nicotine just to function, but he couldn't bear asking her for permission to smoke. He looked around the kitchen without touching anything, listening to the gurgle of the coffee machine and the ticking of the clock. Every tick, every movement of the hand, every second was bringing Vadim closer to the end. He hadn't known that pain could be so intense, and it was growing by the day.

When she returned he sat in exactly the same way as before. Stiff, upright, back straight.

She came out when the coffee machine was gurgling steam, face reddened, hair pulled up and fastened with a metal comb. She didn't meet his gaze when she stepped into the kitchen, instead headed straight for the coffee machine again. "Milk? Sugar?" Her voice seemed much huskier now, and she was distracted, the sharp focus had been drained.

"Sugar," Dan looked up, watched her, studied every motion, "three spoonfuls, if possible."

She looked like she might have cried in the privacy of the shower. She put the hands on the work surface, straightened her arms, head lowered. "I could make you pay for this." Her voice still vibrating with something. Her lips pressed together for a long moment. "I guess I will."

Make you pay for this. Her words hit his core. What had he expected? To smile and ask and be met with understanding or, at the worst, to beg on his knees? Pay. He would. However much she wanted. Money? "I don't understand."

"I failed to get pregnant. My clock is ticking, but I want another child. The last one." She took two mugs with one hand, the ceramic clicking together as her hand shook. She pressed her teeth shut and set the mugs down hard. Needed a minute as if trying to remember where the sugar was. Stared into the open cupboard for a long moment. "The letter from my gynaecologist. The insemination failed. I am not pregnant." She found the sugar in another glass jar, unscrewed the lid, measured three spoons, forcing herself back to precision as she poured the coffee into one mug, stirred for him and set the mug down in front of him, now looking into his face. "That is the only thing I want. A child."

Dan automatically reached for the mug, didn't see it, just stared at her, tried to make sense, failed. Nothing made sense, nothing except the time moving—unstoppable—towards the end.

"What does that have to do with me?" He looked at her straight on, face mere inches away.

Her own face was nearly without expression, maybe a hint of anger. "You are a man. I believe children happen when a sperm fuses with an egg." She stayed exactly there, did not move closer, did not pull away. "You seem healthy enough, and being a homosexual does not make you infertile." Her eyes held a challenge, and now she moved away, like a fencer having scored a point. "Szandor is a friend, but he is out of the question."

The penny dropped slowly for Dan, far too slowly. "You can't be serious." Impossible to believe, he must have misheard her. His scarred hand curled around the mug. "You can't...you can't want *that*."

She gently shook her head, then sighed. "You think." She moved back to the coffee machine, her precision back, face thoughtful. "Vadim is Anoushka's father. I don't think he ever wanted to, not truly. I think he was trying to fool himself, but Vadim isn't easily fooled. And I am even less likely to be fooled. I saw him with Szandor, one night, and I knew then what he was. But at the same time, I was trying to end my career with a flash, not a whimper."

She took the mug with both hands and raised it. "He needed all the protection he could get in his position. If I had been around, they wouldn't have caught him. He must have grown careless."

"Not careless," Dan muttered, they hadn't been, but how could he be so sure. "Just..." Just what. What, Dan? India, the hospital, the safe house and then the hotel. The KGB could have had an easy game. That last night. He couldn't bear remembering. Too painful.

Dan's hands twitched, the coffee disturbed in the mug. "Vadim has two children. He showed me a picture." Of you, a girl and a boy. I remember, the baths, the lapis lazuli, the water, the touches and the smiles. The sex, always that, lust, but more than that. Much more.

"Yes. But Nikolai looks a lot like the man we shared for a while. A pilot that was shot down in Afghanistan before I could leave Vadim for him. I was naïve." She shook her head. "We were partners in crime, Vadim and I."

Dan's mouth opened, shut again. Vadim not the boy's father? Partners in crime? They shared a pilot? "Fuck, you're fucking sick." Murmured, too quiet for her to have heard all of his words. Was there anything she wouldn't do? Not that...that thing she had talked about before. Impossible.

He raised his hand to wipe across his face, coffee forgotten. She resented him, he'd expected that. She accused him, and he hadn't counted on how much that hurt.

"Will you do it? Will you talk to his father?" He looked up once more, straight into her eyes. He was selfish, and he knew it.

"Yes. I will break Pyotr's heart." She looked at him.

"What do you want from me in return." Dan understood at last, no matter how impossible it was. "How do you want me to *pay*." Cold. Business. Like the coffee cooling in his mug, untouched. One thing he thought he needed to know, 'did you ever love Vadim?' but what did it matter. The question remained buried in silence.

She shrugged. "I understand you will not find a female body particularly worthy of attention." A thin smile. "I share nothing with Vadim, after all. I don't flatter myself on being able to make somebody like you react. I think that would embarrass us both, on top of the awkwardness."

Dan's hand around the mug tensed, scars and tendons creating freakish patterns. "Spell it out." Refused to put the two things together. "Spell out what the fuck you want!"

No. Just no, it was impossible, even though he understood perfectly well. What difference would this be, to a night, ten years ago in Kabul. "What price do you want me to pay. Say it."

Her brow darkened. "You understood me. I know what you want, and you know what I want and I need it now, it is the perfect time for conception, I cannot wait. Can you function with a woman or not?"

"You want me to be your whore." No question, a statement. "Your fucking bargain, deal, blackmail or what the fuck ever, is to fuck yourself on your ex-husband's lover to add to your collection of soldiers' kids." He had to put the impossible into words. Fucking Krasnoradas and their aptitude for 'Nothing'. His hand tensed so hard, the mug spun out of his grip, spilling across the table. "You fucking bitch!"

She crossed the distance as swiftly as she'd ever been and backhanded him, seething with rage. "Don't you dare! It was you who ruined him. Don't you forget that." Her eyes ablaze. "My children are none of your business. At least I gave Vadim more than death."

His face stung, first reaction to defend, attack and *kill*. He shook, brimming with rage, fists clenched, fighting his own instincts. A killer, not allowed to kill. Those words, more painful than the rape, but perhaps it was the price he had to pay for the torture.

An eye for an eye. A life for guilt and pain for loss.

"Seems you *are* trying to make your children my business." He jumped off the chair, stood, shoved his hand into the pocket, fingers gripping the beads in anguish. Couldn't do it, couldn't bear it. Was that what ten years had been reduced to? Destruction, death and fucked-up, painful, sickening love.

She looked at him, unafraid. He was strong enough to break her, angry enough to do it, but maybe being the wife of a Spetsnaz officer had prepared her for it.

"One more thing: Are you healthy?"

"What?" Dark eyes glaring, he couldn't find the words. Nothing but mockery, anger, impotent rage. "If you mean if I've got the fucking 'faggot disease' no I haven't got it!"

"Good. That means we have a deal."

Couldn't do it. Had to do it.

Vadim.

"I fucking hate you." His hand came back out of his pocket, clumsy with anger, and the string of prayer beads cluttered to the floor, scattering across the kitchen.

The faint clatter distracted her, and she looked at the beads. Lips opened in clear surprise and there was realisation in her eyes. He had spoken the truth.

The same beads, probably the same stall on a market in Kabul. Her gaze flickered to the drawer that held hers, in the living room. Back to the man, a question in her eyes, some of the harshness drained. He had destroyed Vadim, but there had been a day when Vadim had given him those. Vadim who didn't think much of such tokens.

Dan balked at her reaction, fuck, the beads. Watched her eyes, followed her gaze. Fuck the bitch. Too late, the words she'd said would never leave him.

He turned his head when she moved past him to the bedroom, didn't follow at first. Walked over to the beads instead, carefully picked them up, stashed them in his inner jacket pocket this time. Couldn't bear to have anything of Vadim's anywhere near this...thing. Crime scene. That's what it felt like. The heavy curtains were drawn, the bed a large, low futon, black sheets and covers, the room held very little else, two matching nightstands, an alarm clock, a bookshelf. She had dropped the bathrobe, her body lean and muscular, toned, not exactly boyish, soft and rounded in the right places, but hiding her strength underneath. She stood at the foot of the bed, facing him, naked, only her hair done up.

Dan left the jacket draped over a chair in the kitchen, followed her, forced to accept the deal. He hated her more that moment than he had ever hated Vadim. Ten years ago his body had been raped. Today it was his mind. "I want you to give me your word. I don't know if I am even fertile, impossible to guarantee success. Give me your word *this* is my part of the bargain and it completes the deal. In return you will talk to Vadim's father and you will find a way to deliver a message from me." He took his jumper off, dumped it on the floor, unbuttoned his shirt. Eyes narrowed.

"I will ask you for a sample tomorrow," she said. "That increases the chances. But yes, that's it. All the fine print." She watched him undress, assessing the chest, remaining just as calm as she'd been most of the time. "I will deliver the message, tomorrow."

Dan pushed the shirt off his shoulders, let it drop on top of the jumper. Revealing a scar that was round, neat, precise, perfectly on top of the left shoulder, and the 'V', cut into clear lines of scars on his left biceps. Scarred face and hand had already been visible, but not the line of dead ragged flesh that peeked on top of the waistband of his jeans. "A sample. Where. Your surgery?"

No sign of any emotion on his face, yet inside raged hatred, pure, cold, and focussed. He had to function. Refusing to assess right now how much this was hurting him, how much terror this truly was. This. This *thing*. He had come to beg for mercy, was being used in return. What had he expected? Dan, you fool.

"What if you *are* successful."

She made room for him, stepped to the side, keeping her eyes unfocused for a moment. “If this works, you will have no obligations, just like any donor. You will forget about this, and I will not demand anything more. On your side, you will have no rights. You will not make contact and if you do, I have ways to make you pay and claim you forced me.”

“Forget it?” You fucking bitch. Callous, cold, and just like Vadim had been, all those years ago. The man you had been married to. Brains splattered on mothers—using a desperate man as a tool. Fuck you. Fuck you to hell and back, and may you rot in all eternity. “Keep your threats. If you are successful I will not have anything to do with anything that is yours. Ever. You understand me? I will never see you again. For your own safety.”

Not a muscle moved in his face while he undid the belt and buttons. He bent down to loosen the laces of his boots, stepped out of them and left them beside the growing pile. The trousers pushed down, then kicked on top. Stood naked, commando as usual, the ugly mess of scars across his abdomen in stark contrast to his dark skin. All over his body the signs of injuries. On arms, wrist, thighs, back, chest. Some faint, all worn. A body used up by a life on the line.

“I understand.” She nodded curtly, accepting the rules, like the decision of a referee.

“I won’t touch you.” He walked over to the bed.

Irony. The last woman he’d fucked was a pink-clad big-breasted giggling bimbo in London.

“You don’t have to.” All she needed was a physiological reaction. She did look at that body, though, maybe remembering the scars Vadim had carried when he came back to Moscow to heal up. Maybe wondered about Dan and Vadim together. How the dark skin matched Vadim’s near permanent sunburn. She shook her head, and went to the bathroom, to prepare with Vaseline. Gave him time to prepare as well. As businesslike as in a brothel.

Dan didn’t look at her when she left, wouldn’t look at anything at all. Lay down on the futon, on his back. No way he could close his eyes, his life had taught him that blindness equated to vulnerability, and he stared at the ceiling, open-eyed.

He didn’t want to sully his memories of Vadim, but couldn’t get a reaction. Shit. This was business, a deal he should be easily able to fulfil. Had had women

before, dozens of them, had fucked himself through the first thirty-one years of his life.

Took his cock in a violent, painful grip, self-punishing and so full of fucking hatred for that bitch, he wanted nothing but kill. Kill. That was it. Death, destruction, memories of skin, cut; face, beaten; body, kicked. Caves and mountains, skies and fires. Dirty hovels in Kabul, a fuck close to a patrol. Violence and aggression, sweat and blood, blades and boots, fists and teeth. None of the other images. No love, no laughter, no tenderness and no kissing. Dan was stroking himself, images racing before the inner canvas of his blindly staring eyes. Getting hard, as was required.

She returned, slid onto the bed, a lithe form, moving on top of him, supporting her weight with legs that were all sleek rounded muscle, knees open, not even touching his sides. She seemed almost thoughtful as she took his cock into her hand, pumped it just to slick it up as well, deciding to go right for the target, no more discussion, no tenderness, hardly acknowledging the other in her bed. It was not required. Lowering herself, legs strong enough for complete control, eyes cast down as her body accepted him, jaw muscles tensing again, focus, concentration, pure brazenness to follow through with this. Tight, obviously trained, powerful in this position, then moving, curving her back and pushing against him, slow, intense, moving into a practised rhythm with every motion firmly in control.

He hated her. Fucking hated every fibre of her. Wanted to kill her again when she took his cock out of his own hand, as if it belonged to her. Her tool. Dan never acknowledged that body on top of his, stared at the ceiling, grabbed handfuls of cotton sheeting, clenching the fabric in his fists. Jaw square, body tense. Used. Again. Had to stay hard, had to come.

Mountains. Heat. Blade cutting smooth flesh, forming words across a back. Cunt. My cunt. My fucking cunt.

Like himself. Her cunt.

She moved, hands on her thighs, not touching him either, a business transaction. Breath firmly controlled even as her body began to gleam with sweat, just like a workout, nothing to it, no moans, no sighs, no gasped words.

Accepting the burden of having to do all the work, not making it easier, not making it more difficult, merely going through the mechanics of sex. Cynical

enough to do it, use a body like any other tool, holding him tight, giving him what friction she could. Her own control never shaken, she wouldn't come, it was not required, merely a somewhat pleasant feeling and mostly hard work.

For Dan, it was required. Had to climax or their bargain would be void. He tried. Stared blind-eyed, focussed on his inner vision, but it was wrong, all of it, even the physical sensations. Not enough friction, no violence, wrong kind of aggression, no feelings, just hatred. "Shit." Pressed out between his teeth, he couldn't, couldn't come. "I need..." What, Vadim? "More."

Her eyes opened, gazing into his face, her own flushed from the work. She seemed a touch surprised, possibly had been just too confident in herself and how she thought things worked. Vadim hadn't given her this kind of trouble, and the fact Dan's body didn't play by the rules threw her off balance. "How?" she whispered, as if speaking could do even more harm now.

"I got to do the fucking." And the make-believe. The aggression would topple him over the edge. His face distorted by anger, eyes harbouring hatred. "Mustn't see you. Just fuck a hole. I'll come."

Her face reddened and she was perfectly still, blood draining from her features, red spots remaining on her cheeks. Incredulous, clearly shocked at the thought, eyes showing insecurity now, a flicker of resistance, even fear. His fists twisted into the sheets, knuckles white, strained to the breaking point but he could not break. "Kneel."

A hair's breadth away from calling it all off, her lips close to speaking, let's forget about it, sorry, no way, haha, how embarrassing. Kneel like an animal. She left his body, jaw tense again, eyes the colour of blue glass. Pride, resistance, even revulsion. It had taken much to get that far.

But she knelt, body tense with inner struggle. Wouldn't speak, wouldn't call this sick joke off. Had gone too far, and would not admit defeat.

Dan turned, knelt behind her, paid no attention to her resistance nor facial expression. Didn't care about her thoughts. They had a deal, he'd fulfil it. No matter how.

He fucked her, just like that. It was brutal, but not personal. He was goddamned strong, just like Vadim, but unlike the other, nothing held him back. Not with this woman. Fucked a hole and a body, with the aggression of hatred and

the violence of abuse. His own. Not hers. Even though it was her body that was being penetrated.

Didn't touch her except for his hands digging into her hips, holding her steady for his thrusts. Didn't look at her, except for a blurred gaze of her back. Stared right through her, remembered lines of scars across and down a broad back, a word that had changed its meaning. Didn't try not to hurt her, didn't give a shit. Fucked her body with mechanical precision. Silent, except for sharp breaths. He was quick, wouldn't draw it out, no pleasure for either of them.

Pain and terror, horror and death.

The climax was sudden, without warning. It crashed upon him, as unfeeling as everything that had come before. Pressing out between panted breath and gritted teeth, while he sacrificed his sperm into her body. "Fucking...bitch!"

He'd done what she wanted. Hands shaking, barely able to control the temper. Her whore. She'd used him and his despair. He fucking hated her and would for the rest of his life. Hoped she'd never get pregnant, no spawn of the devil's child.

She moved away as soon as it was over, visibly shaken, her hips bruised, reddening, her strength had resisted him, but she was no match, and she had felt that, given up more than she had wanted, still able and willing to accept the consequences. Knew more about him and Vadim now than she had wanted.

From the bed, she reached for the bathrobe and slipped into it while getting up, legs shaking from just staying upright while Dan rolled over the moment he was done, staring at the ceiling.

She turned around to put her hair back together and to not look at him, doubtlessly still feeling it. "You..." Voice shaky. "Can sleep in that bed. The covers are...fresh." A gesture to the bed. She'd sleep in Anoushka's room, on the guest bed she used when the children were ill.

Sprawled across the futon, Dan looked at her, straight on. No expression in his face, no emotion. "I need a shower. Towel." Must wash off your scent, bitch.

"I'll put some on the basket near the shower." She moved further away, finding it hard to find her strength back. Play the host so things could be anything less but violence and fear. "Do you want to eat? I can fix something quick." Spooked, yes, and she clearly felt how odd conversation was.

Vadim at least hadn't made conversation that night in Kabul.

“No. I don’t want anything from you.” Dan rolled off the bed, stood with surprising ease for a man with a surgery scar across one knee. “I need a hotel. Will be back in the morning for your sample.” He walked over to the pile of his clothes. “I leave the text of the message. He’ll understand.” He will, unlike you. Fucking bitch.

“I will call you a taxi.” Relieved to see him go, even if she couldn’t admit it. “And call the hotel.” She went to the living room, picked up the phone and spoke Hungarian for a little. Booking him a room in a four star hotel in inner Budapest, with a view onto the river, breakfast included, and dinner, of course. Glad to see him go, understood she didn’t understand; understood something had happened she had no words for. Good to see him go. She and her children. Nobody else counted at the moment.

He watched her leave the room before looking for bathroom and promised towel. Couldn’t bear to get back into his clothes unwashed, sticky with her, smelling of her, any memory of her unbearable. It took him precisely three minutes to wash her scent off his hair and body, still damp when he emerged and she announced the taxi would be there any moment. He nodded, no words spoken, just went back into the bedroom that still smelled of sweat and sex, to get into his clothes, and he hated her even more. Sex, he’d never have sex with Vadim again, nor feel the lust that was so much more than mere fucking.

He hurt, but at least it couldn’t get any worse anymore, she’d hammered the dagger home, she’d finished him off. A dog on the ground, kicked and beaten. He’d never thought he could get that low.

Fully clothed, boots laced, Dan came back into the kitchen to take his jacket, looking for the sheet of paper. “Here.” Put it down onto the table. “It’s typed. It’s a ‘fable’. Make sure it is told exactly in this way.”

She nodded, taking the sheet of paper, pulling it closer, not reading it now, later. She doubted she could read anything right now. “I promise. I will call Pyotr as soon as he is home.” Keeping her gaze at the table in front of her, not looking anywhere else. Thought, maybe, of the lapis in the drawer. Maybe of her daughter.

Dan nodded. He’d fulfilled the worst of his part of the bargain. It was done. Tomorrow morning was a universe away. “I wait downstairs.” Said nothing else, turned and left the flat, the jacket over his shoulders.

He was empty. Used up. Had almost forgotten his purpose.

Lapushka. Fucking Kittenpaw.

* * *

0700 hrs the next morning, a taxi pulled up at the same house. The man who stepped out of it was dressed almost the same as the day before. Dan glanced up at the building, then pushed the main door open, remembered it hadn't been locked. Taking the stairs, one after the other, a steady pace despite the burning wish to turn back and leave and never see the bitch again.

He had to do it, had to fulfil the last part of the bargain.

Done and over with, just like Vadim's life.

Left hand in the jeans pocket again, he rang the door bell, waited. Listened for sounds inside.

When the door opened, Dan was faced with a girl. Blonde, hair long, pulled into an overly complicated braid, hair reaching well past her shoulders. She had Vadim's eyes, his lips, more delicate, with lip gloss, and nose, never broken, would never be broken, never reconstructed. The girl was pretty, and probably knowing it, still experimenting with the eye shadow, grey and blue mixed that was somewhere between debutante and a bruise. Shirt open to where her breasts started, the shirt tight enough to show the beginning curve. She was already tall. She measured him with a somewhat disinterested glance she must have had a lot of practice with, as it looked nearly natural.

Dan almost jumped backwards, managed to have himself under control with one sharp intake of breath. Fuck. Not that. A mirror, just younger, so much younger, and female. Vadim. Fuck. Fuck! How was he supposed to pull through with the last task of his fucking part of a motherfucking deal? He'd been raw inside for longer than he could remember, and the last day had torn him up. Like the shrapnel, his guts spilled across a landscape of red dust. And now...that girl was a grenade exploding in his face.

"Mom, he's here," she called over her shoulder. "She's in the bath. Come on in."

Dan stepped inside, he was expected? What the hell had the fucking bitch told this kid.

She turned and headed back into the kitchen, where she sat down in front of a bowl of muesli. Fresh fruit, yogurt, oat flakes. Breakfast of champions. She was reading something, a sheet of paper that had been folded up. The fable. Her brow darkened, and she looked up. “And? How does the story end? This is yours, isn’t it?”

Dan frowned, eyes narrowing. First instinct to tear the paper out of her hand, but what did it matter. Vadim. His daughter. The whole fucked-up family and he himself the greatest mess of them all. “The mountain lion dies. End of story.”

She put the paper down and folded it, displeased. “Then why is that ending not there? That’s not a proper story. Stories have beginning, and middles, and ends.” Looking at him, nearly accusingly.

“The ending hasn’t happened yet.” He glanced at the door, wanting to get this done and over with. Out. Out! Had to get out of this fucking place.

She glanced towards the corridor, a conspirator’s movement, only so very obvious. “Are you a friend of...” Hesitation, and a whisper. “Dad?” as if the word was not welcome, not allowed. “He taught me English, you know. He said I can never know who I will meet and who doesn’t speak my language.”

How could she be so cool and unconcerned. Her father was dying.

“Aye. I know your dad.” I know. I *know*. “Why?” Where the fuck was the bitch with the sample vial.

She kept one eye on the corridor, listening to the sound of the bathroom door, eyes then flicked to him. “Because you’re not like the usual friends of my mom.” Another quick glance. “Dad should be here, but she said it’s easier if I remember the good times.” She pulled a face towards the corridor. “And be good at school.” Another, darker, more poisonous look, the exact same resentment her father could show when unguarded, when the mask slipped and he showed his feelings.

Dan shrugged. Too close, too similar, too unbearable the resemblance. “I don’t fucking care.” Spilled out, unguarded. Truth. He had no strength left to give a damn. “Guess that’s what kids do. Go to school and shit like that.” He, too, glanced at the bathroom door. Where the fuck was that bitch. “Treasure the good times. You never know when you or the other one fucks up and dies.”

She frowned. Maybe those language lessons hadn't involved profanity. There was a sound from the end of the corridor, and Anoushka quickly pushed the folded sheet back into its original position, exactly where Dan had left it the evening before. Busied herself with the yogurt, cutting up banana pieces.

When Katya emerged, she remained in the doorway. Seemed to consider whether to explain who the stranger was, or the daughter, or leave it, and decided against it. "Go downstairs, darling, Szandor will take you to school."

In Russian.

Again dark resentment, sullen hostility like only a teenager could feel it. "I'm *eating*, Mom."

"I can see that. You go downstairs."

Anoushka stared at her. "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

"You are not an Olympian, and you will do as I say." Katya's voice cool, entirely unimpressed at her daughter's bad five minutes. "Off you go, now."

Dan watched the exchange in silence. Fucking dysfunctional 'family'. Fitted the father and his lover. Everyone else as fucked up as them. What about the son? Not Vadim's. A collection of kids of killers, soldiers. Whatever.

Anoushka's knuckles became pointy around the spoon, and she tensed, but then she gave a sickeningly sweet smile at her mother. "Yes sir." In Russian, and she got up, a smiling and pretty girl. "Of course. How stupid of me." She smiled at Dan. "Nice meeting you." And with something that was her idea of a curtsy, she left. No smashing doors.

"Bye." Dan nodded at the girl, tense, then turned to look at the woman when the kid had left. "Have you spoken to Vadim's father?"

She moved into the room, cleared away bowl and spoon and banana peel. "I will speak to him today, for longer, and explain what I want him to do. The families can visit if they queue up for long enough, and they can bring food with them. Half of that is taken by the guards, but I'm sure Pyotr can make it there. I am only concerned because he's in the Lubyanka. That's the old KGB prison in Moscow. It's not...known for humane treatment."

"I know." Dan hid his shaking hands in his jeans pockets. "I read about it." Maggie and her attempts to help him understand. Maggie and her relentless work. Maggie and the final defeat. No bribery, no power, nothing had succeeded.

He turned his head, found the kitchen window, stared out of it. It would be another sunny day. The sky began to lighten as dawn was approaching. He didn't want to talk, just get it over with. "Solitary confinement. Beatings. Sleep deprivation." Eyes never away from the window.

She leaned against the sink, arms crossed. Shaking her head as she thought what to say. "Yes, that's what they do. They know what he did, but they have no idea what he...has been." Audibly choosing the tense of the sentence. "He fought like a lion. He'll die just human. The last time I saw him, when...something had happened. He came back from that country, and I've never seen him in pain like that. His eyes? How they turn dark? He looked at me, and I knew he'd rather break his own bones. He said he wanted to keep me out of trouble. He was planning his escape from his job, because it started to hurt him. Frankly, I never thought it would happen. I didn't recognize it at first, but that night, I finally understood." She shook her head, remembering Vadim not sharing the name or nationality of the man he was leaving her for.

Her, the army, his life. So, this was him. Who else?

"He knew about the consequences, and still did it. And I believe that is how he will die. He'll see it, and he'll still take it, somehow, I don't know how, but I believe, I know, Vadim will never flinch from what he did. He always had good reasons for everything, and not a guilty moment in his life. That's why I loved him."

Dan had nothing to say. The anguish, the darkening of eyes. Knew every little thing, each detail, could see it and feel it. Her love? He didn't care. Didn't matter what she believed. Yes, Vadim would die, but he'd die broken. "He signed a confession." He finally replied. "Admitted to something he's never done. No secrets, no collaboration." Just lust, then love. Addiction all the way through. "They broke him." He paused, his hand shook while he brushed a strand of hair out of his face before he buried the hand once more.

Never taking his eyes off the approaching dawn outside.

She nodded. "Confession, yes. Regret? I don't think so. I just can't see him regret anything, or be guilty of anything. They kill him just because they can't bend him to their rules. They can break him, but they can't make him something he isn't. It's not much, but it is something." She gave a strange smile. "I can't see you regret anything, either. That's why you're here."

Dan shook his head. “I tried. I fought. So did people in high places. Bribery. Power. Promises.” He paused again, “Nothing.” He had no more words. Empty. Except for something he’d hidden deep inside. “You don’t know what it is like to be a killer.” Dan’s voice was toneless, almost gentle. Like ashes to ashes and dust to dust. “I have no right to grief.”

“I wouldn’t know who could take that right from you, frankly. Apart from yourself.”

Dan held his hand out. Waiting for the sample. He didn’t want to see her as human, easier to just hate the bitch as an enemy without a face.

“Let me do my duty now.” Quietly. “Or I won’t be able to.” If you talk anymore I will break apart. I need to hate you, you have to hurt me like last night, or your words will cut me open and leave me to bleed dry.

She nodded. “Bathroom. It’s...in the bathroom.” She turned and started to prepare tea. Not asking whether he wanted coffee. Decided he’d not accept it, and there was nothing else to do. “You can just leave it. I don’t want to keep you here longer than necessary.” Voice a hint softer than what the last word implied. Not looking at him, instead pouring water, and measuring tea.

Dan left without another word, the sound of the bathroom door opening, closing, then the scrape of the lock. He stayed in there for far longer than expected, just a rustle from within, then silence again. He remained locked inside for over half an hour, several flushes of the loo before the door opened again and his steps were heard leading straight to the entrance door.

He was gone without acknowledgement nor trace, except for the sample container that stood sealed and correctly packaged, inserted in the transportation kit. She had twenty-four hours before his sperm would have lost its mobility, and forty-eight before it was useless.

He’d be back in Dubai before then.

1990—Moscow, between 9th January and 7th February

Sometime after the trial, Vadim had a visitor. His father. He looked aged and worn, and his hands shook with agitation. Vadim sat there, looking at him, seeing that familiar face. After a long silence, his father told him about the family.

No words such as ‘how are you’, no niceties, his father was an intelligent man, he didn’t make things look better than they were. And they did not speak about the execution. Vadim was too tired to tell his father to go home, instead endured his presence like anything else, knowing it would end, like any other pain.

Once upon a time, a mountain lion and a tiger escaped a circus. They had been trained to jump through flaming hoops, and to stand tall on their hind legs, reaching with their paws into the air to please the audience. But one day, something happened that set them free. Now they had nobody to keep them from fighting each other, and nobody to feed them, and nobody made them stand on their hind legs and raise their paws high.

They went hunting together. They were an unlikely pair, but so be it. Stranger things have happened. When one of them was tired, the other would guard his sleep, and when one was injured, the other would lick his wounds and hunt for him until he was feeling well again.

You need to know lions and tigers are never friends, lions hate the tigers’ stripes, and tigers hate everybody, even other tigers, but lions worse, because lions are so strong and hunt in prides, and tigers think that is the wrong way to do things.

But there were hunters, and they said lions and tigers are not supposed to be friends, they were not themselves anymore, the lion had forgotten how to be a lion, and the tiger had betrayed his stripes. On one of their hunts together, the lion fell into a trap. The tiger tried to free his friend, but he had no hands to reach down inside the pit and help him out. The hunters couldn’t trap the tiger, try as they might, and the tiger still roams their old hunting grounds, remembering the gift of love and friendship.

Lions may die, but friendship doesn’t.

“Who is the tiger, Vadim?”

Vadim sat there, blinked, saw his father’s eyes fill with tears, and felt a deep and sudden shame, a pain more intense than breaking ribs.

“Who is the tiger? Please, tell me, who is the tiger? I am not stupid. Is it true what they say? Did you...do that?”

“Yes, I did.” He saw his father cry harder, felt old resentment well up, the fights they’d had, the disagreements about even the most basic things in life, above all, his father’s ideas and truths, but most of all the expectations. Be the best. Work harder. What for?

Tiger. The tiger can't lose his stripes. Two predators in the mountains. Friendship. Try as they might. Dan. This was Dan's story. His past lover. And that was proof Dan was alive. No sniper. And he had come to believe what the interrogator had said. It was just too much time. Dan. Emotions, pleasure, something had kept him together.

He remembered, and there was relief, at least the other had made it out alive. Dan was still there, and that was good. He'd try and keep that thought in his mind when they'd shoot him. Not a disgrace, at least not that.

But like all other thoughts, this one didn't have any strength to last.

1990—Dubai, 7th February

Silence. Nothing but the weary tick-tick-tick of the wall clock. Blinds drawn, shutting out the sun except for a strip of light cutting across the floor like a knife blade slicing into flesh. How dared the sun shine, it was barely dawn in Moscow.

Dan sat on the edge of his bed, opposite the wall and its clock, the black hands moving ever forward. Hour, minutes. Second after second. Moving. Forward and to the end. Finality, measured by the unyielding tick-tick-tick. No other sounds, the building as silent as a tomb, with staff tiptoeing across the hall and whispering in the corridors. The room, nothing but grave walls, closing in on him, and only one constant: the clock. Its hands. Their movement. Relentless and uncaring. Silence, except for the counting of time.

Tick-tick-tick until the end.

Three more minutes, and seven...six...five...seconds.

They would have taken him out of his cell, shuffling towards one of the execution rooms, down in the bowels of the Lubyanka. Could he still walk? March proud and tall, unbent.

Dan's hands were damp, he didn't feel the cold of the A/C blasting icy air into the dusky room. Sitting motionless, eyes transfixed.

Two minutes and forty...thirty-nine...thirty-eight...seconds.

They would have bound his hands, reached the room. Tiled for convenience. Scrubbed clean from previous blood, ready for another slaughter. Dan's eyes were dry. No tears, he'd lost the ability to cry.

Two minutes and three...two...one...seconds.

They would have forced him onto his knees, in the centre of the room. Blindfold waiting.

Dan was sweating. Cold sheen on clammy skin. His stomach a tight, painful fist, lodged in his guts. Agony, sharp and endless. An empty vessel filled with nothing but loss. No life, no time.

One minute and thirteen...twelve...eleven...seconds.

They would be standing behind him now. Pistol drawn, muzzle against the back of his neck. Eyes bound, blind.

Dan's unblinking eyes fixed on the clock and its merciless hands kept moving. His own hand gripping his thighs. Knuckles white, muscles locked, body as still and dead as a statue.

Vadim. Would he feel fear? Or would he be numb? Would the bullet tear into his brain in terror?

Vadim. Would he remember him?

Five seconds...four...three...two...

Dan's lips moved, but no sound. "Farewell."

It was over.

Vadim was dead.

The pain was a never-ending emptiness. Scraped out and left raw inside. All feelings torn out at their roots, battered into a bleeding mess. Love broken on the wheel, quartered, feeding Dan's numbness with pain and ever more pain. Each memory, every touch. Every punch and cut. Each kiss. Vadim's scent and heat, his body clenching around Dan's, taking and being taken. Never again.

Dan sat immobile, eyes blind. Not a muscle twitched in his face. The clock didn't matter anymore, and nor did time. His life empty, a senseless struggle.

He'd live. He'd work. He'd drink. He'd function. He'd die.

* * *

He must have stood up at some stage, for when the sound of soft knocks on the door got through to his senses, he found himself standing in front of the drawn blinds, an hour later.

“Dan?” The voice behind the door belonged to none other than the Baroness. Another knock, as softly as before. “Dan? I need to talk to you. Please.”

Perhaps it was her voice that made him move and the fact she was his boss, or maybe he simply walked to the door and opened it, because there was nothing else to do. A puppet that needed to be moved by a force outside himself. He looked at her: his unwavering constant. Same pearls, same twin set, same petite figure and grey coiffed hair.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“I’m sorry Dan, I didn’t wish to have anyone or anything disturb you, but...,” hesitation was not her manner, but he didn’t notice. Unaware of anything at all. “...but I have received information from Moscow I cannot keep from you. You would not wish me to.”

He stepped aside when she entered the room, closing the door behind her. “Moscow.” Flat voice, no inflexion. Uncomprehending, but then nothing made sense anymore. Not now, now that it was all over.

“Yes, Moscow. A phone call from one of my contacts.” She stood, hands clasped in front of her, but even though he looked at her, he saw nothing. Her words didn’t make any sense.

“Dan, please do sit. What I have to tell you might come as a shock.”

He waited for any reaction inside, for a sense of insane hilarity that anything could possibly be a ‘shock’ anymore, but nothing happened. Cold. Numb. He felt nothing. Yet he sat down, back on the bed. The puppet compelled to move by following simple orders. He was thankful for that.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“My contact, the most reliable one I have,” she seemed eager to emphasise this point, “he called me about ten minutes ago. Dan...,” again the uncharacteristic hesitation, but Dan didn’t notice. “Vadim Krasnorada is not dead. He was *not* executed. There will be a re-trial instead.”

He stared at her in complete disbelief. “What?”

“It was a mock execution, Dan, it was a lie. The re-trial had been ordered some weeks ago, under pressure of the political and diplomatic channels we had

used, but most of all because of interior forces. We had been right all the time, the Soviet Union is crumbling rapidly, especially with recent developments in Azerbaijan that shifted the power balance in Moscow significantly. The KGB is losing power to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry is aggressively regaining ground. My contacts indicate the Ministry will not let the KGB execute Vadim. It's an old-fashioned inter-Soviet power struggle. The pressure is great enough not even the KGB could go through with the execution, although they orchestrated a mock execution to keep face. He is not dead, Dan, Vadim Krasnorada is still alive."

"You lie." Dan refused to believe, the sense of hope that tried to steal inside his mind too cruel to ponder. "That's bullshit."

"No, Dan," she shook her head, "you have to believe me, it is the truth. My contact's informants are infallible."

Dan's hands were clenching into fists, shaking his head. "You are lying. Don't fuck with me, Ma'am, don't do that to me. You are lying, it's all lies! Vadim is dead, do you hear me? Vadim is dead! Don't you fucking lie to me!" Agitated, he'd forgotten his manners, speech and anything, just the numbness inside that was turning into unbearable pain. Not hope, not this, not the cruellest of all feelings.

She did not flinch at the sudden barrage of profanities. Still steadfast and strong. "Listen to me, Dan, you have to believe me. It is the truth. Vadim is not dead, my contact told me only a few minutes ago."

"No!" Dan yelled, hands clenched into fists. "What a fucking goddamned lie! He is dead, don't you get it? Done, dead, fucking over. Everything, just over and done with. Dead, dead, dead! Fucking dead!" He was shaking his head wildly, his dark eyes burning with rage. Rage fuelled by pain. "Don't do this to me, don't you fucking tell me he is alive. Don't you fucking lie to me unless you give me proof, you hear me? Give me *proof*!"

The Baroness' voice tuned even calmer. "I will, Dan, I will get you proof." She did not realise what a mistake she was making when she took a step closer, placing her hand on Dan's shoulder. "But you have to believe me, Vadim is alive."

"No fucking way!" He pushed her hand away and she almost lost her balance as he lunged forward, as if he were about to attack. He did not notice when she shrunk back, for the first time ever in her life. His rage had no boundaries, and neither his pain, forgetting all but the knowledge everything was over and Vadim

was dead and the unbearable agony finally had time and space to settle, consume him, and eat him alive.

“You’re fucking lying, everyone’s lying. You said you would help him, and nothing, fucking nothing! Bastard Britain, no hope, no help, no chance, just death and pain and torture. You did *nothing*, no one did, no one in this goddamnedmotherfucking country did anything. No one cared, because what did he have to offer? Just one measly life and a stupid arse lover who’d devoted his life to this fucking country and its fucking army. Orders, duty, just doing what we were told and what thanks did we get? Nothing! Fucking nothing, just lies and pain and shit and more lies and...” he took a breath, yelling at the top of his lungs, “fuck you! Fuck all of you! Fuck Britain, fuck this country and fucking fuck the whole damned fucking lot of you!”

Dan was shaking, uncontrolled, completely out of his mind, while she retreated towards the exit. He paid no attention when she left and the door closed behind her, had no notion of anything but the fury and pain inside, which had spun out of any control. Turning, he slammed his fist into the nearest thing, the stereo, smashing the front panel, crashing the whole thing onto the floor. He swept his arm across the table, every object on it scattering through the room. Kicking the television, again and again until the screen broke and a flame shot out of its back. Took the chair, hit it against the wall, broken legs slashing into the blinds, its remains hammering against the window. Destroy! Hurt and kill and not feel this pain. The hopelessness, the fear, the things he’d done and said and dreamt of, the memories, and now—the damned lies.

Dead! Dead! Dead!

And Dan smashed, kicked, beat and destroyed. The frantic sound of furniture breaking, objects crashing, fabric ripping and glass shattering. He took the whole room apart, until nothing was in its place, and he ended curled up on the floor, amidst the debris, cradling his bloodied hands and torn knuckles. He finally cried, at long last.

Outside, the Baroness had been standing, somewhat shaken and breathing deeply to calm herself, before she held her hand up to stop several of her staff who came running at the noise from Dan’s room.

“No, leave him alone.”

They protested but she remained adamant. “It does not matter what you hear and neither what you think. I wish this room not to be entered unless it is by myself. Do you understand?”

Despite the discontent, no one dared disobey her orders.

* * *

An hour later, Baroness de Vilde made her way back to Dan’s room, which was steeped in silence. Listening for a moment at the door, she knocked, but no answer. Taking a deeper breath, she knocked once more, did not hear anything this time either.

Slowly pushing down the handle, she hesitated, listening once more, but not the faintest sound came from inside. She had to use force to open the door, it got stuck, hindered by some of the debris on the floor. Looking around the trashed room once she was able to step inside, she merely took one single fortifying breath at the destruction that lay before her eyes. Nothing was where it had been before, everything broken and shattered.

She closed the door quietly behind her, when her gaze fell onto the curled up figure on the floor. Huddled into himself like an embryo, seeking shelter from the outside world.

She waited a moment, but no sound nor motion came from Dan, and she crossed the chaos, carefully stepping between the broken rubble, until she could crouch beside Dan’s head, whose face was hidden beneath his hands. “Dan?” Softly, accompanied by the rustling of paper. “I brought your evidence.” She waited, and still there was nothing, so she placed her hand once more onto his shoulder. Applying gentle pressure. “I have a fax for you. I leave it right beside you, is that alright?” For a moment it seemed she would stroke the dark hair, but then she took her hand back off the still shoulder, placing the paper next to his face.

She stood up, smoothing her skirt, all the while looking at him. “I will be in my private study. Whenever you feel like it. Just take your time.”

She retreated as quietly from the destroyed room as she had entered.

* * *

Some time later there was a knock on her study door, which opened slowly after she had called out for her visitor to enter.

It was Dan, just as she had expected, and she was gesturing to the leather chair opposite hers.

“Do come in and sit down.” She smiled slightly, while he closed the door. Looking like a beaten dog when he sat down.

“Do you feel any better, Dan?”

“I am sorry, Ma’am. So sorry. For everything.”

She smiled once more, nodding. “I know.” Unspoken, that if she didn’t, he would not be there anymore.

“Please accept my apologies,” Dan’s quiet voice sounded dead, unlike his usual self. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“Oh, but I do. Pain, Dan, pain is universal and pain makes us do the most regrettable things.”

He nodded, looking down at his battered hands, holding the folded fax sheet. “I can pay by instalments for the damage?” Still looking down, he had never felt so bad for something so uncharacteristic of himself. “If...if you want me to leave the embassy, I understand.”

“I am sure we will come to a mutually satisfactory agreement regarding the financial settlement of the damage, and I certainly do not wish for you to leave my employment.”

She was still smiling, and Dan did not know what he should feel more thankful for. Her understanding or her forgiveness for his unforgivable behaviour towards her. “Thank you, Ma’am.”

“You are welcome.”

He finally looked up, “I do believe you now. Vadim is still alive.”

* * *

The following day, Dan was called into Her Excellency’s office, sitting down in the chair in front of her desk, where she had been waiting for him.

“Ma’am? What is this?” Dan looked down at the envelope in her hand, which she was pushing towards him.

“Plane tickets.” She leaned back in her seat with a smile, folding her hands on her desk.

He raised his brows questioningly, before picking up the envelope, peering inside when she nodded towards him. “Why?”

“Because you need a break, Dan.”

“Do you want me out of here?” Pulling out the colourful portfolio.
“Because of...what I did?”

She shook her head, still smiling. “No, of course not. I don’t want you out of here and I certainly don’t want to lose your expertise in my employment, but Dan, you have been ceaselessly working for a year. What happened yesterday is only proof you need to get away from everything for a little while. Call it R&R,” she inclined her head with a smile, “on my expenses.”

Opening the portfolio, he stared at the plane tickets in his hands with disbelief. “Your expenses?” Looking at her, wide-eyed, “but why? I just smashed my room, and I...behaved despicably. I have to apologise and not receive gifts.”

“Don’t be silly, your behaviour yesterday is entirely excusable if not understandable. I already told you I accept your apology and the settlement of the damage, or do you wish to query my decision? Do you believe I ever say anything without meaning what I say?”

Chastised, he broke her gaze and shook his head. Still so tired, mentally exhausted, all he could do was murmur, “no, Ma’am, never.” Catching himself the next moment, a glimpse of the old, irreverent Dan, when he looked up and added, “unless you’re doing small talk.”

“Yes, of course, there is that.” She chuckled, pointing with one elegantly manicured finger at the tickets. “I hope you will enjoy my choice of location.”

“It’s the other end of the world.” Dan frowned.

“Indeed,” she nodded, “I do believe New Zealand is just the place for you to be right now. Try to relax a little, no matter how impossible this seems, and enjoy being on the other side of this big blue planet.”

“But Ma’am, what if anything happens, and what if you need me to do something, and Vadim. What if....” He was unable to continue when she leaned forward, shaking her head.

“Dan, Dan, take a breath. I will keep you updated all the time. If any developments take place, anything at all, I will let you know immediately. If you

wish, you may call me daily, but trust me when I tell you, right now there is nothing you can do. The KGB has left itself open for negotiations, and the fact the execution was not carried out is proof they are willing to make a deal. This is *my* game now, at last, and my contacts and I will play it well.”

She smiled, and Dan knew deep down she was right. He was out of his league, just as he’d been throughout the entire year. But this time it was less agonising, because he felt he could leave the job to the experts.

Professionals, just like him, but in a very different field. “You will keep me updated?”

“Of course, I gave you my word.”

“I guess, that’s it, then.” Dan tried a smile, confronted with a small laugh from her.

“Oh, Dan, don’t look so miserable, I am just sending you for three weeks to New Zealand on R&R. Is that so cruel of me?”

“No, of course not, Ma’am. No. Thank you.” He felt like a right idiot, trying hard to be grateful, but he was still so empty and raw inside, unable to muster up any enthusiasm.

She just smiled at him, leaning back in her chair and looking up as he gathered the envelope with hotel reservation, hire car and plane tickets.

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“You are very welcome, my friend.”

It was then that Dan finally smiled. *Friend*. Yes.

“Thank you for everything.”

He had reached the door when she called him back, “We will get him out, Dan.”

His hand on the door knob, Dan turned his head.

“Aye, we will.”

1990—1991 Chapter XXI—Judgment Day

1990—Finland, 24th December. Christmas Eve

The phone call had come in the small hours of the morning. “Be at the gas station in Vaalimaa tonight,” the Baroness had said, ‘he’ll be there’.

He. Dan hadn’t asked any questions.

He would go anywhere to meet Vadim, no matter where. Back into hell or across the frozen Afghan mountains on his own. Or just to the Finnish border.

As long as he’d be there.

Alive.

Almost two years. Twenty-two months and five days since their last night in Kabul, six-hundred-and-eighty-four days since Vadim had been taken, and he had nothing but memories and a string of lapis lazuli beads.

Dan had arrived at the UK embassy in Helsinki four days previously, and expected to stake out for longer, when the call had come from Dubai with the reassurance she would board a plane immediately and was on her way.

2100 hrs, and Dan was standing in the freezing cold, waiting. They had warned him not to move away from the car and to stay still until the prisoner had crossed the open space. Temperature far too many degrees minus, almost worse than the Afghan mountains. Wrapped in thick clothing, he climbed out of the car the moment the second vehicle arrived, while the

Baroness remained inside, and so did the driver. He stood, together with a couple of agents a few steps away, who had come in a third car, parked further away. Body shivering in the cold, but he felt none of it. Nothing mattered but his eyes straining to see in the darkness, following the moving shadow.

A man. One man. Only ever the one.

* * *

The car stopped. Outside, darkness—and electric light of a gas station. A truck idled there. Vadim saw the driver’s breath mist. Surrounding it, forest. They’d driven past icy lakes. Vadim knew the landscape from a tactical exercise.

Another car stood there, lights pointing in their direction. People in heavy coats. Waiting for something. Vadim felt a sudden tension and it didn't leave him. The car seemed an extension of the cell. A place that was safe. Outside only darkness. And light he didn't know how to deal with.

"Get out already," huffed the driver, and Vadim opened the door. He swung his feet into the ankle deep snow, then straightened. Closed the door at the next sharp command.

Lost.

He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat—army issue, ironically, if he could still feel irony. He stood there, unsure what it all meant. Not an execution. Or was it? One of his victims demanding payback? That was alright, he figured.

The other car still stood there, and he forced himself to walk towards it and whatever it meant.

Fifty yards, maybe fifty-five. Open, unprotected space. A million places for a sniper all around. Vadim expected to feel the impact of a bullet, every step took him into a kill zone, and he pulled his head deeper between his shoulders and simply expected the bullet to hit. Expecting was better than the fear.

Walked in the beam of the other car's headlights. Seeing almost nothing. Vadim moved on, step after step, listening to the too loud sound of snow, keeping his eyes lowered, but moved towards the car. He felt nothing. No expectation, no true fear, the only thing that was real was the cold surrounding him and biting into his face and ears. He didn't wear an ushanka. They'd brought him through Leningrad, Vyborg, past Lake Ladoga. This was Finland. Or the border of it. Winter War. A tactical disaster. Nothing of that mattered—echoes of something he'd known as a child.

Thirty yards. Vadim looked over his shoulders, but no car window was open, nothing pointing at him. He turned back to face the other car. Moving through the snow was hard work—virgin snow, reaching to his knees in places. He swerved to the side to get out of the light and move to the driver's side.

Six yards away. He stopped, looking at the car.

"Vadim?" Dan's voice almost broke, unsure if it even carried through the freezing night. His hands at his side, clenched into fists, he could not move, nor think, not even feel. The knot in his stomach as frozen as his twisted guts.

Twenty-two months and five days. Pain, fear, emptiness, hatred and numbness, hope and loss, bribery and hope once more. Almost two years, and Dan barely dared to try and picture the other's face, as it moved back into the shadows.

Vadim looked up, seeking, for a moment, then saw the tall figure—looking at him. Dan. Dan McFadyen, SAS, lover, enemy, everything. Remembered, but only with his mind, and faint, like aged photographs, emotions. Looked at the man and knew he'd loved him and knew every hair, every inflection of the voice, remembered sex and pledges and vows...and thought there had to be something, an echo, a deeper, more profound memory, something deep and powerful and overwhelming, but there wasn't.

He knew the man, but he felt nothing. Cauterized.

"Yes," he said and kept looking at that face, the dark eyes, long lashes, strong features, and thought he looked better than he remembered, but still, there was nothing but a faint wistfulness.

"Vadim..." Dan could do nothing but repeat the name, finally able to move out of his frozen stance. Not the cold had made it impossible to move, but the...what. Uncertainty? Fear, yes, fear it was all a dream and in the end, after almost two years, they had killed Vadim after all.

But he saw the features at last, could make out every line and angle in that face. Vadim's head shaved, his face stubbly, looking gaunt. Drawn, haggard, and far too thin, the weight loss even visible through the thick greatcoat. Like a survivor, one of *them*. One of the few prisoners of war who'd made it out of the Japanese camps.

Memories flooding back to him when he saw the too-pale face, an onslaught of emotions, and he smiled at last, the sheer overwhelming burst of feelings bubbling up from deep inside, like a geyser, ready to burst.

"Vadim." Holding his hand out to the other, beckoning, he knew they were watching and he did not dare to take a step towards him.

Dan's voice finally broke completely, "Oh fuck, Vadim!"

Vadim glanced over his shoulder, but nothing moved in the other car. He heard the machine start up again. They were ready to leave. No joke, no trick. Or was it? He paused again, then moved towards Dan, knew the man would cover him if anything happened. Noticed the hand, wasn't sure what to do with it, but moved closer, then again looked at the other car as it slowly moved across the snow to

turn, the tyres crunching the frost glazed snow. Then the lights were gone, and it was just this car, and the gas station. And it was very cold.

“That...is it?” said Vadim, still not comprehending.

Dan kept his hand where it was, for a while longer, then dropped the arm, untaken. Moving the last step forward, after a glance at the agents who had been hovering at the fringes and who nodded. “You are free.” It wasn’t enough, though, Dan had to say the name again, and again. As if giving voice to the name would make it all true, and would anchor everything in reality.

“Free, Vadim.” His arms raised to embrace the other. “At last, Vadim, at last.”

Vadim nodded, glanced again over his shoulder, then back into the face that was suddenly close. He stood still, felt the embrace tighten, and raised his arms to close them around the other’s back, greeting him like friends or family. Human. Touch. Felt suddenly too much, too close, far closer than anybody had been in a long while, and he felt his heart pound at the hug. He closed his eyes, but that was worse, so he stared at the price sign of the gas station, couldn’t make out the numbers, but could read Markka. Finmark.

“Dan. Good...seeing you.” It was. A sense of relief, but almost too much. Claustrophobic, couldn’t cope with that emotion anymore. Didn’t know what to say. “All...all way from Kabul?”

Dan didn’t let go, couldn’t read the signs of the stiff and unmovable body in his arms. Too long, too much, and he couldn’t let go. Not now, not anymore, not ever. Looking up, he smiled into Vadim’s face, breath misting between them. “No, I have been in Dubai since the middle of last year.” So much time, so much lost.

“Dubai.” Saudi Arabia. They’d have to fly there. Another long way, but at least not Kabul.

“We are staying at the embassy in Helsinki, only a short ride away.” Dan tried to kiss Vadim, but somehow, something stopped him the very last moment. Didn’t dare to and couldn’t explain why. So fragile. Vadim, alive. So fragile.

Vadim exhaled, knew he should want to kiss, but he didn’t feel a thing, none of the movements meant anything, no touch, no word, it all rang hollow and unreal.

“Come into the car, it is fucking freezing.” Dan was still smiling, couldn’t stop it.

“Yes. Cold. It’s...Finland. Not...good place.” Vadim clung to English, didn’t want to speak Russian, but the other language was unwieldy and soulless.

Dan opened the door for him and he got in, could smell smoke in here. Dan was a smoker. “Sorry, I’m just tired.”

“It’s OK. No problem, Vadim.” Again the name, Dan could not get enough of it.

The driver had stayed in the car, and so had the grey haired lady, who was turning in her seat when Vadim got into the back, with Dan sliding into the warmth beside him.

Baroness de Vilde smiled, holding out her hand. “Major Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada,” emphasis on his rank, as if they had never stripped it off him, “I am honoured to meet again the man Dan loves.”

There was a reaction now, a moment of fear, intense and flashing across Vadim’s brain. Power. The kind of power could destroy people. Remembered old fear, embarrassment, humiliation, and didn’t understand why she offered her hand. He felt trapped, then felt his muscles relax. No power. No resistance. No struggle. He had no chance to fight. “I...am honoured, Ma’am.” Took her hand like it was a thing of spikes and poison, forced himself to hold it and lowered his gaze.

Honour? You pride yourself on honour? And isn’t that the greatest of your delusions?

The Baroness shook Vadim’s hand, but something crossed her face like a flash, unseen by Dan. She let go of the large hand quickly, as soon as politeness decreed possible. “I would like you to meet a few people who have helped to ensure your freedom.” She smiled, “Of course, no one has done more towards your release than Dan, but I believe that goes without saying.”

She nodded to the driver, who began to move the vehicle. The chains on the tyres gripping fresh snow, as he carefully turned around.

“Not true,” Dan interrupted, “without the ambassador’s help, anything I did would have ended up in nothing.” He placed a hand onto Vadim’s arm. Just resting, connecting. “Thank you, Ma’am.” Dan smiled and she merely nodded with a smile of her own.

Vadim could only nod. Too much. Too much information, and too close, the car crammed full of people and each single one enough to restrict his breath.

That was when Dan suddenly remembered, “Are you hungry? Or thirsty? I am sorry, Vadim, I keep forgetting the most profound things. I’m just so bloody overwhelmed. We have some food here, though, and a flask with tea and one with coffee. Oh, and some water.” He couldn’t take his eyes off the other, though, not even when he peeled his hands out of his gloves or took the hood from his head, pulling the hat off, and shaking his dark hair, longer and wilder than ever.

Tea. Coffee. Water. Three choices. And Vadim didn’t even know whether he was actually thirsty. Tea. Snow outside and tea worked. “I...” Looking around, saw their eyes on him like they expected him to do something, say something, eyes strangely hungry and demanding and oppressive. Relax. You have no power whatsoever.

I am calling the shots. All you have to do is listen to me and take in what I tell you, and answer my questions.

Vadim swallowed. “Tea, please. Not hungry...don’t think so, no.” Looked at her first, as if she would give an order, then at Dan. Knew something was wrong, despite the lack inside, the hollow place behind his brow and inside his chest, and his guts felt frozen and brittle with dread.

“Tea, of course.” Dan almost spilled the hot liquid over his hands when he tried to fill the cup. Didn’t know why his hands were trembling, nor why his focus was shot to shit. “There you go.” Staring at Vadim while handing the flask’s cup.

“Thanks.” Vadim took it, carefully, and balanced it on his knee. He changed the grip and lifted it, sipping the hot tea, hoped that would help, but the sip of tea was like a stone in his guts.

Dan couldn’t take his eyes of Vadim, watching him drink. Couldn’t believe this was true. Vadim was alive, yet the truth was he sat right there, next to him. “Can I touch you?” Suddenly, murmured. Didn’t know why the hell he’d even asked and hadn’t just done it, but the other felt like a stranger.

Vadim looked up. Maybe that would break the spell. Maybe it wouldn’t. Too close. But not his decision. Had the feeling he owed that, had no right to resist because Dan had every right to. Looked at the lady who had turned back to face the windscreen and the night, busying herself. What would she think? What was she thinking? It was important, somehow, to know that. He looked at Dan. “Sure.”

Dan raised his hand, only his fingertips touching Vadim's face, stroking gently along the somewhat stubbly cheek and jaw. His fingers were cool, he had only started to warm up. "You lost weight, Vadim."

Vadim resisted the notion to take the hand and hold it—so it didn't touch him. It felt awkward and odd and claustrophobic. Couldn't read the words. Did that mean he looked bad? Ill? Did Dan criticise? He just couldn't read it, not the tone, not the touch.

Dan murmured as he smiled, "But you're real."

I don't feel real. I feel nothing. Vadim looked at Dan, and wanted to get out of the car, wanted to move, but knew he had to endure the feeling of being trapped. He glanced at the ambassador for any sign of displeasure. "Yes, it's...me." And who am I? What's left of me. "And...you. Your hair is long."

Dan's hand moved along the jaw, coming to rest on Vadim's shoulder. A minute twitch of his eyes, feeling something...something wrong. Something...he refused to feel. "Aye, it's been growing a bit." His hand sliding off the shoulder, slowly, down the chest which stopped breathing until the hand came to rest on one once massive thigh. "You used to like it long and wild." He smiled, once again refused to acknowledge a nagging irritation, concentrating on only one sensation: of Vadim being back. Almost two years, and he still could not believe it, but his heart was thawing like glacier ice, the full force of emotions beneath the turquoise-shimmering surface, waiting to burst out.

Vadim closed his eyes, tried to escape, but couldn't keep them closed, couldn't trust a world that was entirely hostile or wrong or unfamiliar. Alien. Finally connected the facts. "How...did you do it? How did you convince them?"

Again something didn't feel quite right for Dan, but he could not bear to dwell on it. Of course, it made sense Vadim was distant. Almost two years and the Lubyanka....

"Money, bribes, but mostly diplomatic bitchfighting." He grinned when the Baroness let out a small cough in the front seat.

Vadim's eyes were immediately on the woman ambassador and another wave of dread hit him. Wasn't there any way to get out of this car? "I'm not sure I understand," he carefully put together, concentrating on the conversation, trying to find words, and most of all thoughts, but his mind felt empty and desolate.

“It’s quite simple.” Dan’s hand still resting on Vadim’s thigh, connected-connecting. “We know there was too much opposition against the KGB from inside the Soviet Union, and the KGB was too weakened to push through an execution based on insufficient evidence and a confession signed under...duress.” Dan just couldn’t say it. Not that word, not ‘torture’. “So, we gathered the funds to...” he shrugged, “ach well, you could say ‘persuade’ the fuckers. The UK had you long cleared by then and offered asylum, all we needed to do was discuss the conditions of your release.” Haggling the price, offer and counter-offer, refusal and hard-arsed fights. The Baroness and her contacts had had a field day.

“I’m cleared.”

“Yes, you are.” Dan nodded and smiled.

That was good. He wouldn’t be hunted anymore. He could rest. Vadim was nodding to himself at that thought. Cleared. Not guilty. Well, guilty, but pardoned. “How much?” What’s the value of the rest of me? Idly curious, not bitter, nothing, detached, like talking about a painting’s value he would never be able to afford.

“Under a quarter million.” Dan made a joke out of it, grinning.

“Pound?” The number was vast. Vadim’s mind stumbled over that amount, couldn’t understand how he could possibly be worth so much, how anybody could demand so much money.

“You’re worth every money in the world to me, aye?”

“What rip-off,” murmured Vadim. The interrogator likely had got a piece of that, but above all, the faceless men he’d never seen, that just signed and gave orders. Men who had ordered the interrogator to do what he’d done.

“What do you mean?” Dan leaned forward, crossing the narrow space between them.

Clarify this, please.

Vadim’s face twitched. “Quarter of million pound. That’s...” too much. Too much for what’s left of me. The most expensive beef on the market. More than a thousand pounds per pound of flesh, easily.

“Less than that.” Dan shook his head, leaned back in the seat. “Don’t worry, money means nothing. It’s what money can do that has meaning, and you are here, alive, and free.” His hand stroked Vadim’s thigh, the niggling worry soothed by the limousine’s quiet purr as it navigated the winter landscape towards Helsinki, while the Baroness sat quietly in the front, studying some papers.

Vadim shuddered, remembered the interrogator who'd sneer at him, who'd tell him what a disappointment he was, and what a waste of breath. Just creeping darkness inside, crawling, and coiling, and Vadim wanted nothing but to escape that thought, but he couldn't sleep, couldn't rest. He stared outside into the snow, the calm landscape seemed like a good place to be, nothing but darkness and snow. No people. No expectations.

Dan fell silent, just watching Vadim. Looking, always looking and touching. Moving closer until his thigh touched the other's, his hand still on skin-warmed cloth, and his shoulder against Vadim's. He didn't know what he wanted, if it was touch, kiss, taste, as much as sex, but he knew it was reassurance that kept him close. That, and the vast amount of emotions that began to force their way to the surface. He was quiet for a long time, until he murmured, "I never stopped loving you."

But I did. The thought hit Vadim, and he closed his eyes again. He just didn't feel anything, but he remembered what it had been like to feel, and that, now, was the worst torture. Guilt and loss and utter numbness covered everything in oppressive silence. He nodded, not wanting to speak, unable to either answer as expected, or feel as expected.

Dan said nothing, once again, just smiled. Giving space, and giving time. The once impatient youth had turned into the man who could outwait the Afghan mountains. If he had to, and if it was worth it.

The rest of the drive took place in silence except for the hum of the engine, until the car began to slow down, close to a large building with many lights.

"We are here," the Baroness craned her head, nodding. "Just a small gathering of friends, who have all helped to get you out, Major. They would like to shake your hand and welcome you to Britain."

"Yes, of course." Obligation. Duty. Vadim would do as ordered, do what she wanted, just couldn't resist anything now, not even raise objections.

The gates opened and Vadim saw the flags and big cars, and that was the embassy, then. British flag. He left the car, stood there, looked at her, and then at Dan for clues. Expected to be ordered to change, make himself presentable, felt more insecurity when he thought of all these people. Her friends. Presenting to them what was left of Major Krasnorada. What an anticlimax, what disappointment.

Dan stepped close. “Come with me?” Odd, to ask this as a question, but he felt somehow insecure around Vadim. *This* Vadim. The thin man with blond stubble in his face and shorn head. Smelling of mothballs and dressed in a loose army coat and scuffed boots.

Dan’s voice suddenly broke again, and he had to clear his throat, glancing at the Baroness, who thankfully jumped into the awkward gap. “Would you like to refresh yourself, Major?” She smiled, a gloved hand and fur-coated arm pointed towards the embassy, brightly lit, the staff waiting. “There are comfortable facilities here.”

Vadim looked towards the building and nodded. “Of course.” Confirming an order. Refresh. Shave. Shower. Change? ‘Major’ sounded wrong. Like she called him ‘Prince’ or something else that wasn’t part of him. He had no idea why, was it mockery, he couldn’t decide, and didn’t have the strength to ponder it.

He moved ahead, kept his gaze lowered, followed Dan who led the way towards the ‘facilities’—and the whole place reeked money, and class, and prestige, and status. He felt lost, displaced, wrong, and felt another wave of nausea and fear. Felt like an impostor, like he deserved nothing of it, like he was a complete alien and somehow people fooled themselves about him.

The bathroom held clothes and there was a shower and shaving kit, a far cry from two days ago in prison, being told to ‘clean up’. He needed incredible amounts of concentration to shave, avoided his own eyes in the mirror. He looked positively horrible, scared, haunted, deathly pale. Not even a shadow of himself. He looked like his own corpse.

* * *

Dan was waiting outside, had changed into a suit. Even though he still didn’t like these things, he’d become part of the machinery and accepted the material necessities. Looking at the Baroness when she came towards him. “What do you think, Ma’am?” He couldn’t help it. Insecurity coiling in his guts, while his heart was about to overflow with emotions that had dug their way to the surface.

She looked up at him, considering, smiling in the end and patting his arm. “Give him time. This man has just suffered through almost two years of

imprisonment...and much, much worse. Give him time, Dan. Time and space. As we have talked about.”

“I know, but...but it’s hard.”

She nodded, “I understand, but right now you are the strong one, so it is *you* who has to take control of yourself to make it easy on him.”

“I will. I’ll do anything, but Vadim is completely distant. It’s as if he didn’t even recognise me. I feel like treading on thin ice around a stranger, while the real Vadim, the man I know and love, is lurking somewhere inside.”

“Perhaps it is so.” She smiled a little. “I have arranged for a very good psychiatrist to meet him. He specialises in such cases and has worked with the British Legion and PTSD sufferers. He is, in fact, a medical Officer in the Forces. I hope he will be able to help with whatever psychological effects Major Krasnorada suffers from.” She patted Dan’s arm once more. “In the meantime, give him space and time, the love won’t vanish suddenly, or will it?”

“No,” Dan shook his head, violently, “it won’t. No chance. Not now and not ever.”

“Well, then,” she smiled, “in that case, I shall see both of you at the dinner table.”

She left him standing, and he watched her leave. Deep in thoughts and waiting for Vadim.

* * *

Vadim gave himself the most superficial glance in the mirror as he closed the last button. He looked like jailbait. Only the tattoos missing. Opening the door when all he wanted was to return to the shower and let the hot water run over him. Friends. Meet. Presentation. No way to run, no escape. Just get through it, on the other side, somehow.

He opened the door, saw Dan look up, smiling—look right at him and Vadim couldn’t read the expression on the other’s face. Shock? Irritation? He closed the door behind him and turned. “I’m ready,” he said, to say anything, just to get through it, do the motions as expected.

It was just a small gathering—middle aged and old people in expensive clothes, relaxed and comfortable, still with an edge of...distance, or something

else...and they looked at him with that same mix of expectation and was it hunger? Disdain for the homeless beggar who owed them so much.

Vadim wanted to turn and run away, allowed people to shake his hands, felt close to bolting every time somebody came towards him, smiling, introducing names and faces his mind just couldn't process. All the same, one whirl of expectations and coded messages, he didn't belong here, it all felt wrong, out of place, like he'd stepped from the audience onto the stage while a play was in progress and everybody played along as if that was part of the script.

He could only nod and say words like "Thanks," and "me, too," and "nice meeting you," and hoped it would be alright and he didn't disappoint, didn't invite mockery or shame. Looking at the Ambassador every now and then who was gracious and steered the conversation along lines and rules Vadim didn't understand but he guessed she made sure everything was under control.

Dan was there, too, at his shoulder, reaching out to touch his arm, his back, a touch that seemed awkward as well, and full of something that burnt like acid. Vadim remembered sex, but it seemed far away, like he somehow shared the memory of a different body, and kissing or holding was a bizarre thought after...

You're a predator, nothing else. You are incapable of any gentle emotion. For you, it's breaking and taking, or being broken and being taken. You do not understand anything else but brutality, and thus the only thing you can do is brutalise and being brutalised...

...and was he looking forward to living in Britain, asked somebody, and Vadim blinked, losing something vital for a moment, and nodded, shook his head, said "forgive me" and moved away, turned, saw Dan follow and didn't want him to be close because...

...you are not human. You're deluding yourself, but you are not human and have no right to the company of humans because you are nothing but an animal on the prowl, rabid, and awaiting to be shot like you deserve...

...Dan looked at him with that hope and...whatever it was, but it made everything worse, because he just. Couldn't feel.

* * *

Dan had carried the bags to the taxi, the suite had been booked. Vadim only signed the paper, wrote his first name in Cyrillic, then stopped, paused, crossed the name out, then wrote it in Latin. English transcription. Received the keys and then up to the suite, while Dan didn't talk much, just smiled at him, lingering as if waiting for something, but Vadim didn't have an answer. He wanted to rest, sleep, just escape.

The suite offered every comfort—it was huge, there was a lot of space, two bedrooms, a shared area. Far more space than Vadim was used to, he chose the first bedroom, same size as the other. Dan didn't bring it up, just put his bag into the other room and told him if he needed anything...Vadim again couldn't read the tone or expression, thanked him, glad to have escaped all the people and all the scrutiny, and that without screaming or collapsing. He felt he couldn't trust himself or his reactions anymore.

He took another shower, then went to bed, kept a light burning on the nightstand, heard the toilet flush a little later and Dan's footsteps outside. Vadim stared at the door, expected it to open, expected the guards to come back and beat him up and there was another wave of fear.

When the fear subsided, there was only. Emptiness. Worse. He felt like they had scraped him clean inside, reached inside and had removed all the tissue that kept him together. He had been moving, felt like lead and mud, brittle and heavy, and didn't know where to go.

It hurt to wait here and know about the other, hear him, even, and feel the one thing he hadn't been prepared to feel. Emptiness. He knew in theory what to feel and maybe even how, but there was nothing. He couldn't even mourn it. Like he had used up all those feelings by just remembering them. He'd seen all those things in Dan's eyes, the hope, the joy to see him, and that was worse than being kicked in the teeth. Couldn't share it. Knew he should, but nothing moved. Felt like he had lost both legs and tried to walk in his sleep.

They were strangers now. To return just to realize that. Twenty-two months. They had gone through so much, and these twenty-two months had unmade him. And he couldn't just pretend to enjoy the kindness or the generosity. They scared him, like walking into another prison, lifelong obligation he was expected to feel. Expected to succeed. As always. Somebody told him what was expected, and he had to succeed.

Couldn't. Couldn't look at Dan, couldn't meet his eyes, and felt like he was dead. At least, if he had been, Dan would just mourn him and get on with life. If the KGB had been merciful. If. When. Had been. Could have been. Vadim couldn't rest, got dressed again in the old clothes and the coat, only to take in the cold outside and sober up his mind.

Instead, the night air crept in. He felt like bronze, metal, a statue. Empty. He began walking, tried to get back into whatever it was that was him by walking. He was on the next road, three hours later, when he realized he was cold and he had no idea where he was heading. Didn't even think about turning back.

Dan was there, somewhere. Gone.

He headed on, trudged along a road, until, in the early morning, a truck moved closer. The driver stopped, offered him a lift. Vadim didn't speak a word of Finnish, didn't try Russian, didn't try English, gave him a grateful nod without feeling gratitude. Got off the truck just before the Swedish border. No papers.

Crossed the borders out in the forest, cold and desolate, snow blue in the moonlight, shadows darker blue. Found another truck, hitched another ride.

They were friendly people, those truckers. They listened to late night radio, offered him something to eat. He didn't speak Swedish, either.

He walked off into the forest at one of gas stations, followed a dirt road as he crossed it.

He was very cold by then, welcomed the pain in his fingers and toes, told him there was still something. Something basic. On the outside. Was very tired and very cold and thought about spring and whether they would ever find him.

Stumbled across some low fence, got up again, saw a frozen lake in the distance, dark blue ice, saw, nestled against the dark trees, a bungalow. Survival. It didn't take much to open the door. The frame splintered in the cold, the only sound apart from his chattering teeth. Small place. He brought snow in, it was no warmer inside. Deserted. A couch. TV. Small kitchen. Small bedroom. Somebody's hideaway, a weekend dacha. He closed the door again, leaned an umbrella stand against it.

Cold. Cold. Found the light switch. Nothing. Found the main fuse, switched it. Started the heating. Was cold. The bed. Staggering towards the bed, too cold to fall asleep, too tired to stay awake.

Awoke scared.

Undressed only then, checked out the place. He could leave. Made sure he could leave. The building was wood, lost heat faster than a cooling corpse. Found the gas stove, made tea, sitting in somebody else's tiny kitchen, slumped on the bench, drank from somebody else's chipped mug. Saw the mugs hanging from a wooden rack. Mickey Mouse. Roses. A family. Slept some more, awoke scared and weak with hunger. Found rice, cooked rice. Tinned tuna. Ate both with his fingers. Slept.

Place wouldn't get properly warm. Better than the cell.

No, don't remember.

Slept again, slept as long as he could, lay in somebody else's bed and stared at the ceiling. Wanted vodka. Wanted anything, anything but what he had. If he couldn't be human, at least he could be an animal, concerned only with shelter, food, and sleep.

1990—Helsinki, 24th-25th December

"I wanna...wanna shpeak to the Baronesh. Ish Dan. Dan McFadyen."

Added, remembering her world knew manners, "Please. I know ish Chrishmas, but ish important."

A miracle, they seemed to get her. Perhaps his name carried a meaning he was not aware of at this moment in time. Finally hearing the click of the phone.

"Ma'am?" Before she acknowledged the call.

"Yes? Dan, why do you call?" Her voice as pristine as ever, familiar sounds, stability. Unlike the vodka, which only offered him tears. Too much like the Russian.

"Do you...do you need shomeone to guard you? Shomewhere bad? Dangerous? I need to get out of here." He tried to stop slurring his words, to get his act together, but the empty bottle on the floor too much of a foe to conquer.

"Dan, why do you ask?" Slightly alarmed her voice, but he failed to notice. Failed to answer, in fact, held the phone, stared at the wall.

He'd never felt so empty in all his life. Alone. Even emptier than death had been.

“Dan?” A minute had passed, her voice became urgent. “Dan, speak to me. What is wrong?”

His vision returned in increments. Wall, to table, to floor, to bottle, to hand. “He’s gone.” Empty, dejected.

“Who? What do you mean? Dan, you have to explain this to me.” He clung to her voice, the unwavering constant. He’d had just a few hours. Hopes and wishes, all of them had come true. Almost two years of fighting, never resigning. Then at last, at long last. How Vadim had stepped out of the car. Snow breaking-sliding beneath his boots.

He’d never forgotten the eyes. Pale. Ice. Sometimes dark as a frozen lake, beckoning closer, daring to cross the thin surface. And he’d always accepted the challenge.

“He’s gone.”

She should understand. There was only one, just one who could have come—and gone.

“Dan?” Her voice again, he’d almost forgotten the line was still open. “Dan, I send you my driver. You just wait there. He will pick you up in fifteen minutes.”

So she knew.

“Aye, Ma’am.”

A click, and the line went dead. He put the phone down, stared at his calloused hand. The good one.

Lapushka.

Merry fucking Christmas, Dan.

Perhaps it was the vodka that made him cry.

1990—Helsinki, 25th December. Christmas Day.

The world did not look any better on Christmas day morning. Dan woke curled up on the couch in one of the visitor rooms in the embassy, and someone had placed a blanket over him. A crystal carafe with water and a fine glass stood on a mahogany table beside him on an inlaid tray, together with a packet of tablets that looked like alka seltzer and aspirin.

Dan tried to sit up, groaned, his head was pounding like a whorehouse on a Saturday night. Clutching his forehead, he managed to get vertical, stabilising himself for a moment. Peered at the tablets, didn't give a damn what they were as long as they provided some relief.

He was gone.

Those three words hammering through his mind. Worse than the headache, more debilitating than any hangover. Dan reached for water and pills, popped a handful, washed them down with the water. He wiped his hand across his face, tried to brush away a moment of acute embarrassment, remembering tears, crying in front of her, he had been unable to stop it. Shit. Couldn't be helped. Pushed the memory aside.

Gone.

He closed his eyes, listened to the pounding in his head, at least it told him he was alive. Everything else empty, numb and terrifyingly lost. He'd stepped across the threshold of pain, even Vadim's hour of execution and the bitch's blackmail seemed to pale. He hadn't learned how to cope with such hurt and its magnitude was overwhelming. So he shut off, forced everything down, and locked away any feeling. Better to be dead inside.

Empty.

Dan was sitting with his head in his hands, blanket half thrown onto the floor, when a knock on the door disturbed his abject misery. The door opened after a moment, he could hear heels clicking across the parquet, coming closer, until they stopped right in front of him. He knew who it was before he even looked up.

"I believe you could do with a strong coffee." Baroness de Vilde sounded just as ever. Nothing seemed to perturb the precise consonants and elongated vowels.

Dan took the bone china cup from her hands, tried to smile his thanks, failed, gave up pitifully. Too empty. "Thanks, Ma'am."

Gone. Vadim was gone.

The coffee was black, strong and overly sweet, just as he liked it. Funny how this upper-class lady had turned into the closest to a friend he had ever had. He drank the first few sips in silence, while she pulled one of the lounge chairs close. Sat down and watched him patiently. As ever pristine and elegantly dressed. Impossible to imagine her with her feathers ruffled.

Dan looked at her; the scruffy, worn-out soldier with fucked-up body—and the grey-haired lady, epitome of British peerage and perfection. His gaze transfixed on her hair, as stiffly coiffed as always, wearing the grey helmet of superiority with inimitable style. The corner of his mouth twitched, but then he remembered seeing her once in disarray. He'd never found out what she had been shouting before his body succumbed to agony and unconsciousness.

She met his gaze with unwavering calm. "Dan, are you still adamant to be put to work in the most dangerous place I can find?"

He took his time, waited until the mortar attack in his head subsided, before carefully nodding.

Manicured hands folded in her lap, she nodded, a simple gesture. "I thought you would." She smiled briefly, tinged with an odd melancholy. "I have never known you to waver once you have made a decision. However, I do feel I have to enquire about the wisdom of your decision."

"I can't Ma'am." He tried to shake his head, aborted the movement when a wave of nausea rolled over him.

"You can't what, Dan? Please explain."

"I can't stay here, can't go on. I tried to explain last night but I guess I was too drunk." Dan dropped his aching head into his hands, staring straight ahead onto the floor, while she waited, patiently.

"Ma'am," Lifting his head gingerly after a long silence, "I can't even explain what is happening inside of me. Don't know if there is more hurt or pain, or fear, or anger, or if there is simply absolutely nothing."

She still just listened, her intelligent eyes resting with a gentle expression on Dan's weary appearance.

"I guess...there is just nothing. Nothing at all." Dan's gaze slid off her face, until it dropped onto the ring in her lap. The engagement ring. Love lost, never found. Perhaps she would understand? "I can't go on. I haven't got the strength anymore." He murmured, never lifting his eyes. "Not right now."

She nodded gently, leaning forward to place her finely manicured hand onto his own that had been lying forlorn on his knee. This time he turned his hand and simply took hers. Holding those elegant fingers in his own calloused ones, and taking strength from the touch.

“I could search for him for you, I would find him.” She said very quietly after a long while, but he knew from her voice she was as aware of his answer as he was.

“No. Please don’t.” Dan finally lifted his head, still holding her hand, just for a little while longer. “I can’t. I can’t do this again. I just can’t.” The sense of utter defeat permeated his being: body and mind, and every thought he was still capable of.

“I understand.” And he knew she did. Knew from her slight nod, her strangely sad smile, and the way she squeezed his hand before letting go of it. “I have already made some enquiries and I can assure you there are places where your expertise will be more than welcome, and the financial reward is substantial.”

Dan shook his head slightly, carefully. He was not interested in money, could not care less. Just away, away from there, even if it meant leaving the only true friend he had ever had. Yet the prospect of active duty, of living on the edge once more, gave him something other than the empty abyss inside. He felt himself pulled towards a purpose that promised more than just bottles of booze and a sad excuse for an ex soldier who had got fucked over by the world and resented its existence.

“Thank you, Ma’am. I knew I could count on you.” He meant it. Meant more than the words seemed to convey, but she’d understand.

“Loyalty brings forth loyalty in return.” She smiled, alluding to a day, almost three years ago.

“I was just doing my job, Ma’am,” Dan replied, his standard answer. Her nod being the equally standard reply—they both knew, a wordless understanding.

He emptied the coffee, ignored the churning in his bowels and the creeping sickness that accompanied the hangover.

“When are you looking to relocate, Dan?” Returning to the focus of their conversation, she held out her hand for the empty cup.

He handed it to her, did not hesitate a moment with his answer. “As soon as possible. I cannot bear to be here any longer.”

“Yes, I understand,” and once again he knew she did. “I will arrange for you to be on a plane before the New Year.” She stood up, smoothed her skirt. “I was told Iraq is the most dangerous place to be in 1990.” Adding, quietly, “If this is what you want.”

“Aye, Ma’am. It is where I need to be.”

She nodded, her expression inscrutable as she turned, but stopped, slowly retraced her steps and for a moment her carefully guarded features changed into the concerned face of a friend

“Please, don’t get yourself killed, Dan.”

He looked up and nodded, a silent promise. No suicidal missions born out of desperation.

If he could help it.

1990—Sweden, 27th December

A bright light in his eyes. Vadim awoke startled, squinting against the light that made him remember harsh words and a faceless silhouette, the interrogation room. He rolled to the side, fell onto his knees, heard somebody speak, startled, moved away. He was breathing hard, body forced into a reaction it hardly remembered how to perform.

He was cold, cold and hungry and felt like a bear prodded from the cave. Not awake, couldn’t react while the stress pounded in his ears. Felt helpless. His hands were untied. He could move, could stretch, could stand up.

Somebody said something, the torch was lowered, and he saw two men stand in his camp, looking around with obvious distaste. It was cold inside, cold enough for their breath to mist in the room. Uniforms. Young, fresh faces.

One said something. He didn’t understand, just looked at him, the one with the torch. The question was repeated, the one behind the first one—they must be police, thought Vadim—said something and unbuttoned the leather holster, all obvious for him. Vadim knew that language. The other cop asked something, then took handcuffs from his belt. He was taken into custody. Again. Vadim looked at the gun, saw how the cop saw that glance and pulled the weapon. Taking no risks.

He stood up, slowly, the one with the torch stepped up, indicated for him to turn around, Vadim did, a hand between his shoulder blades pushed him to the wall, insistent. They took his wrists and closed the cool metal around them. He was patted down, the coat, the trousers, they even checked the boots and his collar.

Paused in between, and Vadim detected disgust. Not smelling too good. No emotion.

He was marched outside, through the blue snow. The lake glistened with ice. He was hungry. Hungry and cold.

They made him get into a car. It was warm. The radio was on. An English song. It sounded fast. ‘Cold on a mission so fall on back. Let ‘em know you’re too much. And this is a beat uh you can’t touch’.

Repetitive. But those were words he understood. He leaned against the door and went back to half-sleep, not giving a fuck about anything. He just didn’t have the strength even to wonder. He assumed they’d take him deeper into the forest and shoot him there.

The car stopped on a cobbled market place. A huge Christmas tree right in the middle. They made him get out, brought him inside a warm, brightly lit building.

He squinted, smelled coffee, saw a few cops look up. The two men who had brought him in said something, jokingly, brought him through. One made a phone call, the other sat him down on a wooden bench and took the cuffs off. Offered him a plastic cup with coffee, almost in an afterthought. Vadim took it, warmed his hands, realized from the way the liquid burned just how cold he was. Looked up.

The cop spoke to him again. He didn’t understand the language. Not that he wanted to. He didn’t care. They could shoot him already. The cop shook his head, asked something over his shoulder, the other policeman was still speaking on the phone, and answered. He tried a weak smile, but Vadim could see he was slightly flustered. Tried a different language. Nothing. Vadim looked up, then dropped his gaze. It took too much concentration. He didn’t care.

They marched him into a cell and there was a flutter of panic at the tiles and the bunk that was bolted to the wall and the floor. Vadim didn’t like the look of the tiles. He breathed hard, felt his body react, knew it made no difference. Knew it made no difference if he was afraid or not. No power. They could make him yield. All he did was invite pain.

The cop looked at him, and Vadim saw something strange in the man’s face. He was in his early twenties, blonde hair, almost translucent hair and lashes. Vadim shook his head. “Nyet.” The closest he could get to asking for mercy.

The policeman shouted something down the corridor, and two more cops arrived. Vadim thought they would force him in, beat him into submission. So much for daring to resist. He stepped in, tried to undo the damage. Hoped they'd see he complied.

But they just stood around him, as if regarding an exotic animal hauled in from the forest. One had a small book and leaved through it, tried out the sounds in there before speaking.

"You...Russian?" In Russian. Vadim looked up, saw the strange little parade of uniformed men trying to talk to him. Couldn't quite get why. Why they bothered. He nodded.

Somebody said something, and one of the cops bolted towards the door. Vadim looked after him. Wished they would shut the door and forget about him.

They didn't. Eventually, a bearded man with glasses showed up, accompanied by the cop who had left. Vadim suspected they were bored out of their skulls that they lingered around. This place did seem very peaceful.

"Good evening," said the man, in Russian. Hardly an accent. "I'm the local Russian teacher."

Vadim nodded.

"I understand you are Russian?"

You don't understand, thought Vadim. He sat down on the bunk.

"These policemen need to take your personal details," said the teacher, and he was being polite.

Name, rank, number.

The teacher looked confused, then seemed surprised, unpleasantly surprised. Said something to the cops, who seemed to cool towards him. Something like: He is a soldier.

"Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada?"

Vadim nodded.

"What are you doing here? Did you run away? Are you a convict?" He talked to the cops again, nodded. "Listen, Vadim. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Vadim looked up. "Tired," he said.

Hungry, too. He wanted to lie down and sleep.

“You should wash and have new clothes,” said the teacher. “They also want to have the doctor have a look at you. Come. You can sleep later.” Talking as if to a child.

Vadim thought doing what he was told was easier than resisting. They brought him to another tiled room, and again that tightness in his chest, the thought it would be easy to wash blood away here. Took off his coat, undressed. He couldn’t remember when he had been naked the last time. Had been much too cold. Had needed all the blankets and the mattress to insulate.

The cop said something as Vadim pulled the jumper over his head. Dropped it. Didn’t have enough focus to fold it. He didn’t think they’d allow him to keep the clothes. The teacher nodded, then looked at him. “He says he might have something that fits, but only barely.” Vadim took the shirt off as well, bowed down to open the boots, let his body do this. It remembered how to do this. Took less effort. Don’t think.

Pulled down his trousers, his pants. He was thin he realized as he opened the belt. The cop gave him some kind of shower gel, started the water for him. Both left the room. Vadim stood under the hot water and let it run down his body. Felt something creep to the surface, something he didn’t want. Forced himself to wash, noticed the grime under his fingernails, the stickiness on his body. Washed away. He should make use of the water while it lasted.

It was much warmer than he had expected, and he began to sweat, felt his heart pound. Felt a shadow of something large move under the surface. Water. Heat.

As nobody came to summon him, he eventually stopped. Saw his toes, which looked half frozen. Fingers swollen and discoloured. The wrists. Raw. Swollen. The cold had been pretty bad.

Took the towel. It smelled fresh. Dried himself. Kept the damp towel in front of his body. Remembered he loved the shower. Loved water. Somebody knocked on the door. That courtesy was ridiculous. Vadim had no strength to laugh.

The Russian teacher again, and the cop. The latter said something, nodding approval. The teacher seemed to wonder whether to translate, then let it be. They gave him pants and trousers, all too wide, but the length was right, the jeans comfortable, frayed, soft and firm. A jumper, knitted, colourful. Vadim was suddenly warm. He even sweated. Socks. Military surplus. They brought him back

into the cell and there was another man. The doctor, the teacher explained. The whole village bourgeoisie was there. Vadim did not resist, was prodded, the man checked on his toes and fingers—he'd keep them, the Russian teacher said, but it was damned close.

Then a sharp intake of breath as the doctor was placing the stethoscope on his back. Said something.

The teacher cleared his throat. Said the word. Pizda. Cunt.

They talked amongst themselves, then the teacher asked: "Were you tortured?"

Vadim shrugged. What did it matter. He waited, breathed as he was told, then the doctor nodded, said something. The teacher smiled. "He says you should be alright, just a bronchitis. Nothing he can do about the rest." They talked, the doctor left. Vadim sat down heavily on his bunk, pulled the jumper back over his body.

Pizda. The KGB had liked that. He shuddered.

"Are you alright?" asked the teacher.

Vadim didn't look up. Feared he would see the bars at the iron door. Wanted to see nothing.

"You are here for breaking and entering. They thought you were...vandalizing. Then they thought you were a tramp. Well, technically, you are a tramp." The teacher tried to meet his gaze.

Vadim turned his head away. "I don't care about going to prison." As long as they don't hit me. As long as I am not alone. It is so difficult to think when nobody's there. But these people talked an awful lot.

The teacher seemed flustered. "They are getting in touch with the embassy. They should pick you up."

And all for nothing. Vadim nodded. He'd almost frozen to death, he was better off locked away somewhere. Anywhere. Whatever. He was tired, pulled his legs up on the bunk, reached for the folded blanket. Heavy wool. Lay down and turned to face the tiled wall. Felt a shudder run through his body. The memory of being cold. They would come and pick him up. They had broken him, and shown him he could never get up and walk again. Never walk away. He just didn't have the strength. Not a bone left in his body.

He closed his eyes. Sleep. So tired.

* * *

The door opened and the cop came in. He kept checking on him, mostly when Vadim had convinced himself the world consisted of this cell and found a strange consolation in that fact. He could forget about the world outside. There was a toilet, there was food, and he wasn't cold. Heaven was a place without pain.

Vadim knew by now the word people used for this man was his name. Manke. The young guy who had found him. Had handcuffed him. Something about that should trigger something inside, a kind of humour, but Vadim didn't feel it. He glanced up.

Manke leaned against the wall. Keys on his belt.

Easy to attack him, take the keys and escape. The man carried enough things to be able to survive. A gun. Keys. A torch. Radio. This police station had enough to ensure survival. Bash his face in, take the stuff, run away. He could even take him hostage.

And what for?

At least he hadn't brought the teacher this time. Manke talked with hands and feet, and Vadim understood the basics. His Pashto and Dari had never progressed beyond that level.

Manke studied him, then shook his head. "Do you speak English? Maybe a little?"

Vadim looked up, and saw Manke interpreted that as a yes.

"We have a problem," the cop said. "You don't exist." He paused, as if waiting for a reaction, but Vadim merely looked at him. "We got in touch with your people. The Soviet...uhm, Russian embassy. It's all a bit of a mess at the moment. But they never heard of you."

Vadim opened his lips, then shook his head and lowered his gaze. That was it. They had kicked him out for good and forgotten he had ever existed. Worse than a traitor, worse than a deserter, and worse than death. It should hurt, but it didn't. They had wiped their hands off him.

"Now, the boss sent me to ask you your real name."

Torture. Vadim felt his shoulders tense, couldn't breathe for a long moment. He had been a fool to expect that to stop. He was in their hands, they wouldn't let him go like that.

"But it's funny you gave your rank and number." The cop smiled. "Why should you make up a number? That's the part that doesn't fit. I mean, ex-majors that get here for breaking and entering. If you were insane, you'd be the General Secretary. If you wanted to keep a low profile, why give a rank at all?" Manke shook his head again. "You wouldn't want to look like a deserter. No, you are ex-military. And that is where you have the scars from."

Vadim looked up. The reasoning was simple, straightforward, and betrayed much more common sense than he had encountered for ages.

"But we need to confirm your identity. Any pointers?"

"For prison?"

Manke raised his eyebrows, finally hearing him speak. "You did some substantial damage in that place, like breaking the door. We are in touch with the owners, and they should be returning in a week. They are in Sicily, catching some sun." He shook his head. "Granted, it kept you from freezing to death."

"Can't fault me that, huh?"

Manke laughed. "Are you Vadim Krasnorada? Seriously. Is that your name? Are you Russian?"

The question and answers thing almost became a game. There had been times when he would have answered something like "Do I sound like a fucking Ukrainian," but the time for that kind of joke was over. He just looked at the man.

"Okay, I'll call that a 'yes'." Manke nodded. "I will find out who you are, Major. You are not a ghost. People leave tracks."

Spetsnaz don't.

1990—Sweden, 31st December. New Year.

The police station was nearly deserted, apart from Manke. Nobody else in the cells.

In this kind of place, they didn't keep drunks in the cells for long. They were admonished, fined, then they drove them home. This town dealt with crime

by slapping offenders on the wrist, because there was nothing serious to deal with. Vadim realized why he had caused a minor sensation when they caught him. All other offenders seemed to be neighbours that had had a bad day. And were treated exactly like neighbours. He wasn't.

Manke was just measuring coffee powder into a filter. Vadim preferred the smell to the taste, but coffee was always something one could warm the hands on. Paperwork on Manke's desk. Nothing seemed to be connected to him. Missing people reports, yes, but the one he could see was about a teenage girl with braces and a ponytail high up on her head that failed very much to look sassy.

He sat down in front of the desk. The calendar, 31st. December, New Year's Eve in 1990. Everything was falling apart. Had been for years. He shook his head.

"Even though you seem to like it in your cell, I'm a little lonely," said the cop, shut the coffee machine and flicked the switch. It began to make gargling noises. "You mind being company?"

Vadim shrugged. "Do you have food?"

Manke nodded. "Some pizza. Yogurt in the fridge. Uhm. Beef jerky somewhere in the desk."

Vadim nodded. "Will do."

Manke prepped two mugs with tourist motifs with milk and sugar and sat down. Vadim suspected he had got the New Year's shift because he had no family or didn't mind.

"I spent quite a bit of time in the library," said Manke suddenly. "You know, old-fashioned investigation." He reached behind himself and dropped a folder on his desk. Vadim looked up, but didn't touch it. "Not easy. Did you get kicked out because you threatened to kill him?"

"No." Maybe. He could feel the old anger stir again.

"Boris Onishchenko won a silver medal in modern pentathlon, '72 in Munich."

Manke shook his head. "Not exactly Olympic spirit."

"He tried to force it," said Vadim. "Guess coach knew. But we were on fifth position, and...were expected to bring medal." I was desperate to get a medal, too. I wanted all the work to pay off. He shook his head. Strange that those

thoughts were still there. After all those years. One shot at glory, and then disqualified for cheating, sent home.

“Who won gold?”

“British,” said Vadim. Dan’s people. Call that fucking irony.

“That must have hurt.”

“Worse than being shot.”

Manke looked as if he had somehow forgotten to gloat about the fact he had solved the riddle. As if that disgrace, that humiliation was somehow stronger than the intellectual victory. Then again, he didn’t look like he had gloating inside him.

“I wasn’t ready before that,” said Vadim, kept looking at the folder and knew it held photocopies of what Manke had found. The whole sordid story of a bunch of model athletes that had been sent packing because they had acted as if the Olympic spirit was a myth. Winning at all cost. The Olympics, the Cold War, fucking Afghanistan. Victory was expected, punishment for failure imminent. A matter of national pride. “And I never got ready again after that.”

“They could have sent you to Moscow. That’s where you were born.”

Vadim shook his head. “That was it. Last one.”

Manke leaned back, regarded him. “Do you think you could have won?”

Vadim inhaled, thought of what the masseur had said. He could win. Of course. Never impossible, not because of any of his flaws. It was luck, in the end, blind chance. He only regretted he hadn’t killed the cheater. That was a worse regret than not getting a chance to at least try for the medal. He didn’t want to answer that question. It touched too many things. “I’ll never find out.”

Manke got up again and poured steaming coffee into the mugs, put both down in the middle of the desk. “An Olympic athlete. I figured you were some kind of swimmer, but that takes the biscuit.” He gave a laugh that seemed not at all mocking.

“Not that strange. Lots of,” Spetsnaz, “paras are top athletes. Comes with job.” And how they had gloated how easy it was, in the teeth of the Cold War, to send dozens of trained killers into the enemy’s capitals and get a feel for the places. Just in case they had to spearhead the invasion. He remembered the questions by journalists, about his lieutenant rank. They must have assumed he wore that like some kind of honours degree. Krasnorada was too pretty to be evil.

Manke nodded. "I was thinking. Why does the embassy no longer remember you?"

Vadim stared into his coffee. Thought he wanted to return to his cell, or attack this man, take what he could use and be on his way. The only thing that kept him from it was that he had no idea where he should go. It was warm here. He didn't say anything.

"Well. First things first. You're in trouble with the law. I figure I can talk to people, and tell them they stand to gain nothing if they press charges. It's not like you carry a lot of valuables on you. I happen to know the family, it's a small town. If you're willing to make a gesture, help with some work, I figure we could fix this without getting too much law involved. Because you will not come out on top, Vadim."

"Why?"

"The law doesn't like people without states. You're as illegally here as you could be. I guess the embassy doesn't remember you because they just don't want you back. For whatever reason."

"Afganets." Vadim swallowed hot coffee.

"Afghanistan? You're a veteran of that war? Did it do something to your mind? And they threw you on the trash pile, age forty-one, with no help? Just forgot about you?" He shook his head. "Shit. That's nasty even by Soviet standards."

No strength to correct Manke. Close enough. All the other things made matters only too complicated. Didn't have to tell him about the crimes, the cleansing, the despair of the last few years. He had never felt any of those. It was like he had read about them. None of that was him. "Let me go. I will just vanish."

Manke shook his head. "You're not Swedish, but I can't just let you walk out. Without papers, you can't do any legal work. And how would you feed yourself? Begging?"

Vadim inhaled. "Just let me go."

Manke stood, came around his desk, fast movements, much faster than he had moved before. Vadim's knuckles turned white as he moved his head to the side. Minimize damage.

Manke stopped. “What the fuck...did they do to you?” He crouched, seemed to want to reach for Vadim’s hand, but Vadim knew he’d hit him, only to not be touched. Couldn’t stand touch. Rather be hit in the face. “Don’t.”

Manke raised his hands. “Not touching.” He stood up and pulled back for a few steps, sat on the corner of his desk. “I’ll be in touch with the family. I’ll sort this out. My good deed of the week. Fresh air and a little work might be actually good for you, nothing like it to sort your mind out.” He sat back down and looked at the clock on the wall. “And have a good 1991.”

1990—Kuwait, 31st December. New Year.

Dan had climbed into the Herc like a child returning to the womb. Knew and relished the comfort of familiar discomfort. Five hours, now, sitting in a cacophony of engine noise, amidst grey plastic along ceilings and walls, interspersed with various wiring sheathing and the odd bit of masking tape.

Disconcerting for a new recruit, comforting for a disillusioned ex-soldier. He’d been lucky, she’d got him onto the next possible flight out to Baghdad, on the thirty-first of December, with nothing but a payload of passengers. Temporary seating of aluminium framework and red webbing was put in position, running along the outside and down the central spine to form four loose rows. Uncanny resemblance to the inside of a very long Landrover—mega-wheel base. Basic, but functional. The kind of barren environment that soothed the emptiness of Dan’s agonized mind.

His luggage of large bergan and a sports bag with additional necessities like the vitamin pills and extra nutrients he needed for his fucked-up guts, packed on pallets with rope netting stretched over it, at the back, near the rear doors of the plane. Out of sight—out of mind. All he had taken with him was the additional equipment he’d bought in a military surplus and outdoor shop: new shades, boots, socks and survival equipment. He’d left everything else behind, anything connected with his life before Christmas Eve, even the string of lapis lazuli beads. The Baroness had said she’d keep them safe, but he’d told her to bin the trash.

Couldn’t bear the memories, had been tortured by them for nearly two years, had finally signed his confession.

The noise was getting worse the closer they got to the Gulf, or perhaps it was just his imagination. Dan had tried to get some sleep, climbing on piles of cargo and rolling up in his sleeping bag to keep warm, but the thoughts wouldn't let him. He'd squashed up the yellow ear defenders and pushed them inside his ear, nodding to the loadmaster before climbing into his sleeping bag, but even the familiarity of noise and smell, company of younger soldiers and hard-assed mercs, hadn't helped to fight the never ending cycle of questions for which he had no answer. Round and round in a carousel of pain, the why? and the where? and the when? and back to the why? again. It fucking hurt.

He couldn't even throw himself into the next suicide mission. As much as that was against his natural survival instinct, right now it would beat the endless emptiness and numbing pain, but he'd given his word. Bloody clever bitch, that Baroness, she knew him better than he did himself. Wouldn't get himself killed, but hell, he'd get himself at least into trouble, to feel anything at all.

The loadmaster issued orders, seemed it was time to land, a quick piss in the bucket before getting to those makeshift seats, and the plane descended towards Baghdad.

What if enemy missiles hit their target while they were circling down towards the ground? So what. Dan felt nothing. Tough shit. Occupational hazard. He'd be dead, couldn't be deader than right now. Impossible superlative of final measures.

The Herc touched down, vomiting its human load into the desert. British soldiers, some close security and a handful of insane fuckers like himself. Dan grabbed his bergen, strapped it onto his back and snatched the extra bag. Pushed the shades back over his eyes and stepped into the glaring sun that caught in the silver streaks of his hair. An old fucker who was out there to lose himself in the danger.

"Happy fucking New Year, Dan McFadyen."

1991—Sweden, March

Vadim helped with some work when the weather improved. Couldn't do much at first, tired out too fast, sweating in the forest, clearing out trees that would

be dug up in spring, chainsaw, axes, piling the wood up. He worked to not think, with a man and his two cousins, young and very strong.

Seemed Manke had told them his mind was broken, they were careful around him, nobody ever approached from behind or patted him on the shoulder, instead communication was mostly hand signs and short orders in Swedish that Vadim learned to understand. Good food, fresh, much better than what he had eaten. His appetite returned with his strength, still the weakest of the bunch, runt of the litter, and he needed more rest, but it was good to only deal with logs, to see those guys fool around, having fun that was not dark at all, just young people joking and laughing.

Manke came to visit every now and then, they talked in Swedish and Vadim felt this strange hope he could just stay, work in the forest, no people but the men he worked with, no talk, no thought. But several weeks later, the piece of forest was cleared, and there was a small celebration which involved ‘oel’—that was beer—and vodka.

One morning in March, Manke showed up again, in his patrol car, like he had sometimes brought him clothes, probably asking around for jumpers and trousers and boots and underwear, and, small town, had received some used, but sound stuff. “He says you’re a good worker,” said Manke and had a walk around the clearing, breath misting in front of his face, but Spring made its advance known. The air smelled differently. The days grew longer. “And you look much better, too. Putting some muscle back on, eh?” He paused, but Vadim didn’t respond. “Charges dropped. You’re still illegal, or we would just keep you around. Any chance you could apply for political asylum? Learn the language...and just stay.”

“You don’t want that,” said Vadim.

“And why not? We’d find you something to do.”

“It’s not political.”

“What did you do, Vadim?” Manke turned to face him. “I can just taste you’re guilty of something, but you don’t look like a criminal. Just don’t make sense to me, and I’m a cop, I don’t like that.”

“Misconduct. Dishonourable discharge. Conduct unbecoming.”

“Those are pretty words for something that’s less pretty, huh?”

Vadim inhaled. “I can’t remember. It was bad.”

Manke shook his head. “If I let you go...I mean, you could have walked away often enough, but now it’s as official as we can make it. What are you going to do?”

He’d considered that. Crime. He didn’t want to do any of that stuff here, robbing and killing. Options, but he didn’t want to disappoint the cop. He had considered joining one of the big tankers, he’d go further down the coast, find a way to get to the big harbours, Riga, Rotterdam, be just a pair of hands. They might not care about papers. Might end up in the tropics, vanish, nameless like an animal, somewhere. Anywhere. Didn’t have the determination to follow through with that.

Had considered a bullet, but it was too good a feeling to lift logs and stand there in the snowy forest, feeling breath flow freely. As long as he could feel that—as little as it was—he didn’t want to end it. Didn’t have a gun, and didn’t like the idea of cutting or hanging. He wanted to make sure it worked.

Maybe. Maybe that. If that was the final option. There had to be ways to get a gun. Find a remote place, leave even the last people behind, and do it when nobody would miss him. Nobody would find him.

One thing he had to do before he could do that, though. “Can you make phone call for me? Dubai. Baroness de Vilde. She’s British ambassador. Ask her...whether she would see me.” She had to be the only person he could reach and that knew where Dan was. He had to tell him, sorry, but he still didn’t feel, everything was over, there were just no emotions, and he didn’t want pity. Couldn’t bear being touched in any way. Hoped Dan would have a good life and find somebody. He’d deserved better than being walked out on. He had to admit the guilt, before he could steal away.

1991 Chapter XXII—War Junkie

January 1991, Saudi Arabia

Dan had been in the camp for two weeks, sharing accom with the Brits who were stationed in Eastern Saudi Arabia, close to the Persian Gulf. Just like everyone else he was going stir crazy, the waiting for something to happen was getting on all of their nerves.

He wasn't even part of the gang, didn't belong to a unit nor regiment, wasn't a member of the British Forces anymore. Instead he had special permissions and passes and was regarded as the odd one out. Merc. Dog Soldier, or PMC, as they were starting to call the glory hounds. The weird one; the old one; the one where no one knew why he was there, who'd given the clearance and who was behind it all. His employer? Dan never answered, just shrugged and cleaned his weapon. Truth was, he'd be buggered if he himself quite knew why he was there, other than that Maggie had wanted him in the Gulf and that the British High Command for Operation Granby was fully aware of his presence and the reason for it. Which was? He didn't have a fucking clue, just kept his profile low and beasted his body. He could be found in the gym tent every free second, and if he wasn't lifting weights, sparring, or running, he was sometimes seen talking to the older Forces guys. Mostly Sergeants and WOs, rarely an Officer. He still regarded them as poncy wastes of space.

He hung onto his water bottle like an alcoholic to his booze, smoking fags, and shoving mountains of chocolate and anything sweet down his gob, while being eager to get out and do something—anything, as long as it gave an adrenaline kick and got him into the heights of danger and sheer survival that were the only things that could make him feel alive.

A forty-one year old geezer, ancient by Infantry standards, but hell, he'd show them he was insane enough and physically fit for two. Not just buttfucking mad—also motherfucking good at what he was doing. Scarred, reckless, without scruples nor fears. A man who had no emotions left, nothing that could disturb a mission, thus focused on the task unlike anyone else. A tough bastard.

The moment it all blew up, in the early hours of January 17, he was called into HQ and finally briefed by the British Commanding Officer. If the necessity arose, the allied command would use him and a few others for the most sensitive

missions, the ones that were crucial and yet in the current political climate couldn't be executed by official troops.

Dan grinned, nodded, hoping those necessities would arise soon, even uttered an "Aye, Sir, about bloody time." Then spent the day getting his kit ready, waiting for orders. He'd be on stand-by, whenever he was needed.

Dying to survive.

February 1991, the Gulf

Dan was wearing polarised shades, despite the murky light in the makeshift pub or 'bar' as the yanks called the place in the compound. He always wore his shades, no matter when nor where, even at night. The other guys had been taking the piss for the first few days, but he either took no notice, or grinned, or shrugged, or simply delivered an un-pulled punch so close to the piss-taker's nose, the guy would recoil and shut up, knowing a quarter inch closer and he'd be coughing blood into the sand.

Mad as a hatter, a fucked-up nutter, or, as some had begun to call him in the few short weeks he'd been there, a mad dog. 'Mad Dog' Dan. He could live with that. Question was, for how long. Live, that was. He had promised the Baroness he'd stay out of suicide missions, but it was all a matter of definition.

He called them challenges, not death-traps, and that was that.

Dan walked up to the bar, nodding in greeting at some of the guys he'd got to know over the past weeks, and ordered a beer. Or whatever this Budweiser piss was meant to be, which came in pathetically small sized bottles. He turned to face the room and leaned against the bar, always preferring to have a barrier in his back and be less of a target. Old habits died hard, and he'd be damned if he went down in a puddle of booze instead of combat.

Watching the rag-tag of patrons, some of them battle-worn bastards like himself, others fresh-faced soldiers, but mostly guys who'd seen their fair bit of combat. A multi-national crowd of those lucky enough to get enough time off and permission to get themselves a non-alcoholic drink. Except for the PMCs who didn't wear anyone's flag, they drenched their thirst with the measly excuses of booze that were available, since the place had special permission from the

government. The guys with bottles were the mercs, who, like him, were as hooked on the adrenaline thrill, out of Infantry, Marines, Para or Special Forces. He wasn't sure for whom they worked, similar to himself, but he sure as hell didn't give a fuck anyway.

Guzzling down some of the foul lager, he looked around the room. Still hadn't had a chance to let off steam, stuck on the ground while tension grew, coiling in the pit of his stomach, with every day of air strikes and nothing noteworthy to do. Couldn't call the jobs 'missions' they sent him out to, didn't deserve the terminology; just tasks, partly under—mostly friendly—fire, never sufficient excitement. Never enough to sleep nor to finish the numbness with a spark of something that resembled feeling alive. He needed action. Ground action, right there in the middle of things. Dan knew the Americans had done the recce, but Operation Desert Sabre was still waiting in the wings.

Waiting...for something-anything that cut through this goddamned morass of an utter absence of feeling.

Another gulp of the cold bear's piss that labelled itself 'beer', before lighting another fag, continuing to watch the patrons. He nodded to a guy he'd bunked with, exchanged a few words, 'mate' here and 'yeah' there and an 'aye' and 'fucking hot' on top of it, before he settled back to smoking. Trying to dispel the tension, but not finding any damned outlet willing to take the full force of the strain. Wankers.

The door opened, but Dan didn't bother looking up. Would be just another git, considering himself lucky to have got out of the boredom behind the lines, either waiting impatiently for the combat stress right in the middle of the battlefield—or with shit in their pants. He guzzled his Bud, smoked his cigarette and minding his own business, leaning against the bar. Tense as a coiled spring, but seemingly slouching.

The newcomer marched up to the bar, Dan caught the motion from the corner of his eyes, but the shades were hiding most of the guy. Made out the attire.

Yank. Standing right beside Dan, too close, into his personal space, and demanding a large coke with a jarhead's unmistakable drawl. Dan knew what kind of arsewipe the moment the fuckwit opened his over-confident gob. He could read the fucktard like an open book and tension increased a notch. The yank's elbow almost touched Dan's arm, but he didn't budge, just smoked his cig and took

another swig from his beer. Not much bothered him these days, except for that damned boredom.

“Hey, buddy, what the fuck are all those fucking faggots doing in here?” The guy sneered to the bartender, his voice cutting through the general noise of the jam-packed place.

The bartender shrugged, “what faggots?” wiping a glass, while Dan listened. Fingers tensing around the bottle. His head lowered, eyes shielded behind the shades.

“Brits.” The yank boasted. “They’re all faggots.” He smirked, knocking back the coke, demanding another.

The atmosphere in the place changed, sudden aggression as several of the British soldiers pushed their chairs away, standing up.

Dan grinned to himself, slowly raised his head and pushed his arm against the idiot’s elbow. Too close quarters, but exactly what he needed. Perfect. Just perfect, he hoped that arsewipe would bite.

“You got a problem with fags, yank? I’m a fucking fag. Got a problem with me?” Dan bared his teeth in a dirty grin. “Not just a Brit, but a full-blown shitstabbing fag.” He didn’t bother pushing the shades off his eyes. “Want me to spell it out for you, dickhead? Got. A. Problem. With. A. Fucking. Fag. You. Fucking. Arsewipe?” He put the bottle down on the bar and turned to face the braggart.

The whole place fell silent.

“You want to get your teeth kicked in, asshole?” The yank’s head had turned an interesting shade of purple. “I suggest you fuck off, back into your camp.”

Seemed he hadn’t swallowed the bait, yet. No reaction to the ‘faggot’. “What, sissy, want me to sashay off? Frightened?” Dan’s smirk showed teeth, each and every one of them. Noticed the other Brits from the corner of his eyes, even recognised one or two of the soldiers. They stood, waiting, ready, but fuck, he didn’t want their intervention.

He pulled the shades off, neatly folded them, still grinning into the yank’s face, while stepping closer. “Got a mouth bigger than your courage? Or dying to get that mouth of yours stuffed with a juicy cock?” Stashing the shades in his shirt

pocket, he wiggled his hips in a lewd gesture, licking his lips exaggeratedly before making smacking kissing noises.

The yank's head had grown redder, close to exploding, shaking his fists. "I warned you, dickhead, you're getting it."

"Go on, then, or are you just a big girl's blouse?" Dan suddenly shoved his palms hard against the braggart's chest, watched him stumble backwards. "You want to mouth off, or are you frightened all of a sudden? Worried the faggot could get your pretty hair out of order, or you might break a nail?"

He didn't get another push in, when the yank finally got the message the faggot really was a faggot and threw the first punch, so angry he was almost foaming at the mouth. Angry and bloody careless, piece of cake for Dan to dodge the straightforward right fist. "Ooohhhh," Dan squealed in a high-pitched voice, "the big brute's getting angry, eh?"

"I'll fucking kill you!" The yank threw another punch, lower, but Dan blocked the fist, delivered one of his own, only clipped the bastard, who laughed, streetwise enough to retaliate with two hits in rapid succession. Hitting Dan this time, and he felt pain exploding behind his eye, on his chin and jaw. Yes, fucking yes! That was what he wanted, adrenaline, anger, pain, and a whole fucking lot more. Only now starting to feel alive.

"Oh dear, that almost hurt..." grinning, Dan shook the hits off, ignoring the split eyebrow and the fact he'd felt teeth rattle in his mouth. "Guess I've got to get to business, now." He pulled back, delivered a no-holds barred punch into the yank's guts. Nice, low, and the man doubled over with a grunt, holding his middle, unable to breathe.

Dan grabbed his shirt, hauled him close and up, pulling the guy into a head butt that smashed the nose, grinning with satisfaction at the scream. "Time to suck my cock, fucker." He snarled, finishing the yank off with a right elbow to the side of his head. Legs giving up, the man crumbled to the floor, stopped in mid-motion when Dan took hold of the collar, keeping the yank's bleeding nose at crotch level, thrusting his hips once, twice, into the man's face, before finally dropping him like a sack of potatoes.

"Well, that was that." He turned, wiped his hands, as if nothing had happened, despite the other Americans in the joint but the Brits were in the majority. Searching for his beer bottle on the bar while fishing for the obligatory

shades and ignoring the stunned silence. Dan was about to order another Bud, when he suddenly had two bottles shoved into his hands. One right, one left, and hands clapping his shoulders, with laughter of “well done, mate,” and “you’re fucking crazy.”

Dan just grinned and shook his head, adjusting the shades. He said nothing before guzzling down half of one of the beers, hardly taking notice of his opponent who was helped up by some others.

“Fucking great joke, mate, the ‘faggot’ thing.” One of the Brits laughed.

“Not a joke.”

“What?” The guy was still laughing. “Taking the piss, aren’t you.”

“Nope.” Dan smirked, proceeded to finish the first of his beers.

“So you really are a faggot?” Another guy piped up from behind Dan’s shoulder.

“Abso-fucking-lutely right.” Dan added after he’d wiped his lips with the back of his hand, turning round so the bar was once again in his back. Still grinning, this time he pulled his lips away from his teeth. “Got a problem with that?”

Silence all around him, despite the dark shades in the already murky place, he could read what was going on behind some of the faces. Disgust, anger, surprise, amusement, and most of all the rather fresh memory of the way he’d just turned the yank braggart into a simpering puppy with its proverbial between its legs.

“You got two options, guys.” Dan lifted his chin, back slightly arched, both hands on the bar counter. Seemingly relaxed, but he’d be off like a bullet within less than a second. “You can either drink a beer with that aging faggot and forget about the fact I shag blokes, because the small matter of who or what I fancy has not a fucking thing to do with the rest of me and most of all my job, or you can get yourselves ready for a fight because if you want to show that aging faggot you’re ten times more of a man than that boasting yank with the broken nose, you’ll find yourself being used as a mop with which I’m wiping the floor.” A feral grin flashed across Dan’s face, “Aye, damn, I almost forget the third option, you just ignore everything and simply avoid the aging faggot and pretend I don’t exist. What’s it gonna be, mates?”

The silence continued, until one of the guys, a Jock like Dan, started to laugh his head off, taking a step forward and thumping Dan on the shoulder.

“You’re fucking priceless, haven’t laughed so hard since Saddam got his knickers

in a twist. At least you're a real Scotsman and that braggart's got some dandruff in the teeth." Calling out to the barman in the broadest Glaswegian accent, "get that man his beer!"

This broke the ice, and the ensuing commotion of laughter and beer bottles clinking allowed those who wanted, to slink away and ignore the prat, and some others to turn away with distorted faces of seething dislike, unable to do anything about it. Yet.

March 1991, the Gulf

"McFadyen," the CO stood straight in his uniformed glory, name tag, stripes, crowns and all, "have you ever done a HALO jump?"

Dan grinned, baring his teeth. He stood with his arms crossed before his chest. No longer bound to standing at attention and catering to those goddamned poncy overblown egos. "I was in The Regiment, Sir. Of course I did."

A dozen jumps, a dozen measly fucking crazy bastard jumps amongst an endless string of normal ones. Still, he remembered the thrill of High Altitude—Low Opening and the maddening surge of adrenaline as his body had half frozen with the air rushing by until he'd almost lost consciousness.

"Good." Sitting down, the Officer indicated a plastic chair in front of his desk. Dan took the invitation, a rare honour to be asked to sit, it was a well-established fact the commanding bastard hated his guts.

"We need a man with enough balls and experience to jump into Iran." The Officer's expression turned outright nasty. "And you seem to have the balls at least, you've been brandishing them around in camp, after all."

Dan merely grinned again. Wasn't going to take the bait. "If you say so, Sir, but why Iran and why HALO? This doesn't make sense here."

The Officer glared, seemed eager to start a fully-blown tirade, and Dan expected to get a proverbial second one ripped, but the man visibly bit down on the intense dislike he'd never made a secret out of. 'Mercenary faggot' had been one of his kinder descriptions.

“Mr McFadyen, as even a man like you can imagine,” The Officer continued and Dan let the insult slip by without comment, “jumping into Iran, right in front of everyone’s noses is not a particularly clever idea.”

“No?” Dan shrugged, “would have thought they had enough of Saddam and his cronies after years of being at war with Iraq.”

The Officer’s frown was growing steeper by the second. “Mr McFadyen, you’d be well advised to listen before rushing to conclusions. This is a most delicate situation.”

“What, Sir, too delicate for SAS or Delta?”

“Yes! And you should bloody well know that!”

“Should I?” Dan smiled ever so sweetly, “and what about other PMCs? Surely, there are armies of private military contractors swarming across the country by now.” Dan blinked straight into the other’s scowling face. “But what do I know, I am not a member of the British Forces anymore, thus hardly privy to all the ins and outs in camp.”

“Cut the crap, McFadyen!” Thoroughly pissed off, the CO was fuming. Dan just grinned, slouching in his chair while revelling in knowing the man needed him. McFadyen, the ‘faggot’.

“You know damn well, McFadyen, certain operations require extraordinary sensitivity and should not be carried out by military personnel, and you happen to be the only one here at this moment in time with the required experience, so stop taking the piss. We have a window of no more than twenty-four hours according to intelligence, and there is no time to get other trained personnel here before the window of opportunity closes.”

“Which opportunity, Sir?”

As much as Dan disliked that gay-hating pompous bastard, he could do with a hefty dose of adrenaline that went beyond bar fights.

“Now we’re talking.” The CO rifled through a stack of papers on his desk, pulled out a couple of photographs. “This opportunity.” Pushed them in front of Dan’s nose. “Ibn Al-Jazaal, one of the highest ranking generals. He has been spotted in a town close to the Iraqi border.”

Dan peered at the photo, saw yet another bushy moustache, black hair and dark eyes. Good thing he’d learned to distinguish Middle Eastern features, back in Afghanistan. “Unless I’m mistaken, he is the one linked to the Iraqi’s stupid-arsed

stunt of flying their remaining air crafts to Iran.” The Officer nodded and Dan raised a brow. “I gather it’s also the same man who has been accused of war crimes, such as murder, torture and genocide?” The Officer nodded while Dan continued, “and who has been pursued by the combined Allied Forces but without success? And, who managed to escape and hide somewhere in Iran, even though one would assume this was the last place an Iraqi general would want to go to?” Dan flashed a brief smirk, “Is that the man, Sir?”

“The very same.”

“I guess the ‘window of opportunity’ is this Ibn chap has been spotted, aye? And of all places in Iran, which sounds a rather unlikely choice, despite that air force exploit, unless he’s more clever than we thought.”

The CO just nodded.

“And you need someone to go and extricate good old Ibn, preferably alive and without getting caught himself, while being unable to offer anything but covert military assistance from a distance, while that someone is in the country.”

“That was the plan, yes.” The man’s annoyance was almost palpable.

Dan was starting to really enjoy himself. “And you haven’t got anyone insane and experienced enough, and, of course, not a member of the British or Allied Forces, to attempt this mission with a fair chance of actually being successful. Is that right, Sir? No one...,” Dan smirked, teeth and all, “except this aging fag.”

“Goddammit, McFadyen! You had to rub it in again, didn’t you?” The CO’s fist came slamming down onto the desk, fuelled by Dan’s impetuous grin.

“Apologies, Sir.” Dan didn’t mean it, and it was bloody obvious. “But I am right, am I not?”

The CO glowered. “Yes.” Snapping, “feel free to gloat. You’re the only one currently available with enough experience, who speaks the lingo, knows the terrain, has done a HALO jump before and thus is able to get into Iran without stirring up a fuss. Who is used to operating on his own, has even a vague chance of getting back out of the country alive and, hell, you’re the only one who can get away with going native.” Growling, the Officer added, “and by God, I wish I didn’t have to ask *you*.”

Dan crossed his arms, if possible at all, grinning even wider. "I'm glad to hear. I was getting cabin fever." The plastic chair squeaked as he shifted his position. "That mission sounds just like the thing I am going to enjoy."

The Officer was rolling his eyes. "Enjoy?" He huffed, "You are the most obnoxious person I have ever met. If I had been your OC I'd busted your arse out of the Army and into Collie. But you'd probably enjoyed prison too much."

Dan shrugged and kept grinning. Wasn't giving a shit about the insult, preferred to start figuring out his chances instead. "Thankfully, Sir, I am not under your jurisdiction and never have been and am thus not imprisoned. Instead ready to pick up dear Ibn and deliver the parcel right into your hands. Ready and rolling for interrogation."

As pissed off as the CO was, he could do nothing but glare.

"Well," Dan unfolded his arms and leaned forward, "let's get down to business, then." Turning from sneering bastard to fully-fledged professional within an instance. "I gather you want me to get on with it as soon as possible.

Twenty-four hours, aye?"

"Yes, I want you out there before dawn."

"And the equipment?"

"Is being put together as we speak."

Dan nodded, "We've talked about getting in, anything planned for getting out?"

"You'll be on your own," the CO's gaze had become intense, leaving the dislike aside for a moment, "but preferably with your target."

"No problem, I drive anything." Dan shrugged, his own eyes narrowing.

"Without a key?"

Dan flashed a smirk and raised his brows. "I'm an ex SAS blade. What do you think."

The CO looked at him for a moment, then pulled out some papers and a map. "You don't want to know what I think."

Dan shrugged with a lopsided grin, "let's start the briefing, then. No time for pleasantries."

Suicidal Mission. Lone operation. Behind the lines. No backup until whenever they could arrange a rendezvous point. HALO jump. He hadn't even

done a standard one in years and his knees were thoroughly fucked these days. His chances weren't the best and the adrenaline would be lethal.

He couldn't wait to get out there.

* * *

Dan was standing at the edge of the airfield, looking towards the black sky. At least a couple more hours before dawn and he had hardly managed to get any sleep at all. No time, and, if he were honest with himself, too many nerves. It would be just about turning light shortly after the jump, if all went well. A night jump was even more dangerous, but the risk of detection was less. Despite the cool of the early hours, he started to sweat, the multi-layers of thermal underwear beneath the jumping overall were roasting him like a foil-baked potato whilst on the ground. Yet it would save his life, keeping his body from freezing to death in sub zero temperatures, while plummeting through the sky.

Dan was strapped into his harness, carrying his helmet in one hand, with goggles and gloves stuffed inside of it. He frowned at the sky, wondering for no more than a second if he was either too fucking insane, or simply didn't care anymore about his life, or, indeed, if he enjoyed this shit far too much and always had, and had missed danger—with a capital D—during his job for the Baroness more than he had thought. Fiddling subconsciously with the fixture on the strap across his chest that meant life—or death, connecting mask with oxygen bottle and both of them with the aircraft oxygen console. He moved one leg, annoyed with the tightness around his knee, both of them strapped up with bandages that provided casing, designed to keep his knee caps in place, while his feet were boiling in specialist boots that were meant to protect his ankles from the impact. He'd hoped so, anyway, but the worry was less oppressive than the weight of the parachute on his back. Rigging carefully stashed, canopy perfectly folded, and he'd just have to hope to hell and back he'd make it down in one piece. If any of his equipment was going to fail, he'd be toast and Ibn would have a happy Ever After.

Either way, he'd hurt like the motherfucker despite protective clothing, precautions, and sheer and utter bravado, and yet he couldn't wait to get up into the air.

“All right?” The voice behind him brought his head round. Dan nodded at the approaching two men: pilot and co-pilot.

“Aye, as ready as I’ll ever be.” He grinned, got a shoulder-slap by the co-pilot in return.

“Let’s get you up there, mate.”

Dan uttered a sharp “Aye!” picked up his backpack, which would be strapped to his legs. He’d checked and re-checked the contents, native clothing, inconspicuous bag, belt kit, couple of 24 hour survival rations, map, as much water as was feasible to carry, personal radio and a selection of weapons. He knew exactly where every single item was stashed.

Checking the harness once more and going over webbing’s fastening, Dan had made sure he could survive out there with nothing but his belt kit and trusted knife, even if he lost the bergan. His hand patted the bailout oxygen flask, strapped to his left thigh, as he trotted behind the crew. He’d have to get through at least twenty minutes of pre-breathing before take-off, and once he’d boarded the Herc, he got himself geared up, dropped the bergan and helmet on the floor beside him.

Getting himself hooked up to the plane’s oxygen console when the last safety check was finished, the jumpmaster inspected the breathing equipment, before Dan sat down with the mask in front of his face. The 100% oxygen was flooding into his lungs, creating unbidden memories of helplessness in a hospital in India, but he fought to instantly discard all thoughts. He needed to be sharp; needed all his senses and every ounce of strength, cunning and fitness that his aging body still possessed. Fighting fit, but no longer young—twenty-one years too late for the foolishness of youth.

He sat on his bergan, legs crossed, while the oxygen flushed the nitrogen out of his blood. No way in hell was he going to end up with the bends like a scuba diver.

Checking and rechecking himself and his kit through the next half hour, the Herc finally roared to life and before long they were steadily climbing towards the desired height of 30,000 feet. Dan checked his automatic opening device once more, knowing it was his last defence should anything go wrong in the air, such as getting into a spin which could cause him to blackout. All seemed fine, and the adrenaline was starting to course through his system. Not much longer and he’d be on his own again. To prove once more what he was capable of: defying death.

The interior of the Herc was just as noisy and cold as he was used to, in addition to being dark. Only the red tactical lighting was on, and he huddled into himself, remembering the exhilaration of jumping from high altitude and the dangerous moments of possible giddiness and memory loss, which were the last damned thing anyone would want when plummeting to the ground at 120 miles per hour. He'd be dead within forty seconds of coming off oxygen and with that insane falling speed he'd barely have three minutes flying time.

There was no way he was underestimating the dangers. Mad Dog, perhaps, but not an idiot and Dan was determined to get through with this mission, no matter the cost. He would show that bastard CO what a faggot was capable of doing, and he'd come back with Ibn in tow.

Dan was pulled out of his reveries when the loadmaster waved a card into his face, giving the order to get ready. He immediately got up, strapped the heavy bergan onto the back of his legs, while he went through the safety checks one last time. The Hercules was still climbing, and Dan sat back down once more.

Finally, the tailgate was released, and with the ice cold stream of air the noise increased to deafening levels. Dan stared at the open tailgate, focussed, concentrated and waiting for the green light. Despite his twenty years in the Forces, most of which as part of the Special Forces, he couldn't help the sweat, adrenalin and the fear building up. In fact, he figured while he was staring into the darkness, he wouldn't be alive if he hadn't respected fear.

What distinguished a frightened coward from a frightened soldier was courage: the courage to go in and do it, despite and even because of the danger and fear.

Dan disconnected his oxygen line from the main supply at a signal from the jumpmaster, switching over onto his own oxygen bottle. He was lucky, it went without a hitch and he stood up. It was bloody black and freezing outside and he was about to jump into this hell. He had to be mad. A strange grin crossed his face as he readjusted his goggles and helmet, smoothing the gloves firmly onto his hands. Finally! The red light went on and he moved forward, towards the rear of the tailgate. His goggles were misting up within seconds and he could hardly see what was in front of him. Two seconds, one, and...green on!

Without the slightest hesitation, Dan threw himself out of the plane.

His goggles froze up the very moment he launched himself into the sky, and he was spinning so violently, not only could he not see anything, he was getting rapidly dizzy. The bergan strapped to his legs dragged like a heavy sack of potatoes, and he felt as if ice water was being sprayed into his face. Just another second of dizzying freefall, and his protective gear was covered in sleet while his goggles were completely blinded by ice.

Dan spread his legs, attempting to steady his fall, worried he'd be drifting too far off his target, and simply riding out the spin, while trying to glance at his altimeter, which went through zero once, then twice, and he figured his AOD should be opening just about now, at 3,500 feet. He felt it pop off that very moment, and the canopy deployed with the familiar pull. Before he knew it, he was gliding down through the dark sky, feeling himself pass through warmer layers of air and steering to a suitable landing place once he got further down.

The ground came faster towards him than he had hoped, and even though the landing wasn't too bad, Dan lost his balance at impact, which rattled his knees. At least he had the presence of mind to let himself roll onto the other side of the bailout bottle. Lying there for a moment, just breathing, while listening to the canopy fluttering to the ground, and then nothing. Stillness. No one except himself and the sounds of the night.

There he was. Iran. And about to do something neither side would find acceptable.

Swiftly checking through his body, every bone and joint seemed to be in working order, before patting himself down. His goggles were filmed with ice and his jump suit covered with sleet, and he groaned as he sat up.

"I'm getting too old for this shit." Mumbled to himself, he had no time to lie around aching. Gloves, helmet and goggles came off before he got onto his knees, pulling on the rigging lines to gather the canopy. He wouldn't need the parachute anymore, on the contrary, he had to hide all his gear. He stood, got the webbing off and undid the straps for his bergan, in complete relief when all of the heavy weight fell off his body.

The parachute gathered, he spread it out and dropped his jumping gear into the middle. Undid the wrap around his neck, then stepped out of the military jumpsuit, throwing it onto the pile before undoing his boots and pulling the thick socks off, finally climbing out of the normal jumpsuit he'd worn underneath. Boots

and socks left to the side, he wiggled out of a turtleneck sweater before reaching the last layer, the thermal underwear. Discarding that as well, thrown on top of the pile, Dan stood in his skivvies. Time for a change of identity, and he'd be buggered if he couldn't fit as much into an Iranian marketplace as he had fit into an Afghan one.

Rummaging in his bergan, all done with speed but avoiding haste, which would make anyone clumsy, he pulled out the kit that would get him through this mission. Stepped into a pair of BDUs, rolling them up to knee height, securing the hem with a couple of safety pins. Then t-shirt, flak vest over it, throwing the long native gown on top of it all, hiding the Western gear. Dan smirked a moment to himself at the almost white material. Nightgown, just where was his night cap.

Fixing the kit belt securely around his waist and strapping all his weapons to his body, until everything was effectively hidden, he slipped barefoot into the sandals, stuffing desert boots and socks into a heavy-duty shoulder bag someone had found on the market, together with a shawl, which he wound around his head. He had no mirror, but he'd done this often enough, back in Afghanistan, that his haphazard job looked more convincingly native than the most thorough attempt could have been. That was it, time to fix the personal radio so he could hide both radio and battery, the size of two bloody heavy house bricks, in his voluminous shoulder bag, slung across his back, and almost as comfortable as a bergan.

Dan checked over the equipment once more, damn glad they hadn't provided him with the bog standard radio, too heavy to carry on a mission like that and the standard issue British kit would have been too dangerous should he be detected. The high tech version for Special Forces was considerably smaller and lighter, even though it still weighed more than the water bottles he was lugging around. He fiddled with cables and headpiece, stashing them away securely, then bundled the canopy up with its treasure, and threw the bag over his shoulder. He stuffed as much of the parachute into the camouflage bergan as he could, before dragging it to a spot close by that offered a drop and enough stones and debris to pile on top of the gear. If anyone ever found it, they'd be none the wiser and he'd be long out of the country by then.

Only then did he switch on the radio, the headset haphazardly close to ear and lips, hindered by the rag around his head, and waited for the static to clear before making his announcement. "Calling HQ." Waiting another moment, relief

ghosted across his face when he heard the confirmation from the other end. At least the technology worked, what a miracle for the usual British crap, held together with sticky tape and spit. "The eagle has landed. About to fly out of the nest." Once more awaiting conformation, he nodded to himself and checked his watch that was hidden beneath the long sleeve of the gown. "Roger. Over and out." Hiding the radio inside the bag, he slung the whole heavy thing across his back before glancing at the sky that began to turn light. "Let's go get Ibn." Muttered to himself in broken Arabic, then set off towards the town where he hoped to find his target.

* * *

Marching at a fast pace despite wearing nothing but sandals, Dan was covering the terrain in under two hours, getting towards the town in the cool of the morning, just as the muezzin called the faithful to fajr prayer. He hid in a derelict shed near the outskirts of the town during prayer, couldn't afford to get caught wandering around as an able bodied man, if he wanted to pass as a native.

While sheltered from prying eyes, Dan checked out the radio and contacted HQ. Voice low, using a few chosen code words that let them know he was close to the town and about to go in. Careful not to give away his position nor intention for any prying ears, should the communications line get compromised. Waiting his turn after shutting down the comm link, Dan emerged from the ruins into bright sunlight.

The town had come to life, bustling with activity, and once he'd reached the central market place, the world was bursting into colours, smells and sounds. Dan felt himself teleported back to Afghanistan and into Kabul, but the closer he got the more intense the stink became. He wasn't sure where it came from, guessed a combination of rotten vegetables, open air butcher stands, raw sewage, and burning waste. Yet despite the stench he didn't twitch a muscle and walked stoically on. Severed sheeps' heads to his right, laid out on a cart; baskets with fruit of every colour; crates and boxes overflowing with vegetables; animal carcasses laid out in the sun and attracting thick, black flies that made an incessant noise; freshly caught fish, gutted in another corner, and casks and barrels of spices and

dried herbs and powders, masking the stench the further he got into the market and towards the indoor part, which offered shelter from heat and blinding sun.

Dan sauntered around the stalls, on high alert while keeping a low profile. Eyes cast down, darting around from beneath his lashes, as he checked out his surroundings. The dark shadow of stubble on his deeply tanned face helped with the illusion of being one of the natives, same with the clothing that hid anything Western beneath their folds.

He knew he was in the right place, the Brits' informant had been adamant, and since he had nothing else to go from, all he had to do was be there and wait for the target to arrive. When, however, within the next twelve hours, was anyone's guess. Insh'allah.

Weaving his meandering path from stall to stall, Dan moved further into the bowels of the bazaar, stopping at a cloth merchant's stall that sold brightly coloured and intricately patterned traditional clothing. Getting his bearings, Dan feigned interest in a particularly gaudy headscarf, bright red with gold coins around the edges, fondling the fabric to bide his time while communicating in monosyllabic replies with the merchant, to steer clear of the danger of giving himself away by his accent.

Sudden motion in the narrow passageway between the stalls, when a group of men came through, all of them dressed native with several of them talking, while the man in the middle walked purposefully and in silence. Dan barely twitched when he recognised his target. Ibn Al-Jazaal, without a doubt, he had memorised the photos all through the night. But who the fuck were all those other guys doing there, surrounding him? Bodyguards, Dan thought with a frown while trying to hide his facial expression by rifling through the headscarves. The stall holder had noticed, though, taking the frown for a complaint about the price of the fiery red headscarf, and lurching into a lament of falling prices, hungry children, demanding wife, scolding mother-in-law and wouldn't the customer make up his mind already, he'd even be willing to haggle the price. Dan shook his head while keeping track of the target's progress from the corner of his eye.

He left the stall without a sale the moment he almost lost Ibn's entourage from his sight, followed by angry shouts from the merchant, but he paid no heed, instead following his target plus cronies while keeping a safe distance. Watching them pass through the rug-hung curtains that closed off the back part of a carpet

stall, Dan stopped close by, glancing around and finding to his relief a tea stall, conveniently nestled in a nook no more than a few feet away.

Dan ordered tea in the same carefully economic style, sitting and soon sipping the hot and overly sweetened dark brown brew, just as he had done many times in Afghanistan, while monitoring the entrance without appearing to do so. Leaning forward after a while, he pretended to look through his bag, while checking on the radio. Too dangerous to activate it there and then, he'd have to wait for a more convenient moment and just see how things went until then. Nothing he could do except continue observation while sipping tea and waiting, appearing as relaxed as someone who had no worries and nothing else to do than drink tea in the market.

Dan sat there for the good part of two hours, going through several teas and handfuls of accompanying sweets, beginning to worry if somehow he'd overlooked a secret back entrance and he'd missed Al-Jazaal's exit, when his target reappeared, still protected by those bodyguards.

Dan observed from his seat, masking his interest behind the raised tea glass, then emptying it, with deceptive leisure, before throwing some money onto the table and taking his leave. Following at a distance, he had to concentrate on appearing unhurried and unconcerned while keeping tabs on Al-Jazaal.

Once he'd left the bustling market and turned a couple of corners, Dan came to an abrupt halt at the end of a narrow street, suddenly confronted with all of Ibn's men. All seven of them, standing in groups around three cars, seemingly debating something. Dan spotted one head through the window in the middle car: his target.

Dan slunk back into the shadows of the next alley, watching and straining to listen. He only managed to catch snippets of the conversation, their Arabic too fast and too far away, but from what he could make out they were deciding who should take the front and rear vehicles. Dan nodded to himself, he would bet those guys were ex Republican guards, Saddam's very own and very best soldiers, who'd managed to flee together with Al-Jazaal. They seemed to be on their way 'home' whatever that meant, but clearly fitted into plan and movements he'd been briefed with by the CO. Twenty-four hour window, and someone, somewhere, was going to pick Ibn up in a few hours, probably around dawn, if Dan didn't find a way to

grab him before that. Preferably without getting riddled with bullets or perforated with blades in the process.

Dan frowned when they seemed about to get into the vehicles. If he didn't get himself some transport in the very near future, something like two minutes tops, he'd probably lose the target for good. Not only had it been too risky so far to kidnap Al-Jazaal from within the midst of his bodyguards, but simply impossible. No, he had to bide his time and wait for another chance—within the next twelve hours or so, and only if he could get his arse onto a set of wheels and follow those cars.

Shit, if he didn't come up with something in the next...fuck, the men were moving now, getting into the cars. Dan was looking around, desperate for any kind of transport that was faster than a donkey and his cart, when he heard the tell-tale puttering of a motorbike coming closer. Just in time, even though it sounded asthmatic and slow. Keeping one eye on the cars that had started their engines and the other on the advancing sound, Dan slunk further back into the shadows.

There! The motorbike came into view, two men sitting on it, one dressed native, riding piston, the other in westernised clothing, laughing and chatting while turning his head backwards towards his passenger, trundling along in barely more than swift walking speed. Two. Damn. Dan had to be quick or his target would be irretrievably lost, plus if he got caught in Iran, there'd be far too many questions and none of which he wanted to answer.

When they got to his level, Dan jumped out of the shadows, swinging the heavy shoulder bag as a makeshift weapon, he knocked the passenger off the bike. He was fast, too fast for the rider to call out for help, when the next second the man had a fist flying towards his head, hitting the right spot on the temple which knocked him out cold, slumped on the bike. The engine was still running and the machine bucked, but Dan held it in a vice grip. "Get off already!" Hissed beneath his breath, he delivered a kick to the unconscious driver, finally getting him off.

He saw the cars had moving off from the corner of his eyes. No more time. Hitching up the native dress until the BDUs almost showed at the knees, he swung one leg over the bike, praying he hadn't forgotten how to ride it. Old bike. Ancient. Vibrating beneath and between his legs, and when he glanced down he almost laughed at the make: an old British classic, so old it would be a rare catch, back in Blighty. He didn't give a damn, though, as long as it was faster than a bloody

donkey...Forcing himself to remember all he had ever learned about motorbikes, it felt a lifetime ago, the last time he'd been on a one. Letting go of the clutch, Dan revved up the tortured engine and managed to keep his balance as he sped away, as fast as the old lady allowed, while the two men on the street behind him began to shout—but no one was there to listen.

He was pushing the bike as much as he could, following the three cars he could just about make out in the distance. Readjusting his shoulder bag in mid-ride when it threatened to slip off and entangle in the spokes, Dan opened the throttle fully, finding his bearings once more, as it all came flooding back from his youth in the Forces. Whoever had come up with the proverb it was just like riding a bike—impossible to forget—had been damn right.

The road was winding its way through a landscape of dried out semi-desert. At least it was still mild in February, as opposed to the sweltering heat of summer, and the bike was doing its best to keep up with the cars, while Dan carefully kept his distance to avoid being detected. He was partly cursing the flat plateau that stretched all around him and offered no notable cover, but without the lowland terrain he'd probably have lost his target by now. Dan was forced to slow down when the moment he noticed the cars had lost speed and were turning towards the right into an area that was less open than before, with several low-level rock formations. He wouldn't be able to drive much further, couldn't take the risk of being detected. Slowing down and keeping a low profile, Dan got as close as possible, when he realised the cars had pulled into a sort of compound, or whatever the shabby cluster of buildings could be called. A one-storey building, white washed and mud built, with several small outhouses and what appeared to be stables, now deserted and in a state of disrepair.

Switching off the engine as soon as the cars had stopped, Dan moved immediately behind an outcrop of rocks, throwing the bike down. He was still a long while away, could barely make out the individual men, but if he was going to get any closer, he had to do it on foot, and bloody carefully so.

Setting up the radio on the relative safety of his hiding place, he contacted HQ, quietly reporting his whereabouts and his intention, being fed back the latest news from their informant within the country emphasised he had to strike before the morning. Al-Jazaal would be taken to a safe place in the early hours, whatever that meant. Dan frowned to himself, acknowledged the message and settled behind

the rocks for a while longer. After some time it became clear the target had no intention of leaving the compound, at least not for the night. It would be far too dangerous trying to get any closer in daylight, thus there was no point in being any more uncomfortable than he had to be. Getting some of the rations from his pack, together with the water he had been carrying, Dan kept as hydrated as he could and was not going to go hungry either.

Settling into observation mode, he used the small binoculars he'd packed, keeping the house under surveillance. Nothing noteworthy happened, except for the regular appearance of a man, usually a different one, making their way over to one of the small wooden outhouses, remaining inside for a minute or two before reappearing. A pattern seemed to emerge and Dan grinned, no doubt he'd just located their loo and he started to whistle under his breath when the target himself came out of the main building, accompanied by two of his bodyguards. Al-Jazaal seemed to be agitated and shouting at them, waving his arms to shoo them away. The next moment he got into the hut, on his own, with the two men slinking back into the house and not reappearing.

The target made his way back into the house after a while, on his own. Dan watched and wondered. If he was to have any chance...it might just as well be the shitter.

The long hours of the day passed uneventful, as he stayed hidden behind the low outcrop of rocks, keeping the compound in focus and biding his time. It was getting towards dusk when he finally made a move again, checking in with HQ first. "Eagle going in. Target in cross-hair. Extraction imminent before zero." The acknowledgement came swiftly, together with an evaluation of his coordinates.

He'd be on his own, but they'd pick him up at a yet unknown rendezvous point, if he made it.

Changing out of his native clothing when the sun began to set, Dan pulled down his BDU's, getting rid of the safety pins, and shook his head once his hair was freed from the scarf. Taking off the dusty sandals, he couldn't wait to get his feet back into socks and army boots, at least he knew how to run in them. Properly dressed, the native kit stashed in his bag, he looked down at himself. No way he would be mistaken for an Iranian now, weapons, kit, clothing all too obvious, but he'd have to be quick and rely on his wits, more than the deceit or disguise. He had a plan, ludicrous as it might be, but it might just work.

Dusk was settling in and darkness advanced rapidly. With the darkness Dan approached as well, making his way closer towards the compound. Moving behind cover as much as he could, then getting down onto his knees and crawling the rest of the way until he was near enough to make out some of the voices from inside. Throwing himself down the moment a strip of light announced the door opening, Dan hardly dared to breathe, keeping absolutely still behind a straggling patch of dried grass, praying he was invisible. The man who came out went to one of the cars and it took an eternity before he vanished in the outhouse to presumably take a piss, finally returning back into the main building. Only then did Dan dare to belly-crawl closer, towards the dilapidated barn whose ruins would give some shelter.

The later it got the colder it became, but Dan had survived the freezing winters in the Afghan mountains, he wasn't going to be thwarted by a measly February on the Iranian plains. Keeping watch, alert despite the encroaching tiredness, he began to see a pattern that continued on from the day. It was obvious the guards had no intention of letting up on their watch and go to sleep, but what about Al-Jazaal himself? Dan was wondering, he had not seen him for at least two hours and the night was moving on.

He didn't dare contact HQ, lest even a whisper alerted the men inside. Besides, he couldn't be sure what kind of equipment they had. Despite the run-down building and the wrecked looking cars, he wasn't going to take any chances. Thus staying crouched, keeping movements to a minimum, just enough not to seize up in the cold and to stay functional.

Keeping track of time and movements, he had been hiding for several uneventful hours when it got towards 1 AM and the door of the main building opened again, with none other than the target stepping out. Carrying something under his arm with a couple of his bodyguards following. From his vantage point Dan could clearly see and hear them arguing, deciphering some of the heated interchange that came down to the one thing: Al-Jazaal was not going to be escorted to the outhouse loo but was going to have his privacy and the guards should not be so annoying or they'd find themselves back in Iraq and in the hands of the American swine.

Interesting. Dan grinned, it was obvious to him with whatever he had rolled under his arm, and it looked remarkably like reading material, the guy was up to spending some time in solitude on the shitter. Most likely having a good old

satisfactory dumb before the early hours of the morning when they were meant to move on and thus out of reach of the Allies.

As expected, Ibn was eventually left alone, with the two guys vanishing back into the main building. That was Dan's cue. He moved silently out of the ruined shed once the target had locked the door behind him, crawling over to the cars. He wasn't sure how much time he had, but was betting on at least five minutes. No man, no matter which colour or creed, was ever going to take a dump without sufficient leisure, certainly not when carrying reading material.

Checking the cars over, he swiftly ascertained their state, deciding which one was the best of the lot, while praying the guards had done their job properly and left all of them filled nicely with fuel. Trying handles and boots—unlocked, he grinned triumphantly to himself. Bloody stupid bastards were far too smug, unable to imagine someone was after them and had gone to the length of checking out their hide-out. In Iran. Of all the impossible places an Iraqi ex-general could go.

Deciding on the largest of the vehicles, the one Al-Jazaal had been riding in, it had a voluminous boot and seemed the best kept of the lot. Dan crawled over to the others, meticulously slashing the tires, one after the other, even though he would have much preferred disabling them by cutting the wires off the alternator or slitting them off the spark plugs, but he didn't have the time. Most of all, he couldn't take the chance to make any noise by opening the bonnet.

Satisfied all vehicles were sufficiently disabled except for the big galleon itself, he stopped, looked around, ensuring no one was listening nor watching, then crawled back, this time all the way to the shit-house. Adrenaline surging, his heart was hammering just like in the old days when he was out on his own and fighting to survive the impossible: in the midst of Russian gun fire or between warring Afghan tribal lords. Or, indeed, in Northern Ireland, back in the seventies, or Belize and any other shitty place Britain had ever sent him to. Alive, that's what he felt: alive. Despite or because of the danger.

Silently drawing himself up to full height, if any of the guards stepped right now out of the building he'd be toast, but this was his only chance and he'd bloody well use it. Peering at the lock, a brief smirk crossed his face, and his favourite knife was in his hand without a sound. The latch was nothing but wood and the crack in the door large enough to slip the blade through. A rickety piece of shit for a crappy shithouse that housed one of the biggest pieces of shit.

He had one try, and if he fucked it up there was no escaping. Taking in a deep steadying breath, Dan slid the blade with his left into the crack of the door, pushed it upwards and the latch out of the way. The door sprang open, he tore it wide ajar, the same moment his right fist connecting hard with the target's temple. Al-Jazaal had looked up in shocked surprise, mouth open, but never managed to get a sound out. Dan pulled back when the man slumped forward, steadying the descent with his left hand, knife still in it, and delivered another punch with his right for good measure. Wouldn't do if the bastard woke up too early. Breathing hard, Dan was moving swiftly. One sound, a few seconds delay and he'd be so fucked he wasn't going to be able to keep his promise to the Baroness.

Ibn had his trousers round the ankles, sandals on his feet and the long shirt hitched up. No time for niceties, Dan simply dragged the unconscious body upwards and hoisted the dead weight over his shoulder in a fireman's lift. Suppressing a groan as his knees wanted to buckle under the strain, he turned, hurrying over to the car he'd left in working order. He let the body slide down to the ground behind the car and pulled cable ties from his belt kit, binding Al-Jazaal's wrist tightly behind his back and lashing his ankles together. It was bloody dark, the only light came from moon and stars, but Dan managed to gag the man with a part of the headscarf he still carried with him in the shoulder bag. Looking down at his bundle, then at his watch. No more than one minute had passed since he'd opened the shutter and knocked the target out cold. If he were lucky the building stayed quiet until they'd hear the noise of the engine.

The boot opened without a hitch and barely a sound, proving to be as large as he'd hoped, and nicely empty. Dan stooped and picked up the trussed-up body, wrestling it into the car as fast as he could. Closing the boot before he threw the shoulder bag inside, Dan hurried to get into the driver's seat. He was racing against time. Any moment the guards could come out to look for Al-Jazaal, and he hadn't even started the damned vehicle.

The belt kit proved once again his life saver, something he had learned from a battle worn sergeant in The Regiment when he'd been nothing but a young grunt, Dan searched for his all-tool, a handyman's sturdy version of the Swiss army knife. He knew in theory how to get the damned car started without a key, and was fumbling in the dark until he found the plastic panel. Levering the screwdriver into the panel, he broke it off, wincing at the noise and sweating

despite the cold. Feeling around, he found two screws and undid them in haste while cursing under his breath when he slipped twice. Pulling the tumbler out, he stuck the flat headed screwdriver inside. Now came the hard bit, he didn't have a crowbar with him and his knife had to do, as he pulled on the ignition, using the handle as leverage. Employing all his strength, he finally managed in what felt like an eternity to pull down hard and the ignition fell to the floor. Dan turned the screwdriver in the tumbler and with a triumphant, "fuck, yes!" the engine started.

That was it, the noise would get them out of their hiding, and now he had no more than split seconds to get out of their range of bullets once the door opened. Revving up the engine, Dan turned with screeching tires, kicking up dust. He saw as clearly as day in the glare of the headlights, how the door opened and several men came piling out. Shouting to each other, barely heard above the noise inside the car, and raising their weapons.

Dan pushed the accelerator down to the floor, the pedal almost going through the metal, and the car shot off. Fast despite its size, with the cargo in its boot. Racing away from the compound and along the small dirt track, Dan kept his head as low as he could when the bullets came flying. Hitting the car, possibly entering the boot, but he couldn't hear muffled screams from inside and even if, at least he got the target alive, whatever happened to him from 'friendly fire' wasn't really his business.

He had to get to the rendezvous point, somewhere at the coast of the Persian Gulf. No way could he try and get out of the country by crossing the border, HQ had set up a plan to pick them up by chopper.

Dan was driving like a madman once he had reached the main road. Not too worried about the target, since he heard the man kicking against the boot, probably hoping to open it from the inside and throw himself out, but no fucking chance. Not with Dan speeding along the dusty road in the darkness of the night.

He was making good progress, disabling the other two vehicles had paid off, because he wasn't followed, and even if the guards managed to get their hands on a car, it was unlikely they'd catch up any time soon and they sure as hell couldn't count on help from the native population.

Dan activated the radio while driving. Fiddling one-handed, eyes always peeled on the blackness in front of him and constantly checking the rear view mirror, he called HQ. Announcing the mission had been successful, the target

extracted, and he was on his way to the rendezvous point, no more than an hour away. The disembodied voice in the ear piece of his headset acknowledged his report, as they tried to ascertain his exact location before finalising the pick-up by helicopter. Right at the Gulf and as close to the border as they dared.

Driving on, Dan still couldn't quite believe his luck, but nothing happened. Nothing except for every mile racing by, getting him closer to the coast, until finally saw the coast. As agreed, he alerted HQ to be ready with the chopper. He'd hardly stopped the car when he heard the well-known noise of rotor blades coming closer and Dan got out, opening the boot, to find a bound and gagged man with his trousers around his ankles and the shirt ridden up, twisted in the confined space and glaring with utter rage at him while making noises into the cloth in his mouth. Dan sneered, the nastiest sort of grin he managed as he shrugged, pointing to the helicopter above. "Time to go 'on vacation' Ibn. They say the U.S. of A. is a nice place to be this time of year."

He was still grinning when he heaved the struggling man out of the boot, waving into the search light of the chopper before the equipment was lowered and he secured the trussed up bundle in the straps. He watched them hoist the target inside, before the bird lowered further, one of the marines held out their hand and Dan grabbed it, was pulled inside as the helicopter went off again.

"Welcome on board, Mad Dog." One of the soldiers grinned, helping Dan scramble to a crouch on the metal floor.

"Aye, kind of glad to see you lot." Dan laughed, and his first action was to search for his shades, slipping them on despite the darkness. Jesus fucking Christ, he needed a fag. Glancing over to where they were dealing with Al-Jazaal, he shrugged a final time and scooted back to sit against the wall, as the bird made its way back through the night. Back into Saudi Arabia and back into camp, where he'd sleep for as long as they'd bloody well let him—after one of those damned debriefings the wanker of a CO would be adamant on.

* * *

As predicted, Dan spent the rest of the night and the early hours of the morning in debriefings, being grilled by the CO and his cronies, while struggling to stay awake, until they finally let him off with three days paid extra leave, which he

decided to spend sleeping, working out and sleeping some more. Oh, and drinking in the bar.

The story of his crazy stunt was spreading like wildfire when Dan was on his way to hit the showers in the morning, and he could hardly get on with all the shoulder slapping from well meaning lads—mercs and soldiers alike, who were queuing up for breakfast. The ones who hated his guts and would have liked to show the faggot a hard wall in the face, kept quiet to the cries of “well done, Mad Dog,” or “you fucking lucky bastard!,” and “good one, mate.”

At last, when Dan managed to get through the crowd and into the shower, they left him alone and he managed to sleep the entire day long into the afternoon without so much as waking once.

He spent the early evening in the bar as one of the few who could legitimately indulge in booze and had a hard time not to get too pissed with all the free rounds. Dan called it a night, early on, wondering if that meant he was getting old: too tired to get rat-arsed after nothing but one measly mission.

He was grinning to himself as he walked along, on his way back into camp for another round of mercifully dreamless sleep, not paying any attention to the shuffling sounds behind his back.

“Hey, buddy?”

Dan stopped, turned, raised his brows above the shades and looked at the man who had come up to him. Made an inventory of the guy within a split second. Yank. Jarhead. Typical stupid buzz cut. Buff. Young. No older than twenty...one or two. Fucking good looking if he were into kids. “What the fuck do you want. A broken nose?”

The guy raised his hands, took a step back. “Hell, no. Just thought I’d, you know, catch you. I was in the bar. Saw you.”

Dan’s brows rose even higher. “So, you wanted a chat with the aging fag, eh?”

He didn’t expect the yank’s answer and neither the broad grin. “Yeah, buddy, that’s exactly why.”

“Aye?” Dan didn’t try to hide the surprise, even gave the kid the honour to push the shades off his eyes, securing them in the tangle of his dark and grey-speckled unruly mane. “Guess you best tell me why.”

The kid nodded, looked left then right. “Can we go, like, somewhere else to talk?”

Grinning, Dan mimicked the yank’s furtive glances. “You worried to be seen with me, is that it? Think I’m contagious?”

“No. Sure not.” The kid shook his head, held out his hand. Good, strong handshake when Dan took it, mildly surprised at the formalities. “I’m Matt. C’mon buddy. Can we talk? Over there.” He gestured to a secluded corner right behind a couple of generators.

Dan shrugged, returned the firm handshake and nodded. “Sure. I’m Dan, but I guess you know that.”

They started walking, Matt grinned, glancing sideways at Dan. “Sure thing. You’re Mad Dog. I already heard of your stunt in Iran.” Once they’d reached the generators, shadows engulfed them and they were undisturbed.

“That’s great,” Dan leaned against one of the camo-netted metal boxes, “but you’re not here to talk to me about the HALO jump, are you? Could have done that in the bar.”

Matt slipped into the narrow space between Dan and the next generator, bodies almost touching. “You’re right. Wanted to talk to you about...” paused, and caused Dan’s brows to creep back up towards the hairline. “...about, you know, what you are.”

“What, gay?”

The kid nodded. “Yeah.”

“Why?” Dan knew all of a sudden, still asked. Wasn’t an idiot but not a charity either.

“Cause...,” silence, then a loudly swallowed gulp, seemed the yank was desperate enough to continue, “cause I’m, too. Just can’t say it, can’t come out of the closet, or I’m thrown out of the Marines, OK?”

“And?” Dan crossed his arms in front of his chest. “What’s that got to do with me?”

“Cause you’re gay? And so am I?” Dan’s answer apparently unexpected.

“And?” Dan insisted. “What does that mean?” He was enjoying himself entirely too much. Revelled in the stunned silence, could hardly hold back his laughter. Old geezer—fit lad. Surely the spread of cards was laid out to give only

the one reading: him gagging for it. Perhaps he did, but he wasn't going to tell, and the yank was squirming far too prettily. "Want me to jump your bones, kid?"

More silence, audible breathing in the dimness, then finally a flash of teeth and a slightly unsure grin. "Yeah. You game?"

"Depends." Dan smirked, watched the fish dangling on the hook and thought it was a damn good catch. Out of the blue, bloody unexpected and all the better for it. The catch was fairly tall, definitely just as broad as he was young, and if the other yanks he'd seen were anything to go by, the kid would be a beefy prize to behold. "How desperate are you?"

"Listen, buddy, I've been here for weeks, haven't seen my boyfriend back home for four months, seem to be, like, the only gay within the entirety of Iraq. Have to lie about my sexuality and watch straight porn with the other guys, bored to death of damned pussies. How fucking desperate do you think I am?"

"Very." Dan commented dryly, pushed forward and pinned the kid between generator and himself. Ground his hips into the other's groin. Far, far too entertaining. Seemed he got lucky tonight. Mission and sex. He'd won the jackpot.

Matt groaned, silenced himself, grabbed hold of Dan's hips, pushed hard. Dan was somewhat surprised at the reaction, but sure as fuck didn't complain, letting himself be pulled closer.

"So, seems you want to get off." He chuckled, relishing the sense of control, while the kid was losing it. Had been a long time since he'd been on top of that age-old game of bodies against bodies. "How much, kid? Enough to risk it here, in camp?"

"Yeah..." Matt breathed, husky. "You have no fucking idea how desperate I am..." Pushing against Dan, fumbling for his belt, all the while trying to reach the evasive face and find Dan's lips to kiss.

"I do, kid, I do..." Dan moved his head and turned his face away from the searching mouth, away from a kiss. Shades slipping off and falling with a faint clatter into the dust, as he found and conquered Matt's exposed neck. He was shoving against the other's groin, crushing their cocks. He'd done it many times before, yet it was all different now. Not thinking, just revelling in having made it out of a suicidal mission, celebrating life by pressing against a muscular body. Young, alive, fucking perfect, and suitably strong. Good. He felt on top and clearly in charge, as if disconnected from his own body, watching both of them and

listening to the kid, who was rapidly losing it. The yank threatened to make too much noise until Dan pushed his arm into the kid's face. Winced when teeth bit into sleeve and biceps, but at least the groans were muffled.

It was too fucking easy, almost like playing a cheap arcade game. Pushing all the right buttons and stroking the cut cock, while rubbing against his own, both in his right hand, while grinding into the buff body that willingly moved with him, against and together. The kid hadn't lied, was too bloody desperate to last long, and Dan enjoyed that knowledge. Cool, superior, in charge and in fucking control of himself and the other's body. It felt good. Easy, a kind of sex he'd never had.

He grabbed the back of the yank's head the moment he felt the convulsions starting to wreck the other's body, forced the face against his chest, arm, sleeve, and all, muffling any sounds the kid might make, before closing his eyes for just a moment and simply letting go, allowing himself to come with an almost completely suppressed groan. Controlled, measured, but a bloody lot of release after pent up months of shit and nothing; anger and blood; numbness and pain.

Still listening to the kid's panting when he had himself back under control, he kept the head pressed against his chest. Murmuring, lips touching the shaved skull, "Better, kid?"

"Yeah." Breathless, the yank made no attempt to move. Neither body, spent cock nor head. "But I'm not a kid."

Dan chuckled quietly. "Sure you are. I could be your daddy." Letting go of the other's head, watching it come up, grinning at him.

"Want me to call you Sugar Daddy, not Mad Dog?" Matt smirked, drew in a shuddering breath, obviously enjoying a last moment of aftershocks. Dan clipped the shaved head with the palm of his hand. "Don't get too cocky, kid."

Matt sniggered, stretching in the confines of their bodies. "Guess I just did. 'Cocky', that is." Looked down between them, wiggled his hips. "Urgh, shit. I'm sticky."

"Want me to call your nanny, kid?" Dan laughed under his breath, careful to keep the noise down, as he stepped backwards and into the other metal box.

"Bastard." Matt was wiping at his trousers.

"Yep, that's me." Dan didn't care about the cum, just tucked himself in and closed his belt, would deal with the trousers later. "I resemble that remark."

“Yeah...” Sound of metal and rustling of fabric as Matt put himself back into order. “Guess they’re right, you know, calling you Mad Dog.”

Dan had stooped down, searching for the shades he’d lost. “Guess they are.” Glanced up, suddenly found himself face to face with the yank again, who was crouching beside him, the shades dangling from his fingers.

“Lost something, old man?”

Dan sneered, took bait, shades and taunting, and slipped them back onto the top of his head. “Cheers, kid. Good thing you children are still playing hide-and-seek.”

Matt was laughing, just as quietly as Dan earlier, then stopped, his hand suddenly on Dan’s shoulder. “Seriously?” paused.

“Seriously...what?” Dan queried, marvelled for a moment at the sheer untainted freshness of that face before him.

“Seriously, like, can we meet again?”

Dan nodded without a second thought, surprising himself. It had been easy, painless, the most light-hearted bit of sex he’d ever had in his life. No depth, no feeling, just a few words, a lot of grinning and a body that ground itself against his own. “Sure.”

Matt nodded, relieved. “When? Where?”

“I know where to find you.” Dan grinned, stood back up, time to get some sleep. “In the nursery.”

“Fucker.” Matt retorted, but Dan was already leaving, and his subdued laughter was heard all the way to the gates of his camp.

* * *

Dan made an effort in the following week to actually greet the guys he knew and who weren’t avoiding the maniac self-confessed fag like the bubonic plague. Nodded to some, chatted to others, and his efforts at being matey paid off when ten days later his beefy jarhead reappeared. Matt looked even more like a kid in the murky light of the bar, especially when Dan pushed his shades up to study the yank for a moment, before letting them fall back down over his eyes and getting a fresh drink from the bartender.

Walking over, he nodded to Matt, then indicated with his chin towards a corner, to have a word. No one noticed, Dan had been talking to most guys at some stage or another, him chatting was a normal thing by now. Mad Dog had got friendlier, but he'd never lost his bite.

"Still desperate?" Dan murmured when Matt was close enough, before chugging some beer.

Matt grinned, nodded, scratching the back of his neck. "Fuck, yeah." Nursing a bottle of coke. Nothing but coke, and not even the full-fat variety.

"OK. I got a safe house."

"In Saudi Arabia?" Matt almost snorted the last mouthful of his drink back out through his nose. "How the fuck did you do that?"

Dan tapped the side of his nose, grinning. "Resourceful. Besides, I went through nine years of shagging in Kabul and the Gulf can't be as tricky as the Afghan mountains, but that's another bedtime story. I gather you're off duty tomorrow morning?"

"How do you..." Matt trailed off, faced with Dan's full-toothed grin. "Course you'd know. Bastard. Mad Dog and all that shit." He nodded. "Where?"

Dan turned away, pretending to get bored having a half-arsed conversation with that fresh-faced yank kid. "Here." Ended the motion with a piece of paper slipped into the other's hand. "See you at 1000 hrs. Sharp."

"Yes, daddy." Matt grinned, stuffed the paper into his tunic and would have earned himself a clip over the head again, if Dan didn't have to avoid the sort of familiarity that could rouse suspicion.

Dan raised the middle finger of his scarred left hand, mouthed 'fuck you', then turned and walked back to his customary place at the bar. Finishing his Bud then heading back to his bunk to get some shut-eye for the night. He slept without waking for once.

* * *

1003 hrs and Dan heard a light rap on the door of the building he'd found in a slightly more up-market category than the rickety pieces of muddy shit he'd used in Kabul. Build from brick, it housed a fully grown bed instead of a rolled-out bergan and even had extra space that was used as a loo with a sink. Positively

luxurious compared to the shitholes of his past, but back then his bones hadn't been creaking, his body hadn't protested and his...no. Not going there. Refused to think of the past in any more broader terms than 'back then'.

"You're late." Dan opened the door, alert but not wary, watched the yank slip in and look around till he found the Brit standing in his back.

"Bang." Dan said casually, a finger posing as a gun, grinning. "You got a lot to learn about healthy paranoia."

"Fuck you." Matt retorted, went straight to the bed and sat down.

"No, that's wasn't quite my intention."

"No?" Matt looked up, fingers on the buttons of his tunic, "what did you have in mind, then?"

Dan shrugged, walked over, pulled the only chair in the room close until he sat opposite to the yank, watching him undress. "No plans. Just things I don't do and others I do do."

"Such as?" Matt glanced up from the bed, "in case you wonder, I'm clean. Can show you my latest test."

"Aye, that's OK. Same here." Dan watched him through the customary shades, grinning and nodding, amused at the speed with which the kid was getting himself out of his tunic and t-shirt, sitting bare-chested on the bed while reaching for his boots to unlace them. And what a chest it was. Fuck, so young. Unflawed. Not a goddamned scar. Too healthy, too...normal. But it would do; would do just nicely.

"Anyway, what do you do and don't do, man?"

"Guess you'll find out." Dan grinned, evasive, stretched his legs out and crossed both arms over his clothed chest. Watching the show before him while he felt remarkably at ease. Saw the boots come off, then the socks, the camo trousers remaining, or 'pants' as the yank would call them.

"Are you going to undress?" Matt stood up, hands on his belt, looking down at the sprawled man on the chair. "Show me the goods. Is only fair, buddy."

Dan laughed, shoved the shades off his eyes and chucked them on top of a rickety table behind him. "That'll do?"

Matt rolled his eyes, but kept looking at the freshly bared face for a while longer. "Dunno why you cover them up." Muttered to himself while stripping out of the trousers and standing in his briefs.

Dan said nothing, his brows rose at the murmur, then shrugged and started to take off his own boots, then socks. Was a good boy, remembered the correct order. He glanced up. "Afraid it's damaged goods, kid."

"Yeah, yeah, sure, old man." Matt grinned, fingers beneath the waistband of his brief. Dan saw the kid pull them down and step out of them, before his shirt covered his eyes for a moment while he pulled it over his head. Bent down to undo belt and slip down trousers, while the jarhead was fumbling with the pile of his clothes, bent over the bed. Firm arse in his vision. Smooth, damned perfect as well, and Dan almost forgot to step out of the trousers that pooled around his ankles. Holy shit, he didn't quite know where they made those kids so buffed-up fresh-faced flawless, but he didn't complain.

He was naked when he came back up, slumped himself once more onto the chair, as sprawled as before, and watched Matt turn. Presented with the full view of a nicely sized cock. Dan hadn't had a cut one before, in fact he hadn't...not go there.

"Shit!" Matt exclaimed, staring at Dan's naked body. "You didn't exaggerate. Holy Christ, you got a fucking impressive collection." Pointing at the scars, most of all the large ones crossing Dan's abs. "Time for an inventory, buddy."

Dan laughed, shaking his head. "What's that, eh? Your idea of foreplay?"

"Call it what you like." Matt stepped closer, cock at Dan's eye level, who enjoyed the view. "Let's start on the top. Face?" Index finger running along the knife scar that crossed from left temple to the corner of Dan's mouth. Dan was still laughing, but his head stilled at the touch. He couldn't help being drawn into the light-hearted banter. Unable to remember when last he'd laughed like that, not even grin, other than smirk or sneer. He'd been in a damn dark place despite his promise to the Baroness. "Bloody Afghans. Thought I'd eyed up their women." He pointed at another knife scar on his biceps. "Got that at the same time. Took some convincing to calm them down." He grinned, couldn't help himself again, the way the kid was throwing his head back and laughing at his explanation was goddamned infectious. Didn't point out the collection of thin knife scars in his upper back and on top of his shoulders. Hardly noticeable, even though he always remembered that young German soldier's face when he caught a glimpse of the white lines on his skin. Not go there.

“Fucking ironic.” Matt sniggered.

“Guess so...” Dan hadn’t ever really thought about it, and now that Matt pointed out the obvious, he felt a wave of hilarity roll up from deep inside. They’d almost killed him during those nine months in the mountains, because they’d thought he had impure thoughts towards their women. Back then he should have pissed himself with laughter instead of kneeling in a cave and letting an enemy shave his face.

Vadim.

“And this one?” Matt’s finger rested on the neat round scar at the left shoulder.

Dan frowned. “Bullet. Close range. In an odd way that bullet saved my life.” A Russian cunt. A raid on a house and a chance to get out alive.

Vadim.

“What?” Matt stepped even closer, made his way between Dan’s legs, who felt invited to grab the smooth and muscular arse with both hands, rather enjoying himself while copping a feel.

“Never mind, kid, long story.” Squeezed the buttocks, elicited a squirm that made Dan chuckle. The yank’s growing interest was undeniably obvious, right there in front of his face.

“Fair enough.” Matt moved his hips until his cock brushed Dan’s lips, while his hand ran up and down the other’s left arm. “I’ve seen that one before.”

Fingertips bumping over the V-shaped scar on the biceps. “Thought, like, whoa, what a strange motherfucker. ‘V’ for victory.”

Dan shook his head, caught the tip of the cock with his tongue a couple of times, with utmost deliberation. He grinned, despite the memory, focussed on marvelling at lack of foreskin instead. “Not for Victory, but it’s an even longer story.” Snatching a taste, “let’s just say I’m a kinky motherfucker.”

V. For Vadim.

“OK.” Matt grinned, looked down, stooped, and ran a hand between Dan’s pecs down to the heavily scarred abdomen. “I bet that one’s a fucking big story.”

“Bloody well is. Car bomb while I was guarding the British ambassador in Kabul. Tore me into enough pieces to have me in ICU for weeks. The hand’s a result of that as well. Fucking arsewipes.”

A hospital in India. Darkness, fear and pain, and then a promise. A promise that couldn't be kept.

Vadim.

"Shit, man, you've been around. No wonder they call you Mad Dog." Matt squirmed closer to touch the scar on the thigh, his cock brushing against Dan's cheek in the process. "That one?"

Dan rubbed his face against the hard flesh, chuckling at the eager jump and the groan that followed. "That was a scary one. Flesh wound, Soviet patrol. They thought I was dead, covered in blood and shit, and left me lying under a pile of Mudja corpses."

"Fuck! How did you get out?"

Dan tapped the side of his nose, grinned. "That's my secret."

I can read you on my skin.

Matt laughed and Dan could feel the vibration of that laughter run through his own body before the yank was about to turn to the other side to try and find more scars.

"Nuh-huh." Dan stopped him, steadied Matt's hips with both hands, while shaking his head. "Enough foreplay. Time for business."

Matt didn't manage to answer anything resembling speech before his cock vanished between Dan's lips, being pushed further in and down the throat. He didn't say anything either a few minutes later when all he could do was groan and mutter nonsensical sounds. Sometimes his eyes closed, head fallen into the back of his neck, rhythmically riding the sensations; other times his head fell forward, eyes open, staring down at the way Dan's cheeks hollowed before pushing forward, swallowing as much of the length as he could. Matt's hand tangled in the dark hair, almost losing balance a couple of times, bracing his legs further while losing himself amidst moans and shuddering tremors.

Dan bloody well enjoyed himself. In fact, hadn't enjoyed himself that much since...since he didn't want to remember. Sucked that fresh-faced buff bodied jarhead with the same enthusiasm with which he had tasted the Russian's cock. Used the tricks he'd acquired in all those years, blowing the kid's brains out while giving him the blowjob of his young life.

He was rewarded soon enough, with a spectacular show of orgasm, convulsions, breathless groans, and trembling loss of balance. Followed by buckling knees and completely spaced out keeling backwards.

Shit, that was good. Dan grinned and wiped his lips, watching the yank collapse on the bed behind him. Bloody hell, he'd missed that, could get used to this again. The taste, the feel, plus the whole hog of light-hearted ease.

"Anyone out there?" Dan smirked at the kid, who took a moment to come back round to the land of the living. What a way to spend an off-duty morning.

Matt groaned, waved a hand at Dan, then scrambled into a semblance of sitting. "Guess so." He grinned as stupidly as only a young guy could. From one ear to the other. "You're kinda good at that."

Dan laughed, slouching even further down in his chair. "Cocksucking fag, I know."

"You wanna fuck me now?" Matt's lingering breathlessness gave his voice an interesting shade of husky, even smoothing his accent. Dan figured the kid should always talk like that and he'd be quite willing to do his occasional damnest to make sure it happened.

"No."

"Why?" Matt's disbelief made Dan chuckle and shrug. "Don't get it, thought that's what you wanted."

"Why?" Dan mimicked Matt's question, grabbed the plastic water bottle close to the bed and had a good swig before handing it to the kid.

"Cause that's what guys do. Especially older ones." Matt chugged down half the bottle in one go, wiped his lips and grinned at Dan. "Why you laughing?"

"Because I figure you're buying into that sugar daddy shit a bit too much."

"Hm." Matt huffed, put the water safely out of reach, ran a hand over his shaved head. "Then what do you want? I'm pretty easy."

Dan laughed, "I got that. The 'easy' bit."

"Should I be, like, offended now?" Matt grinned with teeth and all, leaning forward and getting hold of Dan's hand. With the surprise on his side he managed to pull him out of the chair and over to the bed, where Dan let himself fall down onto his side. Torso on the bed, legs partly on the floor. Sprawled once more.

"Your choice, kid, but if it were me, I wouldn't be offended." Dan wanted a fag, glanced over at the bergan, so fucking far away, couldn't be arsed. "OK,

buddy.” Matt’s hand wandered across Dan’s chest, then up, and down again, ending on the scars. Suddenly grinning, he leaned forward, intending to kiss. His lips touched Dan’s for a mere split second, before Dan turned his head away.

“Hey,” Matt frowned, “what’s up? Just want to make out.” He tried again, got the same reaction. “Fuck that,” Matt pulled away, rolling his eyes. “I’m not a fucking whore.”

“No. You’re not.” Dan paused, “but perhaps I am.”

Matt’s frown smoothed and he started to grin. Seemed nothing could piss on this guy’s parade for long. “What do you mean? You got cooties?” He smirked, “go on, how many blokes did you have? See if you can freak me.”

Oh shit. Bull’s eye. Dan felt like an idiot for the sudden embarrassed squirm that set in before he could stop it. “Well...”

“Yeah?” Matt sniggered. “Twenty? Thirty? Fifty or even a hundred? You’re old enough to have fucked yourself through a whole regiment.”

“Aye...” if his face was going to flush now, Dan would kill that kid. Seriously. “Guess I could have.”

“And did you?” Matt prodded him, then poked Dan’s chest when he didn’t get an answer. “Did you? Did you?”

“Not...quite.” Dan sighed, no point in further evasive action, he could tackle the junior marine and punch his lights out, but what a waste of muscles, skin, body and opportunity that would be.

“Oh fuckin’ hell, man, you gonna tell me how many or not?” Another poke and a double effort prod, and Dan relented.

“One.”

Silence. Open mouthed disbelief.

Dan sighed, nodded, scratched his groin. “Aye, you heard right. One.”

“Uh...why? You’re, what, forty-something?”

“One. Forty-*one*, mate. Too old to be a monogamous prick. I know, no need to say it.”

Matt shook his head. “You really are fucking mad. But whatever has rocked your boat, bit too late now, buddy. For the monogamy.” He pointed at Dan’s face with a huge-ass grin. “You tell me why we shouldn’t make out.”

Dan shrugged. Why. Why the fuck shouldn’t he? “Guess there’s no reason, really.”

He had just about spoken the last word aloud when he was grabbed and drawn into a full-blown snog with the enthusiasm of a twenty-one year old. Dan barely managed to catch a breath here and there, assaulted by lips, tongue and teeth, while chuckling in the back of his throat. Damn, the kid was a good kisser, and he allowed himself to just enjoy the ride, which eventually took him to use those condoms after all and shag the delicious arse of his baby-yank.

1991 Chapter XXIII—Longitude

April 1991, Helsinki

Vadim was let through heavy oak panelled doors into the Ambassador's office. They swung silently open to reveal a large room, elegantly furnished. The Baroness sat behind the desk, a barrier of dark, gleaming wood and brass, the epitome of natural authority and understated class. She did not look up when he entered, instead continuing to write with a lacquered fountain pen, until her aide left and the doors closed behind her visitor.

There had been days when Vadim entered a room and everybody looked at him. Not to be acknowledged, now, and then almost ignored. He could feel his heart sink, sink deeper from the not too elevated position it had climbed up to. Felt it was useless, and he shouldn't have come.

Baroness de Vilde glanced up to acknowledge her visitor at last, face devoid of any expression. The cool features contrasted with the friendly purple and yellow of a bouquet of flowers in a vase beside her. She studied him in silence, nothing escaped the scrutiny of those acutely intelligent eyes. She had not changed at all since Vadim had last seen her. Grey hair still perfectly coiffed, same pearl necklace, aged but finely manicured hands, similar silk blouse and cashmere suit.

The place made him feel even smaller, and he needed a lot of strength to keep his shoulders square. A conscious decision to stay upright, but his eyes down. He found it hard to look around much. As if he was no longer used to it. As if there was nothing left to see. Did not meet her eyes, but knew she was looking at him. Should be looking up, but found it near impossible.

"Please take a seat, Mr. Krasnorada." Indicating the chair in front of her desk. An economic gesture, as polite but curt as the deliberate use of 'Mr.' She had called him 'Major', three months ago, had made a point of courtesy and respect.

Mister. The word didn't sting. It should have. But it had melted away, the rank, whatever title, whatever part of him had taken pride in that. Chastised. Too often. He wanted to turn around and leave, already drained of the strength that he had gathered.

He sat down. It was an order, it was easy to follow orders. Eyes glancing up to meet her gaze, at least touch it before he stared at the polished wood again. Took his hands from the rests of the chair and placed them on his thighs, elbows tight to

his torso. He didn't feel at ease in his own body. It appeared too big to fill out. He should have gone out to the sea, should have cast it all off. It was stupid being here. He had nothing to offer. Nothing to bargain with. Didn't have the strength to bargain. Damaged.

She waited a moment, gaze never wavering, before cutting straight to the point. "Why are you here to see me, Mr. Krasnorada?" 'Here', an embassy that wasn't her own in an office she had borrowed from her colleague in Finland.

"I need to find Dan," Vadim murmured, then cleared his throat, and repeated, because he wasn't sure it had been audible. "I need to find Daniel McFadyen. I need to speak to him." And give him a proper goodbye, at least. Can't disgrace him, too, of all people. Not like that. He felt the thought cut deep, surprised at the amount of pain that caused. Surprised he could feel that kind of pain now.

The Baroness was watching him while her gaze remained dispassionate. She studied the man, the gestures, each movement and every motion he should have done—and had left aborted.

"I was hoping you would request this." She screwed the cap back onto her fountain pen and placed the exquisite object onto the marbled surface of the desk, placing her hands together on top of it. Her eyes never lost their steadfast gaze. "I am afraid Dan is not in Europe, and while I am privy to his whereabouts, I feel unable to satisfy your request at this stage."

So, that was a no. He could go now.

Vadim felt numb, and a raging pain beneath the surface. Deemed not worthy. And who could fault her for it. He nodded, as if understanding, but he didn't.

"Mr. Krasnorada, do you remember the promise I made to you three months ago?" Pausing, she waited patiently.

Promise. Passport. A job. No more freezing, no more running. Getting up to work, and leaving work to go to bed. That was what other people did with their lives. He didn't want to live like a dog.

"Yes, I remember." He kept his eyes down. Expected her to say something like 'forget it', and didn't know how to expect and prepare for it. They had played too many games with him. He knew nothing. Could expect nothing. They had kept him on his toes. Don't expect. Let it all happen. At least look at her, he thought,

and tried. He was a beggar now, finally hit the last depth on this way down. If she made him beg, he would. There was no pride. He couldn't afford pride.

She nodded once. "It is good you remember, because my words still stand. However, they are not a promise, but a deal I have to offer you."

She stood up, walked around the desk, unafraid of leaving her barrier of gleaming oak, shiny brass and unshakable authority. Standing close, in front of the chair, a slight figure of an elderly lady, yet exuding natural authority. "Do you understand, Mr. Krasnorada? A deal for both parts." Looking at him, waiting.

She was smaller than he had thought. The moment she got up, that moment he wanted to stand. It would be more natural to stand. He looked up, met her gaze now, part surprised, part feeling the walls get closer, not sure if that was a good thing. He didn't expect anything good in a place like this. But then. She hadn't been unkind to him. Hadn't pulled any of the tricks of party or KGB, functionary, nomenclature. Didn't mean she couldn't, the skeptical part of him reiterated. And she prompted him. That was easier than come up with words and thoughts by himself. He could just respond. Nothing to lose, nothing to win.

She knows where Dan is.

Well, something to win, then. It took concentration. "Baroness..." Whatever you're asking. Whatever you want. Nothing else to bargain with. The truth. Papers. No longer running. Because he had no idea where he would run to. "What is my part of the deal?" Not 'would be'.

Once more the nod and this unending patience. "We need to know if you are still useful." Not 'I', but 'we'. "Three months ago, I would have offered you to work for us, together with Daniel McFadyen. It would have probably been a fairly straightforward process." She paused, before explaining further. "'Us', you must understand, Mr. Krasnorada, is right now a non-further explained entity. Let us call the 'we' simply 'I' for the matter of simplicity."

A shift, and she leaned against the desk with her left hand as support. "As it is now, I need to find out for certain whether you will not break under strain, if you can still function, and if you are able to fulfill the tasks that might be given you. Thus, you will be sent to attempt getting through the SAS Selection, where it will be ensured you will be tested to breaking point—and beyond. Make no mistake, Mr. Krasnorada, you will be tested." Her clear eyes rested on him, expressionless. "If you are successful and satisfy the requirements and thus instill the necessary

trust, you will be considered for the work that had been proposed for a man with a military background like you, and a leaning towards the renegade.” Another pause, she let the words sink.

Vadim’s eyes widened a fraction, then narrowed, to hide the shock. Soldier. SAS. Mother and father and bastard brother of Spetsnaz. He felt curiosity, a touch of the mystique. Tested. Useful. The words impacted on his mind, and he could feel responses build inside him, responses that had nothing to do with the leaden tiredness that bound every muscle in place as if to mock the thing he had been. Impossible. Work for the Brits, in a military capacity. That was the closest he had ever got to treason.

You are no longer KGB. Vympel. Spetsnaz. One big, gigantic waste of time and money and effort now. His jaw muscles tensed as he bit down on the bitterness. If he passed the test, he could do things he was good at. Things that didn’t require much more than what he could do. Had done for ages. Had been good at.

The Baroness’ voice cut through his thoughts. “I might need another man who is able to act as alpha wolf without backup from the pack. This is why, Mr. Krasnorada, I want you to truly understand what your side of the deal will be and I want you to ask questions if you do not believe you understand.”

Silence, she waited, looking at him, allowing the time and pause to speak. Soldier. Return to being a soldier. Whom was he kidding? He could never be a civilian. And never again serve the Soviet Union. The bleeding, dismembered corpse that was something else now, something he didn’t understand. He had served the Russian people. They required him no longer.

He wanted to make one reservation. Never against his own people. But they wouldn’t be that stupid. He nodded. “You need to understand, I was ... part of the Interior Ministry. We were under their command.”

“I know.” No need for explanation. No ‘I read your file’, no nothing. Two simple words. “And you need to understand that especially this, which could now be construed as your weakness, will be tested. Interrogation, confinement. Let alone physical fitness. Those men will be out for your blood. You are forty-one, the ones you are competing against might be twenty years younger. Even if you successfully pass the physical tests, your mental stability will have to be examined. Again and again, and they will be out to break you.” Another pause, never a change in inflexion and tone.

Forty-one? He did the numbers. Correct. He was mildly astonished. Somehow, life had just gone on without him. He remembered the Colonel, hard as rock, the fucking bastard, what, mid-forties? Back when he had been captain, and later major. Long ago. Compete. The word made his face twitch.

Ridiculous. The odds were ridiculous. He was almost used up, how much could there be left? Only to fail again? Ridicule and hostility and...

"If you are deemed useful, my part of the deal is a passport, British citizenship, and the chance to meet and possibly work with Dan McFadyen. If you are not successful, I will personally ensure you gain a permanent permit to stay in the UK and permission to work, but no passport. You will have a job, a place to live, and you will never again have any contact with anything or anyone military." Silence, allowing him time to truly grasp what she was saying between the lines.

But she had said one crucial thing. Work with Dan. Get a chance to maybe tell him. Talk. The one unfinished business he had to take care of. He'd jump through hoops and do absolutely anything to accept the consequences of what he'd done. He owed Dan at least the truth. Never mind a quarter *million* pounds.

"Do you understand what I am offering you, Mr. Krasnorada?"

He groaned and closed his eyes. Could feel that protective layer slip away. There was always the bullet. Always the way out. A life. Or Dan. Civilian, or soldier. Dan. Dan still was. Dan could do it with his fucked knees, and fucked hand. How difficult could it be? Might not be the strongest, or the fastest of the lot, but he'd actually seen combat. Survived on his guts.

Break you. He kept his lips pressed together. Interrogation. Stress. He didn't want to face that. He didn't want to break and cry like a lost child. Didn't ... your mind's fucking you again, Vadim, he thought. Nothing has happened yet. It's an offer—you try, and are rewarded either way. That is the most generous deal anybody has ever offered you. He nodded, silently, then inhaled. "I will have time to prepare for the test, yes?" Running, diet, weight lifting, push-ups. Part of him already adjusted. Knew what he would have to do to succeed, work on a plan. The last complex thought had been how to get her to meet him.

"Yes, of course." Somehow her voice seemed to soften a little. "This is not a punishment, Mr. Krasnorada, this is a deal. A deal as fair as I can make it, for both of us." Her hand moved slowly along the marbled surface of the desk before returning to her lap.

“Four weeks to train at the Royal Marines training centre, then on towards the SAS training camp in Hereford for the first part of selection. If you succeed, you will go on to two further stages, and after that ... it remains to be seen.”

Royal Marines. SAS. If they even had an inkling of an idea what he was—had been—they’d rip him apart. He was glad he didn’t have to stand. Four weeks. He could trust his body to get back into shape, enough so he would have a fighting chance. Just a chance to not be exposed as a fool. He nodded. Always another way. There was no better option. There was no option at all if he ever wanted to have a life again.

She took a breath, her smooth flow of words was stalled for a moment. “It is not my place to interfere with affairs that are not mine.” She looked at him with increased intensity, “but I feel it necessary to ensure a friend close to me is not going to be hurt unnecessarily any more. I assume you are able to ascertain what I am saying? I might understand your motives, the reasons behind your actions, and realize it seemed at the time the only option, but I want you to understand in return the effect it had on this friend of mine. Do you agree you require to know?”

Her English appeared to grow more complex, and he was almost guessing what she was saying. He had to understand how much he had hurt Dan? Now comes the punishment part, he thought. He looked at her, tried to meet that gaze again. It’s enough, too much already, he thought. He had no words to justify it, no words to apologize, or explain. Futile, even thinking about it. Those were facts. He had run away.

Honoured to meet the man who Dan loves.

No honour now. “Yes, I...require to know,” he said.

She straightened and nodded. There was a long pause, a silence fit for a barrage of words, but she did nothing of that ilk, just looked at him. “He loves you and always will, but he is too broken right now to see it.” She began to move away from the desk. “If you do pass the tests, then make him see.”

She turned and continued to walk out of the room where the aide was waiting.

Vadim took that with an unmoved face. *Too broken right now to see it.* It was the worst blow, somehow, and with that, he was dismissed. Bitchslapped and dismissed. Left with a scrap of hope. Mercy.

He could feel his chest burn like from a long, exhausting swim, the one discipline he had loved and had never been fast enough for. Exhausted. His shoulders ran out of strength, and he leaned forward to cover his face in his hands. Closed his eyes, hoped there was nobody to see this, then again, cameras had already taken everything else from him.

After some time, he came up, inhaling sharply, deeply, like a man who had just escaped drowning. Stood, wanted to run and had no strength left to do it. He'd made a decision, he'd follow through with it. As much as it scared him.

Dan. You deserve more. The feeling of obligation was bad, a bad thing to carry around. Nothing gave him strength, only limited what he could inflict on what self-respect he had left. Maybe he could tell Dan why, at least that. What Moscow had achieved Kabul had never managed.

Ridiculous there should be a knock on the panelled doors, but there was, and they opened slowly, long after Vadim had stood back up. "Sir?" it was the aide, perfectly mannered, "there are two gentlemen to escort you."

Two gentlemen, indeed. Two men in uniform, and green berets. Royal Marines, at least not Military Police.

She had to have known he was going to accept the deal. She had to have had faith in him.

* * *

Vadim was being escorted out of the room. Few words exchanged, no necessity to indulge in pleasantries. The two Marines were taking him straight from the office towards the front of the building, where a vehicle was waiting.

Vadim was ushered inside the car, taken to the airport and onto the next flight to Britain, the necessary papers already waiting in the aircraft.

'Diplomatic baggage', one way to allow a stateless former Soviet Army Spetsnaz officer without passport nor affiliation to enter the United Kingdom.

Once in the plane, Vadim kept watching his hands, head bowed, elbows on his thighs, hands loosely folded. The sounds and smells of the aircraft. Different from the Hinds, of course, nothing quite like the beloved 'hunchback', the closest approximation of man's dream to cross a magical horse with a flying carpet, and tool of deliverance in the wastelands. And of revenge. Vadim kept his breath

steady, remembered the Hinds over Afghanistan, remembered the paras, comrades getting ready to cut lines of support, take out convoys of the enemy out in the wilderness. Remembered himself clutching a rifle, ready to fight. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the seat. Now that all decisions were made, he could rest.

Sometimes he thought he had never needed rest. Ten years ago, he had hardly ever slept. A different man.

He loves you and always will, but he is too broken right now to see it.

No. He couldn't think about it. That hurt, that hurt badly, and it didn't make any sense right now. Nothing of it did. It seemed paradox, and he had dropped out of philosophy classes because he found it hard to battle problems that had no solution. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and willed himself to relax.

And sleep.

The plane eventually landed near Lymington, South Devon, the Commando Training Centre. To Vadim a place like any other, and the first camp he'd ever been to in Britain. Once an enemy, and now?

He was taken out, made to wait while papers were sorted in the guard room, an armed guard standing beside him. It seemed to take a suspiciously short while, as if they had known he was going to arrive. Then a different man appeared, a new face amongst unknown ones, gesturing to the guard to get back to his position.

"Mr Krasnorada, follow me to the medical centre for your initial check-up. We have been waiting for you."

There. He'd said it. They had known. Seemed the lady had had more faith than she had let on.

Vadim watched, then turned to look who was following, didn't think they would. But used to having handlers around him. He nodded to the man, following. Couldn't help studying the place, lines of sight, state of the buildings, uniforms, gear. Took in all the information, felt how his brain returned to processing all the data, mulling it through and storing it away at the same time.

His name sounded strange spoken in English, he kept thinking that. He'd always feel strange, never at home. Never again at home. She had arranged all this, and it seemed like a processing line, people would work on him, many against him, probably most, and in the end ... maybe Dan.

The only thing of this strange country he knew apart from the language. He was treated with a pronounced disinterest that appeared studied. Lack of curiosity, just British laxity or deliberate attitude? He was being glanced at by some young recruits that were passing as they marched in a straight line, getting drilled into perfect tin soldiers.

The Provo Sergeant was taking him past the NAAFI shop to a bungalow towards the East of the camp, a plaque announcing it housed the medical centre. Letting him inside, he spoke a few quiet words with a nurse, who looked fresh and far too young in her starched uniform. She nodded, left the room, to return a moment later with the announcement the Medical Officer in charge was ready to see the newcomer, and that he requested to see him alone.

The Provost raised his brows but refrained from questioning the superior's decision. Officer was Officer, commissioned by the Crown. He gestured for Vadim to step into the examination room. "You will be given your clothes later."

Vadim glanced at the Provost, not sure about protocol, assumed it was strange or different, then nodded. Clothes. That should mean sports kit. The room itself was as uninspiring as any medical centre's room could ever be. White. Plastic chair, table. Steel instruments, grey linoleum floor and partially tiled walls, the rest painted in the obligatory MoD magnolia white. Skeleton, charts and medical books on a wooden shelf in a corner. A desk, a chair in front, and a thin, grey-haired man in his early fifties behind it. Glancing up over rimless spectacles. One hand on a very thick file on his desk, the other indicating the plastic chair.

Vadim's eyes slipped off the tiles, didn't like tiles, and knew too many reasons why. Quick glance over the other man, then his eyes rested for a moment on the file. Now, that would be his. Where on earth could they even find that much medical information about him?

"I am Dr Williams. Please sit down."

He sat down, answered that gaze, then looked again at the file. How much could they know? How much *was* there to know? "Yes sir." Sir, not comrade.

Oh, the protocol. Wrong country. Wrong army.

"First things first. How much English do you understand, do you need me to speak slowly?"

"I'm competent. Weak on slang." Vadim was a little surprised they even considered that. Speak slowly. A strange notion.

The doctor nodded. "I need to check a few facts. Your name is Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada? Tell me your service history in the Soviet Army, your rank, number and deployments, to the best of your memory." He opened the file.

Vadim confirmed his identity, told the short story; military and athletic career, both one, two ways to serve, officer academy and then, later, a full move away from sports and into the military. He stalled for a moment before he said the word Vympel, kept his eyes down when he said Interior Ministry. Nothing he should be saying, nothing he was a part of anymore. Deployments, missions, duties. Kill the Afghan president. Prepare the country for the invasion. Behind enemy lines, as if the fucking enemy knew its own lines or as if those were actually lines and not a jumble of improvised bullshit. Rattled down the deployments, Afghanistan was one haze of heat, hard to remember it all, he did remember meeting Dan, remembered the need and the rare encounters. Forced his mind back. Debriefed his life. Some model soldier's life. What medals he got and why. That one was easy. He remembered the official praise and paraphrased it. Valour. Above and beyond. How he'd climbed the ranks. Insanely high ranks in spetsnaz. Major.

He listened to himself and thought he should be proud, confident. Long list of achievements. Disgraced and kicked out of a crumbling place, with barely his body intact. No alternatives, no options, no way out. He thought he'd give it all to still have Katya and the children. Still have Dan. He fell silent, all that felt meaningless, children's games, pompous titles and strange adventures in a wild and strange dream land.

The Medical Officer was listening attentively, sometimes ticking an item off on the file, then turning a page, listening once more, occasionally writing in the margins and making notes, adding and verifying. Finally, when Vadim finished, he looked back up, nodding.

"Well, Major Krasnorada, you have had a most distinguished military career." The doctor gave respect where respect was due, even though it could only last a moment. Major was once, now nevermore.

"As you can see, we have a fairly substantial file on you. Our agencies have been busy and understandably so." He spoke distinctly, easy to follow. "Rest assured, some of what is in this file is entirely confidential and only accessible to me or another Medical Officer should you be transferred. We are under the Oath of

Hippocrates, as you might now. Thus some of the information I have access to and, consequently, questions I will ask later will remain between you and me in my capacity as Medical Officer in charge of your health.” He pointed to a separate file, secured in an opened folder.

Vadim didn’t trust the oath. Everything committed to paper was a potential trap. As long as ranks and authorities were involved, a potentially deadly trap. And the thing that sat on the desk in front of the medical officer looked like a whole field of landmines. The bridges behind him had long since burnt, and before him: this. His eyes trailed to the separate file, the one that might be even more dangerous. He had no idea how they could have amassed so much information. It seemed unlikely the Ministry had given them all this. But if they had, he was as naked as he could possibly be.

He nodded, confirming he had understood. Hoped it looked like acceptance. Nothing he could do about it, but it struck him in all the wrong ways.

“I need to verify occurrences after you were taken and charged by the KGB. You must understand while the physical examination will bring much to light, we need to assure ourselves of your mental stability.” The doctor paused, turning another page in the file. Another page, for Vadim, another life, and the end of everything he had known.

Disturbed. The word Manke had used. Mental stability. Vadim didn’t feel strong, knew he was much worse for wear, worse than in Afghanistan. There, at least, he had been part of something. Belonged. Lead. Had something to work for. His family. Dan. Home. The rush to fight, to kill, to survive, get drunk, get laid. All of this was gone now, and he didn’t even have the strength to miss it.

You probably thought your training was bad, he could hear the KGB officer say. They were only testing the machine, then. But I will understand how the parts work. And putting it back together is not, repeat, not a factor in this. Do you understand?

Vadim nodded again, but his mouth was dry. That was it. He felt like a bag of disassembled parts. Pieces of something more complex, more fragile and less reliable than an AK-47, scattered around in the dirt, and in pitch darkness.

“Tell me, what was done to you during imprisonment. Physical and mental interrogation techniques? Mode of incarceration?” The doctor adjusted his glasses,

the look on his face neutral. "I am not here to force you through a trauma, remembering. I am here because I need to know."

The complete terror and despair defied words. Impossible. Vadim wanted to get up and walk out. Knew that was a common response. Shame, fear.

"At first, they warmed me up." Preliminary beatings. "I was beaten by a group of men." And kicked. Punched. Face, groin, ribs. Concrete floor, cold and wet. Tied up. "They were instructed to be hard on me."

Break the spetsnaz. Those dogs can take pain.

"First session. Build rapport with the prisoner. Ask him whether he's uncomfortable. Establish the rules." He could feel everything drain from his voice, his face was cold. "I was told I would be charged with treason and told to sign a confession. It was untrue, and I didn't. Treason means execution." He inhaled. "Then they became unpleasant. Started to play...mindgames. Told me they could make it easy, or not. All my decision. They would walk out with the confession, no other option." He looked at his hands and could see they had become fists. "Humiliation, they tried to break my pride." And they did, eventually. "The man knew me well. Knew too much. Used it all. I...was then put under strain, sensory deprivation, sleep deprivation, interrupted by beatings. I was disoriented. I was cold." He paused, then understood the doctor might not know what all this meant, what the procedure was. "That was in the Lubyanka. That's the KGB prison in Moscow. They told me I wouldn't be kept with other prisoners." Because I would *enjoy* that too much. The shower, the knife fights.

"I vanished in a hole. Nothing in there, just managed to lie down. Couldn't hear or see a thing. I don't know how long that lasted. Solitary confinement. I was talking to myself a lot." Singing. Remembering. Speaking to dead people, dead soldiers, dead family members, people that never existed. Going insane, knowing it, feeling concentration slip away. Remembering Afghanistan. Dan. Remembering everything, every kiss, every bite, every glint from a blade. Using up his mind, using up the memories, sucking them dry to not die of thirst, until they were pale. Until I thought I could no longer remember what sun on skin tasted like. Everything was darkness and concrete, including my body and soul.

"I think my ribs healed in that time." Purely mechanical tensing of muscles, thoughts of having to be able to move, maybe fight, when they came. If they came.

The fear they had forgotten him. The only acknowledgement from outside was the food. Not a word. No way to measure time. Lost track of time every time he tried.

“I have no idea when I signed, but I did.” Vadim swallowed. “That was the hard part. I was transferred out of the Lubyanka. The trial was complicated.”

He was fairly sure he hadn’t collaborated, but had had a carnal relationship with a man called Dan. Hard to remember his smell or what it felt like. Had been asked about dishonourable conduct. Had denied it. Had been asked whether he had had sex with a man. Had admitted that. Nothing dishonourable about it. He was pretty sure he had remained adamant about that. Nothing shameful whatsoever.

“They told me I’d get executed for treason.” And the relief. The sheer, sweet, blissful relief. He had been so grateful.

“I had a visitor. My father. It wasn’t easy.” How old the man had become, how easily he cried, how he had tried to keep the accusations away, but they were in every movement. Treason. KGB cleaning out house. How things had gotten so much worse, things happened in Moscow, bad things, inflation, nobody knew what was happening, treason, the KGB had mocked him for bringing up a degenerate that took it up the ass from an enemy. Vadim could picture that, but all his father had said was whether the KGB had told him the truth. Yes, they had. Those were facts. His father couldn’t understand that, but touched his hands and cried. Execution was pretty soon.

And the fairytale. Brave effort, so useless, so human. At least Dan had survived. Told his father he wouldn’t suffer, and it was true. Dying was easy, living was hard. Reduced the old man to tears again, felt embarrassed because he knew the bastards were watching, eager for blood. Told his father to go home. Washed, shaved, then waited for execution. He should have died in Afghanistan. What point was there to come back. Tin coffins were a much cleaner option. Better men than he had died. He was sure the KGB shared that sentiment.

“They brought me into a tiled room, made to kneel in the centre. The doctor was so drunk he could hardly stand.” And I only hoped he’d be sober enough to be able to tell death from life, that was his only job. The official was there, looking disdainful, like he considered it all to be a complete waste of his time. “I was waiting and had my hands tied, and then he...”

pulled an envelope out of his pocket and opened it, unfolded a piece of paper. While I was sweating like an animal and felt my body panic. Thought I

would throw up. Leaving this life like that, throwing up. He stepped close, the paper in his hand, and dropped it in front of me, stepped back, looked at me. I bent down and read what was written. Execution aborted. Weeks ago. A retrial for lack of evidence.

“... told me there was a retrial. I was brought back.”

Only then threw up in my cell.

“Mock execution. It didn’t make sense to do that. It was about how much they despised me.”

Not facing death like a spetsnaz. He wished he could have, but he was just an animal scared of death. One life, nothing after that. He just couldn’t believe there was anything, any sense, rhyme or reason.

He swallowed, looked at the doctor. “They kept me in solitary prior to the trial. Told me it wouldn’t make a difference. I believed them. I wanted it to be over.” Over and done with, with no memories left to keep him sane.

He hadn’t been able to follow most of the re-trial’s proceedings. Too complicated, too convoluted, he was too tired and exhausted after being brought in. People were shouting and interrupting each other, and he was answering questions. Often, he couldn’t remember. Just simply couldn’t remember. Yes, he was a degenerate. But not a traitor. He could remember moments when he had wondered whether he could leave and go away and be something else, but the Russian people. They deserved better. They deserved his love and loyalty and service. He thought he said as much while being questioned by the judge. Lots of noise from the onlookers at that. He was accused of manipulation. Nothing manipulative about it. He had long ago stopped doing things for orders and superiors. Knew the only good thing about Russia were her people. Stuck to it. Last bit to cling to. Owed himself that much. The only thing left in his weakened mind.

Next thing he knew, two years sentence for dishonourable conduct and what amounted to corruption. Wasteful management of resources. They made him responsible for every rifle that failed to show up between being brought in to Afghanistan, and being pulled out. How ironic. They had made those two accusations stick. On top of deviant sexual behaviour.

So, back to prison, dishonourable discharge, no pension, no bonuses, his military career wiped out, no rank. A disgraced former henchman. He knew the real criminals in prison would like that a lot.

The transport got diverted, they drove a long time, first by car, then train to St Petersburg, then car again, and he never arrived in prison. Instead, he was made to step out in the snow, and told to walk to that gas station. Too much open space around him. It was cold.

But he didn't argue.

The Medical Officer had sat throughout and listened with patience. Not a single interruption. Nothing except neutrality. Calm, steady, making notes and moving paper with faint rustling noises. He waited a long while in silence until he finally nodded. "I have information about the re-trial in the confidential file."

The sordid details and accusations. Russia was no longer ruled by the KGB, but run by corruption. The doctor's hand rested on the additional folder. "You were let out close to the Finnish border on 24th December 1990. Three months ago. I have information on your whereabouts in Sweden and we were able to verify the details."

Vadim nodded. He wondered whether Manke knew, whether they had called him. And the Russian teacher. And everybody else he had spoken to. Good, swift, clean work. Took only a few phone calls, but still.

The Officer closed the main file, pulled the confidential one on top. "You are an extraordinary case for the British Forces, but you will be treated the same way as everyone else. Consider yourself a new recruit regarding the examinations." He gestured to an adjacent door. "Go and take a shower, you will find everything necessary there. Leave your clothing and return."

Vadim nodded again, vaguely relieved it hadn't been that bad, up to now at least. Recruit. That meant physical examination. Well. Yes. He didn't look forward to it, but he'd been there before. More than once. Nothing in the man's face or eyes or posture spoke of disgust. Not even compassion. Vadim wasn't sure which of the two would have been worse.

The doctor pointed to a glass vessel. "Make sure to hand a urine sample in before the shower." With that Vadim was dismissed for now, and the Officer stood up to gather the instruments to be ready when he returned.

Been a while since Vadim had pissed into a glass vial. Paused for a moment, wondered about the stuff that had been injected into his body, all the nice cocktails, from the 'vitamins' during his first career to the entirely self-inflicted stuff he'd used to bulk up, and then the stuff that was supposed to be 'medicine' but made

him dizzy and blurred his speech. Well, that last bit had clearly not been recreational.

He stripped, stepped into the shower, shower gel, hot water, plenty of it. Couldn't quite relax or enjoy this, but kept the thoughts away. Towelled himself down. Was aware of the scars on his back that would stand out in white against the reddening skin. Did the man speak Russian?

Did it matter? He found a razor and shaved. His hair was too long, he felt dishevelled, hoped for the buzzcut, hoped to get them to shave it even shorter than what he'd seen so far. Hair too short to grab him by. Long hair is for bitches. He remembered laughing at that, once. Towelled his feet, stepped into a pair of flip-flops, and left everything on a pile. The clothes he'd worn in Sweden, the towel. Left the shower again, felt the cooler air hit his skin. Fresh.

The Officer looked up from sorting his instruments. Surprise clearly written across his face at the sight of the stark naked man. Caught himself, gestured for Vadim to come closer to the examination table and to sit down on it. "You're certainly efficient." He remarked dryly, seemed he'd never encountered anyone before who hadn't come back out with the towel or at least a hand covering their genitals.

Vadim didn't understand at first, but when he did, he lowered his gaze. A life in sports and communal showers. Now that he mentioned it, it was embarrassing he didn't feel embarrassed. Everything was so complicated. First gaffe.

"I'm going through the usual tests. Lung function, reaction speed, ears, nose, throat check. The dentist will take care of the teeth later. Blood for tests including STDs and HIV and other infectious diseases. An assortment of jabs, genital and rectal examination, and in addition a tissue sample for substance tests." He waited for Vadim to sit down.

Vadim went over the list in his head. His lungs were first class. Capacity far above average. Reaction speed solid, never any trouble with his senses. The teeth were alright apart from two splintered molars from a few fights. Two crowns kept them together. HIV. That AIDS thing. He'd never much thought about it, he knew Dan had, but that stuff happened to other people. And it was more likely when he did things he usually didn't. Swallow. Take it. He didn't. And Dan was clean, mostly for lack of opportunity and maybe brazen balls to take what he wanted from

anybody else. Or did he? He assumed there were no other encounters. But what did he actually know? Substances.

Well. He might actually find out what the KGB had injected. Something to soften him up.

“First, I want to check the scars and epidermis.”

Vadim nodded. His skin. Too tender, too scarred, and too easy to burn. The whole story written on his surface. The torture, the cutting—and why did he never consider the scars part of the torture?—the dust had settled in the old sunburns and scarred him more subtly. Afghanistan had hated him, and that feeling was entirely mutual.

The Officer began the examination. Making notes on a clip board. Checking out the round scar in the hollow of Vadim’s throat, then worked his way along the body. Noting down the numerous sun burns that had gone more than skin deep. His expression never changed, his professional efficiency never wavered. It was obvious he had been on active service, seen the battlefield and dealt with injuries no civilian could imagine. He started to check out the back, and even though Vadim could not see it, there was no change in his mien. Working his fingers along some of the pronounced ridges of the cutting on the lower back. The touches felt neutral, and Vadim only briefly tensed when the man touched the wound on his back.

“I am not too happy with several of the scars. The tissue has hardened and cracked in places, I can see they are quite old and partially neglected. That needs to get sorted first of all.” The Officer turned to the desk and made a note on another pad, before looking at Vadim. “While you are in camp, the nurse will apply a salve every morning after breakfast. Be in the medical centre at 0730 hrs. You should continue with the treatment indefinitely, whenever you can.” Reaching for the stethoscope, “I appreciate some places are difficult to reach, perhaps you will find someone to assist.”

Vadim did raise an eyebrow, finding with a hint of surprise that irony had survived the KGB cellar, and bit back a comment to the end of that being a terrific pickup line. ‘Want to oil my scars? I’ve got a nice one right down there. The doctor said I need help’. He shook his head and pushed the thought aside. He’d make do. Always had. “Yes, sir.” Nice and simple order, one ritual, one fixed point established.

“Good.” The Officer nodded, made another note and pushed his hand into Vadim’s muscles, pulling skin taut between fingers and working his way in this manner up the arms, across the shoulders, down pectorals and abdomen. “Muscle atrophy, but beginning to recover.” A couple more notes, before fixing the stethoscope to his ears. “I will hand a diet plan to the Mess chef. You require an abundance of protein and additional vitamins. The wastage had been fairly substantial, but the last few weeks seem to have put some substance back. Five meals a day, at least. I will see that it is timetabled into your schedule.”

Vadim had known that, but the word sounded bad, spoken aloud. Atrophy. He had withered away. Deeply narcissistic personality, Konstantinov had said. He was mute, merely nodded. Back to eating like there was no tomorrow. Eggs, meat, lots of good stuff, just to keep the machine running, the harder he worked, the more fuel he needed to stuff down. Beef jerky. Some people swore by it. Nuts.

Placing the cool metal onto Vadim’s chest, the doctor looked down at the stethoscope. “Breathe deeply.” Thoroughly checking out lung function and ending this part of the examination with a satisfied nod. “Very good.” The note in the file was short, no need for further examination. Another instrument from the table and then he stepped close, looking at Vadim’s face. “Eyes right ahead.” Working through an examination of eyes, nose, ears and throat. He took his time, but was immensely efficient.

“Time for the blood tests.”

Vadim offered his left arm. “That vein likes rolling.” A nightmare with a nervous nurse. One of the afghankas had nearly suffered a nervous breakdown after five attempts to pin that vein.

He watched his blood fill the plastic tubes, colour coded, thought it looked fairly dark, what a stark red in this place, hand was a loose fist, kept alternating pressing and releasing it. He looked into the man’s face, wondered about his emotions, maybe conclusions, found himself wondering about somebody again. Shouldn’t. That file held enough information to destroy him. Make him or destroy him. And despite the evidence, he could trust nobody. If this man decided he wasn’t fit to go through this, it would all be over. He needed to succeed, but it was not in his hands. Control issues. Another term of the KGB.

They had skinned his mind and shown him what lay underneath. Nothing of that had been particularly pretty. Kept silent, but did wonder. Wondered about why a man would join the army as a medic. To kill, yes, but to mend? Why?

One tube was filled after the other, carefully labelled and placed into a stacking holder. Calling the nurse from another room, the Officer handed the vials over without a word, since she already had her instructions. Some of the tests would take a few days, but no reason not to start the training straight away.

Then reaction tests, the small hammer came down every time on the perfect point, and this note, too, remained short, and so was the brief nod. “Good.”

The medic’s glance fell onto Vadim’s feet, taking each in turn between his hands and checking ankle bone, heel, instep and each joint. Glancing up over his spectacles while pushing his thumb into the ball of the foot, bones moving beneath. “Do you ever experience pain when walking?” Those feet were obviously worn, but something seemed to have caught his attention.

Vadim wanted to draw in his toes; thought of the other examination, just a few months that he nearly lost some bits and pieces there. Losing toes fucks up the ability to run. Even so, they looked everything but pretty. Just what too much walking in combat boots, the whole para business, the mountains and then everything else had done to his feet. “After about sixty kilometres or so,” he murmured. “Depends on the terrain.”

That did draw a reaction, a short, immensely dry laugh. “Forty miles? Most soldiers half your age wish they could say that.”

“Russia is a big country. Plenty of walking.” Oh, he had loved his forced marches. Vadim smirked, oddly pleased to have drawn a reaction.

Another quick note, then reaching for the box with rubber gloves. “Stand up and cough when I tell you.” Waiting for Vadim to comply while the glove was pushed onto his right hand.

Vadim stood, looked straight at the wall opposite. Nothing personal, just a touch from a rubber glove. Like the touch from the stethoscope disk. He coughed, obediently. The hint of irony grew in his mind. Now, bend over. Just glad his antics had never lead to any injuries there—but they had to know that about him, the fact he had sex with men. Had had. Been a while.

The Officer was as thorough in checking the genitals as with anything else. “Good.” Examination done, another note. Nothing abnormal. “Turn around and

bend over. Try to relax.” No inflexion in his voice, it seemed to make no difference to him if he knew a man had had anal sex or if he wasn’t aware. What difference did it make? To all intents and purposes, each of the recruits he had examined could have had a penis inside the rectum. Or a finger, or fist, or a foreign object. He’d been a subscriber of “The Lancet” for too many years to be surprised by anything.

Spreading lube onto his fingers while Vadim turned, he didn’t show even the mildest interest in any of this. Bodies were bodies. He treated them all alike. Movements economical but smooth, the intrusion efficient. Checking the prostate and colon, pausing for a moment while pushing the other hand onto the abdomen. Pressure points meeting inside and out. “I need a tissue sample.” Explaining what he was doing came automatic by now. Had found it helped the examination.

Vadim still closed his eyes. If anything, it was unpleasant, but he still relaxed. He could do that, that was easy. Could feel both hands move and prod, pressure, the man was strong. Tissue sample. Whatever. Just the fact the man knew what he did, had done, the fact he knew about it and there was no denying, no smoke screen, no marriage in his papers to protect him, to make that thing unlikely. He could feel his stomach tense, breath halted while this was going on.

Movements behind Vadim, but the finger did not leave the rectum. “There will be a short pain, try not to get startled.” Wouldn’t do to have the examinee jump all of a sudden. Cool steel taking the place of the finger, an almost seamless exchange, and the sensation of moderate stretching. Heat in Vadim’s face. He actually blushed. Oh fuck. He wasn’t eighteen anymore. He had seen conscripts faint when they carried their blood samples to the next stage in the mustering. Perfectly human, perfectly normal. He was capable of more responses than he had thought he would be.

“One moment.” The doctor’s voice again. A few seconds before the sample was taken, a swift snip, too negligible to cause bleeding. Another second and the instrument slid out as well. “Done.”

That was that. So easy, just a job like many others. Sample labelled and enclosed in a tube, ready for the nurse. “You can get dressed. A pile of clothes is on the chair in the corner.” The glove taken off, thrown away, then water and soap, washing hands. “Come and sit back down when you’re dressed. I want to have a word with you before you see the dentist.”

Vadim breathed again, stayed turned away to give his skin the chance to unflush. Shouldn't have flustered him so much. He didn't want to show it had affected him like this. Got dressed in the sports kit that lay there, neatly folded, it fitted, of course, and he wondered what that 'word' would entail. But if he had failed, there was no reason to send him on to the dentist. Everything was about repairing the damage, and assessing how much was left. How much of a special forces soldier remained.

Vadim felt his scalp crawl but refrained from scratching or rubbing it. Gathered himself, forced himself to focus, be awake and responsive. Sat down and looked at the man.

The Officer nodded at him, a hand on the now closed file. "It looks good so far. Obviously the results of the blood tests are not available yet, but I am satisfied with the state of your body. Remarkable for the amount of abuse it has taken." He paused, "I will recommend the training is started straight away. You will struggle more with regaining endurance than strength, but the basis is there."

Moving both folders to the side, confidential and official, then folding his hands. "Do you have any questions?"

Vadim inhaled deeply, deeper than he had dared to breathe for a long time. He looked at the folders, then back to the man. Had, absurdly, begun to trust him, maybe. He didn't expect anything cruel from him, anything volatile, and that meant there was something he could feel. Liked the doctor in his businesslike way. Always good to have professionals around. He thought about the question, assumed it was more than formality.

How realistic is it? Realistic enough for them to give him a shot. His age. He remembered the major, back before they had stormed that house. That man would be absolutely lethal at fifty or sixty. "No, sir. It was perfectly clear."

"Good, then I will only give you one word of advice, before you're dismissed." The Officer stalled, hand moving on top of the folder, "since I have obviously read your confidential file," hand moved to the specs, took them off and rubbed over his eyes. "I am aware this advice is most probably superfluous, but I give it to you anyway. Your homosexuality is confidential right now. Keep it that way."

Her Majesty's Armed Forces. Exempt from the Sexual Offences Act, no decriminalisation of homosexuality. Illegal. Unwanted. Court, trial and Administrative Discharge. The doctor nodded, "As I am sure you will."

Vadim inhaled again, kept the breath inside his chest. Fucking model soldier, apart from one flaw.

"You are a smart man, well above average. But what you fail to understand is you have been victimized. The masseur."

Vadim glanced up to meet the KGB officer's eye. They had dug deep, and they knew about it. After all the other unpleasant surprises, they couldn't have harmed the old man. Couldn't. He wanted to ask whether the man was alive or free or both, but he couldn't betray much interest. It would harm them both.

"We assume you were plied with what you mistook as affection." Konstantinov folded his hands. *"He probably told you you were something special. These predators can wear many masks. But that strategy would work best with your deeply narcissistic personality."*

The voice wavered between 'you are to blame for a fair part of that' and 'you poor bastard' and neither sounded genuine. Vadim tensed, could feel the words slip under his skin like parasites. Predator. Special. A poisonous mix of truth and lies. How could it matter anyway. More than twenty years ago. In a world where people were more interested in his weight, height, body fat and his best times of the week, one person had actually touched him. Plied with affection. What an ugly way to speak about desire and trust.

"Understandably, you would fall victim to a man like that—one who abuses his position of trust to satisfy his appalling urges." Konstantinov shook his head. "The most disgusting thing is what he did to your mind. No doubt telling you this twisted thing was completely acceptable. Understandable, again. That is the way the human mind protects itself. We assume we had control over an incident and blame ourselves if it was an adverse experience. Sometimes, we convince ourselves it was not negative at all. In the words of the famous German philosopher: What doesn't kill us..."

Makes us stronger.

The KGB officer smiled. "You fell victim to a pedophile, the lowliest form of sexual predator. We can only guess how many boys he abused. But we can study the consequences very well on you. You have become a predator as well, seeking

your pleasure in the pain and weakness of others. It's his fault. He taught you these things. And you were too weak to not follow his example. This will stop.

Makes us stronger.

Plied with affection. All lies. Everybody lied. One to torture him, the other to fuck him without resistance. All lies, all subterfuge and manipulation, and the thing he'd had with Dan as dead as the obsession. Vadim looked to the side, felt raw and pained inside, felt dirty and used and brainwashed and didn't know what he felt. Or could even feel. If he could only have been the man Katya deserved.

He swallowed hard, could feel his mind *shift*, as intense as a hallucination. He blinked and looked at the doctor. "I ... didn't plan to ... engage in any kind of...that behaviour."

The Officer looked up, surprise in his face. "I don't understand?" Placing the specs back onto the bridge of his nose. "Surely one's sexuality is not a matter of 'planning'."

Vadim closed his eyes. The things he couldn't do. And the things he could. The KGB officer had believed it was something he had learnt. Been trained to respond to. Been deluded into believing that was okay.

"It's always a decision," Vadim said, voice without any depth. "I can decide to leave it." Mind over matter. It had been a while since he had felt any real desire. It had gone stale and sour like blood in a corpse. "That means, I haven't ..." Oh fuck, did he have to tell him that? "Engaged in any ... homosexual activity in the recent past."

"A decision?" The Officer pondered the statement, a slight nod and definite interest. "In a way, perhaps, but leaving one's nature? It will find ways to make itself known. A medical fact, and facts is what I am interested in." Silence, the hand wandered back on top of the files. "I studied your file. I know what you were accused of and with whom." Pause, "it is none of my business if you have or if you have not engaged in active or passive homosexual activities. You are not a member of the British Forces and never will be. Your sexuality is yours, as long as you keep it private."

You are a predator, just like the man who poisoned you. We will not place you in general custody with the others. Chances are you will enjoy it too much. And you can be sure you will never again be in any position of authority or trust

with any Soviet citizen or soldier. We can only guess what you did to your male child. Why your token wife left you.

Vadim felt the pain constrict his throat. "It's a decision," he repeated. "That means ... I am ... under control." Unlike Kabul. Unlike whole fucking Afghanistan. Unlike every day and night in the fucking Soviet Army, getting high on combat and adrenaline and the occasional rape. Until that stopped. Dan. "Nothing to worry about, Sir. I have ... learnt the lesson." I'd rather shoot myself in the head than touch anybody here.

"I am not worried." Calmly, scrutinising, the doctor seemed to see more than his words let on. Paused once more until he added as an afterthought, "and your decision is wise, as long as you are under control." Another studying look, and then the dismissal. "The dentist is waiting, and the barber. You will meet your PT instructor after lunch in the Mess." Dismissed. The nurse was already waiting.

Vadim nodded and got up. Felt he owed a salute, but he was no soldier, just a hopeful piece of flotsam that had somehow found its way here. Not even that. A Soviet army salute was not appropriate either. He could feel sweat under his arms, hoped he hadn't appeared like a nervous wreck. He only hoped he could forget the interrogation one day. The pit of darkness in his soul, and that of Konstantinov. "Thank you, Sir."

The nurse took Vadim to the dentist, who did checkups and some work on a few instances of cavities, proof of the neglect. Then the barber, shaving the hair in a No 2 all over. A few millimetres, giving the perfect buzz. Then the Provo Sergeant again, waiting for him after the nurse had given Vadim a protein shake and some vitamin pills.

Vadim felt already tired, exhausted after all the examinations. Remembered, took in as much as he could, grateful for the privacy and grateful he wasn't alone, and grateful his head was clean and shaved again. He did exactly what was asked, took the protein, the pills, eager to comply to the rules that were set down. Life became simpler again, the jumble in front of him gradually turned into stark lines without shading. Knew he'd fall into a routine and that was the way out, the way to salvation.

The Provo took him along the edge of the parade square towards the Sgts and WOs Mess and its half dozen rooms that were used as transit accommodation. The room was small and narrow, but luxury compared to a cell. A window at the

far end, along the right wall a bed, and a partition separated a wash basin from the rest. Along the left side some shelves and a built-in wardrobe. There was bed linen folded on the bed, waiting to be put on, and a couple of towels, stacked beside the basin. A can of shaving foam, a pack of razors, toothbrush and paste, a fresh bar of soap and a bottle of shower gel. Not much more a man could need.

Vadim was told lunch was in five minutes downstairs in the Mess, before the key to the room was handed to him. The Provo accompanied him back downstairs, towards a large room with a lot of silver ornaments, medals, display cases, pictures of former glory and paintings of victories and defeat. And a line of NCOs to be fed.

Vadim queued up with them to get his food, which looked much better than standard fare in the Soviet Army and positively delicious to what had kept him alive, yet didn't smell as good as the cold marinated fresh salmon Manke had decided he had to try. He sat down near his minder, concentrating on eating slowly, thoroughly, filling up his stomach and getting calories down. Watching the place from the corners of his eyes.

Several people were glancing at him while talking, but none addressed him directly. Lunch was uneventful, the Provo remained mostly quiet, it seemed Vadim was a non-entity as long as he hadn't proven himself yet in something. Perhaps in time.

Soon after lunch Vadim was taken to the gym, where the Provo knocked on the door of an office, then gestured him inside before leaving. Time to meet the PT instructor.

The man who walked up to Vadim stood with legs braced, arms crossed in front of his chest and grinned. A packet of solid muscle, strength and stamina. Condensed in about 5'5," reaching to no more than Vadim's shoulder. "Right," The PT instructor grinned broadly, "I'm Smudge and I'll beast your Russian arse." Teeth gleaming in that toothy grin. "Best get started."

Vadim met the man's eyes at the promise. *Beast my ass*, he echoed inside. Just one of many. Wasn't much of a challenge these days, anyway. Swallowed that moment of bitterness again. Victimised. Too easy to let people trample all over him. Just don't resist. Don't even twitch. He'd come a long way.

He straightened, drawing from his height, kept his face even. No smile, no scowl, nothing. Wouldn't admit he believed the man could make him throw up all

that food before dark. Fumbled around to find the bravado he had stored away somewhere in his mind. “You are welcome to try.” Didn’t feel it, didn’t believe it, but he knew this species of soldier came without pity or compassion.

Smudge grinned, oblivious to any signs of discomfort in that Russian giant. He didn’t do ‘subtle’ and couldn’t read between lines. What-you-see-is-what-you-get and what Vadim would get was intensive PT of gigantic proportions. To Smudge’s mind, anyway.

“I will try. Trust me, mate.” He laughed, appeared to be constantly on the move, without even moving. More energy than a rubber ball. Smudge pointed to the long track bottoms. “Did they give you shorts? If not, happy to go for a gentle jog in those?”

Vadim’s eyes flickered over the man’s body, the constant motion had a way to make him restless, and next to the man he felt—and probably looked—like a plodding juggernaut. He checked the laces on his shoes, and the laces that kept the track bottoms in place, then nodded. “Perfectly happy, Sir.”

Gentle jog, my arse. Five miles for a starter. But slowly, and Smudge would run each and every one together with Vadim, and he’d do each and every exercise as well. Fair was fair.

Right after the food Vadim felt more like resting, truth be told. But what he felt meant absolutely nothing, and the sooner he got back into the habit, the better. Setting himself into motion again, he found a steady pace, one that felt familiar, but had to slow down further when he could feel his pulse shoot up, and cursed under his breath. This would be hard work, much worse than he had thought. Steady was all he managed, he had no idea what his body could do or would do, and that made him insecure. His body the only thing he had always really known, and now it felt like a log of brittle wood.

After the run, he was drenched in sweat, felt sick and weak, but it was a start. Part of him felt good, right on top of the discomfort. A good long time when his mind had been completely empty, after he had shed the initial worries. No fears, no second thoughts, and most of all, no echoes and no memories. And the bliss of a hot shower. He made his bed half-asleep, had no idea whether the Brits did it just like the Soviet army, hadn’t done this himself for a long time, last time on some exercise. He didn’t remember, and the memory didn’t sneak up on him. He

dropped into the comfort of starchy sheets, and a proper mattress and slept without dreaming.

* * *

The next morning was the first of a series of perfectly regulated days. Not a single minute without schedule, and most of that spent with his PT Instructor, who had been seconded to one-to-one physical training. Smudge was a human rubber ball and bundle of good nature, nothing could shift his humour, not a thing seemed to annoy him. Always that grin and never out of breath.

The morning started at 0630 hrs, shower, washing, ablutions and shaving, then down to breakfast in the Mess at 0700 hrs. A selection of the good old cholesterol laden British fry-up, sausages, bacon, mountains of eggs, toasts and fried bread, with steel canisters filed to the brim with baked beans, grilled tomatoes, heaps of mushrooms and hash browns. Porridge to go with it and several cereals, coffee, tea, milk in abundance. He'd need it.

Then a trip to the Medical Centre where the nurse was waiting, applying the medication to his scars. The Medical Officer glanced in, nodded and vanished and by 0745 hrs Vadim had to be back in the gym where Smudge was already waiting, boxing a few rounds on one of the sand bags. The day started with a one and a half mile run, pushed to complete under eleven minutes, then swimming, something Vadim's PT Instructor did not indulge in, just watching him do the leaps. Not once did Smudge blink at the sight of the scars across the back. They didn't make sense to him, except for the one: that man had been tortured and survived the ordeal.

At 0900 hrs it was time to dry up and get dressed, ready for general PT. It consisted of a couple of hours of stretching, machines, weights, jumping and circle training. Smudge accompanied Vadim all the way. At 1100 hrs the cooling down session began, consisting of climbing up ropes, hanging from others, getting from one to another and finally jumping over hurdles and then more stretching. By 1200 hrs it was time for lunch.

Shower in the gym beforehand, then back into sports gear that consisted of polo shirt which he had to wear when in the Mess, since collarless clothing was not allowed. His sports kit had been chosen well, black and unobtrusive with the best trainers that were currently on the market. Seemed the MoD, or MI5, or ...

whoever else was responsible for this—if anyone at all—had not spared the expense.

1300 hrs brought sixty minutes of calm and the chance to catch a few winks, before it all started again at 1400 hrs, with several rounds of boxing sand bags and sparring in the ring. Smudge had the greatest fun, it seemed, to try and get one over the giant Russian, laughing when getting hit, and dancing around like a small monkey on steroids and adrenaline. 1500 hrs time for another round of PT, this time gentler, stretching exercises that built up to another go at the weights, when at 1600 hrs it was time for the run. Smudge started without additional load, five miles at first, then building the next day to a fuller bergan and ending the week with thirty pounds of gear in his bergan and on a ten mile speed march.

It was at the end of the week. Vadim woke up suddenly, thought he must have been screaming because his throat felt raw, that had to have been what woke him up, his own scream, and he wanted to curl up and die, a desire more wretched than throwing up in training. Not quite there, but PT was a pain, a constant pain that was building up. Just didn't have that kind of stamina anymore. Smudge seemed to know exactly how far he could push him, and always got him to do more, stretch further. He wanted to, was desperate to succeed, but it hurt like a bitch. Like he had been given the wrong kind of tool to do it with. The flesh was all wrong, and the mind knew and remembered it wasn't that hard, really.

The room suffocated him, he got rid of the blanket, wet with sweat. No surprise, but even the mattress was sweaty and it smelled bad, the kind of unhealthy sweat that was panic, not exertion.

Vadim sat up, brought his feet down, rubbed his face. Shit. His mind raced around, frantic, his breath tried to catch up, heart pounded like a raccoon trapped in a trashcan. He stood and wiped the sweat off, stared into the darkness. He could move in here. Nobody would beat him.

Liar, his mind whispered. You can never know when that door opens and they come for you. The Brits don't do that. You can never know whether you are dreaming or awake. You can never know when you are safe. You are never safe.

He shook his head. Paranoia. Mind out of control, the fear out of control. He knew it and it still affected him, still made him scared. Light. The room was under control. The room inside wasn't. Fuck you, Vadim, sober up. Fucking don't freak. You are fine. You haven't been better in two years.

As long as they allow you to...

He shook his head again, got dressed, fiddled with the laces, sports kit. He'd do some running. Aching muscles, whatever, just get out of here.

You know about the Hippocratic oath? I am responsible for your health, and you can talk to me.

The file. The secrets. The debriefing. Shit. But maybe that man could help. He left the room, headed for the doctor's quarters. Of course he knew where the man was. He'd done his recce, part of him had stored the information, and it just came back. Knocked on the man's door. It was four in the morning. But he needed help.

Dr Williams had been asleep in his quarters in the Officer's Mess. Enjoying the spacious room and the peace and quiet, away from social demands of an ambitious lady ex-wife. The first knock shook him out of his slumber, the second one made him rise, voice rough with sleep, searching for his spectacles. "One moment, please." He knew no one would dare wake him if they did not have a very valid reason. Found specs and dressing gown, he wrapped himself in the dark blue terry cloth garment and walked to the door, unlocking it.

If he was surprised at the man who stood in the doorframe, he did not show it, not even at 4 AM. "Good morning." A friendly, sleepy smile.

Vadim returned that smile, felt sorry, suddenly, already felt better, wanted to turn round and leave and let the poor man sleep. Kidding himself. "I am sorry," he said, focusing on speaking English and not Russian, but he was sure he had screamed in Russian. Of course. The KGB's native language.

"I ... am asking for something to help me sleep, Sir." He stepped away from the door to appear not threatening, when he wanted to barge right through the door to be inside and out of sight of any potential sniper. His neck crawled with the fear there had to be a sniper. Must be. Was impossible not to.

"I think ... that was nightmares. Should be ... temporary." Yeah, right. "I hope I didn't wake anybody."

And you don't know what you dreamed.

The Officer cocked his head, fully awake within a few seconds, suddenly alert. "No, don't be sorry. That's what I'm here for." He looked behind him, back into the room. "Wait a moment, I get the keys for the surgery." True to his word he left the door open, allowing a glimpse into a fairly big room with bed, table, chairs,

television, desk and a small fridge, all nicely furnished, before he returned with the keys in his hand.

“Believe me, if you woke anybody important with a scream you would already know about it.” Dr Williams closed the door behind him and locked it, a dryly amused smile on his face. “Let’s go and have a cup of tea while I think about the best way of approaching the sleeping problem.” He started to walk along the corridor and towards the back exit, inviting Vadim to come along, who followed. “I find tea is a good remedy for just about everything, especially at four in the morning.”

They reached the medical centre within a few minutes. “Sit down. I’ll get the kettle.” The doctor’s movements when making the tea were as precise and economic as they were during examinations. “How are you getting on with PT?” Glancing at Vadim while pouring the water.

“I think I am getting back into it,” Vadim murmured, sitting down and watching the older man make tea.

“The reports I am getting are very positive.”

The praise lifted Vadim’s spirits, while there was the voice that said the man was reading reports about him. Who was writing those? And on what grounds? He should be more careful, try harder. “That is good to hear. I am glad.” Positive. He could do it, was meeting expectations. He felt his shoulders relax and listened to the boiling water.

He should fix the tea, that man was a senior officer. Knowing how those had their tea had been a crucial skill at some point in his career. No career. Homosexual officer, what a joke. Crime. They had told him they could extend his sentence infinitely, just for homosexual encounters in prison. If they even let him out to meet other prisoners, which had been more a threat than something he could have looked forward to. There was this story about Afganets looking out for each other, checking and making visits in prison if they got into trouble. They had organised, or something. But nothing towards him. Maybe it had still stuck, the thing about treason.

“I can’t remember what I dreamed.” Vadim glanced up. “It would be easier if I did. If I knew something was hunting me, or I was falling. But it’s all dark.”

The doctor nodded silently, brought milk and sugar over, then the cups of tea over. One placed in front of Vadim, the other on his side of the desk. He sat

down, quietly adding sugar to his tea while creating the special atmosphere of doctor and patient without saying anything at all. No reports on the desk, no paper, not even pens. Nothing. Just two men and two cups of tea.

Dr Williams took a sip, studied Vadim for a moment. "I can give you a sleeping aid for the acute period of the next few weeks, but they will neither work after that nor will they be beneficial." Silence again, looking at his tea then back up at Vadim. "In the short term, however, they will ensure you function throughout the night." A man who had nightmares and screamed, such a man would never get through any tests.

Function. That was really all Vadim wanted. Function like a machine, because that way lay redemption. No, wrong word. Peace. He cleared his throat, felt it still sore. He must have screamed badly. He warmed his hand on the tea, started to tip it against his lips and breathed in the warmth, then took a small sip, savouring the heat.

The doctor added, after several more sips of tea, "I have been working with men who experienced solitary confinement." An invitation without the slightest pressure.

So, the doctor knew. It made it easier, to think that stuff had happened to others and they had been talking to this doctor. That man wasn't a beginner, would, might, could understand. "I guess they were just as...screwed up as I am. In my head, I mean. The body functions. But my head doesn't. Not when I'm alone." Oh shit. That was the point. The core of it. Solitary confinement had taken one thing from him, being comfortable with his own company. "I mean, asleep. It's like...sharks moving under the water."

"'Screwed up' is perhaps not a medical term, but I would agree with you. Solitary confinement for prolonged periods of time causes the feeling of dysfunction. It is similar to sleep deprivation, the mind does not get a chance to calm without the influence of outside stimuli." Those long, elegant surgeon's hands were resting on the desk. "You are not alone in what you are experiencing. Solitary confinement causes the mind to turn into itself, like a cancer tumour, eating itself and thinning resistance by projecting every thought into a size, ten times bigger. Like an echo building and reverberating throughout the mind." He smoothed a non-existent speck off the handle of the mug. "Your mind has forgotten how to rest."

Vadim swallowed hard, closed his eyes, fought the fucking tears and thought whatthefuck, I can't break down and cry like a four year old. He brought his head back up and smoothed his features, forced his eyes to not cry, breathed.

"I just don't want to think. Tried to shut it down, but it doesn't work like that. You can't ignore your mind. It is what does the ignoring. I ... don't know. I can function, Sir. I want to."

Felt a moment of panic again, like he was pleading with the KGB officer. I want to be good, I never committed treason, I swear, I promise, I will never...Sipped the tea, fought the panic back down. Down. Nobody will harm you here. He might write a report. Or maybe he would consider it a mercy if he testified against him. "They knew what they were doing. How to target me. They tried several angles, but they thought with my ... condition, isolating me was the way to go. I know why. I even know how. But I'm still in that place."

The Officer listened attentively, nodded. "You do remember what I told you. Whatever happens here, between you and me and whatever you tell me, it remains confidential. There will be no reports that are seen by anyone. This might be difficult to believe for you, but it is true. I am bound by my oath of confidentiality." A long pause, "You see, they were professionals, just as much as you and I. I am a doctor, you are a soldier, they are torturers. Highly developed. You stood no chance."

Vadim nodded, sipped his tea. No chance. Outmanoeuvred in his own mind, his own emotions, trapped within himself. "It's not an option, Sir. Failure, I mean." Living with that somewhere in a foreign country, trapped again. There were always ways to end it. He'd succeed, or die.

"Failure here, in training and selection, or failure to calm your mind?" Dr William's gaze was intense but kind.

"I think they are the same thing," murmured Vadim. He tried a smile, and it came out sad and only a shadow of his former smiles. "If I get through this, I have a place. A...life." Breathe. Don't cry. Just breathe. "If I don't, there's nothing. I ... checked my options, I don't want to ... live like that." He looked towards the door. He should make an excuse and get away, get out of here.

The doctor slowly shook his head. "No. I am afraid it won't be that easy" Quietly, "I understand what you say, but getting through this will not exorcise the demons." He leaned slightly forward, "but it would give you a chance to find a

way to live with those demons side by side.” No miracle cure, no promise, except, “and I’m here to help you get that chance.”

Vadim nodded. And why? Because it was his job? Possibly. That might be enough. It could hardly be the hope to wrangle another five years of killing and work behind enemy lines out of this body that had its clock ticking. Five years when he could have fifteen or twenty from somebody without all the trouble. “A fighting chance is all I need.” Don’t tell anybody I talked of suicide.

But it wasn’t in his hands. He drank more of the tea. “Thank you for this.”

Doctor Williams nodded, opened a drawer in the desk and took out a key. Stood up and walked to a medicine cabinet behind him, which yielded a packet of diazepam. “Take one, no more. It will help you sleep without screaming.” He pushed the packet across the desk, looking at Vadim with that small smile. “I have insomnia. I might be quite glad for an interruption at night.” Inviting, offering.

Vadim took the pack, checked his watch. Five. He wouldn’t find any sleep tonight. Maybe tomorrow. What to say. “I seem like a ... meek person, doctor, but don’t be mistaken. If you offer, I will take advantage.” He stood, exhaled deeply. “Thanks again.”

“Meek?” Dr Williams raised his brows and pushed the specs back into position. “I consider you anything but meek. I am not easily fooled nor mistaken.” He nodded slightly with a small smile, dismissing Vadim back into the night with the most polite manner.

* * *

The pills helped Vadim sleep and kept the nightmares buried. If he had nightmares, they didn’t wake him, and his mind felt less brittle. He didn’t struggle as much with exhaustion, it was only physical. He never grew close to anybody—they didn’t seem to acknowledge him much, the Brits, apart from when it was necessary, and it was just as well. The only men that mattered were the ones giving orders and putting him through training. He worked hard, mostly because that was the best way to not think or feel anything. Time ran past without reason, or fears. Sometimes, there was a turn of phrase, a sound, a face that reminded him of Dan. The way these Brits ‘took the piss’, as Dan would have called it.

These men were closer to Dan than to himself. Primitives, by any Russian standard, brutes, most were men that had had no chance in life and no perspective but to become soldiers and learn how to fight and kill. The common British soldier was a creature of foul language, crude humour, and as unsophisticated as they came. The PT trainer was a perfect example. But that made them easy to handle. These men lacked the refinement to understand what he was. They shrugged, and didn't give a damn.

On the weekends, Vadim continued with PT. Never left the barracks for the town and pubs that lay beyond, stubbornly continuing to work out and eat and sleep, like he had in the forest in Sweden. Cleaning up. A forest. A head. It was really the same. He found it hard to sit down and think, and he discovered another thing. He couldn't read. Back before all this, words he read on the page had echoed in his mind, he had heard them, felt rhythm and flow like breath, had seen things in his mind. He'd been able to feel words, clever puns had made him laugh out loud, and that was just one of the things books had given him. Now, they remained marks on white. He understood them, but they never penetrated, never once sunk into him. Sparked nothing. He stared at a page, and read, and then suddenly realized he had no idea what he was reading. Or what the text was about. It wasn't exhaustion. He tried again and again, but it remained the same. His mind couldn't hold onto text. Words did nothing now, like his mind had become blind, like he could see nothing anymore. The numbness crept even into that place in his mind he'd never thought anybody could touch. Something as basic and primal as sex—but even that was dead these days. Just like his mind didn't stir, nothing happened in his body, a most disconcerting observation. He knew, remembered it, but nothing happened. Sex was not an issue. Had moved so far away. His body didn't feel pleasure, no arousal, he didn't see any beauty in the men around him. The loss of reading was more profound though, the pleasure lasted longer—used to. What did give him a strange kind of pleasure were the conversations with Dr Williams. The man was erudite, civilised, well-read, and, on top of all that, wise. Vadim began, against better experience, to believe this man kept his Hippocratic Oath seriously indeed, and there was an odd feeling in the room when they had tea, talking. Vadim felt almost sane on those evenings, and he wondered whether the doctor did enjoy the company, too.

He made an effort to not be glum all the time, didn't want to drag the man down with him, felt he shouldn't pour it over that man's feet like vomit. Still, sometimes he did talk, said more than he wanted, laid himself bare like that, and the next day he was appalled he had exposed himself that much, but there was never punishment, never chiding, like the doctor could be trusted, and his English tact forbade to take advantage of what he knew. Indeed, Vadim could forget those embarrassing things the man knew and share the company. In this place, the greatest gift.

Smudge meticulously prepared him for the PT test, so meticulous in fact that the test, when it came, felt like nothing worse than Smudge on a nongenerous day. Vadim felt in control, pushed himself and easily knew he didn't have to give his utmost, just trying hard was enough. He was relieved when it was over—the Royal Marines seemed pleased, maybe also pleased to see him go, finally, and take up neither space nor effort, but these men lacked evil.

This was a formality to them. Smudge was more openly pleased, however, giving him a string of abuse that betrayed he'd done very well indeed. After another shower, Vadim was called to the doctor's office. Dr Williams was sitting behind his desk but got up when the door opened. The specs were in his hands as he was rubbed the bridge of his nose where a red depression had formed. He smiled tiredly at Vadim. "I believe congratulations are in order." The specs went back onto his nose before holding out his hand.

Vadim looked at the hand and felt the odd urge to embrace that man, just a flash across his mind that was still abuzz with what passing meant, and what would come next. Eager like a fighting dog, all of a sudden. Instead, he relaxed and took that hand, held it for a moment. "You look tired?" It was meant to be just a stating of facts, but became a question, as his intonation twisted up at the end of the sentence as if driven by a life of its own. He looked towards the desk, assumed that was his fault.

The doctor chuckled quietly as he shook Vadim's hand before pointing to the usual chair. Busying himself with making tea, unasked. It had become a comfortable routine, and he seemed reluctant to disturb it, even though it was within office hours.

"I can't fool you, can I?"

Well, I used to be in charge of men, was what Vadim wanted to retort, but he didn't feel the lightness. Some questions didn't need answers, and Brits especially reacted strangely when taken literally.

The kettle was switched on and tea bags dropped into mugs. "It's the joy of getting older, I'm afraid. A long time ago I had a shoulder injury and it was never quite the same afterwards. Has turned into arthritis and, as it happens, it kept me awake last night." Dr Williams shrugged one-shouldered, while glancing at Vadim.

"Oh, I see." It seemed strange that doctors got wounded, too. Vadim tried a small smile, it seemed natural with this officer. The man's dry humour allowed it. "You know about mine. How did yours happen?"

"A long time ago." The doctor smiled wryly. "A very long time in fact. I wasn't always sitting in a nice office and I wasn't always commissioned. I started out my Army career as a medic, attached to an infantry regiment, and believe it or not, but we do sometimes get wounded on duty." The kind look in his face told Vadim Dr Williams believed he did know. His patient had seen enough enemy action in his life. "It wasn't half as spectacular as a bullet or shrapnel wound could have been, I just broke it in a fall from a helicopter."

A bit like Dima. Dima had been a hard bastard, though, probably a middling high officer by now, in case Afghanistan had let him live. "Wounds don't have to be spectacular to hurt," Vadim agreed.

Dr Williams shrugged again, one sided. "At least being awake meant I could read up on some medical notes last night. There has been quite a bit of research recently about the Falklands war and the effect it had on our soldiers." The kettle switched itself off and the doctor poured the boiling water into the two mugs, carrying them over to the desk, before getting hold of sugar and a pint of milk.

"Falklands. Not as bad as the American cluster... disaster in Grenada. But I can't say I know much about that war."

"Not many do, it was a very British affair, and we are dealing with the psychological fall-out in a very British way as well." Fishing the tea bag out of his mug and onto a saucer, Dr Williams added some milk to his brew, "please, help yourself." Indicating the condiments. "I am tasked to do a final medical exam on you, but I believe in having a civilised cup of tea first."

In a British way. Vadim wasn't sure what that meant. He figured he could just as well get used to the British way of tea. Maybe the sugar wasn't as bad when he added the milk. He stirred the mix and let it sit, not too eager to try. "What is the psychological fall-out? You won that war. It's not like Afghanistan, where we grew too tired to carry on."

"Suicides."

Vadim's breath caught. Suicide. The way out. It seemed far away today, further than it had been, but he was always aware of it. Always thought he should have a gun, just in case. Just to make sure it would work. He peered at the man, but the doctor was taking a sip, concentrating on nothing but the tea, it seemed, while staring into a void. Not caught, then. Not exposed. Not discovered.

When Dr Williams lifted his eyes he looked tired. "It is now over nine years ago and the suicide rate of Falkland veterans is rising. No one has paid sufficient attention to the whys and wherefores. No one, until recently. I happen to have caused a bit of a stir with a paper of mine the other day." He took another sip of tea, "It is time we properly study the consequences of battlefield action and related trauma."

"You are doing work on that? Suicides ... of veterans?" It made sense. Vadim had seen more than one suicide. More than one deserted that way. Nothing new. Some just couldn't deal with it. But veterans—those had gone through and come out alive.

"Yes." Dr William's answer was simple. "I am a medical doctor, but many years ago, in fact at the time when I was out of duty with the broken shoulder, I decided to go down both paths, and I am a clinical psychologist as well." Setting the mug down, he nodded at Vadim, "and in that vein, I would like to tell you, and be absolutely certain about this, you may call me whenever you wish. Do you understand me, Mr Krasnorada? When I give you my contact numbers I want you to be utterly clear about the fact whenever you feel like talking to me, or if you believe it would be advantageous for someone else to talk to me, I will be there and listen and, if I can, give my advice." He paused, as if he wanted to add something but never did.

Vadim's brow darkened and he looked at the man, unblinking. The doctor knew about these thoughts. He knew about what was going on inside him, and he'd never told him the extent of that, not enough to appear like somebody who had

nothing left to live for. Why? If he walked out that door, he'd stop being the man's responsibility. "You're a good man," he murmured, eyes lowered. "Much better than I am."

The doctor merely shook his head. "We are all good *and* bad in our own ways. It all depends on our circumstances. You, Mr Krasnorada, you are alive and fighting for a chance—I would call that being a good man." He paused, both hands around the mug, "And I want you to have that chance. Call it professional interest, if you like and if it suits you best, or strike it up to my naïve wish of keeping one more life while so many are lost. Whatever it is, don't think I am altruistic. We are all driven by our own needs and wishes, and mine is being a good doctor, for the body and the mind."

"Wasn't it a German who said even altruistic deeds are selfish? It makes us feel better to do good." Vadim shook his head. "Philosophy."

"Nietzsche?" The officer wondered, "it usually is."

"Yes. Nietzsche." Smiling, Vadim looked at all the books on a shelf behind the desk. Medical reviews, no doubt. He'd never have thought this man contributed to that. But there was something bookish about him, academic. "Do you have enough material to make me a case study?"

"Do you *want* me to make a case study?" Dr William's voice was quiet.

Vadim snorted. "I enjoyed Afghanistan. I don't dream of the things I did. My mind withstood the time there. The deaths and the futility. I did many things that would give other men nightmares, but I believed in what I did. I don't feel I did wrong. I sometimes feel something like ... regret. Like I could have ... contributed to something bigger, done my country ... did something honourable. But I'm not intelligent enough to be a rocket scientist, or a cosmonaut, or, you know, created art. I'm not a poet, not a dancer, and I even failed as an athlete. The only thing I didn't fail in was being spetsnaz, and even that could be argued, with my ... with the way it turned out." Vadim inhaled deeply. "It's not the war. The war didn't break me. The KGB broke my mind. That's nothing like being a veteran. I don't know how you can help other soldiers with my sorry example."

Vadim stood, felt sudden agitation run through his body, felt ashamed, should have kept quiet, but knew, at the same time, the doctor had seen him in a worse state. "But if you can ... and if you have enough material ... I guess you might, I don't know ... go ahead."

The doctor sat calmly through all of Vadim's agitation, still calm when he shook his head. "I was not talking about veterans who suffer from battlefield situations. I was talking about trauma. It comes in many guises and for many reasons." He paused, looked up to where Vadim was standing. "Do you believe you are the only one, Mr Krasnorada? The only man or woman held in captivity and systematically tortured under the pretence of war, or espionage, or betrayal, or any of the reasons a power—any power—could come up with?"

His hands uncurled from the mug as he peered above the rims of his spectacles. "Amnesty International would not be such a prominent institution if you were."

Vadim inhaled, pressed his lips together, like he had to keep a scream from coming out. Felt like drowning again, knew it was his mind that fucked him again, that dark coiling mass of vipers and that was only what he could see. "Yes. Use what you have. Call it ... I don't know. A gift? I don't know these people, but I know you. If it pleases you, if that allows you to do good ..." He motioned to the medical journals.

Dr Williams nodded, standing up as well. "Thank you. I will do what I can with the knowledge I have. Sometimes all it takes is one voice to call out loudly and be taken seriously." He walked around the desk, glancing at Vadim's untouched cup of tea, before looking at the man himself. "Now, Mr Krasnorada, may I ask you to undress so we can conduct the final exam before you are taken to Hereford?"

He'd miss him, thought Vadim, as he undressed and the man checked him over, pleased with the state of his muscles, how he had recovered. Vadim didn't tense or flinch, didn't feel embarrassed. That man knew everything about him that mattered, and the thought was so very strange, that that was actually a good thing.

* * *

Unlike all the other soldiers who'd been accepted to SAS selection, Vadim was taken to Bradbury Lines barracks by military transport. Hereford, a quiet and sleepy town that could have fooled anyone into believing the last thing it housed was the SAS regiment. The only indication, once turning off a small side lane leading into the countryside, were red and white barriers and a sign in light and

dark blue that sported the sword of Damocles in flames: the famous winged dagger. Above the emblazoned sign were the words 'Bradbury Lines' and below it '22nd Special Air Service Regiment'.

Vadim wasn't asked by the guard to show his ID, an ID he didn't have, when after a few words with the driver they were waved through to the unremarkable looking compound. It was a shabby place, and nothing anyone would have expected in association with the Regiment. A far call from what Vadim knew about Delta, or any of the American outfits. Americans always thought money was a replacement for taking things seriously. Good kit always expected to neutralise bad planning and bad leadership.

So this was the place where they created arguably the top special forces in the world. Men that got the job done. Men that could stand toe to toe with spetsnaz. Like Dan.

When Vadim got out of the Landrover, an MoD policeman pointed him to the training wing to check in, a cluster of several wooden buildings that had seen better days a long time ago. Only a few people were in uniform, and none of them was wearing an SAS beret.

Once there, they pointed him towards a long, dark corridor, where he reported to a major. 'Reporting for selection', was the term. He didn't know how much the man knew, but wondered that 'only' a major was in charge of this place, and wasn't it strange he'd shared that rank once upon a time? He remembered the ranks in SAS were low, and Dan had never got beyond Staff Sergeant.

Just a little later he was billeted in one of the rooms and had been issued with his kit. SAS bergan, waterproofs, maps, compasses, emergency equipment including a 24-hour ration pack. Other guys were around, too, Vadim saw how they introduced themselves to each other, but he stayed aloof, remote for now. Most of them seemed very young, very eager, aglow with the mystique of SAS.

They were all here for one thing, to become part of the world's top special forces, to be a part of the Regiment, the Special Air Service, to become a blade and to gain a share in the glory. All of them, except one: Vadim, who almost felt like an impostor.

The Welsh mountains were not far away, and while Hereford seemed to be the sleepest, most uninspiring place anyone could imagine, it was the Brecon Beacons that were calling from a distance. Those mountains would have to be

tackled for the first leg of selection. The landscape looked picturesque from a distance, but over the years the Beacons had claimed many lives, military and civilian. Unlike the SAS hopefuls, most of those victims had been poorly equipped, not catering for the rapidly changing weather conditions. Like other inhospitable places, like Iceland, weather could change rapidly and there had been snow in July and a blizzard in August.

Vadim listened to the stories, how an experienced officer had died from exposure once, in the seventies, and others barely managed to come back alive. A little piece of wilderness in a small, small country that bred very strange men. Men like Dan.

Vadim checked through his kit, and the mountains had to be the reason why his bergen had a 24hr ration. These guys didn't take any chances with the rough terrain, even if they were far less imposing than the parched moonscape of Afghanistan.

He sat on his bunk, thinking, bergen at his side, while the young guys milled around. There seemed to be a few men in their mid-thirties, they looked hardened, wiry, paras, Vadim reckoned. Two were especially boisterous, and a couple of the young guys clearly had seen too many bad action films, talking about it all the time, bragging, but the young voices shaking with anxiety and the need to succeed, because they believed they had what it took. And were utterly terrified of the possibility they could be proven wrong.

Watching these men, Vadim figured they were being observed, probably from the first moment onwards. Whenever he'd done training, selection, and assessment, he knew which type made it. The grey man. The one that wasn't neither the loudest, nor the most visible. It was the man without profile, the one that adapted, that had the camo in his skin and changed like a chameleon, becoming all but invisible. Flow like water, he thought, wasn't sure where that came from, maybe Musashi, maybe Sun Tsu, or one of his own officers.

The accommodation was grotty, the buildings were arranged in spider style around an ablutions block. They were nothing but wooden huts without the chance for any privacy. Soon it was time to get sheets and blankets for the bedding, and the men showed their varied skills in making up their beds. Vadim stuck to the drill from the Soviet Army. He doubted it would be that different. He could see who bothered and who knew how to do it. There was pretty much nothing to do until

0700 hrs. Nothing, except for a large meal in the cookhouse, where Vadim continued to watch and listen. Nobody got out of his way to make contact and that was exactly how he wanted it. Still conscious about his accent, and the less he spoke the better. Staying away, apart, watching for those watching him, and just eating, breathing, and watching.

After chow, many of the guys went into town for a couple of pints and a portion of chips before coming back for an early night, while others were glued to their kit, assembling and reassembling, strumming with nervousness.

Vadim did isometrics to work on his muscles, went for a nice long run once the food was halfway digested, then had a long shower, late enough that nobody bothered him. Enjoying the heat in that run-down place, and figuring there was nothing he couldn't deal with. He had already passed all these tests, had already been stretched to the limit. Had actually seen a long and nasty war. How bad could it be? Dan had passed this.

The next morning didn't come too soon for many of the hopefuls, who had been tossing and turning throughout the night. Up at 0600 hrs, fed by 0630 hrs, everyone was out on parade by 0700 hrs. Dressed in the standard combat uniform, the British flag on the left sleeve and their regiments' berets on their heads. Including Vadim, who had been giving the Royal Marines' beret, crest and badges, so he wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb.

The tough looking Major came out of the building, the sand coloured beret of the SAS on his head, strolling out in front of the assembled lines of almost two hundred soldiers. Addressing the assembled men, he stressed the fact the 22nd regiment would not try to impose discipline from above, since they expected every soldier to be disciplined enough to do this for themselves. That meant if they were given instructions regarding timing, they were going to meet them. All men on selection were to be equal, no matter which rank they held in their units. Officers and non-commissioned, it made no difference, on selection everyone was alike. He went on to explain that each day they were going to put details on the training wing notice board and it was the men's responsibility to read them and to follow them, thus knowing everything they needed to know for the following day. Any serious misconduct would result in the perpetrator being RTU'd and minor misdemeanours would be fined, the money to be used for a piss-up at the end of selection. Tough luck to those who didn't make it.

He finished his address by explaining there were only two ways to fail the first stage of selection: by withdrawing voluntarily, which included injury, or by failing to make the times allowed for completing a march during the test phase of week four.

An interesting approach no doubt, Vadim pondered. Nobody would whip them through, they had to motivate themselves. That created people that thought, planned, and had initiative. And a basic level of commitment. Vadim was aware he stood out, and tried to become even greyer. He ranked among the tallest ones, and was among the broadest ones, too. Definitely the oldest. Being invisible wasn't easy. So he'd just mind his own business.

One of the DS staff came to the front, carrying a clipboard. He instructed the men they were going to run the BFT, the Army's Basic Fitness Test, which was nothing more than a one and a half mile run, to be finished in under eleven minutes.

Vadim figured only a cripple wouldn't make it, or a drunk, or a junkie. When the race begun, he moved into the leading group, but didn't make his way to the front. Stayed grey. Completed with hardly breaking a sweat, and nobody else seemed to have suffered much, either.

The week, from then on, was an endless succession of gym work-outs, classroom sessions in basic map reading and several medical lectures on first aid and how to look after oneself in a hostile environment, particularly in the mountains. Vadim followed enough to not draw attention, but was amazed SAS started from zero and allowed that much time to put together the new guys. It made sense, in its way, and it did give him more time to work on the stamina, for runs in boots and uniform, and those runs were getting longer. The circuit training in the gym went on without seeming to ever stop, and Vadim's body shifted to meet that demand. Somewhere in the nerves, the little things that were not bone and muscle, somewhere there was a memory of what it was like to be tough and near indestructible. His body remembered, and seemed to ponder things, ingraining lessons and movements, saturating himself in strength and resolve even during the breaks that were filled with lecture upon lecture.

The week was obviously designed to thin out those who had never really had full intentions to make it through selection, but merely to boast to their mates they'd given it a go. The first week also gave to those who stayed on the basics of surviving in the mountains, skills and endurance that was needed for soldiers who

had not come from the ranks of Paratroopers, Marines, or one of the Infantry units, where tabbing long distances and map reading under pressure were almost daily occurrences.

Nothing special. Hardly noteworthy. Vadim's mind fully concerned with measuring his own progress in the fitness area, keeping his mind focused like memorising movements as if for any competition. He'd fenced a hundred bouts in his mind without getting up, now he was sitting there, in his chair, running and marching and 'surviving' even when listening to a lecture. Listening, above all, to their version of English, and their terms, turns of phrases, about 'birds', and 'bints', and whatever they called things. Feeling into the language, mimicking it in his head, speaking nothing aloud, but thinking to himself in English. Not the English of their literary masters. That gutter trash English that would mask him, and make him another shade greyer.

At the end of week one it was time to get into the mountains and get real. That Sunday, the trainees paraded outside the Training Wing with their bergans, belt kit and packed lunch, boarding the trucks for the first time, to head into the Welsh mountains. The day's training was part run and part orienteering exercise, to sift more of the dead crop out of the bunch. Each of the soldiers had six checkpoints to find, an easy task for anyone with knowledge of map reading. The run, though, was different now. Only over eight miles, but the terrain was hilly and wet, with a fast pace set by the DS. A group of about thirty men managed to stay close to the DS, while everyone else lagged behind, unable to gain enough points that were needed for this exercise.

Vadim held on, 'brought up the rear', the last in the top group, watching the others, having found a pace, while his feet and legs and most of all hamstrings remembered mountains, and sliding half-controlled down. Every now and then, he glanced over his shoulder, but the terrain made it near impossible to keep eye contact with the guys behind. It was misty, the kind of heavy thick mist that was the closest thing to rain, the ground heavy and saturated with last night's downpour. A bitch, but still nothing special. Another test run, another prod at resolve, nothing else. Obviously created to make the blade-to-be wonder whether this was actually what he wanted to do for the rest of his maybe very short life. Vadim looked around, that green and grey desolation, that special smell of this country, the way

the mist settled on his face and hair and hands, his throat, and thought this was really Dan's country.

Just as wide and generous, in a way, a way that made him breathe freer even when he was up on the ridge gulping for breath.

That was not all, though. The next day the real test after the first week took place. It was the infamous 'Fan Dance' march across Pen Y Fan. Set up as a race, it proved to be a no-nonsense tab with a 40lb bergan and a distance of 14 miles up, across, and down the other side and back again over the highest peak in South Wales.

The men were split into two groups of equal size, one on either end of the mountain, supposed to meet halfway in the middle, which meant neither group had an advantage over the other. It was either a steep climb at the beginning, or a more leisurely-looking incline, but since each group had to do each end at some stage, it did not matter where to begin.

Vadim's group got the 'easy end', the DS told them to just 'hang in there', whatever that meant, Vadim thought probably take it easy and steady and keep the strength for when it mattered. The rocky surfaces were the bitch, traps for hands and feet, mostly. And injury meant RTU, or, in Vadim's case, worse. Returned to the trash heap.

He stuck to the DS, again in the middle of the group, not too eager, no reason to risk anything. Anything more than he already did. Steady would do it. This was just a mountain. The DS ran off at a blistering pace, and Vadim got the impression that, like Smudge, he probably did this for fun, or at least enjoyed this so much he could just as well do it only for fun. He wondered what these guys did if they needed to stretch themselves. Run a marathon in combat boots, bergan on his back, he supposed.

Vadim kept up, stuck to the guy as if his life depended on it, saw how he negotiated the territory, and took his clues from him, while keeping his head down, not cursing, not bitching, not cracking stupid jokes. Waste of energy and focus.

He could see the mountain in the distance, part of it, and the misty weather had held; the top was covered in mist, hard to tell exactly what was ahead. Uphill, he adjusted the straps on his bergan, shifted the weight up high on his shoulders to not have to drag the bitch behind him, and kept mostly upright. Eventually, they reached the top, and figures were moving in the mist, fast, following their own DS.

The others ran at them at full pace and Vadim realized they'd try and make them budge off the path. Both would cost strength, losing room up or down, didn't matter, and when Vadim's turn came, he stood there and gave the guys coming towards him his best, baleful stare, hands open, shoulders squared, ready to fight. That made them not try it, and Vadim returned to his pace, feeling an ache creep up from his legs that told him he'd used up his immediate reserves.

But it got worse on the way down. At that speed, with that rough terrain, every uneven rock hit his lower back. He could feel his teeth rattle, and the disks between his vertebrae, and his knees started to hurt from the strain, too.

He gave his details to the DS at the turning point, needed to remember for a second, too rushed to think very clearly at that stage, wanted to finish the run, not stand and do this.

The steep climb from the other side was a real ball breaker with the added nicety of one false horizon after the other. He got to the top, again bathed in mist, hurting, breathing hard, when he saw figures in the mist, moving. That was his group. The last leg. The last bit. Vadim gritted his teeth, forced his body to keep relaxed under the strain, to keep the breath flowing freely, and began to run in earnest, to get back as soon as possible. He wasn't quite sure how many points he had and how much he had scored so far, but giving a little extra now would be good. He only stopped after completion, dropping the bergan and laughing, breathlessly. "Stupid fucking mountains," he muttered to himself.

After the 'Fan Dance', twenty-three men jacked it in and seven were injured, and in total, at the end of the first week they had lost sixty-two of the original number of hopefuls. Either through injury or voluntary withdrawal.

In Vadim's room, two bunks remained empty.

From then on the men were no longer purely fighting for themselves, but those who remained in week two were split into small groups of ten to fifteen men to spend their days walking over the Brecon Beacons.

That evening, several of the soldiers took the opportunity to check out the pubs in Hereford, while others stayed inside, for the umpteenth time checking and re-checking, packing and re-packing their bergans, allowing the anxiety to grow. Vadim stretched, and ran, and did isometrics to the point when he had got rid of the pressure they were starting to build in him. He wouldn't be broken by that kind of

strain. He'd had too much of it. Compared to Afghanistan, this was a five star holiday with fitness programme.

If anything, he regretted he could feel the fact he'd been out of it for a while. Ten years ago, he'd have passed with flying colours without hurting afterwards. He saw the nervous and miserable guys and wasn't sure how to break their tension. They wouldn't listen if he tried. He wasn't their officer and he couldn't tell small stories to keep the morale up. He didn't connect to these men, not like he had connected to Soviets, his troops, Lesha, Dima, and the others. Platon. The kid would be just as miserable if he were here, in this situation. And nothing to do, for him, except be the guy that wasn't actually here, that wouldn't truly become visible, fighting the battle in his mind, like going through the motions in fencing.

The next two weeks saw an increase in pressure, which kept on relentlessly and grew in demand. All of the men had to be at the trucks at 0600 hrs each morning for the two hour drive into the Welsh mountains, while never being told in advance where they were going or what was to be expected of them. Fine. In Afghanistan, things had been improvising so long Vadim didn't actually care. It was to screw their minds and keep them flexible, breaking out of the routine. Vadim wholeheartedly agreed. Spetsnaz exercises were a worse bitch. Being told they'd only go out for two days and then something went 'wrong' and they had to fight for two weeks. That was far worse than being left in the dark.

The only information they received was given the night before on the notices in each accommodation, which detailed what kit was to be brought for the next day. It would always be the bergan with 40lb weight with one extra item: a drill rifle, which added more weight and was always to be carried at the ready. The men were not allowed to sling the weapon over a shoulder or to stuff it down the side of their backpack to carry it more comfortably. This made sense, and made all this feel more natural to Vadim. He fell back into the other mind, the one he'd used for combat, for patrol, and couldn't help but look for places and angles of attack. Sniping country. All this was wide open.

He had to reign in his mind and remember this wasn't actually war, not truly, no casualties. But it came back, like the lion resurfacing somehow, sensing the air, tasting dust that wasn't there. Senses more alert than they'd been for ages, melting away the dull lead that had covered him, and it was like coming up for air.

Despite it being April, each morning, when boarding the truck, it would rain and be miserable and cold. The clever ones would get their sleeping bags out, pile on top of each other in the back of the trucks and grab a couple of hours sleep in the warmth of their doss bags. The others, who couldn't be arsed, would sit in the cold on the benches, shivering throughout the ride, while their strength and determination got further sapped with every day, ground down by the physical and mental strain. Vadim, though, sat there, rifle on his knees, sleeping bag around his shoulders, minimizing exposure, and resting while being alert. That half-sleep, half-rest he'd cultivated in enemy country.

Once the trucks stopped it was hard to get out from beneath or within the warmth, knowing the day was going to be a repeat of the day before and an even more painful one at that. The rush of cold air, saturated with water, attacked every part of a man's body the moment they climbed out of the sleeping bag, but once they'd jumped off the truck, jarring bruised joints and blistered feet, it was time to get the first grid reference and get going.

There were several shades of pain, the dull, throbbing, stiff pain that seemed to forbid movement, and the creaky, reluctant pain when Vadim actually did move. But once he got moving, that pain warmed up into a strangely comforting sensation that became part of the body like an arm or a leg or the damned bergan.

Before they set off, the DS called each man, asking for the exact location, expecting to be shown the correct spot on the map, before proceeding with the first grid reference. Taking a compass bearing, Vadim and the others tabbed off as fast as they could to get to the checkpoints and go through a set routine. Some of the checkpoints were in specific locations, like a bend in a river or a certain rock formation. Others were in the middle of nowhere with a DS tucked away in a small tent, huddled in the warmth with a hot cuppa, communicating through a partly lowered zipper in the tent while noting down each man's details. They were expected to rattle the data off, no matter in which condition they were. Vadim felt bitter envy at the tea, and yet strangely enjoyed stretching himself like that. He could still deal with this, still had a heart left, still more spirit. Not *winning* was the goal, at the moment, it was not losing.

The faster a trainee was on each day's run, the better their chances of getting onto the first truck that went back into camp. If the vehicle filled up fast,

there was a chance to get into the few bath tubs by piling straight in, dropping bergan and kit beside the tub and soak luxuriously in the hot water to ease the pain in muscles and joints. Vadim rushed faster just for that comfort, while part of him mocked himself for that primal response, but after being wet and half-frozen, nothing was like a hot bath. Just the easing of pain was delicious. After scran in the cookhouse it was time to find out who hadn't made it that day, as the DS on duty went from room to room, telling the occupants if they were still in or if they got either a warning or thrown out of the course immediately. Each time it was quieter in the rooms after the DS's round, until the rumour mill started up once again, with most of the men wondering aloud who was going to get binned the next day. Vadim didn't move a single muscle when it was somebody else's name—and he didn't expect for his name to come up. He was doing alright. Unless he got injured, he'd be alright. Most guys were at breaking point, he could smell it, see it in their eyes, and see some were hanging on with sheer balls, while their body already rebelled.

The end of week two saw another murderous timed march: 14 miles through Radnor Forest in Southern Wales followed by 21 miles the very same night, across the peaty bogs. The pain was keen. Worse than keen. Stumbling across this forsaken, nightmarish landscape, falling, getting back up again, all the time cold and miserable. Vadim hated the country, hated the cold, and it seemed almost a good idea to stop and not be bothered, why put himself through this much pain. At his age? After so many years out of it? He still went on, pushed the thought away, worked, he'd get there and if he'd crawl, he'd get there.

A lot of the hopefuls gave up that night, several with fractured legs and twisted joints, while Vadim was just completely fucked afterwards. He felt every single month he was older than thirty, every day, every hour and wondered, without true emotion or connection, how Dan had made this. What had driven Dan through this, what motivated a man for this? What had driven *him*?

Week three started in a similar way as the one before, now with even less men, since a third of them had been binned or withdrawn voluntarily. The weather took a sudden turn for the worst, with blizzards in April, snow and plummeting temperatures, which made the terrain even more treacherous than before. The men were told to buddy up with two or more others, to cut down the risk of getting lost and to ensure if someone were to take a bad fall and get seriously injured, there

would be help at hand. Vadim didn't take the initiative, could see them gauge him, knew almost certainly what they were thinking—he'd made it this far, so he was tough, but still he hadn't become 'matey' with anybody, so he was the last one to 'buddy up', which didn't cause a stirring in him. Made sense, and he wasn't too keen on this, either. He'd prefer to be on his own, pull his weight, do his part, but still keep a low profile.

Timings, of course, were slower in such hazardous weather, but the only way to gauge one's time when coming off the mountains in sleet and snow, was to judge how many others were already waiting in the truck.

By that week, some men were in agony because of their feet that were covered in blisters, Vadim could see the bloody socks clinging to their feet. He'd stuck to keeping his own dry, wear two pairs of socks, and he still had calluses from Afghanistan—and kept them. Leaving his feet to hang out of the bath when he got a soak and took meticulous care of them all the time. Feet can kill you, as the officers used to say in training. Even the toughest guys couldn't ignore their feet falling apart. Marching was bad enough, and the weather, and the strain, but blisters? They made the difference.

The end of week three saw another ballbuster of a day and night tab, this time over snow covered bogs and across the mountain ridges, which resulted in several more men dropping out before test week started.

Few of the hopefuls could imagine there was possibly anything worse that could be asked of them, but test week started on Monday and was a series of marches similar to the ones before, but longer and with more weight. They culminated in a murderous 43 mile march while being forced to keep off roads and tracks, not allowed to buddy up with anyone else. While every man was on their own they were also still against the clock. This was when Vadim felt he was getting back into it, mostly by seeing how much better he did than the others. Finally on his own again, with just his thoughts, and his breath misting in the ice cold air.

The first march was 12 miles with 35lb bergen, the second 14 miles with 40lb weight, the third 17 miles with 45lb and the fourth 12 miles with 50lb and only a sketch map as guidance. The harder they pressed Vadim, the more he responded to it, simply no other way, despite the aches. Like everything, one got used to abuse, to torture, and whenever he thought he couldn't carry the rifle for a

single mile further, he thought of that first week with Dan, busted up, heat-dazed, choking on the weight of his own arms. And somehow, there was another mile in him. Somewhere.

The fifth and final endurance march was 43 miles carrying 55lb. The men had between eighteen and twenty hours to complete it. They were tabbing within a points system, and the more points the safer their survival on the course and the completion of the first stage of selection, which would allow them to go onto the jungle phase. Vadim chose to ignore the word jungle. He knew plains, forests, mountains. He had no idea about jungle.

The last march was the final breaking point for several of the hopefuls, who gave up or got injured in the foul weather, or who did not have the stamina to continue. In the end, out of the initial almost 200 men there were only 35 left who had made it through the first stage of selection. Vadim among them.

* * *

The next part of the course Continuation Training, a build-up period that lasted four weeks before all of those who had passed the first stage of selection were taken to Belize and into the jungle phase, which took another four weeks.

Weapons handling was taught, everything that was being used in operational theatres around the world, as well as lessons on tactics, basic living and surviving in the jungle. All the time the gym continued to be as demanding as before. The men learned drills for patrols of teams of four, which would carry out tasks such as sabotage, reconnaissance and laying automatic firing ambushes. In such small patrols the emphasis was on laying down continuous fire while breaking contact with the enemy. Direct confrontation was to be avoided at all costs. In other words: Unlike the Americans who'd dig in and fire for all they were worth, SAS learnt to run away. Brilliantly down-to-earth.

Vadim stuck to the book as if he'd never been trained differently, only changing things and adapting his own experience when he could get away with it and when his tricks were actually superior. Still laying low and keeping his focus on gym and stamina, knowing it would likely only get harder, and he needed every bit of preparation—not allowing himself to wonder what would come after. They seemed harsh, but generally fair, not cruel, no bastards, it all proceeded with a

straightforward no-nonsense approach that appealed to him. Even without him wanting to, Vadim started to almost ... believe in all that, started to accept all ranks were equal and other ridiculous ideas the Brits sometimes held. No wonder Dan was such an irreverent bastard.

The patrols carried out live firing drills in patrolling ranges that had been cut out of woodland. Targets that popped up in different distances, which they had to hit by firing two rounds, then getting down to cover. When the DS, still a constant attendant, shouted 'stop' or 'change' another man would become lead man of the four-man patrol. These drills were carried out endlessly, teaching the hopefuls more about weapons than they'd probably ever known before, apart from Vadim. He'd trained with those weapons, and it took only a refresher to re-familiarize himself. Everything else was still second nature. Eerie, how much it actually was part of him.

Contact drills were a part of the routine as well, which meant that within each patrol every man had to get to know the other very well, to be able to rely completely on each other. They had to make sure everyone in the patrol was proficient, and most importantly safe, when carrying out those drills. And if any personality clashes showed up once they had reached the jungle, it would be too late for the shit not to boil over.

The classroom sessions continued throughout the month, numerous lectures and tests on jungle related subjects, such as hygiene and safety, medical techniques, signals and Morse code. Even a crash course in languages, which was purely designed to test the candidate's academic ability: SAS was not just highly trained killers, but *clever* highly trained killers. While three didn't make it, Vadim found this the easiest part of the lot. He knew his Morse, he knew enough in several languages to get by. And he was amazed to learn hardly any Brit spoke anything but their gutter trash English. What did they spend their time with in school?

But the strangest thing was the one or two Brits that actually did well in languages seemed to be almost self-conscious about it, as if they had to apologize ... a certain unease that betrayed these guys didn't consider education a worthy or even honourable thing to have.

* * *

With 32 men left from the original 191, all of the hopefuls and a number of DS staff made their way to Belize, to enter the jungle phase. The small Central American country faced the Caribbean Sea and was one of the many former parts of the British Empire. Each patrol, consisting of four men, was to live, sleep, eat, exercise and survive together, with one DS attached to it, who would always be somewhere, observing, but never where the men might expect him.

They were flown into the country, taken a further way in by helicopter, before the men were let out to march the rest to the camp in the very midst of the jungle. The air was so thick Vadim had to drink it, and he was soaked in sweat the moment his feet touched the ground. His heart pounded so hard he felt dizzy, as his body struggled with the heat, and he was half-dazed as he followed the others through the thick vegetation. Needing all concentration just to keep walking despite his body rebelling against the humidity and the heat.

It took five hours to reach the point where they met their DS. The sun could hardly be seen through the thickness of the leaves, but its effect was felt keenly, as the patrol had to stop every fifteen minutes to drink. Vadim's pulse had transformed into a pounding headache that made him miserable quickly. He suspected several of the others didn't feel any better, and hoped he'd adjust, but he also suspected it would be especially tough for him, being the oldest. And however much he drank, sweat just kept pouring out of him, trickling down his neck, his temple, his throat, and all he could do was wait for it to be over, while marching.

According to the briefing, it would take them a week to get used to the territory and the climate, and then it was another three weeks to go. They learnt how to survive the hostile environment, how to put up pole beds that kept the body off the ground and thus away from dangerous wildlife, and were introduced to a wide variety of insects, snakes and other animals. They had to realise what was edible and what would prove poisonous.

Throughout all of this the patrol had to constantly remain tactical with the only mode of communication allowed was whispering, while weapons and webbing were to be worn at all times. Each morning, at least forty-five minutes before dawn, they had to stand to, which meant getting up in total silence, getting out of the dry clothes, zip them up in a plastic bag and putting the damp and cold kit from the day before back on, no matter how hard or uncomfortable it was. The kit was packed away without making any sound, before each man had to move to a

certain guard point, standing at attention, guarding the jungle, face out, until daylight approached. At some point, it stopped being hell, and was merely tough. Vadim learnt to understand the men he was 'out on patrol with', and it wasn't all that different from patrol in Afghanistan, if in a worse environment, if anything could be worse than the mountains.

Many of the days were spent on ranges, live firing while under constant pressure and scrutiny from the DS, never quite knowing where he was. He might be hidden close by, while the patrol was standing to in the light of dawn, observing if each and every man was silent, meticulous and fitting into the group; or he might be standing by during the firing, ensuring each man would fit into the Regiment, since it operated in small numbers, often behind enemy lines.

One of the men had obvious leadership experience, just the kind people looked to for decision-making, and Vadim stuck to his resolve to remain invisible. He wouldn't challenge that position of authority, it would mean too much scrutiny, even if he had the feeling the other guy assumed he might—being the oldest of the lot. But Vadim fell back into the ranks, never questioned, even when he was fairly sure the guy was improvising, sometimes offering a piece of advice, which seemed to be taken as a challenge, but Vadim remained completely non-aggressive. At some point, that guy started to listen to him and would look at him when giving what passed for orders, and Vadim would be the first to do as told, which relaxed everybody. Quite likely the guy had no idea why Vadim was doing what he did, and Vadim didn't clue him in, instead filled the position of the second-in-command, which was ceded, and expected of him. Once that was settled, the patrol got on perfectly. A smooth, small machine that worked without a hitch, without a flaw, and Vadim began to enjoy it. He was close when any of the guys was struggling with something, never asked, always perceptive, always ready to lend a hand. He felt like the invisible strings connected with him, around him, and were at his disposal. Leadership by example, without becoming the actual leader.

The stress was a constant, like the pouring sweat. Exhaustion taxed them heavily, heat and humidity made every movement anguish. On patrol, they always had to keep off track, pretending there'd be enemy ambushes or booby traps, so they continuously moved through primary jungle whenever they had to be at a certain location. It could take up to six hours to move five hundred meters.

Too intense. When it got too bad, the heat, the humidity, living and feeding like an animal, only speaking in whispers, Vadim paused, breathed, and thought of times when he had broken down. How he'd broken under Dan, how Dan had nearly killed him, and he'd betrayed himself, his unit, his country, his family, only to not die in that horrible, messy way. This then, this jungle, was only half as bad as that, he could stand the wearing down, the chipping away, he knew he had more strength than that. He'd been there. He'd broken before, had been set, and healed. Recovered himself. This was bad, but it wasn't breaking him. He could see the stress flicker in the other guys' eyes, though, and while they were lying in wait, breathlessly whispering, he could suddenly feel a shift. The guy's name was Chris or something. Christopher, Vadim reckoned, and suddenly Chris' dirt, sweat-streaked face distorted, and Vadim could just feel this was the most the man could bear. A quick glance around, then Vadim crawled over, swiftly, touched Chris' shoulder, and could feel the man vibrate under the strain like a steel cable close to tearing and whipping around. The man's breath was fast and became irregular, shallow, quick, hyperventilating from the stress. If he freaked, that would be bad—Vadim couldn't tell whether the DS was watching or not, but he assumed he was.

Vadim caught a glance from the leader, then looked into wide stress-diluted pupils, could just see the man was about to scream and bolt, and grabbed him by the shoulder, speaking in whispers to him, calming him, reminding him how far he'd come, told him to breathe, fucking in and out, while the rest of the group held the position and kept their heads down.

It was a huge battle, fought in silence, the man's self-control against the overwhelming desire to scream, to escape this slow torture, escape the infernal noise of the jungle, all those birds and insects, and eat like a human again. With concerns beyond staying fit and watered, and Vadim suddenly felt the man's hands on him, around him, pulled into the desperate embrace of a man who'd come too fucking close to breakdown. Despite the fact he didn't want to touch anybody, he understood this as different, comradeship, and the man clung him to draw strength from him.

If you knew what I've done to the likes of you, thought Vadim, and patted the man's back, kept speaking in a whisper, while the tension built up as if Chris was about to break into tears, doubtlessly at the limits of endurance, while Vadim

told him to keep breathing and they were comrades, and all would be good, just a little while longer.

Eventually, Chris pulled himself together, and Vadim pulled back, but stayed close to the other. He had no idea what the DS would make of this small episode. They never knew when they'd blown it, or if they'd blown it. There was no set of rules to cling to, and Vadim assumed it was all about seeing them perform as a team under pressure. Their leader did well, and Chris, despite that small episode, was an exceptional soldier.

He kept at the man's side, watching him—and the others—for any sign of mounting stress, for any indication of break-down. All the time performing his tasks, working as hard, if not harder than anybody else, feeling strangely responsible for these younger men. Like he'd felt for Platon, but without the embarrassing, vicious, destructive needs. He had no needs. For all intents and purposes, his body had stopped to desire and was just a machine these days. Under control. No control necessary. He didn't see anything attractive in any of the men, not the way he used to feel. He could work with them, and touch them, and be touched, and it was nothing, held no meaning, no double edge, nothing that would spill blood. It was a relief and he caught himself smiling for no other reason but the fact that, for once, in that half-light, noise, stress, sweat-drenched heat, he belonged.

Days had turned into weeks and the pace of the course increased as did the pressure. None of the men knew how they were doing, as it was impossible to judge. While the DS was always somewhere, at the most unexpected places, he would never let on how well any of the men conducted themselves. Neither were any of the patrols aware of how their mates were faring in the other patrols, since they never met each other until the very last day during the breaking up of camp which saw a squadron sized 'attack' on an enemy camp, which came as a shock and a relief, as the pressure mounted and then exploded. Vadim fell immediately into age-old reflexes, fighting hard and giving no quarter, expecting no quarter—this had become war, the war against fear. He wouldn't be afraid anymore.

Finally, they made it out of the jungle, and were picked up by trucks, including their kit. Vadim found it impossible to relax just yet, expecting another attack, an ambush, nerves still taut with stress, but nothing happened on the way back to the army base.

The men in his team exchanged stories with the others, Vadim merely listened, having nothing to tell, keeping his own counsel, and people moved away, gave him space, as if he belonged and yet didn't belong. They must have caught his accent, thought Vadim, refusing to speak more than a few words at any given time, and knew the others caught how unnatural that was. And despite all the bragging and the nervous laughter, no one had any idea if they had passed or failed. The results of the Jungle phase were going to be announced when they had returned to Hereford, but Vadim was confident. His mind was still intact, more so than it had been before, like the machine just came back under pressure, assembled like an assault rifle.

Under fire, under pressure, not something one thought about. Only lacking the parts that could cause trouble. If anything, improving the base design. Once back in Britain and in camp, all 32 men were gathered in a lecture room of the Training Wing, eagerly awaiting the results. They had got back the previous night, few of them finding much sleep, too desperate to know—whereas Vadim slept like a stone, knowing he'd given all, hadn't frayed under pressure and likely performed best mentally. The only thing they could hold against him was his refusal to take command and control, but he doubted they knew he had been an officer. Or maybe guessed it, but had no inkling of an idea he'd been spetsnaz. The odd pride in that accomplishment was still there, and he had to hide it among these children that had never been drilled the Soviet way.

On that Wednesday morning, the Officer in Command read out the list of failures, telling the men to hand in their kit. Out of the 32 men who went into the Jungle phase, only 11 remained. Vadim's patrol had lost Chris, the soldier who had almost had a nervous breakdown, and the leader. Despite being an experienced man he had taken on leadership without leading fully, dependent on another's approval. But Vadim, Vadim had made it, and the remaining 11 men were told to report for the start of the Combat Survival phase at 0800 hrs sharp the following Monday after several days of rest.

Vadim was stunned to see those two men go, joking, but clearly shattered about their failure. A sudden barrier went straight through the group, creating two factions. That of those who had made it and those who had failed. The atmosphere was poisoned with envy, regret, the guilty feeling of triumphing when mates were left behind. It was an eerie feeling and Vadim forced those men out of his head.

They were casualties as far as he was concerned. He'd not made them fail, he had done what he could to support. These were gone now, history.

He paid a visit to the doctor, where he got some antiseptic tinctures for all the insect bites and leech wounds, it was a miracle *where* insects could bite and suck blood, and he half-amusedly expected some kind of nasty fever to hit him. Checking his weight, he had lost a good one and a half stone, his face looked completely different to how he remembered it, but he still didn't look half as bad as straight from prison.

Despite the fact he swayed on his feet, he forced himself to clean up what he could and give himself at least a proper shave now, which took forever, and reminded him suddenly of Dan. In his half-apathetic state, he could imagine Dan standing behind him and steadying the blade for the shave, maybe mocking him for it, in a tender way. Vadim stared into the mirror, could almost see Dan, almost feel that body's heat close, those strong fingers on his wrist. His vision suddenly blurred and he put the razor down, set both hands onto the basin, fingers splayed to support him, and hung his head.

Dan. Dan was the reason for all this, but Vadim wasn't quite sure now how. Why. Or even what. Dan deserved the truth. He had repeated that in his mind, over and over and over again. Dan deserved the truth.

His eyes burned and Vadim drew a deep, shaky breath, knew he needed to calm, to steady himself, there were always eyes watching. He could almost see part of the DS in the undergrowth, a silhouette, a rustle, a smell, all deliberate to let them know he was there. He caught a real motion behind him and shook his head, wiped over his face, saw Chris suddenly appear. Bergan over his shoulder, looking at him, and Vadim looked back, speechless. And he still didn't speak when the Brit dropped his kit and pulled him into a tight, matey hug. "You'll make it," Chris said, voice rough. "Thanks, man. You deserve it—six months, and we'll have a beer, eh?"

Vadim nodded, oddly glad for the touch himself, glad Chris had accepted it and had his sights set on the goal. "Yes."

"Good." Chris grinned, if pained, and lifted the bergan back up on his shoulder, stepped back and waved, then headed out.

Vadim barely managed to not peel the skin off his face with the razor, too tired now to be remotely coherent. Sleep. Food. Recover. Allow his body to heal and his morale to build up again.

It was silent in the barracks during the next days. Most guys were sleeping or eating, and even the boldest and most ingenious didn't manage to combine the two, try as they might. Vadim found it hard to set his priorities during the first two days, then later food became more important. Anything that wasn't brackish water and some hapless wildlife was a delicacy. And that included the British ruined tea and the heavy, fat-dripping fare that kept these men together.

Monday morning saw not only the 11 remaining men from Selection, but 39 others at the start of the Combat Survival course, because the course was open to all branches of the Armed Forces. It took place in the vicinity of the Regiment's barracks and the 50 men were once again split up into groups of four men per patrol, to be taught over the next month how to live off the land, trap and hunt game, and build and live in makeshift shelters that were constructed from pieces of wood and found material.

The learning phase took three weeks, a steep curve for those who never had to survive in the wild before, and those were most, with Vadim one proficient exception. Compared to what spetsnaz did, this was a walk in the park, but Vadim felt he could use that walk in the park only too well to heal and recover, put some of his weight back on and supplement all this with running, isometrics and stretching.

During the last and fourth week the patrols were be out in their four-man groups, let loose on the run to survive off the land for five days while being chased by a hunter force that consisted of paratroopers aided by hunter dogs. Fugitives who did not get caught during the five days of evasion and survival were to get themselves captured and taken away for a 36-hour interrogation phase.

Just before that test started they were stripped naked, which made Vadim impossibly queasy, but it was worse when they were physically checked, every orifice, and he had to remind himself nobody could tell he was gay, and he hadn't taken part in any homosexual activity. Of course, the scars would be noticed: the one close to his balls, the Cyrillic letters down his back.

They could read he had been tortured once, but he answered no question, allowing them to check his body and shutting everything else down, fear, shame, doubt. It was about finding any goodies that would make the five days easier.

Each man was given an old army trench coat, a pair of boots, a small tobacco tin containing a couple of wire snares, a condom for holding water and other bits of survival equipment, as well as a rough sketch map of the area, and a bin liner.

Everyone was desperate to avoid getting caught, because the punishment was severe. Those who did not manage to evade capture were kept in an open pen, no matter how bad the weather was, and kept in a stress position for four to five hours. After that they were released to carry on as before until the inevitable final interrogation. It was crucial to avoid early capture to conserve mental and physical strength, or breakdown and failure during the final phase was all too possible.

Vadim carefully considered the odds. He didn't want to take control of the four man patrol, at the same time he didn't trust the leadership of that pretentious fuck who was too keen to show he knew everything and certainly didn't want to hear any kind of dissent. That one hadn't been an SAS hopeful and hadn't made it through Selection so far, so there was no glue to keep them together, and Vadim lost him and his crony at the earliest opportunity. Staying together was not part of the game plan.

Instead, he and Andy (that was probably Andrew) covered a lot of ground, as much as humanly possible, using all tricks Vadim knew and Andy seemed fine with that, every now and then grinning at him and speaking in that strangely musical dialect Vadim had learnt to distinguish as Welsh. Just speaking his vowels differently, less flat, and actually half-rolling the 'r' which to Vadim sounded like a much prettier form of English.

One night, they were sitting together after a long, long march, and Vadim still felt restless, staring up to the stars through the branches of the tree, suddenly seeing Andy's teeth gleam.

"What?" He nodded towards Andy.

"What are you planning?" Andy pulled a little closer to whisper. "You are thinking."

"Sorry." Vadim grinned back, with irony. "I'm just tired of running."

"Tell me about it," whispered Andy. "Fuck those bastards."

Vadim gave a toneless laugh. He liked the man. “What I’m planning ... are you ready to be punished?”

“Does it involve giving those guys a hard time?”

“Aye.” Vadim grinned, suddenly enjoying this. “It does. They are paratroopers. Paratroopers are arrogant bitches. I have an idea where they are going. I’m planning to teach one a lesson.”

“You know we’re still supposed to hand ourselves in?”

“Yes.” Vadim shrugged. “But it would be a change of pace to hunt instead of being hunted. What do you say?”

Andy laughed. “You crazy fuck. I like it. Let’s go.”

The paras were confident. Driving men before them like sheep did that to their egos. Vadim moved in a circle, flanking, with Andy unwavering near him, giving support and pulling every trick in the book. Vadim knew it was madness, he did expect a sound beating to follow that stunt, but at the same time, he could feel his mind fray under the stress of being hunted, not finding much rest if any at all, and he figured he needed to change something, win the initiative. So, he flanked, Andy helped by laying a trail for the fucking dog, and they attacked straight in a thicket, grabbing man and dog and carrying both off, tying up the bastard dog, and administering a sound beating to the struggling, panicking para, for the fun and the hell of it, the best way of stress relief. And vanished before the guy’s comrades found them.

This was an altogether different game, with the hunters concentrating on Vadim and Andy, and Vadim told the Welsh guy he should break away and cover his own ass, but Andy had nothing of that, telling him he was only around to learn some more tricks.

The hunt was elating, especially as they managed to repeat the stunt. Pure reckless energy, blood pounding with fierce joy at how dangerous they were, and Vadim found himself staring at the man, the comrade, suddenly realizing he felt a careful, watchful desire, a dull ache more than the raging fire of years ago. That troubled him, troubled him a lot when he watched as Andy slept for just an hour, on the run, barely catching the absolutely necessary rest and sleep, always driven on by Vadim’s resolution to not get caught. The KGB had caught him, nobody would ever again get him alive. And the fact this man shared the danger, the stress, formed a bond he had not expected.

The time ran out and they still hadn't been caught. Andy high-fived him, stood up from their hiding place and stretched, for once not afraid to move out into the open. "Let's go, then." Checking the map for the place of rendezvous, the march back was far less straining than the actual hunt, and Andy seemed fairly light-hearted, whereas Vadim felt dread impending. One thing to be caught, another to hand himself in. But that wasn't prison, wasn't bad, just another test. The final test, he hoped. Only that kept him together.

"You're a queer bird," said Andy.

"I know." Vadim looked sideways at him, this man had grown close in the last five days, felt like a brother, or a comrade, trusted him on some level, and wanted him, which neutralised the trust. He didn't want to touch him, and did. He didn't want to wonder about him, and did. "But I can't tell you."

Andy shrugged. "Whatever. You just don't strike me as very English."

"True."

"Coming from me, that's not a bad thing." Andy gave another laugh and slapped him on the shoulder. "Let's see whether those fucktards break us, eh?"

They were gathered in one place, where they were promptly blindfolded, and, Vadim supposed, separated. For a moment he feared for Andy, which distracted him from the fact he'd normally fear for himself, but that strange closeness ran deeper.

He was stripped again, and there was again dread, didn't actually think anybody would even consider rape, but felt so fucking vulnerable with that blindfold. Worse, it brought him right back into prison and he could feel himself panic. They made him wear some kind of loose pyjamas and once covered, Vadim focussed on fighting that fear while he was taken into a place that was ice cold and filled with a deafening 'white noise'. Nobody spoke a word as he was prodded into a stress position: standing up facing a wall with legs and arms wide apart, then at some point, later, difficult to keep track of time, they forced him down into a squat position with legs bent and arms pulled behind his head, which hurt, but gave him the pain to focus on. It was cold, and seemed to grow colder every minute, and the white noise made it hard to concentrate at all, a steady pressure on his nerves. Then it was time to change into another position and Vadim fought hard against the panic, knowing they couldn't actually harm him, couldn't actually torture him. But the fear stayed, gnawing on him, whittling his resolve away.

He concentrated on reminding himself of the rules. They had been briefed about what they could and couldn't do. Absolutely not signing anything. That was easy. Vadim had signed one confession, he wouldn't do it again, certainly not in a few days or hours worth of whatever they'd throw at him. They could only give name, rank and number, and the response for everything else was "I can't answer that question". But the first part posed a problem. Vadim didn't have a number. He didn't, technically, have a rank, either, and giving his name meant that they could find that out. Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada wasn't exactly the most British name around.

And he wasn't sure about the rules for lying. He could make an identity up, but he had no idea what methods of checking they had. He didn't even know how many digits that number was supposed to have, and he didn't feel ready to face any jibes at his nationality—and the lack of it. It was too fucking obvious what he was, any more clues and it would scream into their faces.

That left him with the second option—go hard-assed all the way. 'I can't answer that question'. That was important. Not being a smartass, not allow them to rile or confuse him, keeping his wits together. He kept repeating that sentence in his mind, in English. I can't answer that question. Over and over, imprinting it in his mind, using what he knew about psychology: imagining it in bright red, Latin, letters, imagining it sung, spoken, screamed. He busied his mind with finding variations on the sentence—what would it smell like? If it was the title of a song, what would it sound like? That calmed him down, kept his mind away from the fear. If he made this test, he'd be okay. He'd be alright.

After several hours in the ever-changing stress positions, Vadim was hauled up to stand and led into a room where the blindfold was taken off. By now, the sentence was firmly ingrained in his mind, and he felt strong, bolstered by the simple trick. He wouldn't forget this, not even if they actually went tough on him.

Behind a table in an otherwise completely bare room sat a tall and skinny man who was glaring at the 'prisoner' through small metal framed spectacles before lowering his head to start writing something down.

Just what he was writing was a mystery. Impossible they knew anything yet. If they knew, he would have been reading the file. So what was the man writing? Probably a shopping list. This was designed to show the man was in control and had authority. Fuck him.

Vadim was left to stand at attention for at least ten minutes before the man spoke again in a sharp, clipped voice. “I know why you are here.”

Brilliance. So do I? So what? This is an interrogation course. You play interrogator, I play prisoner, and I could snap your scrawny neck before anybody could stop me.

Not looking up, the interrogator continued to write while talking, no mean feat, unless it was the shopping list, after all. That thought amused Vadim. Milk porridge...

“You’re Special Forces, you cunt, and I know you are a Paratrooper, because your mate has told me.”

Only that no mate knew anything about him. Vadim had never left anything open, not even to Andy, who, hopefully, was smart enough to not step into any similar trap. Strictly speaking, he had no mates. But they assumed he’d had, and that was certainly right for everybody else. The paratrooper stuff was amusing, even though Vadim felt a momentary impulse of “oh shit”—that had always been his cover, that and ‘military advisor’.

“So, you better admit to it, or you make it hard for yourself, you pathetic piece of shit.”

Vadim’s jaw muscles tensed as he looked the man squarely in the face. No question had been asked. He didn’t have to answer, so he wouldn’t answer. He was only mildly curious whether the man would bring on more heat, or this was already the extent of it.

The pen came abruptly down onto the table as the man stood up, once more glaring at Vadim, a glower that was returned in equal measure. “Don’t you try playing games with me, we know everything already. That mate of yours, he sang like a bird and you,” a spindly finger pointed at Vadim, “you’re nothing but horseshit and a waste of breathing space.”

Still no question. Vadim raised half an eyebrow to see if that would rile the interrogator, and did his utmost to combine curiosity, obedience and a backhanded challenge.

With surprising speed, the man came from behind his desk, flying towards Vadim, where he started to yell abuse right into his ear, insulting him in every manner imaginable, down to calling his mother a whore. Vadim stood there,

staring straight ahead. Merely tensing his shoulders and keeping the large, red letters in his mind, trying to shut out the voice like the roar from a tank or artillery.

But the man never asked a question.

The insults seemed to take forever, before the interrogator got the guards to take ‘the piece of scum’ away.

Vadim was again blindfolded and hoped they didn’t notice that the blindfold scared him, worse than the interrogation. It shut out most things he could concentrate on...then they brought him back into the ice cold room with the white noise and once again he was put into a stress position, this time kneeling with his arms behind his head and shoulders pulled back as far as it was physically possible. His every move continued to be watched by the guards and if his arms dropped down even a tiny bit they were immediately brutally yanked up without anyone ever uttering a word.

His shoulders hurt, his back started to hurt, and he remembered Dan doing this to him, the rope had choked him, and he’d been in peak physical condition, much better than he was now; on the other hand, he was thinner and less muscled now, more wiry than he’d ever been, which worked to his advantage, at least he kept telling himself that.

The pain didn’t stop, his back knotted up, radiated out into every limb, and he had no idea how long it took. It was a cold miserable place, and his mind started to respond to the white noise. It caused more than discomfort, real, true pain, and the guards weren’t exactly gentle when they pulled his arms up again, which felt like they tried to dislocate his shoulders. This made his weak shoulder hurt, the one that had actually been dislocated. Mountain. Dan. Heat. Heat dazed, stumbling through rocks with his legs tied. He knew that had been worse, but he’d been thirty then, and not used up, not fucking broken.

The breaking had happened later. He shifted again, but every movement was agony with the tensed up muscles. Remembering what had given him respite once, and hoping he didn’t break the rules. He moved his head in the direction where he assumed one of the guards stood, and murmured “I need to piss.”

Wondering if they’d force him to do that into the pyjama trousers...likely not. He was yanked up again, which made him grit his teeth, and taken to the loo, which, above all, allowed him to roll his shoulders and stretch his legs. Bliss. He had no idea whether he hit the urinal or whatever it was, but didn’t actually care.

Took his time—every tiny thing counted, every moment lessened the stress. These guys wouldn't take it far. They wouldn't. They adhered to some kind of rulebook, and that was their weakness.

Then back again. Waiting took a long time, with no food nor water and several more painful positions, one of them where he stood facing the wall with legs and arms outstretched in a search position, while holding himself up by his fingertips. The noise grinding on the nerves and the stress wearing on the body. The interrogation wasn't actually the hard part. The interrogation was a walk in the park. Firstly, that room was warm, and secondly, his body could recover, but most importantly, these didn't leave him alone with himself, wondering, doubting, but gave him an enemy to concentrate on. When they took him out again, he was led into a different room, which seemed unlike the earlier interrogation room, similar to a hospital ward. Once the blindfold was gone, Vadim saw a small round man with a red face, bloated like a pig, and a nurse in fully starched uniform, who had to be in her fifties and was sternly looking at him with a large syringe in her hand that seemed more designed for a horse than a man. He didn't believe they'd put that into him, no way. He looked the nurse over, dismissively, from head to toe, then smiled softly at the syringe. Needles? A common fear, but this was exaggerated. He had plucked rubbery leeches off his skin for weeks. Syringes at least were hygienic and didn't wriggle.

"Your name!" The man barked, who was dressed in a white coat with a stethoscope around his neck, hands sheathed in rubber gloves. Nice touch. The gloves alone promised another body cavity search. Vadim thought they should have done this as a dentist's room. That was an even worse fear for most.

Even though spoken as an order, this was the first proper question. Well. Time to give them something for their money.

"I can't answer that question." Softly, to downplay what accent he had left.

"Where is your injury." Narrowing his eyes, the man came closer, forced to look up as he barely reached to the height of Vadim's shoulders.

"I can't answer that question." "You are here because you are sick. You have been reported. So, don't take me for a fool, where does it hurt."

Vadim was amazed they considered this little mind game effective enough to intimidate somebody who'd gone through Selection. It was bizarre more than

funny, this guy probably acting on some film featuring evil Nazi doctors and assuming that would faze him.

“I can’t answer that question.”

“Speak up!” The man barked, “Why are you here? Louder!”

Oh shit. If he didn’t answer, that was admitting a weakness, and that would allow them to home in on it. “I can’t answer that question.” Somewhat louder, throat tight because he knew he wouldn’t pass for native. And that made his accent probably worse.

“You pathetic little weakling.” The ‘doctor’s’ face got redder as his voice rose. “We’ll find out anyway.” He waved to the nurse who came closer, now with a clip board in her hand, pen poised. “Take all your clothes off.”

Vadim hesitated, eyes briefly meeting those of the nurse, but her stare was fixed without any expression onto him as the ‘doctor’ continued to shout out his orders. “*All* your clothes.”

Vadim stripped, his guts tightening. The Cyrillic on his back. The scar even closer to his balls. Fuck. He should never have allowed that, should never have allowed to be marked like that. While Dr Williams was too polite to comment, good manners were clearly not necessary in this room. He only hoped both these Brits followed their country’s time-honoured tradition of complete ignorance regarding any language that wasn’t English. Dan was an exception. A very exceptional exception. He straightened and stood there naked, forcing himself to stare straight ahead.

The nurse was making notes throughout, then walking slowly around Vadim, as her pen scratched over the paper, and he felt his shoulder blades moving closer together as if his body was trying to protect itself from her stare. His body was tense, muscles taut, and he suddenly found it hard to breathe. This stopped being funny.

The nurse had not said a word while the man sat down at his desk, as he took over the clip board. The nurse stepped into Vadim’s back and he had to resist turning around, or glancing over his shoulder with more effort than he could mask. The tensing of his stomach muscles was only too visible. “Closer.” The ‘doctor’ expected Vadim to stand right in front of the desk. “Legs braced.”

Vadim closed his eyes. They wouldn’t. Would they? How far could they go? Obeying, though, but he knew he betrayed stress now.

The interrogating 'doctor's' fleshy hand moved right between Vadim's legs, cupping his balls and pressing upwards while squeezing, hard. Vadim further tensed his muscles and he felt like jumping and staying completely still. No comment on the scars. It meant nothing to them. Nothing at all.

"Cough." Ordering, while the hand gripped even harder, as if the 'doctor' tried to fist the tissue back into the body, making Vadim breathless and nearly choking the cough inside. Fucking hurt. He didn't want the guy touching him. Medically yes, whatever, but this went over his capacity to ignore. Hurt.

Fucking stop it!

"Does that hurt?"

Vadim's first response was to snarl and tell him what the fuck he thought he was doing, another part of him wanted to crawl back as deeply into his skin as possible, and those conflicting urges gave way to a sentence written in red letters all over his mind.

"I can't..." bear this, "answer that question." Vadim tensed more, expecting to be kicked or hit now, shamed and humiliated.

"You are bringing this onto yourself." The 'doctor's' fat face was sweating now and the anger made his face glow.

"Bend over!" The command was sharp as the man stood up once more, hands on the desk, leaning forward so his face was close to Vadim's. He could feel the spittle spray as the 'doctor' shouted out, "are you a liar, then? If you don't tell us where it hurts, I assume you are a liar, and we hate liars." The voice got even louder, yelling into the other ear, "do you know what we do with liars?"

Bend over. Like any of the sick games in the army. Vadim's disbelief vanished, his heart raced and he began to sweat. They wouldn't. Throat so tight he was unable to speak, unable to protest, clinging to that sentence, the one thing he was allowed to say. *You're bringing this upon yourself.* "I can't answer that question." Needed to speak it to mask the fear that was clawing at him.

Rubber-gloved hands, much smaller than the interrogator's, were suddenly on Vadim's bared arse, roughly manipulating muscles and flesh. It didn't matter they didn't go any further, Vadim's whole body tensed into immovability, eyes closed, sudden tension nauseating as his stomach jumped into his throat, gagging him.

“Spread your legs, you useless, sorry excuse for a soldier!” The man yelled at the top of his lungs, right into Vadim’s ear.

They are. Vadim believed they would, his mind lurched, and he opened his eyes, forcing the memory away of being helpless and outside his body, of the animal fear *they* had drilled into him. He stared at the man, whose beady eyes narrowed, with hatred and fear raging inside, so intense, his mind was blank, while the ‘doctor’s’ face twitched. But Vadim obeyed the order, mostly because he had no strength to resist. Knowing in his heart they could and they would, and there was nothing he could do about it. No resistance. No mercy. Teeth clenched to not scream at the bastard.

Those hands remained on his arse, the sensation of rubber digging into clenched skin while moving quickly, as the ‘doctor’ shouted at him once more, “what is your name, scum!”

“I can’t answer that question.” I can’t. Because if you make me speak, I’ll rip your head off. I’ll kill both of you. And get done for murder.

“Where do you hurt, loser!” Snarling, Vadim repeated the red sentence, the one that felt like a dentist’s drill and tasted like bile. “I can’t answer *that question!*” shouting on the last two words, brought too close, anger and outrage replacing the fear, fully. They would do it, and then he’d kill them. Life was simple now, a place of simple choices. Endure, or die. Kill, or die inside. Again.

The pressure behind him increased, a body came close, too close, pressing against his own while the ‘doctor’s’ eyes flickered to a spot beyond Vadim, when suddenly the door flew open and two guards came marching in without a word. The presence in Vadim’s back vanished that very second and before he knew what happened, they slipped the blindfold over his eyes. It was tied and his arms grabbed and pulled into his back as the guards pushed him forwards, away, to move once more, while not a single sound was uttered by anyone until he had reached the door and the ‘doctor’s’ voice was heard a last time, yelling after him, “you’ll wish you had answered my question, you sorry excuse for a man!”

Vadim struggled for a moment, wanted to turn round and go at the fat bastard’s throat, but the guard held him and he knew they’d drag him away and give him a beating, just because he’d been disrespectful, but everything was better than having a body press against him, getting ... getting ... What? What had that actually been?

And once more into the freezing cold and darkness. They threw the pyjamas at Vadim and untied him, and he dressed, burning with shame and fear, just expecting to be kicked and beaten up, knowing he'd get badly injured in the process. That would RTU him, which meant nothing, exactly nothing, because there was no unit, no life, no nothing. He would have crawled into some space, protect his guts from the onslaught—which never came. They made him sit and forced his hands onto his head, legs stretched out in front of him so he sat in a very upright 'L' with his elbows wrenched back behind his ears. The white noise was deafening and the cold kept creeping into his body and every bone, as they changed his position after an hour of wrenching him back every time he threatened to sag.

The fear became a dull dread sometime during that hour and the adrenaline burned out, leaving him completely exhausted. He wondered why the guards had come in. Did the 'doctor' have any way of alarming them? Did they think he'd flip? Did the bastard actually read him so well? Was he that easily read? The position was agony, exhaustion turned into the desperate need to sleep, as all thoughts blurred and the red sentence blurred with them. He had no idea anymore what he was doing here, or why, just wanted to rest and sleep and be safe. He was hungry and thirsty, thirsty enough for his kidneys to hurt, but above all, he wanted to sleep.

The isolation went on for hours, until he was finally pulled up from one of the stress positions and once more walked into yet another room. If it could be called walking. His body seemed to be numb, he hardly felt it, hardly felt anything at all anything in his body or mind, just moved with where he was dragged.

The room was so hot, the heat descended like a suffocating blanket. When they took the blindfold off him Vadim struggled to straighten up and stand to attention. He was presented with a middle aged man, distinguished looking, with grey temples and dressed in a fine suit. "Please, at ease, man."

Vadim slumped slightly, grateful for that small kindness, but at the same time his hackles rose at the man's appearance. He didn't like this, didn't like it at all. Too much like Konstantinov. Too much like any twisted father figure he'd ever had. Different approach. He was so fucking tired.

The gentleman steepled his fingertips together and let his pale grey eyes rest on Vadim. Pulling his thin lips into a fake smile, he sat and merely regarded

Vadim with a scrutiny that did not seem to miss even the tiniest thing. And Vadim had no strength left to be grey, didn't have the strength left to resist much.

"What is your name?"

It was wrong to speak, even if it felt like a relief. It would be over if only he spoke. "Can't ... answer." Vadim shook his head. "That question." Wanted to add "sorry," or a "sir," but was too tired to bother and knew he wasn't allowed to say anything else. And if it killed him.

"I see." The man leaned back in his chair, looking Vadim up and down. "Is that because you don't *understand* the question? We can get you a translator if you'd like." Another thin-lipped smile, "if that made it easier for you. Would it?"

The accent. Fuck those bastards for working it out and fuck himself for betraying it. Vadim's guts twisted and coiled again; the man likely knew what language he usually spoke, or had spoken, back in the days when speaking had meant something. His eyes fixed on the interrogator, he was too tired to react to the bait. He wouldn't be here if he didn't understand English. And that of the man was polished and educated—which made him fearsome. Vadim breathed, deeply, and forced himself to study that face, every line around the eyes, then the eyes themselves, tried to see the viciously destructive intelligence that had bested him ... the type Konstantinov had harboured. He wanted to defend himself. He really did. "I can't answer that question." Evenly, and this time not even slipping on that "I," that Russian didn't need and frequently omitted. He didn't speak Russian, and would never again speak Russian.

"Can't, or won't?" The interrogator blinked once, taking his time, as he studied Vadim's face. He seemed to take in every bit of fatigue, every twitch of pain, each line of exhaustion, and Vadim looked at him and studied the intelligence behind those eyes, perceptive, awake, rested, and intent. Four bad things.

"Tell me where you come from."

"I can't answer that question."

"Why are you here?"

"I can't answer that question."

"Who sent you?"

"I can't answer that question."

"Who gave you the orders?"

"I can't answer that question."

“What is your name?”

The questions came in rapid succession, as fast and precise as a machine gun, and Vadim forced his mind to blank, knew he had to answer, and answered by clinging to the red sentence that blurred, but was still readable. The man’s stare was hard to bear and he looked at a point to the side, near the temple, concentrated on one hair that stood away, hardly noticeable. Not even think any of the answers, not in his state, no, no thinking, obeying without giving in, without taking a single step back. There was no room behind him, just a cliff.

“Who are you?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

“Where do you come from?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

“Are you thirsty?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

“Who sent you here?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

“How old are you?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

Where were you born?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

“Would you like something to eat?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

“What is your name?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

On and on and on, again and again, in a never ending barrage of questions, designed to trip up and confuse the weakened mind and to wind their way into the victim’s brain until his resolve broke down. Vadim struggled against it, keeping to the one sentence that was just as monotonous, just as bad, but still was his only sanctuary. He had no idea how long the game lasted, he was tired and confused and felt weak and pathetic, everything blurred, while the interrogation went on, seemingly endlessly.

Finally, after an eternity, the man stood up. Nothing had ruffled his countenance and even now, when he pushed a piece of paper and a pen towards

Vadim, his voice sounded exactly as it had done throughout. Never raised, never altered. “Very well, then. In that case sign here and you can go.”

Vadim’s hand raised—and clenched. Wrong. Trap. No.

Sign the confession, and it will all be over. That is what you want, isn’t it?

He looked at the paper again, couldn’t even read what was written on there, if anything at all, then looked at the man again. He wanted to sign, but Konstantinov would have won again. And he had no points to give away. He shook his head, once.

“What,” the man’s pronunciation betrayed upper class and education, “can’t you write, man?”

“I can’t answer that ... question.” Vadim watched impassively as the interrogator picked up the pen himself. “Here, let me help.” Pushing it into Vadim’s hand, which refused to close around it, like it was a glowing coal. He’d never again sign his life away. Never again. No way.

“Just a few crosses will do. Just go ahead and sign and there will be food and drink waiting, and sleep.” The interrogator even pulled his thin lips into a pale smile.

Crosses. Treating him like an imbecile. Vadim dropped the pen and shook his head again. Instead stared at the red sentence in his mind, tried to make the words larger, nail them all over his mind. Whatever insult. Whatever trick. The man stood for a moment, searched the face in front of him, before he nodded to someone behind and beyond Vadim. The next moment he was grabbed by hands that held his arms as the blindfold came over his eyes once more. He hadn’t noticed anybody else in the room and this came as a shock, again, but he didn’t struggle for long, just an instinctive reaction.

The same routine, the same room, the same noise and the same ice cold air, as well as the same positions of pain and utter discomfort which went on for several more hours. He had no idea how long it took, tried counting, tried anything, too exhausted to do much more than think of things he’d learnt by heart, like the pledge back in the Soviet Army days, to serve his country with honour, but that burnt his mind. He recoiled, disgusted and shocked he would fall back onto something he’d cursed so often, pledges he had broken, and that had, ultimately, broken him.

Whatever memory he groped for, each one was wrapped in barbed wire, and he kept repeating old army songs in his head, because he couldn't remember much poetry, or literature, spending the time while his mind underneath panicked like a frantic rat in a burning cage. It would never stop, he was back in the Lubyanka and it would never stop, and he had to tear his mind back into the present, with a supreme act of will.

He had no idea how much time had passed, or would yet pass, and how many more interrogations. He wasn't sure he could take a single one now, not now, not ever. Thought, with what felt like desperate irony, that it was good Chris had been sent home to his unit—if the tension in the jungle had nearly made him break, he didn't stand a chance of coming out on the other side of this one.

Just when Vadim thought he could not take any more, and when his body threatened to collapse under the strain of pain and exhaustion, he was hauled back up onto his feet once more.

He entered the warmth of a room but it took a while, during which he stood as best as he could to attention, before they finally took his blindfold off. In front of him, draped over a chair, was a highly attractive, dark-haired woman, dressed provocatively in an elegant gown with a low neck, revealing an exquisite cleavage. And, as she shifted with a smile on her beautifully made up face, long, shapely legs came into view, matching the rest of her perfect figure.

What. The. Fuck. She could have been from Mars, or anything else that didn't make any sense. Vadim didn't get why she was here, thought for a moment they'd taken him into the wrong room and this was for the officers' entertainment.

"You look exhausted." She smiled, "they must be treating you terribly." Her voice soft and warm with a most pleasing Irish accent, as gentle as her dark eyes, as she pointed to a chair close to her. "Would you like to sit down?"

"I can't answer that question." Saying that didn't make any sense, but at least it had become a reflex. He had no idea what this meant. Or why. Then, staring at her and the way she sat there, he realised probably every man out there had to find her irresistible. She showed enough to be that, at least to every red-blooded male. Only, he wasn't.

"No?" She pouted, "oh dear, what a shame, and I would have so liked to have a chat with you." Shifting once more, she stretched out on the chair to reveal

the full length of her leg and most of the swelling of her breasts as she leaned forward.

Vadim's eyes rested on that leg and he thought they were nicely toned, she must be running, or maybe dancing. The lithe way she moved spoke of dancing, most likely. A prostitute? Why?

"Tell me at least, do you find me attractive?" She smiled warmly and enticingly, as she slowly moved to stand up. Asking that didn't make any sense. Like asking him what he thought of the décor. He looked at her and measured the body. Pretty. She was. Softer than Katya, but a Damascene rapier was softer than Katya. Still, it didn't make any sense. He glanced at the door, wondered when the guards would take him and bring him to the proper room. But maybe it wasn't a mistake. And she had asked a question, nonsensical as the chirping of a bird, but a question. "I can't answer that question."

"No, really." She walked around Vadim and leaned close, softly speaking into his ear. "I'm not joking, do you find me attractive?" Her hand rested on his arm as her body pressed gently close. The warmth of her skin heated his own through the thin fabric of the pyjamas, cold from endless hours in freezing conditions.

That was nice. The warmth. Really nice. Somebody who didn't shout at him. He liked that voice, yet another variation of English, throaty, cat-like, a nice, pleasant touch, and he soaked up her warmth. Oh. Again. Question. "I can't answer that question." Didn't want to tell her she was pretty, but not quite his taste. Women didn't like that.

She tried again, and with every trick under the sun and every bit of charm she was capable of. Cajoling and smiling, asking and touching, but all she ever got in the end, was "I can't answer that question" until she got annoyed, her tone suddenly turning sharp and abrupt as she took a step back. At the same time the door opened and two guards entered the room, remaining close to the wall without interfering.

"Strip off, please." Impatiently waiting as she tapped her high heeled foot, her hands on her slender hips. "Come on hurry up, if you can't talk to me then I want to see how big you are. Or can't you talk because you have such a small one? Hm?"

Big one. Small one. Whatever. Vadim again began to strip, dropping the top first, with no emotional response. It was an order, so he did it. He was like an automaton now, with his mind only awake enough to stick to the sentence, the rules, and nothing else.

“Answer me.”

Question. Response. “I can’t answer that question.” Stepping out of the pyjama bottoms. Obedience. He was still cold, exhausted, ready to collapse, but at the same time, these tests were the only thing that stood between him and real physical pain.

She laughed as she stood before him. “You aren’t big at all, are you? In fact, you’re the smallest I have ever seen and here I was, believing such a big man would have a big cock. Far from it.” She took a step closer, “tell me, or maybe you are a girl? It certainly is small enough for it.”

“I can’t answer that question.” It was absurd in a way some dreams were absurd, nothing got close, he glanced warily at the guards, then at the prostitute, then suddenly realised they didn’t know he wasn’t interested in women. Not even this kind, certainly not this kind. He gave her a smile at that thought, wondered how many of the others had responded to her and knew he was immune and they didn’t know the first thing about his weaknesses. She continued to insult him, in every way imaginable. His body, his manhood, questioning his very being, asking questions that only ever received the same answer, until she finally called angrily to the guards to take that faggot out of her sight, leaving Vadim just enough time to gather up the pyjamas before the blindfold once more descended over his eyes and he was marched out of the room.

Faggot. That was about right, but he’d been called that so often and laced with a far worse punishment, and he was too tired to care. Okay, they might know now, and knew he wasn’t British, but they were still trying to get a grip on him. That was good. The past started to blur, the other interrogations became one, moved away, became black and white and sepia. Hard to remember, when all he wanted to do was sleep. Maybe a few more hours.

Half a day. He didn’t care, it didn’t matter, as long as he stuck to that sentence. He was taken back into the white noise of the freezing room and made to put the clothing back on before he was forced to stand on his tiptoes, arms stretched out over his head and against the wall, supported by his fingertips. Pain.

Tiredness. His mind washed out, merely holding on, muscles tight, as if shortened, and weak, beginning to cramp up again, tremors passing through his body that might be early warnings of cramps, or shuddering from the cold. He idly wondered whether Dr Williams had had any idea what he was sending him into. Vadim didn't know what was going on, whether they talked about him, whether they felt he was doing alright, and at this point didn't even care whether he'd made it or not. Nothing made much sense, nothing was important. Anaesthetised.

Barely half an hour later, he was once again taken out of the ice cold room and was guided through one of the many corridors, when suddenly his blindfold was taken off, still in the corridor itself. This made him tense, now expecting that beating he'd been feeling hanging over his head, but no real fear, more a feeling of "let's get it over with," but he reached a room where the door was wide open, warmth and light coming out of it, as well as voices.

Strange. But he was past caring.

"Krasnorada." A man's voice at Vadim's side, and the next moment a person stepped into his vision. The Officer in Command of the training wing, in uniform and with a black armband. That meant something, something important, like a different set of rules.

"Krasnorada, are you feeling alright?" The OC asked, as one of the DS staff, who had been working closely with Vadim's patrol, came out of the room, carrying two cups of coffee.

"I can't answer that question." Looking at the OC, ignoring the DS, he'd kill for a cup of coffee, or tea, or whatever. Vadim wasn't expected to make any deals, sign anything, accept anything. Not even something hot to drink. Ignoring the bastard, and concentrating on the man in charge.

"Of course," the OC nodded as the DS flashed a brief grin. "Remember me, Krasnorada? I am OC Brighton, and this is DS Stafford." Pointing to their black armbands, with the way he spoke it was clear Vadim was not the only one who could not snap out of it. "Remember, when we are wearing black armbands this means it is all over."

Vadim frowned, dug around in his mind, his memories, something about dogs and jungle and the dark shadow of a man, glimpses, and a first meeting somewhere ... at the beginning of training. "I can't ..." Repeated, just to make sure he didn't fail on the last leg. Looked into that man's face like a wild-eyed savage

dragged from the forest. Krasnorada. They knew his name. They would. Nobody else had called him that. Maybe a different authority. Maybe it was true. But the risk of failure was too big. He glanced around, checking for the guards that would keep him under control, drag him out again. Wanting that coffee so very much.

“The 36 hours are done. Relax, Krasnorada, it’s over.” The DS was stepping aside while holding out the cup, drinking from his own as he kept Vadim under careful scrutiny. He wouldn’t have been the first man who flipped at the end.

Vadim reached up for the cup, hand clenched again in mid-motion, nothing in his body seemed to know how to respond. Was he really allowed to drink? There was no cruelty, no pressure, but even the woman had changed faces quickly. Shaking his head, then reaching for the cup, with the dread that alone condemned him as surely as picking up a booby trapped dead comrade.

“It’s over,” the OC repeated once more as they made way into the warmth of the room that had nothing in common with any of the interrogation rooms. It was simply an office Vadim even recognised as he’d been in there before.

“Over,” repeated Vadim, not quite grasping it. No more stress positions. Black armbands. There weren’t, like, dark blue to fuck him up, they were the black thing. They’d told him that that was different rules. The old rules stopped and evaporated. He was dumbstruck at the sudden freedom to speak, or think, and the only thing he wanted was to sleep. “What’s ... the ruling?” Blearyeyed and dog-tired. “Sir?”

“You did it.” The OC smiled and nodded once more. “Well done, Krasnorada. Good man.”

Vadim nodded. Done. Over. The last test, selection done. “Thank... thank you, Sir.” Still bewildered, he gave a smile, idiotic in its relief and openness as he dropped his guard, mostly because he didn’t have the strength to keep it up.

The OC patted Vadim’s shoulder and he could have patted a wall for all the reaction Vadim showed. “Now get that coffee down your neck, then off to the cookhouse for some grub and get yourself checked over by the medic, just in case.” He was about to leave the room.

“Yes, sir.” Vadim wasn’t sure what else was expected, but following that order seemed like a good idea. He took a sip from the coffee, which tasted good, and hot, hot was the main thing.

“And sleep, man. Sleep for as long as you like.” With that the OC turned and walked through the door.

Vadim nodded. “Yes, sir.” That sounded like the best order in the world. Disoriented, but at least free to walk and speak, even if he didn’t make any sense anymore, he followed the orders in the exact sequence they had been given. Finished the coffee, which made him aware just how fucking cold he was, then managed to find the cookhouse, still in the flimsy pyjamas, emptied a plate of whatever it was—he never truly remembered what he ate that night, only that he grabbed some more food on the way. Then fell asleep waiting for the medic and hardly woke as he was prodded and checked, just blissfully sleeping, eventually waking up enough to walk, in whatever direction, and miraculously ending up in a bed. Even his bed. Whether the DS had somehow steered him that way, he didn’t know. Didn’t remember a thing after all this.

* * *

Three days later, in very different surroundings and a very different country, Vadim was asked to wait in an elegantly furnished ante room at the British embassy in Dubai. There was tea in a fine china set beside him on a small table, as well as an arrangement of biscuits, all laid out on silver plates and painted porcelain. The refinement of the place a stark contrast to the thousand places that his body ached. He’d slept on the plane, blissfully unaware, but mostly coherent. He still felt like a week or two of nothing but sleep and food.

Andy had made it, which was good, and there had been the traditional pissup, even though Vadim wasn’t SAS and would never be. Lacking the main things that were needed to be part of the Regiment, like, being born in Britain and being a member of the British Forces, but he was still invited to share in the beer frenzy and the bragging. Only he kept mostly silent and listened, but felt a strange pride when Andy told the story with the paras ‘getting it’. Still, he had to leave, and did, didn’t give a reason, just told Andy he had to “move on,” and Andy called him “strange” again, and “mate,” and Vadim walked out, hurting in an odd way that gave him hope.

He shook his head, stared at the porcelain. He did not have to wait long before the ambassador’s aide returned to take him to the Baroness’ office, where

she was waiting, standing, hands clasped in front of her and appearing far taller than the petite lady truly was.

“Mr Krasnorada, I am glad to see you again.” Perhaps she was, perhaps she wasn’t. No way to tell from the carefully guarded but immensely polite face.

He bowed. “Ma’am. I’m glad to be here.” Honest truth.

“I would hope so.” She allowed herself a brief smile as she gestured elegantly to the leather settee, and he obeyed and sat down. Still mentally too exhausted to fear, as if all of that had been used up and drained away. She was no threat. She played fair. She could still destroy him, though.

Seating herself down onto the comfortable leather chair in front of the settee, she looked at Vadim and took her time doing so. Vadim looked at her, too, meeting that gaze, then turned to the side with a half-smile, trying to be polite and not stare.

“I am impressed with your performance.” She finally said, “and will of course uphold my part of the deal.” As if by magic, her aide appeared again, carrying a document folder which she took from the young man who duly disappeared. The large doors hardly made a sound as they closed behind him. “I have ... a deeper understanding now,” Vadim murmured, which would have sounded more honest in Russian—English somehow made this sound empty, like the worst of his reports. “It was ... insightful.” Trying to find a way to explain what he felt when all the thoughts still hadn’t properly settled. She nodded. “I have here the documents required for your passport, which will be ready as soon as your photograph has been taken.” The Baroness opened the folder on the low table between them, pulling out a wad of papers. “All you need to do is sign.” She looked at him and a brief smile ghosted across her face as she laid a silver pen in front of Vadim. “And you shall be a British citizen.”

Vadim looked at her, then at the pen. Just a signature away now, a life, and not that miserable stolen existence somewhere in limbo. A place where he could be part of something, anything. Like Andy was, or any of the other SAS guys. Like Dan. Changing sides. He took the pen, enjoying the weight, the fine craftsmanship and care that had gone into it.

Ceremonial. His eyes flickered over the document, found the dotted line. Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada. In Latin letters, writing appearing somewhat

unwieldy on his first name, but already smoother on his father's name. And fluid on the last name.

"Well," she said after a pause, looking up with that familiar half-smile, "this is settled, then." Standing up, she held out her hand. "Welcome to the United Kingdom, Mr Krasnorada."

He stood and took her hand, carefully, dazed, but more pleased and relieved than anything else. "Thank you, Ma'am."

"Your passport will be with you in a few hours, until then, you are my guest." She seemed suddenly aware something more important than even the documents had not been touched yet, and she raised her head, looking straight into the pale eyes in front of her. "As for the other part of the bargain, we need another man in the Gulf. Saudi-Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait. You name it, we need you."

Vadim nodded. "They say it's still interesting there."

small pause during which she folded her hands once more. "Are you still willing to meet Dan McFadyen again?"

Willing? "Willing is not the word, Ma'am. More ..." desperate. "Determined. I need to speak to him." And it made his heart beat faster. He'd wanted to tell Dan he felt nothing anymore. But somehow, on the way, that old muscle in his chest had changed its opinion. Something, somewhere, even though he couldn't pinpoint it. Like something had healed, or been opened, or he simply could feel again. "And if I ... can serve you and repay you some of your kindness, I'd be honoured." Again, the naked truth.

The Baroness inclined her head. "In that case, Mr Krasnorada, your flight will be soon." She bent down to gather the documents and to put them back into the folder, carrying it in her hands. "As soon as possible."

"Yes." He didn't have much, and had left nothing behind. He'd needed to be kitted out, but assumed there were ways to do that. The Gulf was close, why even bother and return to the island when he could just travel on—soon. Maybe rest a little more, at least get rid of the aches and that numbness of his mind that spoke of the exhaustion, but after that, he'd be ready. "Maybe ... a week, Ma'am, or ten days, and I'm ready."

She nodded, "I am afraid I have to leave you now but you shall not lack anything while you are my guest." Walking towards a smaller set of doors on the other side of the room, she stopped before she reached them. Turning back, as she

had done, a few months earlier, “And don’t forget, Mr Krasnorada, do make him see.”

Vadim bowed again. “I will make him see.” It would all turn out well in the end. He wouldn’t disappoint Dan again, and, for once, fight side by side. Repaying him his trust and love, and all the good things, and maybe ... maybe it would be as it had been. There was hope.

1991 Chapter XXIV—Collateral Damage

July 1991, The Persian Gulf

The heat outside was nothing compared to the hell inside the armoured vehicle. Dan was drenched in sweat, his body armour soaked and the shirt underneath dark with dampness. He could feel sweat run in rivulets beneath the helmet and his hands kept slipping off the rifle. Ironical he should look forward to stepping into the blinding light of stifling heat under the merciless sun of Iraq's desert. Anything was better than the inside of a moving tin can.

Dan got himself out of the vehicle, head down, rifle in his right, the left fiddling with the helmet strap. The relief of taking it off was unlike anything, except for the joy, perhaps, of getting sweaty feet out of heavy boots. He lifted his head, slicked the sweat drenched hair out of his face, and looked around the open space in front of the huts. One of which had become his 'home'.

Squinting his eyes against the sun, he tried to make out a figure that seemed unfamiliar in these surroundings. Knowing all the regular guys by now, this could be a new addition. Whatever. He'd find out soon enough if the new guy was good for a fight—or a fuck. It was far more important to get the armour unbuckled. He'd probably lost a pound or two underneath from sweating like a pig.

The vehicle was moving off, creating a cloud of dust that seemed to swallow Dan whole for a moment, but he was too used to this yellow-red shit to bother. It only pissed him off when he had to pick the sand out of his jaw's eye. He had finally opened the straps and groaned in something akin to ecstasy when the plates fell open across his chest.

Watching the silhouette of the man out of his eye again, he wondered. The guy was still standing just like before, hadn't moved. Was staring right across the open space. Watching, it seemed, Dan could feel the gaze in his guts and between his eyes. He sighed. Alright, alpha male games? He could play them blindfolded and he'd never lost the game. Not here, not in this camp of soldiers and insane fuckers—formerly authorized killers who couldn't fit into society anymore. Close security, what fun. Better than sectioning the no longer sanctioned ones. Dan lifted one hand to shield his eyes, using the helmet for shadow and froze.

Tall. Broad. Short-shaved blond. Arms crossed on a massive chest. Legs apart.

Fuck.

Dan knew how pale the eyes were; remembered the taste of skin and flesh, had touched every single inch of that body. Knew pain and fear, hurt and tears; remembered utter desolation, a feeling so empty and lost, he needed danger, pub fights, deadly battle and bloodied fists to anaesthetise the agony.

He dropped his hands, rifle in one, helmet in another, and body armour gaping open. Began to walk, a straight line towards the man who stood like a stature. Dan's dusty boots disturbed red clouds with every step, until he stopped in front of the man he had not seen for months. Nearly half a year. Not believed to ever encounter again. Who had vanished without a word and elusive to be traced.

He stood, one step apart.

Two men, same height.

“You fucking *cunt!*”

Dan's voice cut through the entire camp, carrying danger.

You fucking cunt.

Vadim was too surprised even to recoil. They had told him McFadyen's patrol was due any minute, and he'd get picked up by his team leader, who would just about return at the same time. He had passed the time watching the comings and goings, working in his mind on what he wanted to say, while adjusting to the blistering heat as much as he could, drinking two bottles of water while waiting. He'd wanted to offer friendship, ask for forgiveness, explain himself. It was not much different than meeting up after months in Afghanistan. There was enough understanding, enough knowledge, enough...closeness, to bridge the time. They had done that so often, for so long. why then was that thing Dan called him now a punch to the guts? He'd expected anger, had expected to see Dan, but hadn't expected that word.

What it was meant to mean, and what it hadn't, when they had been close. Closer than this. Vadim's shoulders tensed, lips grew hard, jaw tightened, and fists formed. He locked his body in place to not give a quarter.

Dan, covered in red dust, bristling with anger. It was really him. Surprise, and a familiarity, a feeling of recognizing, of knowing this man, and now not knowing him at all. Like he'd misread him all the time, like this man had changed so much there was no knowing left, no memories, only the bad stuff, the stuff when they had been enemies. And that was something he hadn't been prepared for,

didn't know how to take it, default response was a show of fighting spirit, like he had always defaulted to that when challenged.

He had to stand his ground or everybody would walk all over him. No man could take that word without being laughed at, no way he could accept that. Couldn't. He met Dan's eyes, could feel the other's breath on his face, facing off a tiger. Knew he had lost all momentum, couldn't build it up now for a counter attack, and thought what attack? This is Dan?

Other soldiers drew close, drawn like flies to sweat, and Vadim did what he could: stare right into those dark eyes, encrusted with dirt, and refuse to budge. Refused to move a single muscle, in anger, or in defeat. I can't answer that question. I can't move. I can't speak.

Dan's lips bared his teeth in a snarl. Outraged, out of his mind with fury, all senses set on one goal only: kill.

"How dare you." Dan's arm raised by instinct. Rifle moving, shifting, lifting, aiming without bothering to aim.

Vadim just stared at the rifle, could almost feel the butt impact, or, irony of ironies, could see himself stare down a darkness not even the Lubyanka had been able to emulate. Shot down like a dog. Could do nothing but face it, hadn't been issued his weapons yet.

The safety was still off and Dan's hand re-gripped the weapon. Some of the guys who were starting to gather round Mad Dog and that weird looking newcomer, belonged to Dan's team. One of them dared to walk up to him, uttering a few quiet words and not only taking Dan's helmet but prying the rifle out of his hand.

Dan let go. Too intent on the fucking bastard and the blinding wave of memory, hurt and pain that crashed upon him. It all came back, within one second.

"How fucking dare you!" Dan snarled, empty hands in fists.

Vadim snarled right back. "What? This your private property? You fucking walked into my war, now I fucking walk into yours."

"Wrong, bastard. It's our war. Yours. Mine. It has never ended, just that you walked out of it without a word, to leave me to rot, you fucking piece of Russian shit." Dan spit out the next words, "you fucking cowardly cunt!" Dan was losing it, he'd never felt so much rage, not even in the aftermath of the rape. A lifetime ago. The agony had been less, then. Less shattered, less broken. He had survived more intact than now.

Not the man. Not the man he'd held. Vadim was stunned underneath the anger, found it near impossible to keep that stoic façade together, and he moved forward, to go chest to chest. Maybe invite those punches, allow Dan to vent that anger, have a fight, and maybe talk later? When Dan was too tired to be this angry? When he was more rational? He felt a movement behind him and strong hands grabbing his arms, and a voice. "Don't. He's not worth it. Don't want to spend your first days here in the brig, do you?"

"Not fucking worth it?" The roar that broke out of Dan's chest was enough to get a couple of his team mates alerted to drop the suspense of a proper fist fight, and to rush forward, one on each of his side. "Eleven fucking years not fucking worth it? I'm going to fucking kill you, Legionnaire, when I'm done with that Russian cunt!" Dan was about to throw himself against Vadim, this time no holds barred and death and destruction blazing from his eyes, when the two guys grabbed each one arm. They had to struggle to hold him back.

"Get Mad Dog out of the fucking way. Guy needs a shower. Cold."

Vadim was pulled back, almost physically lifted, when he looked over his shoulder. Caught a glimpse of blue eyes like water, too stunned to do much, saw the guy wore camo, and felt him release his arms. "You stay. Put." "Watch your back, Vadim, I'll cut your chest open, dig your heart out and let it dry in the fucking desert!" Dan was being dragged away, all but fighting the guys who were restraining him. "Keeps you from breaking anymore promises, won't it, *cunt*?"

The stranger stepped between Mad Dog and Vadim, left hand against Vadim's chest. Vadim stared at Dan, felt a shudder rise in his body, knew Dan meant it, meant every word, and found himself lacking the strength to resist.

He couldn't win this fight, as much as he could fend off lightning. Promises. His honour, shit, yeah, what did his word mean anyway? Had prided himself once on things like that, but truth was, that had been one of his many delusions. "Okay, fucking do it. Let's be done with it."

"I'll get my chance, bastard. And when I do, you wish you'd never set foot into a fucked-up place in Kabul, eleven years ago." Too many people around, but he'd do it, meant it, couldn't wait to smell the Russkie's blood on his hands. Payment for pain that was drowning him right now, hurt that had never left. Desolation, and nothing left. Pain welled up from the depths he had shoved it down into. Two years. Then six fucking months ago, on New Year's Eve.

“Bonne chance,” said the guy between them, dark blond, eyes as clear as water, tall, broad, Slavic features, a broad, open face. “Trust me, the brig is even hotter than accommodations.”

“Stay out of this shit, legionnaire.” Dan growled, but the worst spike of hatred was off, now it was just the fucking pain and memories. “Besides, your new friend hates heat. You should know that.” Dan pointed at Vadim, “he’s one of your countrymen. The worst kind. The kind that does not keep promises and does not care.”

The legionnaire huffed. “Mad Dog’s finished biting, huh? That all?” Tone light, but the man was ready to fight, much more ready than Vadim was. “Grab some chow, you’re not getting paid for this shit.”

His team mates were still standing beside Dan, but wary of touching. “Be careful, Legionnaire, the bastard can’t be trusted.” Dan forced himself to turn, ignoring anyone who stepped out of his way quickly enough, ready to punch those who weren’t fast enough to jump. Storming towards the accommodation block and the gym.

The legionnaire looked at Dan’s mates, refrained from commenting, visibly, then looked at Vadim. “It’s no use fighting him. Took on a bunch of jarheads a couple weeks ago. You know. Jarheads. US Marines.”

Vadim blinked, then met the blue eyes. Odd. Something odd about the language...? It was Russian. Felt like the bitch who had changed hands, that’s what it had to look like for everybody. He had taken it lying down, the insults, and then had to be protected by another man. Shit. And Dan. *Be careful Legionnaire*. Like...handing him over. Impossible. Just impossible. Russian. Countryman. He moved away a few steps, was glad when he broke the touch, didn’t want to be touched, only felt guilty and pained, somehow, strength sapped. All the strength they had been building up in him. The hard-won pride. Why again had he bothered? All this, only to be nearly shot down for his troubles?

Make him see.

“Welcome to the Gulf, anyway.” The legionnaire began to walk towards one of the bigger tents. Vadim hoped it held the kitchen, mess hall, whatever, and followed, glad the other gave him time to stomach the punch. “You must be Vadim. They told me you’d arrive today. I’m your team leader. Jean-Pierre, but people call me Jean.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I can show you my papers. It’s all official. I’m Belgian by birth, French by service.”

“I’d say, central Moscow. You sound like you lived two streets down from where I lived.”

“Ah. Hobby linguist.” Jean grinned. “But at least you speak a civilised language. It’s been ages since I heard Russian.”

Shit. He’d responded in Russian without even thinking about it. Too familiar, he just switched back into his language, found it less awkward, and felt stupid and weak because of it, and didn’t want this ‘Jean’ to have that effect on him. He didn’t want to be reminded. He didn’t want to be Russian, look Russian, sound Russian. He wanted nothing to do with Russians.

Jean led him to the mess tent, just in time to grab chow. Not much different from Britain, same kind of food, same kind of company, only more ragtag, more adventurous. Jean gave him the quick story, as if trying to build rapport, as if Vadim would have asked him anything about his past. Jean had joined the French Foreign Legion and, after his service, had a nationality, skills and commanded an excellent price on the market. Too young to retire just yet, had moved on, spent some time in various places in Africa, then had been hired as a security contractor. And he used Afganets lingo, the occasional twist of sentence, the occasional expression. Telling him without telling him, he’d been in that hellhole. Brotherhood of Afghanistan.

Vadim studied him, wondering about his motive. This man might actually be a deserter. Just didn’t look like a career soldier, even if he was now, well, a merc, really. This guy gave off the vibes of a conscript who’d been pulled deeper into the war than he could have wanted.

Jean showed up again after Vadim had set up his kit and his bunk in one of the tin huts. At least he didn’t have to share. He could have all the nightmares in the world and nobody would notice. Jean brought a ‘welcome gift’, a bottle of vodka that wasn’t nearly cold enough, but the taste was clean and crisp. Maybe one Russian thing Vadim welcomed. According to Jean, there was absolutely no alcohol while on duty, but Jean had a day off, and would spend that to show him the ropes in camp. Allow him to settle in smoothly, and for today and tonight, Vadim could relax.

Vadim felt relaxed, dug his heels into the ground, and tilted his head back, taking the last swallow from the bottle, felt it burn and calm and warm him. Fuck Dan. Or ‘Mad Dog’. Mad Dog alright. Unless Dan came to his senses, unless this huge mess sorted itself some way, he would stand and fight. Next time Dan shouted at him or moved to attack him. It didn’t matter whether he was right or wrong. He couldn’t allow anyone to walk over him like that. Last bastards who’d done that had been KGB. Maybe he could punch some sense into the man.

“Okay, Vadya, I shouldn’t be saying this.”

Vadim blinked at the affectionate name. “Then don’t.” Despite Jean speaking Russian, he kept to English, pointedly.

The legionnaire grinned and obliged him, also speaking English. “First: get that Soviet shit out your head. Second: keep the knife where it belongs. You’ll be in trouble here in camp. And I’ll tell you why. Mad Dog started that fight with the ‘Amerikanskies’ when he told everybody he prefers cock and ass. And after the stunt he just pulled in front of everybody? That would be your ass.”

Vadim shuddered. Cocksucker. Faggot. He couldn’t even say it had been Dan who’d been the bitch. Not with those scars on his back. Not the way he had failed to stand his ground alone. Jean, or whatever his name was, had come to the rescue. And Jean took him under the wing, showing him the ropes, tomorrow, for everybody to see. Fantastic. Just brilliant.

“Now. I can’t say I like the fucker. I don’t actually care. But I sure as hell wouldn’t want to be his ex-bitch in a camp full of people that either like the size of that bastard’s balls or hate his guts. Got me? Be careful.”

“I was special forces.” It just slipped out. Vadim frowned.

“The camp’s full of special forces.” Jean paused, as if expecting protest, then nodded again. “Just make sure you control that knife.”

Vadim stared at the empty bottle, could feel the vodka already, which was disgraceful. Half a bottle and it already made him talk. And think, and that was worse. Dan had provided all the information that the other mercs could put two and two together and end up with a twisted version of the truth. Bitch. Suka. Cocksucker. Liked to have a cock up his ass. He remembered having liked it, had loved it, had offered, asked, and begged for it. His body coiled and rolled, didn’t even want touch now. Smelling Dan’s breath had been almost too much. Seeing

him, even in that state. Dan. He just didn't know what to feel. He would have to watch his back very, very carefully. "Shit. Spetsnaz."

"Means fuck-all." The legionnaire smirked. "You could be fucking Vympel, those peasants couldn't tell the difference. Lots of those have spent their lives hating the Soviets. We're not the good guys and it gets even worse when we do shit with the Americans. They'd love a cocksucking commie, ex or not."

Vadim groaned and leaned his head against the sheet of metal doubling as their cover and couch. "Aye. What's the worst I can expect?"

"You're a bright spark, I can tell." The legionnaire laughed. "Well, fists. Lots of those. Ever been in prison?"

Vadim swallowed and made a dismissive gesture. "Cut to the heart."

"Prove you don't go to your knees. Big guy like you should be able to give them a run for their money. But knives is one step too far. It will be nasty, but it's not about killing. You got that?"

He just wasn't used to that anymore. It felt like fucking drilling again, only without the benefit of a rank, and nobody knowing he liked getting fucked. Had liked. He wasn't sure. Been long and even thinking about it brought an acidic taste of shame with it. "Aye."

"And yes, you walked into his war for real." The legionnaire half-turned. "I can't promise anything."

"It's not your job."

"That's it. Wouldn't help you, anyway."

"Because then I'd be your bitch."

The legionnaire eyed him. "I like tits. Truly. Deeply."

Vadim stood. It was late, his body was still aching from the final tests and from lack of sleep. Hadn't quite recovered, he really wasn't thirty anymore, and the conversation went into a territory that was completely unknown and uncharted, and he wouldn't make a single step without some serious recce. It was about comradeship for this man, very likely, about Russianness and about being Afghantsy. Fabled brotherhood of a sold-out, betrayed and fucked-up generation. In a camp full of enemies, and Dan, he could use a 'friend', if he could get across he didn't want to speak Russian and wouldn't mention his past. "You play chess?"

The legionnaire grinned. "You any good?"

"I get by." Vadim rubbed his face and scalp. "I need to crash."

“Won’t walk you to the door.”

“No.” Vadim didn’t really feel that smile. Couldn’t read this Jean, but the man was not a threat. Unlike everybody else, thanks to Dan’s scene. Just great. Mad Dog’s bitch. Dog. Bitch. It wasn’t funny. But he needed control to not make this slaughter. That was the hard part, the whole warning. Murder was murder, provocation or not. He was not a loose gun. He was not a psycho. He had nerves, he knew that, it took a lot to make him flip, he was not a raving lunatic. He had passed all the tests. Then why the fuck did he feel so brittle? He’d fought unjust wars, done nasty shit in his life, then why did this fluster him? It shouldn’t touch him.

Because the KGB had cracked him open and peeled him alive. Professional torture. Screaming in the night? Waking shit-scared, sobbing into the fucking pillow? Sex drive next to nil? Only feeling he’d left was a little pride and that whole, big, heavy nothing in his mind that made way only too willingly to fear. There had been stirrings of something else. Some feelings, but it was like those didn’t matter anymore, like he was sliding back into the darkness with nothing to hold him but sheer willpower. He should have stayed away. Or asked to be sent somewhere else. How fucking naïve to believe Dan would listen.

He had wanted to tell him goodbye, let him go, maybe try and make him understand he had been fucked up, he was a different man now. Then, he had dared to hope, hoped at least for friendship, no, fuck that, had hoped to return to what they’d shared once. Love. The willingness to die for each other. Despite the Baroness’ warnings, nothing had prepared him for Dan’s rage. He did deserve it. He shouldn’t have come. He couldn’t sort this one out. Dan had meant it, the bit about cutting his heart out. That was not a metaphor. Dan didn’t even know what metaphors were.

“I’m so fucked,” he murmured. He was tired, above all things. He’d be ready for the attack, hoped the adrenaline would carry him through. He’d fight it, the bitch thing, whatever they said, whatever they did, however many were going for him to give him a beating just because he’d fucked with Mad Dog, and that made him less of a man.

He headed to his bunk, found it hard to sleep.

Awoke screaming. No surprise there.

After the encounter, Dan had gone straight to the gym, only bothering to take the plate armoured vest off, before lifting more weights than he'd ever done before. Torturing his body into utmost exhaustion, until his knees nearly made him scream and every bone in his body, every muscle, protested in pain. At least the physical pain numbed the agony he was in. Hadn't expected this. This man. This shock. This pain. The onslaught of everything he thought he'd buried deep down. The suicidal emptiness, the bottomless grief, and the sheer unimaginable terror of having lost all he'd fought for, hoped for, loved and lived for.

The alternative to numbing himself with exhaustion would have been murder. Dan took a long, hot shower, closing his eyes under the spray. Wished he had peace of mind. Fat fucking chance with that fuckwit close by. If only he didn't hurt like a torn-open bled-dry motherfucker.

He had a phone call to make, and he had to do it now, before he might commit a crime that would end his own life as well. Once he was washed up and dressed, wearing the shades as always, he marched into HQ, demanding an urgent phone line to Britain. Dialling the Baroness, Dan waited impatiently to be put through to Margaret de Vilde herself. He didn't bother with introductions, not this time. She knew he was on the line, her aide would have told her.

"Ma'am?" Straight to the bone. "There is no way I will work with him. With Vadim Krasnorada." Dan was gripping the phone so tightly, the scars on his left hand were stretched taut. "No way, Ma'am, absolutely no way!"

"Dan, I thought you were a professional." Her voice sounded impeccable and stern, despite the crackling line.

"Ma'am, I could say the same for you, or should I ask why you sent Krasnorada here? Into this camp? Where I am?" Dan bristled. "I asked you, before you sent me here, not to look for him. I thought I'd explained!"

"Are you saying you question my professionalism and are you suggesting there is an ulterior motif to my decision?" There was a pause in the line.

"Aye, Ma'am." Dan kept to his guns, "why here, why he, and why with me. I don't get it. With all due respect, Ma'am, but to me that feels like interfering, especially since I asked you not to." He didn't hear anything for a while until her voice came back, as level as ever.

“First and foremost, Vadim Krasnorada came to me, I did not seek out his whereabouts. Secondly, he has proven during Marine Commando training and SAS Selection he is still in perfect shape. He is simply the best for the job, a job like yours. This is why I have sent him to the Gulf.” She paused, “is this your last word? You will not work with Mr Krasnorada?”

Dan could not make out what she was thinking, her voice had kept its usual crystal clear perfection. If she felt anything at all, it was lost in the precise vowels and consonants.

“Aye, Ma’am. I wouldn’t want a knife to slip on a mission, nor a bullet to stray.” Dan knew exactly what he’d just implied, wasn’t willing to take it back. Fire behind the lines, a knife meant for an enemy, ending in the body of a different kind. He couldn’t guarantee the bastard’s safety. Not now. Not when he wanted to rip the fucking Russian apart, as much as he had been torn to shreds, six months ago, and had never been mended back together. His rage was deep-seated, an all-consuming, blind hatred where there had been nothing but love before.

“I understand.” She conceded, “I will inform the Officer in charge of the situation. You will not work in a team with Vadim Krasnorada, but right now we need his expertise in the Gulf and I am not willing to send him somewhere else.”

Dan frowned, but he knew her too well. There was no way he could sway her decision, not yet anyway. “Thank you, Ma’am.” Curtly, Dan put the receiver down without further acknowledgment, staring at the phone for a while. He didn’t know what to think. Had she done this on purpose? There was no other explanation and for one moment he fucking hated her as well for what she had done.

Time to see if the Yank kid was off duty some time soon. Nothing but a freshfaced jarhead to ease the tension.

* * *

Back in the embassy Baroness Margaret de Vilde was putting the phone down and sighed. Her hand resting on the receiver, she murmured to herself, “I am sorry, my friend.”

* * *

“Hey! Shut the fuck up!” Someone was banging against Vadim’s door.
“Some of us need to grab some sleep.”

Vadim lay awake, shuddering, could scoop the sweat in handfuls from his chest. No idea what it had been, but his heart tried to jump through his throat. “Fuck you!” he shouted towards the door. Remembered what the doc had said. In times of stress. Emotional stress. Seeing Dan obviously counted.

“Ah fuck me,” he groaned, listened to his voice in the tiny place that was his quarters, field bed, a couple boxes, that was pretty much it. His body decided to freak on him. Wiped the sweat off his chest with the blanket and stared into the darkness. Checked the time. Two. Three more hours before he would wake up again, unless the exhaustion claimed him and he’d wake from the commotion the others caused. Stared into the darkness, forcing himself to count his breaths, twenty at a time, then started again until he finally fell asleep.

He awoke from the others moving, chatter outside. Got his kit and headed for the showers, paused. Folded the towel around the soap, improvised weapons were best, slings were one of the things he could work with, even though he preferred the garrotte for speed and elegance. Or any other cable. Fighting in the shower. Now, that would indeed be a throwback. But whatever happened, he’d never been fucked in any shower, and he was pretty confident he would keep it that way.

He could see the glances, none of them friendly. The chatter turned hostile, no specific words, just a general sneer that was in the air, grins that seemed inappropriate. Too many eyes on him.

Vadim stepped under the spray, the guys left and right changed positions, moved one shower further away, there was plenty of space this early in the morning. Vadim kept his face a studied mask, knew he was being checked, assessed, knew they read the scars. Hoped they didn’t know what they meant. No side of his body that didn’t tell a story. The burn mark right under his throat. The knife cuts on his back. His neatly kept, nearly hairless body, shaved neck, short hair. The old tattoo on his arm.

He ran a soapy hand once over his scalp, getting soap into his eyes just wouldn’t do. Stance broad, balanced, as secure in his footing as the Hindu Kush, he was fully there and aware, and he could just feel how they were thinking about ways to take him on.

He washed himself with all the calm of a man who had nowhere to run. Conscious of the wall in his back, even if that wall was not very solid. He weighed a few snide comments, but didn't want to be the one who started it. Not that he would be able to find anybody who'd defend him if an officer caught wind of it.

He stopped the water, shook his head and moved to the side to have a quick towel-down.

"What's that shit on your back?" London, Cockney-tinged. Squaddie. Ex. Oh, the sheer bravado of it.

Vadim dried his hands, didn't want to slip, measured the man. Could feel others draw closer. He would have to get out of here without running away too obviously. Fighting retreat, SAS tactics.

"Hear me, Russkie?" Bastard was already wearing sports kit, danced a little around like he was a boxer. He probably was. That meant a good punch, but an open face. No gloves to hide behind. And they usually didn't expect to be kneed in the balls. "What's that shit on your back." Grinning and leering. Oh, my hero. One of the lads.

"Scars," said Vadim.

"I can see that, dickhead." The Cockney stepped closer, grinning at him, hands at his chest, half closed. Maybe fancied himself to be a martial artist as well. "Princess like you getting that shit."

"Aye, should make you think," said Vadim and remained standing. More people drew closer. Six, seven. That shave would be close, if he started the fight now. Pack mentality. They'd be cowards enough to go for it. Shit situation. He'd get hurt, unless he defused. If he defused, he'd prove he had no balls. Fighting naked. Wonderful way to get back into the rhythm of war. The Brit obviously didn't get it and there was silence for a few heartbeats, then somebody slapped Vadim's ass. "Bitch's been screaming last night."

The London squaddie was back into his depth again and leered. "I can make you scream alright." He moved closer and made a stupid kissy-face. Being slapped meant the others were too fucking close. Simple. Safe distance, neutral distance, fuck it, this was too close, and they knew it.

Vadim advanced and brought his elbow forward, nice clean sambo move along the lines of 'jaws don't grow muscles'. Was rewarded with a grunt and the guy spinning off balance. He could smell blood, then brought his hands up to place

an open-handed heel strike on the next squaddie's nose, hoped it was the bitch that had slapped him.

And after that, it deteriorated into a nasty punch-up. No points for style, it was just plain old dirty hand-to-hand, and he was outnumbered. Pulled all the tricks in the book, solar-plexus, head-butting, knee strikes into the short ribs, axe-kicks to gain space. Slow, but powerful, heel, back of the foot, elbows. Was nearly brought down by somebody who dropped a double fist into his neck, felt his body go numb for far too long, a kick into the lower back pretty much finished the fight for him, the pain only kept in check by the numbness from the earlier hit. Fuck—he managed to cover his face, stagger to the side, too many attacks, was disoriented, then somebody took his hand by the wrist, pulled it to the side like that and punched him straight in the face. Numbing, disorienting pain. Steadied himself against the wall, tasting blood. Fuck. The fight ended once he was down on the ground.

One of the squaddies—the first one, Vadim thought, and his hands formed fists again, stepped up to him. “And I was being nice, cunt.”

Vadim glanced up, saw the man adjust his cock in the trousers, provocative. Stayed out of reach.

“You fucking coward,” hissed Vadim.

The bastard didn't move closer, reluctant even that way, instead brought his leg forward to deliver a kick. It wouldn't have hurt much, he was only wearing trainers, more a stomp than any fancy shit. Vadim thought he should take it, but his body had different ideas. He lunged up and forward, grabbed the guy's leg by the knee and brought it up hard, shouldering into him and dropping his weight onto the other man, who didn't have enough breath in the impact to make more of a sound than his skull on the floor. Vadim's hand found his pulse under the jaw and squeezed, hard, pressed the heel of his hand down on the bastard's voice box, perfectly willing to make him drown in his own blood. “Fuck you...” he snarled.

He was pulled off again, freed himself and staggered off, hearing coughing behind himself. The Cockney would live. This time.

* * *

Dan woke up in a murderous mood. He hadn't had enough sleep, but had to be on duty. Close security, thus no chance for illicit booze at night. Being completely sober didn't help with the sleeping, nothing to stop the thoughts, memories surfacing unhindered and he'd all but given up on sleep, stewing in rage instead, when he'd finally dropped off towards morning. Only to be woken by his alarm half an hour earlier than usual. Eager to avoid the Russian cunt during the morning ablutions, Dan had been in the showers before anyone else, then in the washing block, shaving the first time of twice every day, and finally frequenting the row of loos.

Waiting in the line for breakfast, he was getting pissed off even more, because despite his early morning routine he had been held up by the Quartermaster, trying to exchange his body armour that got somewhat fucked the day before. He could have done without a discussion and a promise 'not to do anymore crap' with it. Yeah, right. Sometimes, kicking the shit out of ceramic plates was the best way to avoid killing another human.

Tray in hand, brows dark and mood even darker, eyes hidden beneath the shades, Dan was standing behind Mick, one of his team mates, and in front of Dave, an Ex-RA gunner, who for once was refraining from making an arsegroping oh-so-funny comment. Dan would have his balls for breakfast, and the guy knew it.

Snide comments raised their ugly heads as Vadim entered the mess. Dan heard the voices, could tell the mood without having to understand the words, made the mistake to look up. Fuck. The bastard. And there he had been trying all morning to avoid the cunt. Averting his eyes before he had to take a proper look at the Russian.

Vadim was just in time because he hadn't gone for the jog, figuring the fight had been enough exercise, but of course he looked like he had had a fight. His lips tingled, swollen and raw, his back ached badly from the nasty hit into the neck, and there were a few places on his body where he would most likely grow bruises. The camo covered most of those, but the face was difficult to hide. He probably walked stiffly, too, which was the reason for the comments. The bitch had got it. Haha. Great fun.

Vadim kept his jaw muscles clenched, kept just barely from grinding his teeth. Queued for the food, held the tray and remembered how to hit and strike with that shape. He was dying to bring it full force into somebody's throat. Not a

bad weapon at all. But the main thing was not being tripped over or having the tray kicked or punched from his hands.

He got an assortment of English breakfast, fat and grease, but surprisingly good, if his cardiovascular system could forgive him, then found himself a safe route around the benches, never within touching, punching or tripping distance. When he reached the empty table without problem, he knew it would be harder on the way back. It always was.

Dan had got his own breakfast, double helpings of sugar laden cereal and the usual blood-clogging full fry up with stacks of fried bread on the side of his overflowing plate. Finding a seat amongst his team mates, he was about to stuff himself and wash it all down with a jug of coffee. Sod's law, when he looked up from ladling the food down his neck, he was confronted smack bang with the man he had tried to avoid. Even through the dark shades, seeing Vadim was like a shock to the system. Fucking arsewipe! He had to be doing that shit on purpose. Dan grunted something vile into his food, shovelled more cereal down, before forced to look up again to drink his coffee. Almost choked on the brew, spilling some of it, when he caught a glance of the bruised face.

Fuck.

What the fuck had happened? No. Don't care.

Looked back down again, chomped and chewed on the next spoonfuls of crunchy sugary stuff as if violently devouring a particularly evil spell. That fucking Russian be damned. Bastard. Cunt. Arsewipe.

How the fuck had he got into that state?

No, he didn't care. He couldn't give less of a shit. Couldn't possibly feel that sudden sharp sense of red-raging anger, wanting to cut whoever was responsible for beating the Russkie up into thin strips, roasting them over an open fire. Vadim was his. His to touch, his to hurt. His.

His cunt.

No.

Not any longer. Dan scraped the last of the cereal out of the bowl before tearing into the sausages and bacon. He didn't care. Didn't give a fuck about the obvious signs of a fight. No. Couldn't afford to feel nor think.

Vadim's skin was taut, he was ready to stand and fight, could feel how the place turned against him, the comments, the sudden change in topics. Cocksucking.

Ass. Bitch. Cowardice. Weakness, groping. What bitches wanted and what they deserved. He ate, kept his gaze straight ahead, peripheral vision wide open. No knife. He better not kill or incapacitate. He was not an officer, this was not the Soviet Army. Fuck. If freedom meant being ridiculed, he would walk home to the Lubyanka and ask to be taken back. He felt a touch on the shoulder, firm, a tray moved within vision, all slow, non-threatening.

Jean. "You alright?" The 'Frenchman' asked in Russian and sat down opposite, keeping his eyes on the area behind Vadim's back. Vadim was grateful, despite the fact the Russian made him tense inside. He knew Jean would signal with his eyes if anybody moved closer. Saw tousled dark hair and sunglasses two rows up front, shit, too close, even with five or six men between them. Too close.

"Aye."

"What happened?"

"Fell off horse." Vadim sipped his tea. Didn't want to speak about it, not in Russian, not in a perfectly conversational tone Jean had started, and stubbornly stuck to English, whether Dan could hear it or not. "I broke my wrists in '72, falling off a stupid horse."

"Both?"

"Aye. And yes, it means wanking is less fun."

Dan's head was lowering further into the food. Didn't want to see, didn't want to know. Of course, the legionnaire. Would make a good pair; the perfect fucking couple to shoot into fucking pieces of fucked-up meat on a fucking patrol out there in fucking Iraq. Fucking bastards!

He tried to ignore the Russkies' conversation, starting to chat with Mick, discussing the plans for the day and the route their armoured vehicle should take. Plotting an alternative route, never the same one for their charges. Talking, just to drown out the words that came wafting over from across.

Jean gave a laugh, which was good. Nobody would assume Vadim was crying his heart out. "You should hear the rumour mill, Vadya. The squaddies are yakking, yak, yak, like babushkas." In Russian. Again. It was beginning to irritate Vadim.

The ex-legionnaire ate a pile of toast and thick gelatine-covered pieces of spam for breakfast, and coffee. Clearly less enthused about the English approach to a coronary.

“And?” Vadim replied in English.

“According to the rumour mill, you’ve slept around and Mad Dog caught you. Or knows it somehow. While he was risking his life.” Jean laughed again, an unpleasant sound. “Unfaithful girl betraying her squaddie lover, old story. Rings a bell with many of these guys.”

“And I thought it might be worse.”

“Oh, it gets worse. That’s the story from Mad Dog’s mates. The ones that don’t care he likes ass. They hate you because he does. Hooray for the right to be an individual.”

Vadim laughed. Oh boy, that felt good. It took the pressure down a notch. “And the other story?”

“Not much of a story, just planning the next attack. Fucking faggots need to get their teeth bashed in, cut their faces, cut off their cocks and balls and all that. It’s open season.”

“And?”

“When you turn your back, Vadya.” Jean did actually look a little worried.

“Figure I should tell you that. Being your team leader and all that.”

“Yeah.”

Jean finished his last slice of toast. “I liked the bit with the elbow. Good work.” He stood and took his tray away, seemingly unconcerned about the attention on him. Them. The bastard had seen the fight in the showers and not interfered. Vadim glared after him.

Dan had managed to drown out the conversation, but caught the motion and despite his best intentions, raised his head to see the legionnaire standing and leaving the table. Old habits died hard, had to check what was going on around him at all times. He was about to point out to Mick and a newcomer to their table, how they should avoid the recently shot-down rubble in the Western area, when he caught a glimpse of a man standing up and waving.

Midge. Fuck. Ringleader. He’d broken that guy’s nose twice already and had received more bruises in return from the bastard’s gang during the first two weeks, than he’d received throughout all of his army career.

“Hey, Mad Dog!” The ginger merc was shouting over from across three rows. “Why the dark look? Thought you’d be whistling today, figured you’d got some man-cunt, now your bitch is back.”

Dan pushed the sunglasses off his eyes, a sign for anyone who knew him, he meant business. Nothing else could get him to take off his shades. Placing each palm beside his tray, he pushed himself off the bench to stand. Ignoring what was going on at the Russkie's table, refused to acknowledge Vadim's existence.

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up, Midge." Each word clearly pronounced. "Unless you want to swallow your own blood. Again."

The cookhouse fell silent, the reaction was unlike Mad Dog's usual banter, who took every insult with his piss-taking sharp and nasty sense of humour, not a threatening seriousness.

Vadim looked up, this Midge guy was too close, two yards counted as too close. He kept him in the corner of his eye. The bastard wouldn't start a fight right here, right now? Would he?

"I can make you whistle." Vadim said and got up. "That is what you want, come. I teach you whistling." Too loud in the silence. But he wouldn't allow Dan to keep acting like he was his bitch or ex-bitch. His own ground. Dan couldn't help it. His head turned a fraction, glancing at Vadim. Fuck. The bastard sounded and acted like he used to. Unlike that one night he'd seen him the last time. He fucking hated the cunt right now, more than ever. He was about to snarl in anger at Midge, who was making exaggeratedly camp hand gestures and wiggling his stupid arse, when there was a sudden commotion.

"Stop. Immediately." The voice was no-nonsense, un-amused, and obviously used to giving orders. "No fighting in the mess. You know the rules, Forces or not. Get the fuck out. Now."

"Not fighting. This would be slaughter," Vadim muttered under his breath. Looking at Midge with all the emotion of a butcher. He wanted to cut his throat. No, worse, a far darker urge, one he hadn't felt in a long time. It would be worthwhile to make the man scream and break him, once and for all.

Dan visibly twitched. Had to refrain, bound to keep order. Hated Vadim for making him remember, reminding him of the knowledge if they fought side by side instead of being enemies, they'd be an unstoppable force. Fighting. Fucking. It hurt to the bone.

Dan turned his attention to the RSM. Fucking joy. No point to mess with the Sergeant Major. He could see the man pointing first at him and then to the exit and shrugged to his mate. Mouthing 'later, vehicle park', before grabbing the

remains of his breakfast in one hand, greasy toasts, last sausage and all, to weave his way through the rows of tables and benches. No point in arguing with the RSM. He'd been marked as a trouble maker long ago, so he better kept a low profile. Successful mission or not, if he was a destructive force amongst the troops he'd find himself out of a job before he could finish a wank.

Vadim moved, knowing that under the eyes of the SNCO nothing could happen to him. He turned his back on Midge, walked close enough past him to smell his aftershave, a biting, citrusy concoction he would be able to identify and sniff out in the darkness, if it came to that, and put the tray away.

Allowing Dan to move first, then himself, making sure he couldn't get attacked in the back the moment he stepped outside. Snarling at Midge on his way past. "That wriggle...good one. You might have talent as a faggot." Not letting it go, no.

Dan's shades were dropped back over his eyes before he stepped outside, turning his head to check on Midge. "Don't be stupid." In Russian, to Vadim, without looking at the cunt, instead keeping the other merc in his vision. "Time for work."

With that Dan turned, tried to stop giving a shit and left both men behind, the sound of nasty laughter in his ears from the ginger twat. Whatever happened now, it wasn't his business. Making his way back to the cookhouse entrance, Dan rapped his knuckles a few times against the door. He was less than twenty yards away, trying hard not to listen to the scraps of sounds drifting over while getting his extra bag of packed lunch from the cook.

"You would know all about faggot talents, wouldn't you, bitch?" Midge glanced towards Dan in the distance, as if he wanted to make sure Mad Dog wasn't in earshot. Appeared to be wary while smirking at Vadim. "I'll get you, when you least expect it, and you'll squeal like a little girl." He bared his teeth, ugly in his hatred.

"You mean like your mother when her dog fucks her?" Vadim turned to face the merc, pose deceptively relaxed, ready to fight.

Midge sneered, didn't take the bait. "Good thing me mother's dead, innit, bitch?" Tension in his stance, once again glancing over to where Dan had been, only a minute ago. "Just remember. I'll get you, and it'll hurt worse than a virgin

on her wedding night.” Casting another nasty grin, Midge turned and hurried into the same direction Dan had vanished to.

“Your mother must have died of embarrassment at seeing you after shitting you in the toilet,” said Vadim, loud enough for Midge to hear it. A bit weak, but hitting the same spot made sense when the other flinched. And Midge had flinched. He shook his head and headed towards the armoury. Time to pick up kit, get fitted with body armour, gear, and the whole lot. Oh yes, and sunscreen. Protection factor 50 or more. He could already feel his skin tighten.

Jean introduced him to the rest of the team. It seemed Jean had them under control. His style of leadership was exactly what Vadim had seen from him so far: he seemed laid back, friendly, open, and led by example, leading from the front like they were equals on some fundamental level, and he just happened to be the leader. Not one to be seduced by the trappings of power or become a bastard just because he had the command.

On the next day, out in the field, Vadim could confirm his assessment. Jean was completely no-nonsense under pressure. Calm like a bomb. Vadim noticed how Jean’s eyes gleamed when he focused, the way his jaw set. Couldn’t help but notice the shape of his lips, neck. But then, it was security duty, boring as hell. Sickeningly tense for a few heartbeats, then mostly the dazing, glaring heat that wore him down, especially in the armour. But it felt so familiar he caught himself smiling. Now, this was something he knew, something he could do, easily. Finally. Some semblance of home.

* * *

The next week did not bring any change, certainly not for the better. Sparring didn’t seem to take the pressure down for Vadim. Fighting with gloves and protection just didn’t satisfy. Punching bags, lifting weights, running, hitting and kicking pads Jean held for him didn’t satisfy. It merely seemed to make the dark flood rise, increase pressure, fill the space inside, and the nightmares stoked the fire. He took the anger with him into the showers, and the first week was a haze of heat, dust, punch-ups, duty, training, sleep.

Vadim never closed his eyes, never turned his back. His body fell into that rhythm, knowing he was only safe when Jean was around. The legionnaire had his

own gang, comprising of his team and the friends of his men, presumably people he had worked with before or shared history with. And as easy-going as he was, he was also surprisingly sane. Jean stayed around to play chess (which he would have been good at if he had bothered to think beyond the fifth or sixth move), and to chill, and to lift weights.

Vadim was itching for a fight. No, worse than itching. It was as dark and cruel a desire as he'd ever felt, much worse than any itch, a burn, a wound in his flesh, no less painful than Dan's knife that had carved his back. A proper fight, no holds barred, he wanted to break and destroy, permanently, wanted to take something apart in a way that nobody would be able to tell what it had been, but he remembered the warning about knives, and didn't carry any when the bitches came for him.

It was nearly a ritual. They were waiting for a mistake, for him to be alone and unprepared, and sometimes they managed, or Vadim sought them out to take the pressure down. Splitting lips and punching jaws, the pain in return keeping the darkness away. He got the reputation to pick a fight for nothing but a sneer, nothing but a crude gesture.

And sneering there was plenty. He was Mad Dog's bitch, after all. He would have to fight the whole camp, that was what it felt like, and he'd rather have cut their throats in their sleep. But Jean's presence was worse. And the fact he spoke Russian, as if to do him a favour, but it felt like a knife in his brain. He detested, he hated that, he wanted to punch Jean every time the bastard called him 'Vadya', like they were close, or lovers, or family.

"It's not getting any better," said Jean, starting to shed his body armour in the tiny room that was his quarters. Nothing much in there—it could have been Vadim's room, apart from the photos blue-tacked to the metal wall near the bed. Vadim leaned in to have a closer look. It looked like cut-outs from a fashion magazine, even though he was halfway sure not even fashion magazines showed their models bent over like on the first picture. That skirt rode up awfully high to reveal a glimpse of black slip. Or it was just shadow.

Jean glanced at him. "C'mon, not like you could do anything with those."

Vadim looked at the bed, thought this was the place where Jean jerked off, staring at the darkness between those legs. Fuck. He swallowed. The back was slender, a white shirt, pilot style, open at the shoulder. She couldn't wear anything,

not even a bra, that would have been visible, so Vadim assumed her breasts were nothing but a handful on her bony, long frame. Hair was clearly a wig, a sleek chin-length cut, face slightly turned to look over her shoulder, but the fake hair covered most of her features. One dark eye, fake lashes, make-up like a mask, moist glistening reddish purple lips formed an 'o'.

Vadim could imagine Jean with that girl, who looked something like sixteen, seventeen, but already in full slut mode. Long fingers in white silk gloves, splayed on her lower back, an invitation, she wouldn't dream of pulling the nothing of black leather skirt down.

"Woah."

"Yes. Sex on legs," said Jean.

"Who's she?"

"My girl."

"You're fucking joking."

"She does some modelling on the side."

"This kind of modelling?"

Jean lifted the body armour off and placed it near the bed, the shirt underneath dark with sweat, clinging to his body, showing off lines and planes, muscle, and his sixpack. "What do you mean?" Calm, but Vadim detected something like...jealousy. If it hadn't been ridiculous.

"She doesn't really seem to wear much."

Jean gave a short laugh and pulled his shirt off, tossed it on the ground. The sixpack was exactly as imagined. There were some freckles on his shoulders, a few tattooed lines on his left pec. 'AB+', in Latin, Cyrillic and what looked like Kanji, Chinese, Arabic and a few other alphabets. Just in case he got shot, Vadim supposed, or maybe it was some kind of personal joke. "You mean for wanking material?" Jean seemed relaxed, but that meant nothing. "Sexy stuff like that, but nothing worse."

"How do you know?"

"She doesn't undress beyond that, not for the camera."

Vadim could feel the reservation, just knew Jean was hiding something. He should let it go, accept the half-lie, but it intrigued him. He imagined that body before him strain against that ass, imagined Jean's cock take her from behind, like

that, rough, fuck her raw. Probably the exact same thing Jean imagined when lying there. The whole purpose of that photo. “Guess you’re one lucky bastard, then.”

“You can say that again.” Jean grinned, like mocking him, that shit-eating, overconfident grin Vadim had got so sick of in the last week, and something snapped, pressure valve exploded. Might have been the image of Jean fucking that girl, or too much naked skin, or truly that grin, hard to assemble and align cause and effect, suddenly Vadim shoulder charged into him, tackled the lighter man, made him stumble and hooked the legs out from under him. Taking the reflex punch without feeling it, and came crashing down on Jean, his whole weight one massive punch that drove the air from the other’s lungs.

The surprise didn’t last, Jean was fighting and Vadim needed his whole weight to keep him down on his back, no way he could turn him around. Could feel Jean’s hand go for the combat knife, took his elbow with his hand, lifted it and brought it down so hard on the ground Jean would have screamed with pain if Vadim’s hand over his mouth had let him.

“No knife,” hissed Vadim and pushed the weapon away, the arm useless now.

Jean was right-handed, that meant he only had the left hand to fight with. And his legs, and the torso. Vadim could smell the stress, shifted his weight to force the legs apart. Jean’s eyes grew wide and he began to breathe hard through the nose, clearly stress, fear, on top of that pain.

“I am nobody’s bitch, tovarich. That includes Dan. You hear me?”

Jean, staring at him with wide blue eyes, sweat beading on his forehead, nodded against his hand.

“Not his girl. It was me who had him. I fucked him, in Kabul. And he loves cock. Can’t get enough of it.” Vadim used the sharper angle, forced his knees between Jean’s legs, came groin to groin with him. Felt the man shudder with revulsion, felt his stomach sweat. “Like I could take you right now,” just breathing into Jean’s ear, grinding against him, slow, deliberate, using pressure and weight. Enjoying this more than he should, could come like this, easily. Enjoyed too much to have Jean under control, the only thing he had under control. Nothing the other could do. Scream for help? Unlikely.

Jean’s eyes closed, the pressure of his legs subsided and it seemed like he was moving against Vadim, probably to get him off faster, to appease him. He was

hard, worked against him with determination, Vadim's hand moved between them and released the belt buckle, nearly tore the fly open, snarling with aggression, freed the other and pushed against him. Jean's cock finding skin where his shirt was pulled up from the fight, hot, strong, sweaty, exactly what Vadim needed, needed even worse than killing. Jean's eyes were closed, whatever he imagined, it wasn't Vadim, and Vadim wanted to punch him to make him acknowledge his presence, his identity, as he came already. Managing just barely to suppress the groan, forced himself harder against that body until he was spent.

Lying on top, still keeping the other pinned, Vadim didn't resist when Jean pulled his hand off his mouth. No way he'd shout for help, not in this position. It looked too willing. Too much like Jean didn't mind at all, never mind the bruise that was forming on his elbow. "Now, that's better," said Vadim and began to stroke Jean, who shuddered from the touch, eyes still closed, lips pressed together like he feared Vadim would try to kiss him.

You won't hate me for long, thought Vadim, and moved down his body, saw his cum run along Jean's flank, the smell of it, and the sweat in the heat of this place.

He took the cock, but didn't try to finish him off quickly, took his time, the last bit of power Jean's body could give him. And he took it, knew he was probably thinking of that girl of his and he didn't mind, didn't remind him, not now, took him deeper and harder, eventually, and made him twitch and push and cum.

Vadim stood to find water to wash the taste away and rummaged through Jean's kit for the bottle.

"I think I..." Jean groaned and reached for the discarded shirt with his left hand to wipe himself down. "I think I understand now why Mad Dog hates you."

Vadim nearly dropped the bottle, turned to face the legionnaire, who got up and stepped away, just out of reach, still breathing hard. "What?"

"You got me." Jean leaned down to pick up his knife and slid it back into its holster. Still with his left hand. "I should cut you open like a pig. Only finishing you off would be a fucking mercy. And I'm not merciful. Get the fuck out of here. And if the medic says you broke my fucking arm, I'll kill you."

"And you bitch came."

“You make my skin crawl, Krasnorada. You got what you wanted, now fuck off to nurse your fucking self-pity and get yourself killed for some shit. And count your blessings I have more fucking honour in my finger than you in your whole fucking body. Get the fuck out.”

Vadim wanted to protest, but Jean turned around and continued to change, as if he had already left. He didn’t hate the other man, hadn’t actually wanted to fight or fuck him, not his intention, even though he had wondered about Jean.

Had wondered about how that man insisted on being his friend just on the basis of the fact they had both been born in the same city. And were both deserters of some description.

I understand why he hates you.

That went deep, turned the buzz into acid. Nothing had gone like he wanted it to go; he hadn’t wanted to do this, if anything, he’d have taken it slow, or not at all, but somehow, his body had wanted this man. He had wanted to punch him and have him, fuck him slow or hard, but have him some way. It felt damn good to be able to do this, felt good to feel a body shudder and tense with orgasm.

Suddenly a soft snort from the legionnaire. “And to think Mad Dog warned me. He was right about you. You can’t be trusted. That’s the deal about you. You’re not afghantsy. You’re just scum.”

You’re a predator, devoid of any humanity. An animal, ruled by animal urges. Vadim didn’t know what he felt and what he didn’t feel. Oddly defenceless against the hostility and had managed to ruin everything. Including the developing ‘friendship’ with the man who called himself Jean. All gone. Wasted. The only man that had even attempted to respect him. Nothing was how he had imagined it to be, when he had contemplated meeting Dan again.

Nobody respected him here, Dan didn’t even look at him, they couldn’t talk, Dan just went on living his life. Of course, what had he expected, he had walked away after all. Couldn’t have expected Dan to wait for him. So, it was over. He’d screwed up and been defeated in everything that mattered.

Vadim turned and left. He’d find Midge. Time for another punch-up. He needed to break something that deserved it.

* * *

That same day Dan was hauled in front of the Officer in Charge.

Uncomfortably reminded of his days in the British Forces, when he was barely more than a raw recruit and way before SAS Selection. The sense of doom came rushing back, even though he knew they had no jurisdiction over him like they had over the regular troops, and neither had he misbehaved in any way, not even partaking in one of the many low-level brawls and secret punch-ups. Still, once a squaddie, always a squaddie, and twenty years could not wipe a hint of dread away.

He felt even stranger once he stood in front of the Big Wig's desk, not having to—nor bothering to—salute. Out of place, but the niggling discomfort disappeared when he realised he really was not part of the Forces anymore. Smirking briefly as he stood while the CO was still looking down, not acknowledging his presence. Typical arrogant upper-class bastard, but Dan didn't need to give a shit anymore. Still, he pushed the shades off his eyes and perched them onto his forehead, the one sign of respect to the man in charge. His face looked bored, but his stance showed tension. Legs braced, arms in his back. Standing like he had done on the day, back in Blighty, when he'd had to defend his decision to leave the Army after twenty years and without his full pension. Four years ago.

Dan waited another moment, but the condescending twat didn't seem to bother acknowledging him yet, which was oddly amusing in an entirely sickening way. Even if the CO had spelt it out in neon letters, his dislike for Daniel McFadyen could not have been more obvious.

"Sir, you wanted to see me?" Dan's voice carried a hint of bored sarcasm.

"Yes, McFadyen, because it can't go on like this."

"Sir?" Dan was confused for a moment, what the fuck was that ponce talking about?

"You know very well, McFadyen. The situation in camp is unbearable, the atmosphere nothing but vicious."

Dan frowned. 'McFadyen', again. Fuck that, the arrogant asshole should be addressing him with 'Mr', but he let it drop.

"Which situation, Sir?"

The Officer stared incredulously at Dan. "You know damn well what I mean, do not try to play games with me. There has been more violence in the last

week, since you have had that stand-off with Krasnorada, than ever before. The men have been talking about that shouting match of yours.”

“It was hardly a ‘match’, Sir.” Dan’s jaws squared, “as far as I remember, Krasnorada hardly returned the compliments.”

The Officer stood up, brimming with rage all of a sudden, almost shouting. “McFadyen, I do not feel like laughing at all. Drop your infantile behaviour, it is most inappropriate in this situation.”

Dan wondered for a moment if that throbbing vein on the red-faced CO was going to burst, before deciding on the most antagonistic course of action. “Which situation, Sir?” He could feel his own dark wave of anger rising, barely held in check by opposing the big-headed dickhead.

“*Which situation?*” The Officer shouted, his face had turned beetroot red. “Do not treat me as if I were stupid! There are constant fights, the men are on edge, there is aggression and violence spilling into the Mess and the cookhouse!”

Dan’s brows, lips tensing into a narrow line. “Does this mean, Sir, you are accusing me of being unable to hold *your* men in check, due to my mere existence in this camp, which coincides with the arrival of a new contractor?”

That was it, the CO was losing it. “McFadyen, are you accusing me of not having my troops under control?”

“No, Sir,” Dan’s lips twitched, revelling in the momentary satisfaction of having hit that twat, right into the gonads, “I am merely saying I cannot see how this situation, nor any other that is connected to Vadim Krasnorada, should have anything to do with me; be of my making; could possibly be influenced by me. What does the recent violence therefore have to do with me? I was not involved in any fights in the past week.”

“No, you weren’t.” The CO snarled, “but you are the root of it.”

Dan felt a bitterness well up in him that tasted like acid in his throat. “Sir, with all due respect, how the fuck am I the cause? Because I’m a fag and everyone knows that? Sir, you have no jurisdiction over me in that respect. Who I fuck is my personal matter, I am not a member of the British Forces anymore, am not committing any crime against the fucking rules, and have never actively pursued my sexuality in camp.” Yeah, and that poncy bastard hated his guts, he could smell the disgust at the word ‘fag’, like he could smell the stench of dried sweat under his body armour.

“Don’t use that language with me!” The man shouted, trembling with anger.

“What do you expect me to do, Sir? Snap my fingers and your men accept the Russkie as their own? I’m not a fucking fairy with a magic wand!”

“You may or may not be a ‘fairy’, but you and Krasnorada clearly have a history.” The Officer was beyond losing it, both hands on the desk, leaning forward. “The situation in camp is not about the Cold War, this is about your past.”

Dan tensed, stood straighter, taller. “Sir, my past is my own business.”

“No, McFadyen, not if it encroaches into the present.”

Dan said nothing, his dark eyes narrowing, jaws working before he answered.

“It doesn’t. There is no present.”

The CO stared at him, long and hard, not buying into any of Dan’s defence, but seemed to realise he wasn’t getting anywhere with him.

“Don’t ever overstep the line, McFadyen, or I’ll bust your sorry arse. I don’t care what kind of Missions you have successfully completed. If you go too far, you’ll have it.” Ponce or not, the CO let his true colours show. Open hostility, which Dan continued to stare down.

“Dismissed.”

The Officer waved a hand and Dan turned without another word. He was burning with anger, needed to fuck or destroy, couldn’t have either and started to run instead. Didn’t give a shit he was in combats and boots, pushed the shades back over his eyes and headed towards the exit. Let them shoot him down like a rabbit if he was unlucky. Didn’t matter shit. Just the heat in his lungs and the pain in his knees and running until his body broke down.

Fucking cunt! Dan didn’t know if he meant one or the other.

* * *

The next day after Dan’s bollocking from the CO, his body was in such agony from overdoing the run, he rediscovered how much a man could ache. Queuing in line for breakfast, customary shades over his eyes, he stood with a stoic expression, refusing to look around nor acknowledge anyone except when he absolutely had to.

He could do with a day off to rest, but fuck, that'd make things worse. Would get him to think, and thinking without proper solitude like the Afghan mountains would get him down even more. Needed all his strength and considerable willpower not to think. Not remember. Not feel. Just exist. Even the damned yanks were conspiring against him, the kid wouldn't be available before Saturday at the earliest. How the fuck he was meant to get through the week was beyond him.

Dan turned when a mate tapped his shoulder, nodded to him, barely bothering to grin, was in the process of once more looking straight ahead at the back of his foreman, when something caught his eye. Despite all good intentions, his vision was drawn to the legionnaire. Stupid wannabe French bastard who was nothing but yet another sick-fuck Russian. But something was wrong.

Something...shit. The guy sure as fuck hadn't had his arm in a sling the day before, and as far as Dan knew the git hadn't even been on duty, but was sporting a lily-white bandage around his elbow, with the arm in a sling. How ...? Dan realised he had been staring and musing for too long when he caught the legionnaire's attention. Great. Fuck. He'd rather chew off his own hand.

Jean looked over, met Dan's eyes and moved into the queue as well, managing with his left hand, which looked nowhere near precise nor strong, but he bore it with an ironic smirk, when somebody asked him whether he had overdone the wanking. Gathering his breakfast, which took longer, he gave Dan a nod of acknowledgement. "Sorry, won't be securing your flank today in the transport. Knowing my luck, this will be the day when something interesting happens."

Dan's brows rose above the shades. Moving stiffly when he turned, damned advancing age. "What the fuck happened, legionnaire?"

"Sprained my elbow. That could take a few days to heal up. Guess I'll be cleaning rifles for a while." The self-irony paled a little at that, the merc clearly resented those aspects of duty. Jean balanced the tray with the left hand and held it against his chest.

"Too bad." Dan shrugged, then made his way towards one of the empty tables. Scanning the room, eyes hidden beneath the shades, as he searched for the Russian. Had to avoid Vadim, couldn't bear it. Impossible. Cutting too deep. Deeper than the Russian's scars.

He didn't know nor care if the legionnaire was following him, until he sat down on the bench and found the Belgian-French-Russian-whateverthefuck seated opposite to him.

"Sprained your elbow." Dan remarked casually, while sorting his bowls and plates, then pouring a triple helping of sugar into his black coffee. "Just like that, eh?"

Jean glanced up as somebody called his name and tried to wave him over. Pascal. One of his usual team. "Later," he called over, then looked at Dan again. "Was working on my chest muscles. Too many press-ups, then a bad move during sparring." He reached for his coffee, then remembered the sugar, let the coffee go, reached for a pack of sugar, tore it open by keeping one corner of the pack between his teeth, then poured the sugar in, and stirred with his left hand. "Seems we're all training too hard."

"Sure." Dan paused, tilted his head in his usual manner, before stirring his own coffee. "and since when do you talk to me?" Took two of the fried pieces breads and bit into them simultaneously. "I remember you figured I wasn't worth it." While chewing.

"We got off on a bad start." Jean rearranged the cutlery to the left side of the plate, then put the knife back, clearly having to get used to being a lefthander for the time being. "Nothing we can't sort out, I'm thinking. There's already too much shit going on in this camp." Tone deceptively light, he didn't meet Dan's eyes, apart from the last word.

Dan chewed on his bread until he had finished both slices, watching the legionnaire all the time, before grabbing a couple of sachets of tomato ketchup and slicing them open with an expert flick of the knife. Knives—they'd never disappointed him.

"Aye." One word, acceptance. Squirting ketchup all over his large portion of bacon, he tucked into the sausages first of all. "A lot of shit going on." Shoved half a sausage into his mouth, munching while watching the other from behind his shades. Swallowed. "Got a bollocking from the CO yesterday."

"Yeah, Pascal heard him shout." Jean made a rude gesture. "Overpaid bitch." He paused for a moment, then flashed a grin. "Bitch in the bastard sense." Reached for the coffee and had to turn the mug around to be able to grab the handle. "What about?"

Dan snorted, shook his head, stuffed his face with an fork-full of scrambled eggs. “The usual. Violence, aggression, brawls, fights, shit like that. Thinks it’s all my fault. ‘I’m at the root of all evil’ he said, or some crap.” He shrugged, washed the food down with his over sweetened coffee. “Accused me of being the reason why the shit’s hitting the fan since the Russian arrived.” Dan couldn’t help his jaw setting and his face showing a reaction he’d rather hide.

“Really?”

“What-the-fuck-ever. It’s a well known fact the CO doesn’t like fags. Especially loud and outspoken ones, and in particular this one.” Dan pointed with the butter and ketchup smeared knife towards himself, shrugged again. “Next thing it’s my fault the Yanks are hitting more of us with friendly fire than the enemy.”

Jean seemed thoughtful, then shook his head, still clinging to his coffee, not yet ready to eat like a left-handed cripple. “The Russian’s a loose gun. They wound him up like a toy and let him go, like the fucking Duracell bunny.” He snorted into his coffee. “By all rights and purposes, the CO has more reasons to hate Krasnorada.”

“At least the Russian hasn’t been walking round telling everyone he was a fucking poof, while itching for a fight.” Dan bared his teeth in a humourless grin, before starting on the pile of mushrooms and hash browns, adding a spot of ketchup dripping bacon to go with it.

“Ah, speak of the devil.” Jean nodded towards the queue, where Vadim had appeared, moving like he was still tired and stiff, clearly had had another fight.

Damn. Fucking bastard. Dan deliberately didn’t look, refused to acknowledge the arsewipe. Every glance cut deep to the bone and it wasn’t getting any better. It just fucking hurt and Dan wondered if it actually got worse with every day. “I wonder how long it takes before they realise Vadim’s going to cut them to strips every time they try it on with him.” Dan shrugged, “he can be a psycho.”

Jean gave pause at that, tried a grin which faltered, then drank coffee. “If he uses a knife he gets done for murder, fucking Spetsnaz or not.” The legionnaire sounded actually angry and his eyes followed the other Russian, as Vadim made his way, careful again, to not be tripped or intercepted or jostled, not that he was easily jostled. Watching Vadim sit down, alone, not even with Jean’s team, even

though they seemed to invite him. The Russian chose to sit alone. “Very hard to predict the man.”

Dan shook his head, still refusing to glance over. “Not hard at all. Expect the worst; expect him to betray you.” Shoved another piece of bread into his mouth, angrily chewing. No, not anger. Worse. Fucking rage and hatred and goddamned hurt. So much pain, if only he could make it stop and if he had to kill Vadim for it, he would. “Not difficult to predict at all.”

Vadim looked up, saw them together, and Jean reached out over the table to touch Dan’s arm. “Just to make sure: Poof, whatever, I don’t care what you fuck. Got me?”

Dan stopped in the middle of eating, staring at the hand on his arm. What the fuck had happened to the legionnaire, singing to an entirely different tune than only a day before. Instant dislike for each other, that’s what they had shared. For whatever reason he’d never bothered to fathom. “I don’t know what the fuck happened to you, mate, nor do I want to know if Vadim had anything to do with it, but I get it.”

Jean pulled his hand away, his team must have seen the gesture and that was almost the typical Russian pair of kisses for friends. Mad Dog was off limits, he was part of the crew now, no snide remarks. “Good.”

Dan nodded, remembered to swallow. “Just don’t expect me to trust you.” His grin was feral, “you’re Russian, after all.”

“Mother Russia sent me to Afghanistan when I was eighteen.” Jean glanced up. “I came as a conscript, then decided to not finish my term.” He shrugged. “You’re as much Afganet as I am.”

“Aye,” Dan smirked, “seems you’re as much Russian as I am English.” He lowered his head, concentrated on the food. Focussing on the good stuff, since there wasn’t that much left of the good things. Food, friends. Friends?

Plural? The Baroness? She’d interfered. The Yank? Sex. Friendship? Who knew. Soldiers had mates—couldn’t afford friends.

“Guess I’m more of an Afganet than you are.” Dan wiped the last of the grease, egg yolk and ketchup off his plate with a couple of pieces of toast. Anyone else would turn into a fat-filled balloon with the amount he was eating. Not him. Lean, tough, and weathered. “Spent seven years in the mountains, working on my own, then left the Forces and another two years in Kabul, close security.”

Jean grinned. “Yeah, a turkey. I never got much of the booty, though. Damned officers took everything.” He glanced at his plate, like considering whether he should eat and didn’t really seem to want to start. It would mean putting down the coffee mug. “Ah, fuck, getting all nostalgic after all those years. If you want to compare notes, guess I’m free all day.” Jean gave a laugh. “And, no, I don’t ask you for a date, Mad Dog. You’re a bit too broad in the shoulders for my taste.”

Dan laughed and it felt good. Hadn’t done so for a while. Shaking that unruly mop of hair, still dark except for the temples. “You’re not my type anyway.” He smirked, “too straight.”

“Damn right.”

Wiping his lips with the napkin, Dan caught a spot of grease on his chin, which already sported a shadow of stubble. “I prefer my shags to be willing.”

He grinned, stood up, still avoiding the tall, blond man, several tables along. “Have to be off, might take you up on the offer.” Taking his tray Dan turned, glancing back at the legionnaire. “Later.” Walking off to do his day’s duty in sweltering heat.

* * *

Jean was lying on his bunk, silently sweating, cursing the bandage that soaked up his sweat and itched like the clap, only more difficult to scratch. He wasn’t supposed to straighten the arm, damn lucky the joint itself seemed alright, no bone or cartilage splinters, just pressure on the bit that held the joint together.

Fucking Russian.

Reminded him of the day when he had almost lost it as a new arrival in Afghanistan. When they had gang raped a woman whose legs were very visibly broken. He’d seen a lot of shit, heard people scream, but that one was still around in his head. At least she wouldn’t kick. Or run away. Damn straight, officer. Krasnorada had brought Afghanistan right back, and the methods, too. He didn’t even want to look at Solange, would get the wrong ideas. Better put up a different photo. Not that he had anything more to do. He stood, set his bare feet on the ground and wiped his face on his shoulder.

Dusk. He switched on the light, waited for the temperature to plummet. Used to temperatures in Djibouti, which had one of the nastiest microclimates on the planet, had sweated in French Guyana. He was alright, as long as he drank enough water.

* * *

Dan showered longer than usual, the heat had been the worst since...almost forever. Bloody lucky he didn't mind heat, nor cold, couldn't help the occasional thought how much the Russian cunt had to be suffering. Tried desperately to stop thinking of Vadim at every damned inopportune moment, throwing himself into the work, thankful for the utter exhaustion of his body, once the sweat took everything out of him.

Thankful, too, for the small mercy of his duties being re-scheduled, leaving him with the chance to sleep in the next day, not having to get ready before the early evening. Showered and shaved a second time, he managed to acquire in highly illegal ways a couple of bottles of port from the Mess, thanks to a mate he'd made amongst the NCOs. Still wearing the shades, no matter if it was dark or bright sunlight, and dressed in flip-flops, cut-off camo shorts and t-shirt. He'd take the legionnaire up on his offer, at least that would give him something to stop thinking and remembering what he couldn't bear thinking about.

Knocking on the door, he called out, "hey, cripple, fancy some booze?"

Jean looked up, didn't quite identify the voice, but booze was good. "Come on in. It's not locked." Too much of a fire hazard, or something. He didn't fancy running into the door on the way to the shitter, either.

When the door opened, he recognized Mad Dog. And two bottles. Jean grinned and motioned. "Welcome to the oven I live in." Nothing much to sit on, he took the handle of one of the crates of kit and pulled it opposite the bed, then tossed the woollen blanket over it. "Beats club sofas, huh?"

Dan grinned, kicked the door shut behind him. "Think my room's any better?" He sat down on the makeshift chair, shoved the shades onto his forehead. "Guess I'm just a lucky bastard, got used to the heat years ago. I don't mind." He shrugged, handed one of the bottles to the legionnaire.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s not like we have most wars going on in nice climates. Maybe we should start something on Réunion, or Vanuatu.” Jean adjusted the light a little to not shine directly into Mad Dog’s face when he sat. “Hm. Glasses. Nope.”

“Fancy glasses are for nancy boys and Southern poofs.” Dan grinned. “I think you just started a war with France and La Legion.” Jean smirked. “We were entitled to half a bottle of wine with meals. Decent quality, too. I used to trade mine in, then they told me if I ever wanted to convince anybody I’m properly Belgian, I should cut that and drink the fucking wine.”

Laughing, Dan unwound the plastic off the first bottle, then pulled the cork. “Slainte.”

Jean glanced at his arm. “The bottle opening hand is a little...worse for wear.” He gave the bottle back with a wry grin.

“Fair point.” Dan traded the open bottle with the other, uncorking that one as well. “However, how the fuck you’d convince anyone you are a Belgian is beyond me. You look like too many of the Russkies I ever encountered in good old Afghanistan.” He grinned, raised the open bottle in a salute, took a swig of the port. Thank fuck it wasn’t a cheap one.

“The recruiter told me to say I’m Belgian. Never mind I don’t speak a word of their language, but apparently even the Frenchmen who join the Legion are Belgians. Regulations. The only Frenchmen are officers.” Jean shrugged. “Back in the day, they were hungry for fresh meat. I imagine they have whole battalions that speak Russian in one dialect or the other these days.” He looked at the bottle, then took a swig, blinking. “Nice...sweet. Ah. Slainte, was it?” Idly wiping a tickling sweat drop off his side and into the camo trousers. He only wore the trousers and the bandage, and that was bad enough.

“I should at least put a shirt on, protect my modesty.”

“You think I give a damn?” Dan wiped his lips with the back of his hand, put the bottle down onto the floor. “I find the myth every gay bloke fancies every male in existence damn funny.” Pulling a packet of fags out of his trouser pocket, he looked at the other questioningly, asking without words if it was okay to have a smoke in the room.

Jean nodded. “Go ahead. Ah, fuck, give me one. It’s not like...somebody would smell it.”

Dan lit one of the cigarettes for Jean, handed it over. “Still, I guess I can’t claim you’re not my type, eh?” His grin threatened to falter, but he had himself under control.

Jean drew his hand with the fag back, slowly, as if to hide the moment of unease, or to make sure Dan understood he didn’t mind. He wouldn’t have known himself. “I look nothing like him.” He leaned back to take a drag, slowly, just restarting a former habit. On-off smoker. He had a habit of quitting. “Blond, then? Blue eyes? Funny. I like my women dark-haired.” He gave a laugh. “All about contrast, huh?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Dan lit his own cigarette, drew in a deep drag, relishing the burn in his lungs. “Haven’t got a type. Things just happened along the way. I wasn’t always gay, used to fuck women.”

“You did?” Jean smirked, but it wasn’t malicious. “Ah, none of my business.” Took another, deeper drag, as if testing what his lungs thought of smoke. They seemed to be fine with it.

Dan laughed, a cynical, dry sound. “Aye, just one of those things.” and a Russian cunt who raped...no. No hatred, no love. No memories. Not now. Had to distract his thoughts with something else...looking around the room, his eyes stopped at the wall over the bed. Squinting at the photos in the murky light, Dan tilted his head. “Holy fuck.” Taking another swig from the bottle before he stood up, taking a step towards the pictures while dragging on his fag. “You mind me taking a look?”

Jean leaned to the side to allow Dan to take any of the photos off the wall. “Take it.”

Dan was studying several of them, one more ‘exotic’ than the other. Peering closely at one of them, the same lady again, long black hair, dark eyes, an unmistakable North African air about her beautiful frame. “She’s fucking beautiful. Is she a model?”

“Yeah, she sometimes...” Jean paused, then willed himself to continue. “wears clothes for money, and I assure you, that’s hard work.” Echoing somebody else’s intonation.

Dan picked the photo carefully off the wall. It was glossy, showed the shortest mini skirt in the world on unbelievably long, straight legs, and the highest fuckme stilettos anyone could wear. Narrow hips, small, perky breasts. Wearing a

corset type top and bare, slender arms that played with something which looked like a black fur stole.

Dan studied the photo closely, smoking, standing right beside the bed.

Jean noticed he didn't mind Dan being close and would have felt stupid if he had moved away. "There are more over there." He nodded to the crate. "Don't call me obsessive, okay?"

Dan turned his head, grinning, sat back down on his improvised chair, still looking at the photo. "That's class, mate. That really is. What a lady. Even I can see that."

"Yeah, she's special." Jean seemed a little surprised a gay guy would say anything like that, but took it as a compliment by proxy.

Turning the picture in the light, Dan took in a deep drag of the cigarette and then suddenly stopped, blinked, coughed when he forgot he had his lungs filled with smoke. Squinted, then looked up at Jean from under his lashes.

"Don't mind me saying that, but that beautiful lady has an adam's apple. I figure you knew that?"

"Shit." Jean paled. "Shouldn't have...left that on the wall. Shit." He inhaled, deeply, looked at Dan, suddenly nervous, guilty, ease gone. Opened his lips a few times to explain, and aborted, wincing instead. "You're the first ever that... spotted that. Oh fuck." Battled the shock, took him several long moments.

"Listen, I didn't know that when I met her. It's...a complicated story, okay? Shit. She's more...no, just as..." Jean suddenly stood. "I didn't know."

"Hey, mate, what's the problem?" Dan handed the photo back to the legionnaire, felt somehow it belonged into the other's hands, not his own. Jean took the photo and put it away, which gave him a moment to try and compose himself. Hiding it in the other crate.

Dan grabbed the bottle and took another swig, loving that sweet stuff. "I remember I was fooled, yonks ago, by a girl in the pub. OK, I was drunk, as usual, but fucking hell, I remember she was hot. Damn shame I was a gay bashing, poof hating, cunt fucking bastard back then. Real cunts, you understand. Giggling girls." He shrugged, a shadow of regret ghosting across his deeply tanned face. "I beat her/his pretty face into a pulp when I took accidentally hold of a package between 'her' legs. She'd been wearing a snug necklace or some shit, can't remember, but I

sure as fuck hadn't seen the adam's apple. Been a bit wary since then, I guess, so I spotted it."

Jean closed his eyes, nodding at the story. "I actually had my knife out when I...worked it out. I was just so fucking freaked. She looked better than the real thing." He rubbed his face with the left hand, then looked at Dan, still embarrassed.

Stubbing the cigarette out on the floor, Dan grinned. "Takes all sorts is what I say. Besides, what the fuck's the problem? She's got class and she looks like a real woman, guess she had that operation thing? Must be weird." He shrugged.

"Not so weird. Yeah, the body changes. Operations should be finished when I...go on R&R next. She promised photos as soon as she's properly healed." Jean looked at the wall, clearly longingly, obviously devoted and in love, and knew himself how bare his emotions were in that moment. Didn't manage to look at the other.

Dan couldn't help but smile, his grin softening. The look on the legionnaire's face didn't go hand-in-hand with the hard arsed image. Had been a while since last he saw anyone like that, let alone felt it himself. "Well, legionnaire, I never in my life fucked anyone that beautiful. So yeah, if she's your girlfriend, then I wonder what the hell you did to deserve and keep such a lass." He chuckled, winked at Jean, "that wasn't an invitation to tell me exactly *how* you keep her happy. Not my cuppa."

"Just don't tell them, right? I'm not...hiding anything, just that...ah, my woman hasn't always been that. She should be all sorted in a couple weeks. Apart from that thing." He pointed at his own throat. "And the size of hands and feet, but there are ways to hide that." He groaned. "I sound like a fucking expert. Serious, she's been never anything but a woman for me." He reached for his bottle and drank, taking several deep swallows. "Just can't see her harmed."

"Why the fuck should I tell anyone?" Dan frowned, "don't insult me, OK? You've never been my enemy, you just couldn't stand my guts and I didn't give a fuck about yours. Besides, even if you had been, I don't do sneaky shit. Get it out and into the open, sling it out with fists, if need be with knives, but insulting a man's woman or man? No chance in fucking hell. No one will know. Not from

me.” Left hand holding the bottle, Dan took a swig, while his right reached out to the other. “You have my word. Deal?”

Jean stepped closer. “Just a healthy dose of paranoia.” Twisting his left hand to take Dan’s right, he pressed it for a moment. “Yeah. So. I never hated you for being gay. My own stuff is pretty messed up as it is. If anything, I hated you for acting as if the whole fucking world belonged to you. That grated on my fucking nerves. I thought you were full of shit.”

Dan gave the hand a firm shake, smirked with teeth and all. “You’re not so far off the mark, there. I *am* full of shit.” Clinked the bottle against Jean’s before taking another swig. He was getting half-way through the potent stuff and started to enjoy himself. “I took an instant dislike to you. Not your fault, must have been the blue-eyed blond haired stuff.”

Jean huffed. “I look nothing like Krasnorada. I have more than one facial expression, for one.” Clinked the bottle against Dan’s, then sat back down on the bunk bed.

Dan grinned, “Reason why I was running round telling every arse, who didn’t want to hear it, I was gay? Itching for a fight. Pressure valve, getting rid of the whole load of crap inside.” He shrugged, “worked quite well, until recently.”

“Now the jarheads are too fucking scared to drink in the same bar as you do? Loved that stunt. Seeing a bunch of Marines run to mommy was priceless.”

“Hey, they aren’t all that bad.” Dan grinned at the memory, though. He’d taken a lot of damage, that night, but if he hadn’t had the mad fight with a handful of pissed off Yanks, he’d probably got himself killed the next day on duty. “They are just so fucking young and bloody naïve, it’s almost painful.” Chuckling, Dan poured some more of the sweet stuff down his neck.

“Yeah, I guess. Plenty of beefcake, anyway.” Jean started to feel the alcohol. It punched just as hard as expected. “Nothing in the world can be as young as an American, I think sometimes.”

“Aye,” Dan grinned to himself, sloshing the port in the bottle, “there’s meat alright.”

Jean felt himself relax, the alcohol dulled the throbbing pain in his fucked-up elbow. “I guess I shouldn’t be saying this...” He waited for a moment. “Or asking. You know. Don’t want to spoil the evening. There’s the story in camp.

Midge and his retards believe Krasnorada was your bitch, and he cheated on you, and you found out. And that's why you hate his guts."

Dan froze, eyes wide. "What?" Complete and utter disbelief in his face, and something else, something much darker, almost insane. "What the *fuck* do they think?" He shook his head, muttered something under his breath. "Vadim was my bitch and slept round and that's why I hate him?" The darkness came welling up inside, tickling Dan's throat with hysterical laughter. "Holy fuck." Couldn't say anymore before the laughter broke out. He was almost pissing himself as he let himself fall into a vat of insanity.

Jean grinned. "I guess that's a no, then." He waited till Dan could breathe properly again and seemed to expect an outbreak of more laughter or violence, but when nothing like that happened, he gave another grin. "Okay. What about...you tell me how on earth somebody like you—I mean, a...bastard who's full of shit about being invincible and unkillable, but who's pretty laid back otherwise...ends up being the ex-lover of one of the scariest, most fucked-up dickheads I've ever met. And yes, that includes the bitches who trained me in French Guyana. What the fuck happened? And what does he do in the Gulf and not in some other meatgrinder? I mean, it's none of my business, really. Or maybe tell me to shut the fuck up."

"No, it's none of your business, but this whole shit is no one's business, yet affecting everyone." Putting the bottle to his lips Dan was tipping back more than a quarter in one go. Wiped his lips. Almost empty. Time for business.

"You know the way you look at the pictures of your lady? That look on your face, that's love. Shit, I recognised it because I know that look. I used to have it myself. I fucking loved him. Nine years in Afghanistan, seven as a turkey, left the army after knee surgery and they didn't want to send me back. Went back anyway, because of him. Close security, whatever, just back to Kabul and back to having a chance to be with him."

Dan's wry grin burned like acid in his face. "Probably sounds fucking impossible, eh? Love and all that shit. Loving that madman, but I tell you what, legionnaire, this here, that fucked-up bastard, is only a part of him. It's the bad part, and that part is goddamned motherfucking bad, so dark and nasty and brutal and without any remorse nor regret, you don't want to be pulled in by its tide." He shook his head, "but that's not the man I've known for over eleven years. The man

I knew and loved saved my life in the mountains, when I lay wounded under a pile of Muja corpses; shaved my face and gave me a reason not to walk into the next bullet because I'd been too weary to duck it; slept with me wrapped around him, and..." he had to stop, inhaled harshly, "but fuck..." this was getting too painful and Dan shuddered, but still he ploughed on. "Too much information, but that man crossed Pakistan and India to get to a hospital where I was lying, dying, blown to pieces by a fucking bomb meant for my charge. That man sat sobbing, holding my hand, professing a fucked-up love that I believed in."

Dan paused, exhausted, put the bottle to his mouth again and drained the last of the port. Feeling the alcohol flood his blood, the only way, except for adrenaline, to deal with all this crap.

Jean didn't move a muscle, only winced every now and then, holding the bottle in his left hand. Looked like he wanted to say something when Dan paused, but pulled back, and listened.

"But then it was all over. The Glorious Soviet Army left. One last night in a hotel, promises, hopes and ridiculously naïve wishes. Stupid, really, to think we could have got away with nine years worth of secrets. The KGB set him up, charged him. Traitor and all that shit. Off to the Lubyanka. Loved that bastard so much, I fought tooth and nail to try and save his life, and when it was too late, when he was sentenced to death, I paid a damn high price to get a message to him. But he wasn't executed, the KGB wasn't all that stupid and the West had too many offers they wanted to take. Money. Financial bribes. More fighting, but never giving up and never surrendering. Pathetic, really."

Dan shrugged, looked at the bottle, empty. Damn. "I sold all my assets and we bribed the shit out of them. Retrial, they let him go. Somewhere. Middle of nowhere in Finland. Last Christmas, almost seven months ago. I stood and waited and picked up a man who was a ghost." Dan wiped his forehead, ran a hand through his hair, before looking up. "He left. Walked away. No word. Nothing. Left me fucking shattered." Tapping another fag out of the package, he lit it and inhaled the smoke.

"I hate the fucking bastard."

Jean looked at Dan, for long, long moments, again reaching for words, and not saying anything for a while. Very little he could say. "That's why he screams off his head at night," he murmured. "Shit. Nine years. Eleven, even. I was a kid

back then. And I thought my shit was complicated.” He gave a small laugh, shaking his head. “Woah. Shit.” He stood and walked over to Dan, tapping one shoulder with his bottle that still held a third of liquid, offering it.

“He’s screaming?” Dan looked up, snatched the offered bottle, looked straight into the other’s face. “Screaming, you say?”

Jean nodded, his hand now dropping on Dan’s shoulder, firmly settling around the round part, clasping. “Screaming his head off. There have been complaints. Happened, what, three nights out of seven. I tried to work him hard in the gym, tried to get him tired, but it doesn’t seem to have any effect. And he’s not talking about it, either.” He stood close.

Dan was still looking, the hand on his shoulder felt good. A Yank. A Belgian. Several Brits as mates. He wasn’t doing too bad after all. His thoughts raced, one catching the tail of the other, until then he suddenly shrugged, holding the bottle tighter. “Not my business. Not anymore.” Tipping his head back, the bottle followed, and Dan gulped down several large swallows. Wiping his lips, he felt the alcohol strongly.

Jean nodded. “Guess it’s better to move on. You know what? You could visit us in Paris on R&R, and we make sure you get nicely distracted from this shit. Paris remains top of the list for nightlife and quality entertainment. And I mean *quality*.” Patted the shoulder, Jean tried to distract and get Dan out of the gloomy state. He didn’t have to know what the Russian madman had done.

“Aye,” Dan grinned, feeling fuzzy, “move on. Paris, Yanks, the next assignment.” Really, that hand was doing nice things. Buddy-like. “Sounds like a plan. But can’t imagine I’d go for a male whore. Have always stuck to the female ones. Blowjobs are blowjobs.” He chuckled, forcing the memories down.

“Yeah, that’s true.” The hand moved to Dan’s sweaty neck, a gesture Jean would do with any of his team members. Rest the head against his side, when they felt tired and pissed and sad. “That how I met her. Got into a fling with two girls in a nightclub. Okay, bar. Seedy kinda money trap, but I was just out and needed to...get rid of some stuff. Took me a while to work out the one that had been sucking me never got undressed.” Jean laughed. “Oh shit. No female bits, there, apart from those lips. They were female alright.”

Dan chuckled, moving his head towards that hand in his neck. Was alright, un-sexual, the touch of a mate. He couldn’t remember when he’d last felt anything

like that. “Must have been a fucker of a shock. How did you manage not to freak? You said there was a knife involved.”

“Yeah. Montmartre...better have a knife.” Jean gathered his thoughts. “We ended up in one of the dingy places there. The other girl was asleep, I was so high on freedom, I could have fucked them both all night. She was halfway through giving me a blowjob when I tried to get her to proper fucking. I mean, she was prettier than the other one, and I’d already had that bitch in all ways. Just wanted to continue with her, so I guess I asked a little roughly, and she said I could fuck her ass if I didn’t touch her. I thought what the fuck, yeah, and I think I was a bit loud, and went a bit rough, tore her dress, massive ruckus. The other bitch wakes up and starts screaming, and she freaks, too, and out comes the knife. I was really close to cut that bastard’s throat. So she starts crying and begging for her life, and swears to God and Allah all she had wanted was suck me off and that was no reason to kill someone.”

Jean inhaled. “She was crying and clinging to my hand and I thought, fuck, something’s seriously wrong. I shouldn’t...believe her. I mean, that was...the body was male. But the crying, all that stuff, that was a woman. Guess I dropped the knife and calmed her down. That friend had run off to get the police, well, good luck finding an honest flic in Montmartre. Made sure she got home alright. She was so flustered she kept losing shoes.”

Dan had closed his eyes, listening, just letting that hand rub his neck. “And then? You took her home.” Felt he shouldn’t be nosy, but fuck, was good to hear about someone else’s life for a change. He had to smile at the story. If that wasn’t a bloody romantic love story, then what was. Better than rape, torture, death and destruction.

“Yeah. She told me she played with the idea to let me sleep on her couch, but feared I’d kill her on second thought, so locked and bolted the door and swore never to pick up horny soldiers again.” Jean laughed. “Next morning, I remember what happened, and check whether she’s alright. She’s still scared, but kinda works out I might not kill her, so we go out for a walk and she tells me she has a thing for soldiers and I’m stupid enough to ask for that blowjob. Because, damn, she was good. Yeah, and made up and everything, that morning, so I thought just don’t think about what she actually is. But seriously? In daylight, when she wasn’t scared, she made it pretty damn special. And I thought, okay, the world’s best

cocksucker is well, that. Cool. Whatever. I don't have to touch her, right? So, we meet. Bars, nightlife, and everybody buys she's a woman. And at the end of the night she asks me to fuck her ass. And she likes it, goes completely crazy for my body, can hardly peel her off me for a week. I mean, she was on hormones already, and you could feel her go softer, the skin changed, you can just see that's becoming a woman in front of your eyes, right under your hands. While you fuck her. Completely blew my head off. She'd been doing some modelling, but wanted the operation badly, so yeah, I didn't really want to deal with her bits...guess I blew a fair part of my money on getting her fixed up."

Dan grinned, his eyes still closed. "While it's a fucked-up story, you do realise you're a bloody romantic sap." Opening one eye, he peered upwards.

Jean glanced down. "Yeah, right. Ex-Russian ex-Legionnaire so fucking horny he'd take anything. Algerian transvestite with a taste for camo. We make something really special there."

"Lust is a great thing, but you're far off that one. Head, heels, and over, now put that back into the right order." Dan chuckled, "hope you'll have a 'happily ever after' to that story and not some crazy shit." Rubbing his eyes, hell, he was booze-mellowed and tired from a hard day in the heat. "If you ever need a best man, tell me. I'll slap that ring on, alright."

Jean smiled, held Dan's head to his side, one hand still stroking the other's neck. "As soon as the papers are sorted out. Fucking bureaucrats get a kick out of delaying shit. But yeah, if I need a best man, I'll ask you. Only thing: you will not wear a scrap of camo while in her line of sight." Patting the neck again. "Shit, that was a nice evening. Beats the hell out of yesterday."

"Deal. Even though I'm afraid as beautiful as your lady is, I'm really not interested. Not quite a 'red hot blooded male' in that respect. Now, if she'd left that cock on, then we'd be talking." Dan laughed, kept his head where it was, enjoying the physical contact. He just didn't get enough of that.

"Yeah, right. No way."

"What happened last night?" Dan asked, out of the blue.

Jean paused. "I was talking to Krasnorada last night. He just gave me the creeps. Ranted about being nobody's bitch and he'd teach them a lesson. Something along those lines. We had a bit of a fight. I tried to calm him down and

got my elbow nearly ripped off for my troubles. Bastard stormed off afterwards. Good riddance.”

Dan nodded. “Sounds like him, I guess.” He started to get up, despite the port and tiredness only slightly unsteady on his feet. “Guess I better head off.”

Feeling more relaxed than he’d done for ages. “Could do with a shag but won’t get anything for a week.”

“Yeah, same here. Hope they let me go earlier on R&R. Fucking elbow.” Jean stepped away and smiled. “Thanks for the booze.”

“Cheers, legionnaire, a night like this was just what the doctor ordered.” Walking to the door, Dan glanced back before pushing the shades over his eyes, “have a wank on my behalf.” He grinned, a flash of teeth in the darkness.

“Easier said than done.” Jean laughed and pointed at his arm. “Doctor said absolutely no strain.” He paused, then winced slightly. “Listen. You could...stay.” Winced harder. “I could use some help.”

Dan stopped, took the shades off again, his sign this was important. “As much as I’d like to take you up on that offer, I like cock a bit too much—and you like cock not halfway enough. It would be a one-sided business on too many levels.”

Jean felt visibly stupid. He should let it go, really. “You said you like my type, and I’m just drunk enough. Don’t think you’d rape me or anything.”

Dan smiled as he pushed the shades back over his eyes. “Mates, alright? Let’s keep it to that and we’ll get along just fine.” Added, while opening the door, “on all levels.”

With that he left.

* * *

What if the legionnaire went to the CO? Vadim covered his eyes with his arm and groaned. Fuck. This was not the Soviet Army. He was not an officer who could do what he liked.

These days they could prove every little shit. There were genetic traces, and somebody had clearly fucked up the other’s elbow. Assault. Whatever they called it. Definitely a crime, even without the sexual part of it. Attempted rape? ‘We

found your genetic code splattered all over this soldier's trousers. Any explanation for that?'

Are you so fucking keen to go back to prison? Are you? This time with the showers and improvised weapons?

You're a predator, vile, depraved and utterly incapable of guilt. I wish I had the time to teach you the meaning of regret.

He'd wanted Jean, he couldn't have him, he'd just taken him. Not like he had fucked his ass. Not a proper rape. Had even given head. Yeah, for the power, not for any kind of equality. Just being able to want, just desiring again. Like drugs. Heady. Like suddenly realising how hungry he had been.

Like fucking Dan in Kabul. He had just gone back into something that had screwed up Dan, and this time, it had been a superior, technically, and the only ally he had had in this place. And fucking Jean ran straight to Dan. Had switched sides, easily, with no visible hesitation. From Vadim's ally to Mad Dog's in a heartbeat.

Mad Dog. It hurt to see him, hurt to know he'd be shouted at, again, have that snarling beast at his throat that wanted nothing more than to rip out his heart. It was agony. Vadim hadn't thought it could actually hurt that bad, had been sure he couldn't feel anything, but he had been wrong. There was fear, and anger, and he thought they felt as potent as they had always been. The fear was certainly stronger, these days.

And knowing what Dan's face had looked like in Kabul, the night they'd spent in the hotel room. What he'd said. My light, my life, my sanity, my love. Nothing of that had been wrong. Not the sex, the kisses, the teenager oaths of staying together, always, rain, shine, life, death. *I'd die for you. Live for me.*

Hold me. Fucking hold me.

Vadim pressed his head against the bunk bed, tried to choke the sound, a pitiful strangled thing from deep in his chest that sounded like somebody had cut his throat, and cried, cried so hard he thought he could never stop.

* * *

Dan slept undisturbed and deeper than he had done for weeks. After his first piss at stupid-o'clock he'd left the door of his 'tin hut' open to get a breeze in, pulling the camo-net in front of it, which he used as a makeshift curtain. It would

get as hot as a cooking pot in these small metal rooms, once the sun was up. The only way to get any air flow going was to wedge the door open, keep the minuscule window wide open as well, and sod all pretence of modesty. At least their accommodation as ‘affiliated’ personnel was a distance away from the British troops, with the added luxury of a few square yards each merc could call their own.

He slept through the racket the guys who were on early morning duty were making, and when he finally woke up, it was baking in the hut, but he didn’t particularly care. Extreme temperatures had never bothered him and he’d got so used to the heat, he moved in it like a lizard. Grogginess for a coffee, his stomach rumbling from lack of food, he had to get washed and shaved before he could present himself anywhere, let alone the cookhouse.

Dan yawned, rubbed his eyes and ran a hand through his tousled bed-hair, feeling better right now than he had done for a while. A little over a week to be precise. Finding his shades first of all, he put them on before scrambling up from bunk and blankets. Searching for flip-flops, towel and wash bag, he wrapped the pale blue towel low around his hips, with the scars peeking over the top, then dangled the olive soap bag from one finger. Filled with shower gel, tooth brush and paste, razor and shaving foam. What else could a man need? Had lived his life with those five items, perhaps a tube of lube added on top, the latter not strictly counting as ‘beauty supplies’.

Lifting the camo-net, he stepped through the door, blinking into the glaring sun despite the shades. July was scorching in this place, as early as 1000 hrs. Dan braced his legs and took a deep breath. “Ah, nothing but a dose of flaming sand and dust in the morning.” Muttering to himself with a grin, mocking the classic line.

Only a short space away, Jean was standing in a gaggle of freshly-showered mercs, wearing PT shorts, trainers and a white wifebeater. He had just finished telling a vastly exaggerated, and enormously untrue story of how he had fucked up his elbow—which included being taken prisoner by a temple of nymphomaniac ninja ladies whom he fended off after he had satisfied their unquenchable lust for his fat cock—and talked his way into a cigarette. It was lit by one of the guys and put between his lips, because Jean was already holding a Styrofoam cup of coffee with his good hand. With a close-lipped grin he gave his goodbyes, as he had just spotted Dan coming their direction. He headed towards the ovens, crossing Dan’s path.

Dan grinned, about ninety-five percent awake, allowing himself the luxury of holding the measly rest back. Meeting the legionnaire in the middle of the open space, his right hand moved before he opened his mouth to get out a greeting, snatched the Styrofoam cup and unceremoniously gulped down half of the coffee, smirking. “Cheers, mate. Just what I needed.”

Jean took the cig from his lips. “Want this too?”

“You just saved my life, mate.” Dan didn’t take the fag, just leaned forward and took a deep drag from the offered cig. Exhaling while talking. “Had run out, was about to get a packet after brekkie.”

Jean glanced over his shoulder, grinning, as a few people seemed to expect anger or some other emotion. “You off duty today?” He grinned, secure despite the weird question. “Or just late?”

“Both.” Dan handed the remaining half of the coffee back. Fair was fair. “Am on after lunch, it’s the evening shift. You think I would have had the booze last night otherwise?” He grinned, “no chance, I’m a professional.”

“Yeah, Mad Dog is more eager for blood than booze, yadda, yadda.” Jean took a drag, flicked the cig away, one hand short to take the coffee back, then emptied the cup. Glancing down at Dan’s body, mostly bared, just a movement of his pupils, nothing more, almost invisible. “Advertising your wares, huh?”

Dan laughed, hitching the towel back up that had threatened to slip even further down, revealing more of the serrated scars and far more of the dark line of hair than he had intended. “Aye, arsehole, as if anyone were interested in them. More scars than a whorehouse boasts used condoms.”

“Offer them at discount to the CO? He’s just a bit tight with the pennies since he had to pay for his momma’s abortion.” A poisonous grin. “To prevent another mistake, y’know.”

Dan sniggered evilly, “So, how was the wanking?” He gestured with his chin at the non functional arm. “Or should I feel pity for you?”

Jean grinned. “Bastard.” Making the international ‘wanker’ gesture with his left hand, which drew some shouts from his usual crew. Jean, fucked up, still dared to call Mad Dog a ‘wanker’. Fun.

Dan was still laughing, shook his head and dropped his hand for a quick grope of Jean’s gonads. Squeezed hard and sudden, let go immediately.

“Yep, I can feel it, still full. Poor boy.”

Jean laughed, shit like that was perfectly normal, like ass-slapping, not worse than a one-finger salute. “Yeah, you would know all about blue balls.”

Dan tapped the side of his nose with his index finger, lowered his voice and winked. “Not as blue as you’d think.”

Jean turned, and saw a pair of eyes so cold it made the desert suddenly feel temperate.

Krasnorada, arms crossed, kitted out, waiting for pick-up not too far away. Must have been standing in the shade, moving forward. Jean could have sworn he hadn’t been there just a minute ago.

Jean glanced back at Dan. “Watch your back out there,” he murmured. Dan’s eyes followed Jean’s glance, hitting the ice cold glare with a full-on stare of his own. For just a second. Like he had done, eleven years ago, in a sweltering hotel room in Kabul. “Trust me, I am the goddamned king of backwatching.” Added, “I won’t die twice.”

Jean felt his body tense with Krasnorada staring at him like that, like he was incapable of anything but that intense stare Jean had mistaken for anything but what it meant. Murderous intent. The bandage itched, and he hardly managed to keep up the easy grin. Didn’t want to stop the talk even though he had intended to, wouldn’t allow Krasnorada the comfort of thinking he had interfered with him talking to Dan. “If you want a piece of me, Mad Dog, you’ll have to battle your way through nymphomaniac ninja ladies like you wouldn’t believe. They’d show you what you’re missing.”

“Aye, I have a fair idea. Just copped a feel, remember?” Dan grinned, refused to acknowledge the glowering presence. He didn’t belong with the other anymore. Fucking bastard, how dared he. How dared he stand there and behave as if he gave the slightest shit about Dan.

“And if I didn’t know you’d kick my teeth in for that, legionnaire, I’d cop another.”

Jean looked straight into Dan’s eyes, his lips spreading into a slow, sly smile. “Aren’t you just itching for it,” he said, loudly, then shot Dan another glance, quick, hard to read, gave a laugh, and was on his way, back to his quarters.

Dan was shaking his head, laughing. “In your dreams, legionnaire!”

Jean turned while he was walking, murmured “bring booze” in Russian, laughed again, and left. Delivering a nice blow to Krasnorada, which was the cause for the last laugh. Indeed.

That silenced Dan for a moment. Had he just been propositioned by a straight guy? Holy shit, there seemed to be room for more firsts in his fucked-up life.

He said nothing, turned away as well to continue towards the showers, refusing to cast another glance at Vadim whose presence he felt even if he didn’t see it.

He started to whistle, badly, and grinned while he walked.

* * *

“Oooohhhh,” A high-pitched squeal greeting him from the running showers. “Behave, girls, there’s Mad Dog and his Big Dick!”

Dan sneered, pulled the towel off his hips and chucked it over the hook. “Look who’s there.” Didn’t even need to glance over at the opposite stalls, knew that taunting voice. “St Trinian’s, but without the skirts.”

He had no idea who else was in the stalls along his side. The fronts were open, but individual stalls had thin side partitions.

The voice piped up again, less high-pitched, instead mock pitiful this time. “Does that make you sad? Not to have a skirt?”

Dan rolled his eyes, squeezed some gel into his hand before stepping under the shower, his head still out of the water. “You’re just jealous, Midge. Itching for a nice juicy cock up your arse, but I’m not doing you the favour.”

The laughter that came out from the stalls was half nasty, half genuine. “Why’s that, then? Found yourself a cunt amongst the jarheads, or is the Russian bitch back in your favours?”

Dan closed his eyes, dunked his head under the water for a moment, lathered shower gel into his dishevelled hair and counted to ten. He’d give the bastard ten seconds grace this time. Arrogant twat—and far too close for comfort. He poked his head back out of the water. “Midge, you stupid wanker, last time you and your mates tried this game with me there was blood spilt all over the tiles. And fuck you, but it wasn’t mine. Want a repeat?”

No answer for a second, before water stopped along the stalls, a guy stepping out into the walkway between. The ginger freckled merc was smirking, but holding his hands up, as if showing he had no weapons. Stark naked that would have been a challenge.

“Calm down, Mad Dog, gotta take the piss.”

Dan was watching the git while sluicing the soap suds off his body. Midge was trouble. He’d have to beat the crap out of him again.

* * *

“But only for five minutes, Monsieur.”

“I pay your fees, remember?”

A dry huff and the doctor left the line. Finally. Little respect for somebody calling from abroad, and even less for somebody who spoke very basic French. Jean had the feeling the doctor had taken an instant dislike for him. As if he pressured Solange into anything. Or maybe because Solange wasn’t strictly white. Hard to tell.

“Baby?” She sounded drowsy.

“How are you?”

“Ask me tomorrow...just tired right now. Are you alright?”

“Won’t leave camp for a while, got my elbow twisted in an exercise.” He leaned against the wall, would have loved to drink her voice, the low huskiness pronounced by whatever they gave her after the operation. Rub against it, hold her, he should fucking be there, and wasn’t, instead nursing his elbow, not even the luxury of getting head over heels in work.

“Does it hurt bad?”

“No. I had worse.” He closed his eyes to concentrate on her, the slightest inflection, how she breathed, *that* she breathed. He missed her so much. “Did you get the dog yet?”

“I think I want a cat.”

He huffed. If she could have made up her mind, they’d be the proud owners of a horse, a falcon, a pair of parrots and an albino python. “Sure. Whatever makes you happy.” And doesn’t require us to move too far away from an airport.

“You’re sweet. I miss you, baby. But I must be so ugly right now.”

Bandaged up, just herself, in that fragile beauty she hid under the stunning feathers she could don. Granted, it took four hours in the bathroom, but it was worth it every time. As long as she was his for the remaining twenty hours. As often as he wanted her. And that was an awful lot. “Only if you cry, remember.”

Don't look at me. I'm ugly. Pulling at her hair like she tried to pull the scalp off. This is not me, this is not me, oh Jean, how can you love me, how can you want this ugly sack of bones.

I'll be pretty for you.”

You're breaking my heart. “You better be,” he grinned. “If you're not properly healed, woman, I'll slap your ass.”

She gave a sigh. “Oh please.” That made him horny beyond belief, that soft sigh, knowing how she flushed when he did those things to her, treated her like his possession. Something other girls would run away screaming from, but it only made her cling more, hold so tight like she would drown without him, and he remembered the nights when he had held that lanky body, bony shoulder trembling with tears. *This is not me. How can you see me?* That intense hatred for a body that was evolving, changing, mood swings. They had warned him, but it was still a hell of a ride, and her fucking family refused to see their son wasn't dead.

“Time's up, angel, I'll call you tomorrow.”

“I love you.”

“Yes, I do, too.”

Couldn't blow kisses or anything, this wasn't exactly private, so that was the most he could do without fucking up his reputation as a tough bastard with a stunner for a girl. Putting the phone down because he didn't want to hear anything from the doctor, nothing like “successful operation” or “everything's on schedule” like her gender reassignment—like she got fucking posted to a different battalion—was nothing but a schedule.

He drew a deep breath, gave a grin to Pascal, one of his crew, who had waited for him on the way to the mess.

“Is it a boy, Jean?”

Jean laughed. You have no fucking idea. “The appendix?” Hit the back of Pascal's head. “Fucking weirdo. Now you made me think about guts. Bastard.”

Is it a boy? No more. Never really. Bastard.

Went on to grab food, felt strangely elated, just having heard her voice. Knew all her girl friends would queue up and entertain her with who was sleeping with whom, who had found that gorgeous little boutique first, and weren't citrine necklaces all the rage this summer? It made her happy. And he didn't care what the necklace had cost he peeled off her on the way to the bed.

In this mood, nothing really touched him, not even the Russian thundercloud in the corner. Krasnorada looked less punched-up today, or healing faster. Jean sat down, had a chat with the blokes, spoke about Solange's appendix operation in as much detail as might be expected, drawing from his own a while back, hard, hot stomach, blue lights, emergency procedure, but she was fine now. It explained why he had been worried. A nose or boob job wouldn't have been convincing. Declined a few invitations to a game of pool, said he'd not give Pascal a view of his ass, bent over a table. Got roaring laughter, felt on top of the game, and called it an early night. So to speak.

* * *

Remembering the weird mix of offer-request from the legionnaire, Dan pulled in favours, offering some in return. He got lucky. Gary, the bloke with the stupidest Yank name any ex-Seal could have, wanted to swap his shift desperately, a shift that was particularly disliked. Friday night, when everyone was already knackered and the Muslim world had gone quiet, but they still had to be on alert.

Dan took the chance, would have to do a double shift, but nothing he hadn't done before, and couldn't handle. He even managed to blag some booze out of the guy. It helped to have mates who had mates who knew mates who...and he ended not only with a free half day ahead, but also with a litre bottle of Jack Daniel's. Those yanks could be good for something, sometime. Just like the kid, who he was oddly missing, the carefree laughter, the toothpaste-ad white grin and the unblemished body that should be playing basketball in an America suburb and not risk life and limbs in the heat of the Gulf.

He'd done his shift, stuffed his face at tea, studiously avoiding the glowering, brooding presence in one of the corners, and was heading towards Jean's room as soon as he was ready. Back in flip-flops, shorts and t-shirt, Dan's

‘uniform’ when off duty. Didn’t bother to knock this time, just called out, once he had reached the door. “Oy, princess, need rescuing?”

Jean was just scratching under the bandage with a pencil, manoeuvring the blunt point around on the itching skin, sweat and bandages were an especially devious torture. “Yeah, come in.”

Got up from the crate, turned the French world news down, stuff was happening, as always. He was wearing shorts, and the bandage. Had placed a wet towel around his shoulders and head, which cooled, pulled it off his head, though, wiping his face with one part of it. He looked up as Dan entered. “‘Princess’? Who’s the faggot?”

Dan grinned, kicked the door shut behind him. “I already told the CO I wasn’t a fairy with a magic wand.” Putting the litre bottle of bourbon down on the table with a thud. “Funny, he didn’t believe me.”

“Magic wand?” Jean huffed. “You’re not talking about that cock of yours, are you?”

Dan smirked at the comment, while getting a good long eyeful of Jean’s scarcely clad body from behind his shades. Holding a couple of tin mugs in his other hand, he placed them down beside the bottle. “You have to thank the yanks for tonight’s treat,” adding while pushing the shades up onto his forehead, “and my considerable charms.” Grinning toothily.

“Thank God or Allah for the yanks, then, and their black market, corruption and willingness to fall to your many charms.” Jean bowed mockingly. “Procurer of whiskey, charmer of Yanks. Wielder of the magic wand.”

Dan laughed, waved his finger about then poked it into Jean’s chest when the man came back up. “Poof, I’m a fairy.”

Jean smirked. “Nope, didn’t work. No change.”

Opening the bottle, Dan glanced at the Russian Frenchie. “One thing, though, if you don’t want to piss me off then don’t call this shit here whisky. I’m Scottish, this is bourbon, never whisky. Don’t insult my heritage with this firewater.” He grinned, “or I’d have to call you Belgian sprout.”

“Bourbon. No whisky. Cool. I’ll explain the difference between a proper wine and Californian grape juice if I can be arsed.” Jean laughed, shaking his head. “Have a Scotsman explain food to me. Ah, France weeps over fried Mars bars.”

Dan waved at the legionnaire. "See who's talking. Borscht and chow. You're Frenchman by choice but you were still brought up on blinis and vodka." He grinned, leaned over the table and poured the black market booze into the mugs. "How's your lady?" Looking up from under his lashes. "Been thinking about you and her. You said she'd be sorted in a couple weeks, I assume she's been under the knife or is going to? She alright?"

"Just came out of surgery, had her on the phone a couple hours ago. She's doing fine." Jean gave a smile. "The others think it was the appendix. Well, close enough, I thought." He paused for a moment, then inhaled deeply.

"She'll be fine. She's a tough one, deep down. Can't wait to fly back to Paris, though." Pressed his lips together. "Well. Another two months. Gives her time to get used to things."

"Two months can be a fucking long time." Dan handed one of the mugs over, filled to the brim. "Then again, we went many times with up to nine months in between encounters and there wasn't even a way of communication. Let alone knowing if the other was still alive. It worked." He shrugged, then smiled, tapped his mug to Jean's.

Jean grinned, spilled a little whisky, laughed while staring at his left hand. "I'm so surgeon material." Hand shaking just enough to be noticeable.

"I propose a toast, then. To your lady's speedy recovery, to time flying fast, and to miraculously resolved paperwork and that I get to be the Best Man for once in my fucking life."

"That sounds like an excellent plan. Slainte." Jean took a big mouthful of the bourbon, closing his eyes to deal with the onslaught of heat.

Dan took a gulp of the burning stuff, shuddered, and added while grinning, "and before you say anything, I'll attend without a scrap of camo. I promise."

Jean laughed, clinked the mug against Dan's once more. "But fully dressed. Those scars can curdle milk, you know."

"I know." Dan grinned and shrugged, "but I don't give a shit."

Jean briefly lowered the hand with the mug and touched it to Dan's abs, meeting his eyes as he did. "She'd get jealous if she knew you squeezed my balls."

"Aye, but mine was a buddy-squeeze and those don't count. Hers would be a fuck-me one. And hell, I know the difference." Dan looked squarely into the blue eyes, before closing his own and tipping another mouthful back.

Jean answered the glance, then chuckled, turning away to put the mug down. "I guess. Not sure everybody can tell the difference. You see, Mad Dog goes pretty rarely buddy on somebody's balls." He sat down, invited Dan to sit on that crate, while he went onto the bed, pulling his legs up.

Dan made himself comfortable, could do with taking the weight off his knee anyway, cradled the mug in his hand. He grinned, but said nothing. Seemed the legionnaire had him pegged quite well on that one.

"Can't help but wonder. You present an interesting challenge. Keeps that grey mush awake." Jean tapped his temple. "You're cut from some different stuff. You stand out."

"Eh? What's that supposed to mean?" Dan shook his head, chuckling. "I stand out in this fucked up place because I walked around announcing to everyone who didn't want to hear I was gay. That's all. That, and the jobs I did or do, but even those aren't not special. There are folks out there now, twenty years younger than I am, who'd piss themselves with arrogant laughter at the granddad who forces his knackered body to pull stunts they'd do without even losing breath." He shrugged, fished for his fags and offered Jean the packet before taking one for himself.

Jean shook his head. "I wouldn't call myself that, granddad." He gave Dan a long look, almost a warning. "I hated the bitches. Still do. Krasnorada is that, you're not."

Dan shook his head. "Not that kind of granddad, but the one with pipe and slippers." His grin faltered slightly. Fought every time with himself, whenever Vadim was mentioned, no matter when.

Jean pulled a cigarette free, then groaned, lifting his injured arm. "What great timing to start smoking again. Light." He leaned over to hand Dan the cigarette, who took it, placed it between his lips and lit the fag before handing it back while Jean continued. "No, can't put my finger on it. But it's odd I invited you, and even weirder I invited you again. My guts tell me you're fine. Couldn't name five guys my guts have the same opinion about, here in camp."

"Well, mate, can't tell you why you fell haplessly for my charms, but seems you did." Dan grinned light heartedly. Pulled a cigarette out of the packet for himself, lighting it. "I could tell you something you probably wouldn't believe, though." Exhaling smoke while pushing the packet back into his shorts pockets. "I

used to be an anti-social bastard with no friends.” He poured some more of the bourbon down his throat, shuddered when it went all the way down in a fiery trail.

Jean smoked with his left hand, didn’t seem to be able to make his mind up how to hold the cigarette. “And then you went into therapy and had your head screwed on right?”

“Not quite.” Dan shrugged. “More like ‘and then I screwed a Russian who taught me all about human interaction’.” He bared his teeth in a feral grin. “Told you it sounded insane.”

Jean glanced towards the door, as if he could see Krasnorada that way, even if he wasn’t there. “Not *that* Russian.” He blinked, then stubbed the cigarette out. “That guy is as suitable for human interaction as a T-34 for heart surgery.”

Dan shrugged, inhaled the smoke. “You only know his worst side: the bastard. Am not saying he isn’t an unhinged fucktard with a tendency to mass murder, but he’s not all that.” Exhaled, huffed dryly. “Bullshit. That sounds like a shit romance novel wifey’s read. Corrected. He didn’t used to be such an asshole. Don’t know what the fuck happened to him in prison, and don’t actually want to know. Not anymore.” Again that shrug, casual pretence. “All I say is, he saved my life several times over, not just physically, and every time he told me he loved me, I actually fucking believed him. Had no reason not to.” Dan stared at the smoke escaping.

Something lit up in Jean’s eyes at the word ‘prison’, like a piece of the puzzle suddenly completed part of a pattern, and he nodded.

“Ach well, fuck that,” Dan tore himself out of reminiscing. “It’s in the past. Let’s talk about friends and mates and what’s the hell’s the difference.”

The legionnaire smiled. “Friends. Now, that’s different from buddies. In my book, buddies are guys you don’t want to kill and share a cigarette with. Friends...They are like best men and you go wind surfing with them in Australia and don’t talk about ambushes and killing all the time.”

Dan slowly exhaled the smoke, watching it escape towards the window. “I haven’t got any friends in that case. Never had. No time, no opportunities, and no chance to establish anything before they most likely died. Mates, aye, friends, no. Squaddies don’t have the luxury of friends.”

Jean got up, went to the radio and turned the volume up a little. He stood behind Dan, resting a hand on his shoulder, close enough to lean against. “I might teach you wind surfing. Terrific for the abs and shoulders.”

Dan felt the sudden increase of heat in his back, that touch again, casual, but not so casual after all. Something comfortable about it, and this comfort reached somewhere inside that none of the fun and sex with Matt had ever touched. The temptation to just lean back into that body was suddenly overwhelming, but he resisted.

“You’re awfully close.” The cigarette, neglected between his fingers, was burning down to the filter.

“Yeah. Sorry.” Jean didn’t move, hand went to Dan’s neck, awkward touch of a man using the wrong hand. “And there’s paragliding, too. I’ll finish my piloting licence when I go home.”

“Paragliding sounds like fun.” Dan dropped the stub to the floor before the dying glow reached his fingers. He didn’t move away from the touch, even though he figured he probably should. Fuck it, live recklessly. He grinned to himself at that notion. “I always used to prefer running and climbing, but the knees are knackered, had surgery on the right one.” Keeping up the conversation while rolling his neck like a man who tried to get rid of some tension. “Not particularly team spirited sports, though.”

“I knew a guy once who went paragliding with a broken foot. Take off and start were bitches, but they still hauled him up. Did that in Peru and lived to brag about it.” Jean’s palm went into Dan’s right trapezoid muscle, firm pressure, rolling against the muscle to relax it. “I’d think your leg won’t be much of a problem. It’s all about balance, anyway.”

“Aye, balance and landing safely.” Dan rolled his neck again, leaning into the hand for a moment. “Quite fancied those gliders, but have never had time. Work hard—play hard. Yeah, fuck that. Where’s the play?”

“Just don’t expect the play coming and looking for you.” Jean’s fingers relaxed again, splayed on Dan’s shoulder. “Can’t do anything about that neck. Not with a fucked arm.”

“That’s alright.” Dan craned his neck to glance up, grinning crookedly. “I’ll just have a wank later. Usually sends me to sleep.”

Jean paused, met that glance, hand moving up the side of Dan's neck, patting it. "Won't help your neck, either."

"Better than nothing." Dan craned his head to the other side, gave more access to the hand, inviting further patting as he grinned.

Jean let the hand lie there, relaxed, comfortable. "That's what you get from carrying the whole kit plus armour."

"Don't I just know it." Dan sighed, finished the rest of his bourbon. "I've been in this game for, what, about ten years longer than you? You pup." He grinned, gazed into his empty mug, felt the alcohol swirling inside his body like a warm, glowing buzz.

Jean huffed. "Yeah. Always wondered what war in the stone age was like."

Dan rolled his eyes. "You're how old? Thirty?"

"Close."

"You were still in your nappies while I was already holding a rifle." Dan grinned. "Must have carried my own bodyweight hundreds of times over throughout my Army career. Didn't expect I'd be back in the treadmill after the cushy security job... Guess I'm just a war junkie."

"Did you get fired?"

"What, from my Army job? No. I told you, I left because I wanted to get back to Kabul. From the security one? Neither. In fact, I'm still working for her. Kind of." Glancing backwards with a shrug. "I'm not exactly a bog-standard merc."

"Ah, so you're part of a secret government project." Jean's voice was playfully ominous. "As long as you don't have to shoot me now because I know too much..." His hand went between Dan's shoulder blades and his body shifted, until he sat behind the other, legs open, left and right of the crate, chest almost touching Dan's back. The hand went back to resting on one shoulder. "I thought bodyguard was what everybody wants to be."

Dan tensed, the closeness was unexpected, but he felt himself relax against the near-touch fairly quickly. Paused for a moment, before he chuckled quietly. "Seems you're doing the body-guarding right now, mate."

"Thought about it, didn't do it, despite the free sex from bored film stars. All I'm doing here is work on my tan."

Jean couldn't see Dan's grin at the misunderstanding, strangely relieved that the meaning had passed by the other. He shouldn't feel as if the close contact was anything other than some weird-assed buddy-stuff, but the vibes he got off the other? Entirely above and beyond the line of buddy-duty. He really shouldn't get into wishful thinking.

"Your tan and earning shitloads of money to keep your lady happy, eh?" Dan shifted, moved slightly away from the close contact, leaning forward to reach for the bottle of bourbon.

"Doesn't hurt, either."

Dan grinned. No, it didn't, he was filling his own accounts back up after depletion, and cushioning them just nicely. "Want another shot?" He glanced backwards, but kept to the slightly extended distance.

"Yeah, mug's over there. Not that I can reach it from here." Another laugh. "Sure." Dan grabbed the second mug as well, started to fill it. "Or are you already sweating too much like a pig?" He smirked, handing the mug to Jean. "You Slavic lightweights, and you already hardly wear anything at all." Dan winced. Great. You had to point out you had noticed, right? Of course you had. You stupid poof.

"I'm sweating anyway. Dressed, undressed, sober, drunk." Jean let the hand slide down over Dan's back, following the spine. A back that was bone dry despite the t-shirt. The man seemed to be heat-resistant. "Hope you're not offended by my lack of full camo gear plus armour plates and helmet. I dressed down for the occasion. Although my lady loves the camo thing. Boots and camo trousers. That gets her going."

Dan was filling his own mug, spilled a little when the hand was wandering again. "Aye, the uniform kink. I remember that one. Always pulled when I let it be known I was a soldier and Special Forces on top of that. Don't know if the girls believed me, but I never gave a fuck, as long as I got to fuck." He chuckled, took a big swig from his refilled mug, then drew in a deep breath, twisting his neck to turn round and look at the other.

"Dressed down for which occasion?"

Jean was looking at him over the rim of the mug as he drunk, took a thirsty swallow, the kind that got people drunk fast. Made a noncommittal gesture with his hand that said 'You know which occasion'.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” Dan barged straight ahead, figured he wouldn’t earn himself a punch. Hoped so anyway.

Jean put the mug down, crossed his arms in front of his chest, closed his legs enough to support his weight on the crate with his thighs, and let his upper body fall back enough to make all muscles tense in his body, showing off abs and chest, and holding the position like a strange sit-up. “Why? Having any success? Or rather, effect?”

Dan’s brows crept to the hairline, unruly as it was. Studying the body on display with a smirk. “Want me to get my cock out as proof? Or will a snorted ‘Duh!’ do? Yours is a good body. Bound to have an effect, mate.”

Jean smirked, flattered. “Me being your type and all. Don’t forget that.”

Dan put the mug to his lips and drained the entire contents in three, four gulps. Holy shit, that stuff would be killing him, but he needed the boozy crutch.

“You see,” Dan wiped his lips, twisted round further. “There’s a big difference between your lady and me.” He poked his finger hard into Jean’s ropey abs. “She’s a woman. I’m a bloke. She’s got a cunt. I got a cock.” He poked again, grinning, “you are aware of that fundamental difference, aren’t you?”

“Quite frankly, she will have the right set of bits when she gets out of the hospital. And yes, I’ve seen you shower. Several times. You got the complete set, as far as I can tell.” Jean came back up, placed the good hand on the crate to lean forward, even closer into Dan’s space.

“OK...” Dan drew out the vowel, stayed exactly where he was and waited a moment, figuring out what he felt about the even closer proximity. Comfortably boozed up and mellow, check. Even more comfortably aroused and ambivalent if he’d want to bother doing anything about that, check. Bloody comfortable in this almost-touching closeness with the other man? Double check. He grinned. “Right, mate. Since that’s clear I got to ask the question again. You trying to seduce me? Coz if you were, I’d tell you I’d be a fucking idiot if I wasn’t game, but I’m not an idiot. So, there, even though I don’t get it.”

“I was kind of expecting you to do the seducing,” murmured Jean, “but seems you brought the booze, so I have to provide the entertainment.” He took another swallow.

Dan smiled, more to himself than to the other. “I don’t do that sort of shit to a mate. A *straight* mate.” He moved a fraction backwards, to where he had sat

before. Enough to touch the other's chest with his back. Sweaty skin and dry t-shirt. Nice. Would be nicer if that shirt weren't in between.

Jean's good hand came to rest on Dan's thigh, the elbow between them, which prevented more contact, but Jean moved in to bridge some of the remaining gap, making contact with his thighs, groin, up to the navel. "I wasn't that drunk last time."

"What last time? Last time you had a bloke?" Dan smirked, didn't move away from the touches. Really wasn't that stupid. If this was going to be a freebie, he'd take it. For now he remained fairly passive, just sitting in that unexpected embrace.

Jean dug his fingers into Dan's thigh in protest. "Last time we met here, and I said you could stay."

"Ah, that one." Dan grinned. "I chalked it up to delusions. But just so you know," he chuckled low, "I'm OK with being a substitute, already am for someone else. But just so we're clear," he raised one brow in a crooked grin, "and just in case I am reading that peacock-feather preening of yours right, I'm not a charity, legionnaire. I don't dish out charitable acts of human cocksucking kindness without expecting anything in return."

"Ah, but you did say the magic word, just now." Jean grinned, a suggestive, dirty grin. "I'm curious." He moved his lips to Dan's ear. "It doesn't feel too bad touching you, Mad Dog. I get the feeling we can be friends. And what's a little touching between friends, huh?"

Dan shook his head a little, enough to make his hair and skin press against the other's lips in the movement. "It doesn't usually work like this, but if that's what you are—curious—then I'll indulge your curiosity."

"Yeah, indulge me," Jean murmured into Dan's ear again, hardly more than a breath, not moving away from the touch, instead opening his lips slightly.

"You really are a weird guy." Dan chuckled low, lowered his head, just so he could move his neck against the other's face, dark hair tickling.

"Well spotted."

Dan came back up, glanced backwards, the motion making his already stubble-shadowed cheek move along Jean's lips. The tightening of the fingers on Dan's thigh indicated the legionnaire didn't object to the touches or where it was going.

“What do you want, Frenchie? I wasn’t trying to seduce you, but...” Dan laughed, the sudden reference to an old film he remembered from his early Army days too fucking ironic to resist, “do you *want* me to seduce you?”

Jean laughed. “Now, that would be extra special nice. Preferential treatment for mates?” His hand moved up Dan’s thigh, rested where it met the torso, fingers on the inside, thumb on the top.

“Not quite.” Dan shifted on the crate, trapped. “Special treatment, full stop. Have never seduced a bloke.” He twisted once more, but couldn’t get anywhere. “Neither is it going to happen with you while I sit like this.”

Jean grinned, hand moved forward to give Dan’s cock a squeeze.

“Fucking tease.” Dan muttered while Jean stood, moving backwards, turned and went to padlock the door. “No use getting interrupted playing chess.”

Dan was pouring himself another measure of booze, then had a few more mouthfuls. “Good thinking, but if you don’t change that awful radio shit to something more palatable, I’m not sure if I’m going to feel frisky.” He grinned, glancing at Jean who rested his hand against the warm metal of the door for a moment, then shook his head. “Change it. I think I’m getting some British station, too.” Jean checked the lock again, knowing he was drunk enough to make obvious mistakes. “Right, then. Back to the seduction bit.” He turned and came back, standing close, but not making contact.

“I guess that involves the shedding of clothes.” Dan put the mug onto the table, changed the radio station, glad to find BBC World and some decent music. Pulled the t-shirt unceremoniously over his head and dropped it onto the crate. “There’s something about skin, you know.” He trailed down Jean’s sweaty chest, strong and calloused fingers finding their path across smooth, damp planes of muscles. “Something fucking irresistible.”

Jean inhaled, stomach muscles tensing, powerless right hand twitching, and closed his eyes, focusing on the touch, warmth against warmth. Good hand touching Dan’s chest, fingers splayed, then stroked down Dan’s side. He grinned with closed eyes. “Some straight part of me is just freaking about how fucking strong you must be.” Opened his eyes to only catch a glimpse.

Dan chuckled, “That’s exactly what I like. The equality. Can’t break a bloke who’s as strong as yourself.” Leaning forward, Dan replaced his hand with lips and tongue, lapping up sweat, leaving a trail of teeth and tickling stubble, right

to the pec, where he lingered at the nipple. His lips moving over the bud of flesh while murmuring. "So irresistible in fact, I intend to taste all of it."

"That..." Jean bared his teeth in an attempt to hide how much he liked that, tried to stay cool. "...was what I had in mind." His hand came up to touch Dan's head, fingers running through the hair. He smiled. "Never seduced a bloke? Everything I know about gays is just jumping out the window."

"Never needed to." Teeth and tongue working on that nipple, sucking in the flesh in a surprise motion, before returning to more gentle laving. "With a bloke..." moving across the chest to give the other nipple equal attention. Jean might not be like Vadim, might be less sensitive, but Dan didn't give a shit. Enjoyed himself too much.

"...guess it's 'hey, mate'..." Dan's hand slipped into the waistband of Jean's shorts, squeezing the muscled arse, which made Jean tense on instinct, drawing a deep breath. "...and then wanking, sucking or fucking without further ado."

"Not wasting any time..." Jean opened his eyes again, swallowed hard. "Less complicated, huh?"

"Much less complicated..." Dan was working his way up to the throat and neck, leaving lapping, biting, friction and damp smoothness in its wake, taking his time. This was a proper seduction, after all. "I remember shagging girls..." pouring attention onto the neck and the line right underneath the jaw, making Jean shiver and lean in, baring his throat. Offering his neck, pulse hammering under the skin. "...tended to be a pain to get..." Dan bit with just the perfect mix of pain and pleasure into the neck muscle, close to the ear, getting Jean to tense and groan "...what I wanted."

Blinking, a touch dizzy from the sensations, Jean stared at Dan's chest, not only the absence of breasts, but the strength of it, hesitating. "Not a charity. Yes, remember. Got you." He ran the fingers of his good hand across the beginning of scars over the belt buckle, around the curve of waist, to the small of Dan's back. Closed his eyes again as his hand moved to Dan's ass, contour of it under the fabric.

Dan stepped closer, pressing his groin into the other man's. Unmistakable hardness, as if he wanted to make a statement. He was a man, would remain a man, fucking loved being a man, and he left no doubt about it.

Jean pressed in as well, hardness against hardness, didn't quite know what to do, cursing his fucked arm under his breath. Seemed he was lost without a routine, torn between letting things happen and regaining the initiative. "Not sure I can give head or anything," Jean murmured. "But I won't leave you hanging." He laughed. "Or standing."

"Didn't expect you to." Dan pushed Jean's shorts down, grinning at the erection that sprang into his hand. "Will be happy with a hand-job." A twist of his hips and a harder grinding of his own cock into the other's.

"Ah...I...I can do that." Jean's eyes were firmly closed. Keeping the light out, a way to concentrate on what he was feeling and less concerned with the gender. "Fuck. You are fucking strong." He ran his hand to Dan's neck, pressed him closer, wanted to touch more but didn't have the hands to do it.

"Figured...fair's fair...But I don't...have to."

"Remember, it's I who is the cocksucker." Dan lifted his head from Jean's neck, winked, before starting to go to his knees. He pulled the shorts down, far enough to give access and push the other's legs apart.

Jean blinked, eyes followed Dan, his body tensing in anticipation, want, need. Looked like he didn't quite understand what was going on, a strange sense of whatthefuck, which still didn't change anything about the desire. "You're really...?" Going to do this, was what he wanted to say, but it was only a strangled moan that came out. "Fucking...hell..."

"Yeah..." Dan drew out the sound. Looking up, he grinned. On his knees and not giving a shit about it. The epitome of self assurance.

Using his tongue to tease and taunt, eliciting responses with teeth and lips, sucking hard all of a sudden before letting go, just tasting precum with the tip of his tongue. "Nice cock. Uncut, makes a change." Dan chuckled, using the vibrations of his subdued laughter as yet another stimulation. Nice cock, indeed, and bigger than any of the ones 'involved' with him. He got into his task, using every skill and want and the overpowering greed for a cock and its taste. Drawing lust from the other man's body with hands, fingers that pressed hard against the dam, lips, teeth, tongue, suction, and the sheer strength of a fucking powerful body.

Jean kept his eyes closed, breathing ragged, had placed his hand on Dan's shoulder, just to steady himself against the whirl of feelings, sensations, the greed, thirst, hunger, enthusiasm for cock. The pressure between his legs, behind the balls

went deep. A pressure that was altogether good in a strange way, deeper inside his body than where he usually felt lust, and he was helpless. Never knew what to expect, just reacted to what Dan gave him, a hot, wet mouth, lips that had strength, could feel the raw strength of Dan's neck as he moved, and shuddered, tensed, relaxed, tensed harder, getting closer, not random, just as the other let him. "Need to...don't want...to get loud..." Breathing, just barely, at another excruciating twist of lust. If that went on, he'd seriously be loud. Didn't want it to stop, fuck no, but this was a bad place to shout any stupid nonsense while cumming.

Dan's head moved back, glanced up, his face looked fucked and fucking, he grinned, pointing to the bed. "Over there." Not a request, but an order. Time too fucking precious to elaborate on bedside manners.

Jean nodded, dazed, any order would make sense now, dumb with need. Staggered to the bed, managed to sit down, not fall.

Dan didn't bother to get up, just shuffled the yard over on his knees. Pushing Jean's legs further apart, he moved between them, then gave the other's chest a non too gentle shove backwards. "Get a fucking pillow into your mouth, or bite your fist." His grin had turned feral, before he got back to his task.

Jean reached blindly around for a pillow, smelling of sweat and stale need, shoved it down, fucking ridiculous, but the walls...reputation, and the need to cum. And no sooner than done, Dan made it unbearable, dealing with his cock with the utmost enthusiasm and a brutally raw but mind-shattering skill for cocksucking.

Pushing himself further down, ignoring the instinct to choke, Dan moved his hands, until his finger was well coated with spit and precum. He could feel the other man getting close, able to read the body as much as he could read any man's, similar to his own. Hand moving backwards, behind the dam, he found the tight muscle and the moment he sucked down particularly viciously, he pushed that slick finger deep into the legionnaire's arse.

Jean came, surprised, shocked, but yes, fucking yes, good he had that pillow in his mouth. That sound didn't become a shout, and only just, came, body helplessly tensing and twitching, a thing in his body, fucking good, unbearably good. Got an inkling, a taste, of why Solange went berserk in bed when he did that. It really felt like nothing else.

Spent, he pulled the pillow from his face, swallowed, dryly, sweat running over his body, tickling him. Didn't want to think, or speak, just glad now, sated,

tired, relaxed, so many good things. Opened an eye to look at Dan. Felt lazy now, heavy and too warm but good.

Dan's hands moved carefully, one thing to push a finger into a bloke when he's about to come, another to slide out afterwards, when he's overly sensitive. He grinned, wiped his lips. "Told you I was a cocksucking bastard." Fuck, he loved that taste, so it wasn't Vadim's cum? Well, neither was it Matt's. Who gave a fuck, he just loved cocks.

Jean nodded, dazed mind realized Dan had swallowed, and he groaned. "You stupid fuck, good I'm clean, huh?" Grinned, mocking his own words. "Chances you are such a stupid fuck to fuck your lady while fucking fucked with disease? Fucking zilch."

"I guess...my turn. Come here."

Dan grinned, stood up. Damn, he needed to come. Opened his cut-off BDUs, dropped them to the floor, not bothering to step out of them, just threw himself onto the bed beside Jean. His own cock in a state of urgent demand, his body was at last covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Glancing pointedly at Jean's left hand. "How the fuck are you going to manage?"

"Yeah. Uhm. Shit." Still trying, Jean wrapped his hand around Dan's cock, twisting his arm a bit, manoeuvred himself onto his side with his legs. Stroking the other, familiar, unfamiliar, strange, but promised, and clearly needed. Not quite strong and precise enough, too awkward.

Dan leant against the wall, limbs splayed on the bed, knees open, watching Jean, his own cock, the hand, and groaning with that goddamned need that was trying to reach relief but just couldn't.

Jean murmured. "Okay...not exactly something...I was trained to do. Right?" Hot, silky flesh, heavy and powerful.

"It's alright..." Dan groaned, closed his eyes, but it wasn't, couldn't be. Not enough friction. "You should have...experienced my first blow job. Fuck, was I crap." He managed to grin, then took hold of the other's wrist while shaking his head. "It's OK. I do it. You watch and learn till your bandage is off." He got a guilty glance from Jean, who clearly hated not being able to live up to promises, but let his hand being moved away. Dan started to stroke himself, slow at first, but with a visible strength and a hint of viciousness. Jean watched, not repulsed, not at all, eyes slightly widened at the picture, something he'd find hard to forget. Raised

his hand as if wondering where and how to touch Dan, or whether he shouldn't distract.

Staring at Jean's face, Dan's head moved forward, then suddenly stopped. Fuck. The urge was there. All that Yank kid's fault, but he couldn't just..."Mind if I kiss you?" Never stopping to stroke his own cock.

Jean stared at him, then his lips cracked into a grin. "Do you think it would hurt much?"

"Only if I haven't shaved for a day." Dan grinned, but hell, he was getting rather desperate. His hand came up to the back of Jean's neck, just rested, didn't use any pressure. He closed his eyes for a moment when his cock twitched, precum glistening on the tip, and he swiftly slicked up his hand.

Jean moved forward, pulled his legs closer to stay balanced, and kissed Dan, eyes closed, lips open, with the feeling at least he could do that much. Tasting smoke and bourbon and lust as he pushed deeper, tongue fucking the other's mouth, much like he would kiss his girl. Breaking away only for a heartbeat to whisper: "Like that?"

"Holy fuck!" Dan gasped out, eyes open. Lust rising, drawing in and concentrating before it flared up and erupted. That man knew what he was doing with tongue and lips. Bloody good kisser. He should shag a straight guy more often.

Jean grinned. "Shhh. You don't want to eat pillow."

"A touch...would be good...too..." Fuck, Dan was getting breathless and concentration was difficult.

Jean's hand moved to Dan's balls, took them and squeezed them, while his tongue returned to Dan's mouth. Kisses and touch fierce, with no reservation, no shyness.

Dan's response to the fierce kisses was violent. Stroking himself fast, reckless, bordering on pain, it only took one harder grip on his balls to topple him over. His groan swallowed by Jean's mouth, as he came onto his own chest, cum running down his hand. His body shook almost uncontrollably with lust, tension, release and aftershocks.

Jean licked his lips, pulling back, then grinned and dipped in again to kiss Dan's neck, the line of the collar bone, lips gathering some of the sweat. His hand idly stroking up Dan's hand, arm, shoulder, and back. "I'd love to share a woman

with you,” he murmured. “Feel you move in somebody? That must be goddamned sexy.”

Dan hadn’t quite got his breath back, closed his eyes and dropping his head to the side to lazily give the other man even better access to his neck. The sound that came out of his chest was nearly a purr.

“Mmmmm...not sure if I could get it up with a woman these days.” Dan sighed contentedly at the touches of hand and lips. “Been a while.” Refused to remember. One and a half years ago. Not a woman, that one, but a snake eater.

“Just a thought. The legion has their own whores, did you know that? They have to speak French. Some of them can take two men, same time, some do.” Jean reached for the towel that had been cooling his neck and still kept a little moisture, and dropped it in Dan’s lap, while kissing his throat and chest. Reaching blindly for the towel, Dan wiped haphazardly at himself and Jean, the kissing was far too good to bother with cleaning off his sticky cum. He grinned, felt sweaty, finally hot, and incredibly relaxed. Jean was different to Matt, and both of them managed to make him feel bloody damn good. Just what he needed.

“Oy, legionnaire,” Dan chuckled, towel in his lap, “you’re awfully good at this shit for a strictly straight guy.”

“What, kissing? Tell you what, women have necks and shoulders and lips, too.” Jean grinned and leaned against the wall, arm brushing Dan’s, the white bandage almost glowing in the half-light. “Or good at being a sexy bastard that has fags fall for him left right and centre?”

“Careful, fucktard, you’re getting too cocky.” Dan’s eyes opened as he laughed, craning his neck to look at the other. “So, how many fags do you have in your harem? Can only see one at the moment.”

Jean’s face darkened, but then grinned again. “I had a couple come-ons. Some of them fashion people.”

Dan made a sound of disgust. “Not my cuppa those folks. Weirdoes. But to each their own, I guess, bet they’d think *we* are fucking bonkers.” He dropped the towel onto the floor before sprawling out on the bed even more. So relaxed, he felt mellower than he had for a long time. Even with Matt he could never quite let himself go completely, the kid was just too young. Jean offered his thigh as a pillow, moved to get more comfortable and rested a hand on Dan’s chest.

“Besides, the ‘fall for’ thing is relative.” Dan let himself slide down more until he lay on the bed, head on Jean’s thigh. As lazy as hell and as comfortable as heaven. “Afraid I won’t go and write love poems to you now.” He chuckled.

“Only because you can’t rhyme.” Jean grinned down. “Ah, bullshit. It’s not that kind of thing. No strings, no rings, as they say.”

“Sure as fuck not.” Dan laughed, blinked upwards, looking at the other upside down. “You got the love sorted anyway. Good for you.” His smile was nothing but genuine.

Jean chuckled. “Yeah, good for me. A wife, and we’ll buy a house in the countryside, somewhere close to an airport. Plan to sort that stuff out when I go on R&R next. And in the meantime...” Jean’s hand moved to touch Dan’s lips. “This kind of thing. Just good. And free.”

Dan closed his eyes, enjoying the easy touch. “Seems I’m a lucky bastard right now. Got myself a multi-national harem.” He smirked idly.

“You fuck Americans? Unless you were talking Jews, because of the ‘cut’ part.” Jean leaned back again, reached around for a bottle of water. Got back up again, unscrewed the bottle and took a big mouthful, then offered the warm water to Dan, who took the bottle.

Lifting up by tensing his abs muscles, Dan grinned. “I trust you, Jean. I get that gut feeling, too.” He gulped down several mouthfuls of the tepid water before handing it back, then letting himself relax once more on Jean’s thigh. “That’s why I’m telling you.” He closed his eyes.

“Clever. That way you keep out of the rumour mill. Stays out of camp, difficult to trace. And seriously, which guy can resist getting sucked off?” Jean again touched Dan’s lips, a speculative grin on his face.

Dan’s brows raised without opening his eyes. “None.” He liked cocksucking too much to argue. “But that’s not the point.” His tongue snaked out to play idly with the fingers on his lips.

“Not? So, are you or are you not?”

“Am I or am I not, what? A cocksucking slut?” The word made him grin. ‘Slut’, hilarious, really. He’d had one single man until four months ago. Pathetic, rather, than slutty.

“No. Fucking Americans.”

“It’s a Yank, aye. Been seeing the kid regularly for four months.” Dan opened his eyes, a mixture of grin and smile on his face. Quite obviously rather fond of the person in question. “Jarhead, beefcake, buff’n beautiful, the typical All American Sports type.” Grinning before he leisurely let his tongue run over the fingers once more.

Jean grinned and ran the thumb over Dan’s lips before placing the hand on the jaw. “You don’t have to sell him to me,” he chuckled. “But if he rocks your boat, cool. So, blue balls syndrome and wanting to get sucked like from a pro?”

“Cheers, mate, you don’t seem to have much faith in my charms. Bastard. There’s more to me than giving head.” Dan grinned. “He’s gay, just like me. He’s twenty-nothing. Loves his job, just tough luck he’s a fag with a boyfriend back home, who’s not happy about him being in the US Military. You do know what it means to be found out being gay if you’re an American soldier?” Looking up at Jean.

“Yeah. You go to hell when you die, because God hates fags. Discharge too. Or do they go to prison for it?”

Dan shrugged, “Not sure. Never had to give a shit about all of that, but the kid’s cool, nice guy, idolises ‘Mad Dog’ a bit, which makes me laugh.” He shook his head before stretching out. Far too comfortable right now, and fuck, was it good. “Thing is, I’m bloody protective. Kid was desperate, approached me, and yeah, been meeting up since then. Anyone finding out he’s getting it off with the fucked-up merc, I’d have to kill them. Kid deserves better than a dishonourable discharge.”

“My lips are sealed.” Jean grinned. “Twenty? Pretty close to cradle-robbing, only that the cradle jumped at you. Never mind. Solange is twenty-three. Looks like...seventeen, eighteen, depending on makeup.”

Dan laughed, “cradle-snatching, yeah, right. At least my ‘kid’ is a buff piece of meat.” He peered up, “hope your Solange is healed soon. Must be a fucking incredible lot of pain to deal with. I remember my shredded guts...No, cheers mate, not going to have something cut off, then cut deep, then twisting, shaping, forming and turning into something else.”

Jean grew serious and a little pale. “Yeah. But she wants it. She wants it so bad. Crying all the time, that...I mean, if somebody’s in so much pain about it, you can’t really just watch. Well, and the only way we can get married and so on. I

don't really want to think about it, what they do. The surgeon explained, but it was too technical for me to understand, thank God."

Dan smiled, then yawned. "She seems bloody courageous and tough to me. Looking forward to meet her at your wedding."

"Next year, end of April. Chestnut bloom in Paris. Honeymoon is to Reunion, that's near Madagascar. Surfing, snorkelling, swimming, big huge ass cocktails and fish grilled right on the beach all day. Oh fuck, yeah."

Jean leaned back, grinning, one shoulder against the wall. "Wonder if I should kick you out or keep you here for the night. We could just have fallen asleep."

"Nah," Dan yawned again, stretching down to the toes, "I'll be off. I don't sleep with anyone. Prefer to be on my own."

"Fair enough." Jean grinned. "This is not exactly a king size bed." He ran his hand through Dan's hair. "Pretty nice, by the way. We could play chess again. Some kind of team building. Get the team leaders to know each other better, eh?"

"Nice." Dan gave a toothy grin. "What, the hair?" Deliberately misunderstood.

Sitting up he stretched his upper body before fishing for the shorts that had ended up somewhere between ankles and bed. The flip flops couldn't be too far away either. "Good thing I always look dishevelled, aye? Wouldn't do to have a teamleader crawl out of another teamleader's den at night, looking fucked and smelling of sex."

"I doubt there are enough people around to smell anything. Could have watched porn and wanked. Not that this wasn't nicer."

Dan was laughing as he got off the bed, looking for his t-shirt to put it back on. "Aye, it was good." Found it, slipped into the shirt, stood for a moment before stepping back to the bed and leaning down. "I'll see you again after work, legionnaire. I feel like a game of chess tomorrow, but without booze, got to be on duty."

"I'm off for a week, at least. No strain on the arm. And nowhere else to go, really, apart from, of course, desert-watching." Jean grinned. "No booze? Fuck, and I was starting to think the plying with booze part was a good start."

Dan was still close, then reached out to grab Jean's neck and planted a swift surprise-attack with tongue and teeth onto the other's lips. Sweeping deeply into

Jean's mouth before pulling back up, Jean opened up on instinct, hand reaching for Dan's shoulder.

"And the best thing?" Dan's voice was low, husky and amused, "no one's going to fucking believe any of this. Safe in plain sight."

"Making out with a straight guy has advantages, huh?"

"Guess it does." Dan grinned and stood back, walking towards the door and snatching the bottle of bourbon on the way.

"Sweet dreams, mate." Undoing the padlock, Dan slipped out of the door, whistling as he went back to his own tin oven he called his room. Life had become remarkable easy-going lately. Except for...

* * *

Oh, he had a bad feeling about this. The change was subtle, but Vadim could see the change in Dan. Mad Dog Dan was having a brilliant time and the main reason was the fact he spent more time with Jean's crew than with his own. Playing pool, doing the usual shit-grinned gropes and touches, the banter. One big, happy family, the legionnaire held court, or whatever, and Dan was the guest of honour.

The others might buy the thing. Jean was over the top, clearly, slightly overplayed it as if to drive the point home they had suddenly just realized they were really alike. Jokes about French-British friendship, which sounded just as phoney as the Soviet-Afghan one had ever been.

Dan was too comfortable touching the other man. It might be just a pat on the back to announce it was him at breakfast. The way Jean called him, fucking 'stud', and everybody found that hilarious. The thought of Jean doing something with avowedly gay Mad Dog was pure comedy. Only Vadim had felt him come, tasted him. Had seen how Jean had closed his eyes and thought of something else, and wondered whether Jean had grown a taste for that. Vadim watched that for a day. The next day, at breakfast, he clearly saw Jean place his hand on Dan's shoulder, lean in and say something with a broad, shit-eating grin that was about a private joke they shared. Dan laughed, took Jean's neck and pressed the face into his shoulder, rubbing the head none-too-tender.

The sound made conversation stop, and some people looked at him. Vadim opened his hand, wiped the splinters of glass off, two minor cuts. He hadn't held the glass anywhere near the bottom or his hand would look much worse. The orange juice pooled on his tray, red mixed into it. Piss and blood. Vadim stood to bring the tray away, watched by more eyes than he wanted. Rolled through the mess like a tank, the injured hand formed a fist to keep the blood in, and his eyes promised murder, but he didn't look at anybody. Oh no. That meant warning them.

The medic cleaned out the cuts, checked the sinews, told Vadim the callous had taken the worst, and Vadim nodded. He could have done that by himself. Had the wound disinfected and plastered, with a bandage for dust protection, some of the shit in the dust was just asking for access to a fresh wound. Had his jabs renewed, and deemed fit for service.

Sought. Knew it was difficult to catch the man alone these days. Patience. Had an idea where Jean might be seeking privacy, headed over to the phones. Jean was just hanging the receiver up, turned and stared at him. "You finished? Or just started?"

Jean shrugged. "Finished."

"Didn't look like it."

"Looked wrong, then."

Vadim stepped into his way. "I know what's going on," he snarled.

"Do you? No longer fucking clueless, then? Good. Suits you."

"Funny you'd say 'fucking'."

Jean huffed. "Funny you'd say 'funny'. Listen, terminator, I don't buy your shit, and you get out of my way now, because Spetsnaz or not, I am your teamleader, and I can have you RTUed faster than you can slaughter a nest of baby birds. You fucking freak."

"Only there is no unit you can return me to."

"Cry me a river. That's hardly my fault." Jean kept staring at him.

"Anything else, Krasnorada?"

"Dan..."

"Teamleader McFadyen...?"

Vadim glanced around, saw that one guy from Dan's team just moved within earshot. The camp would be yakking about stuff unless he cut it right now.

"Playing chess, huh?"

Jean grinned. “You bet. Off with you, Krasnorada. There’s some desert out there you can liberate.”

1991 Chapter XXV—Friendly Fire

July/August 1991, the Persian Gulf

Completely unaware of the stand-off between his new-found more-than mate and Vadim, Dan had refused to take notice of the accident at breakfast. Doing all he could to ignore the Russian—and failing miserably at night. When the world quietened and the adrenaline died down, the images were coming back.

Memories, touches, and most of all the promises.

The desert at night, in a tin room full of shadows, held eleven years inside, like Pandora's box.

After a fairly uneventful day at work, Dan returned bang on time with a couple minutes to spare. Doing the usual routine of signing the weapons back into the store, airing his body armour and dealing with the laundry of his sweatdrenched kit, he finally relished the best moment of the day: washing the sticky cover of sweat, red sand and dust off his skin.

After his hot shower, he went to get some scrum, famished as ever. Sitting first with his team mates, chatting about the events of the day and planning the route for the following day, until it was time to get a second or third helping of sticky toffee pudding. Taking a seat amongst Jean's team after that, laughing and joking while wolfing down his dessert. Glancing at Jean with a grin, Dan made a rude gesture and an entirely inappropriate comment that let the guys break out into roaring laughter. Sure, Mad Dog, the self-professed fag, and Jean, the uber-stud. Made everyone piss themselves.

Half an hour later, while dusk was settling, Dan was talking to Jean as both of them carried a two litre water bottle, while smoking a companionable cigarette on their way towards Jean's hut.

Jean paused, seemingly thoughtfully twisting the cigarette in his hand, glancing at the glowing point, half-turning, a movement that allowed him to have a quick overview of who was close, with one face, one presence especially unwelcome, but Krasnorada was nowhere to be seen. He nodded for Dan to get in, flicked the cigarette away, followed into his microwave oven and padlocked the door. Pulling his shirt off right at the door, he looked at Dan with half-closed eyes. "I think the pieces are all set." Idly adjusting himself in the camo trousers, grinning, left hand against his groin, pressing in a little, glancing at Dan with a friendly

challenge. "I could use a cocksucker," he murmured. "Or just a hand. Flexible here..."

"Funny you should say that," Dan grinned, "I was thinking to myself today," taking his own shirt off and tossing it onto the bed, "while securing that particularly deserted piece of land," popping the button of his shorts and pulling the zipper down, "and guarding this particularly annoying piece of Big Wig shit," dropping the shorts, he stepped out of them, kicking them towards the bed as well, "that I could do with a body."

He suddenly pushed hard against Jean's chest, making him stumble backwards and against the wall. Grinning all the way, especially when he ground his naked body into the other's.

Jean groaned, full-on-contact, part wrestling, not that he wanted to fight, really, a vague, but nagging lust turning into heated desire at the touch, the grinding. He pushed against Dan's groin, felt the heat against himself, fumbled with the belt and buttons to get the trousers down, growing breathless. Would be fast, a quick release, fine with him. Touching and kissing and lying there resting, later. "Any body?" He teased, kissing Dan's neck. "Of course...as long as he's strong, and willing..." he murmured into Dan's ear. "And has a big cock you can suck...you're game..." Toneless laughter.

"Sure, any body." Dan smirked, moved his head, away from the lips on his neck and towards the other's face. "And that would be almost everybody since no one can resist my charm." Biting along the jaw line while pushing Jean's trousers down. Cock against cock now, heat and desire that had been simmering all day.

Dan's right hand got hold of both their cocks, trapped between their bodies, starting to stroke, push and grind.

Jean suppressed a curse, not quite what he had expected, but he'd be damned if he didn't roll with it. Feeling the other's cock so close. Nothing like Krasnorada. Krasnorada had loved the fear. Dan loved the lust. Fuck it. Nothing like the Russian granddaddy. Lips opened, he was starting to pant, push forward, hard enough to force Dan to use more strength, which, in turn, made Jean even hornier.

"If I didn't know you're such an arrogant twat," Dan's voice was husky and breathless, lips working their way towards Jean's mouth, "I'd tell you, you have a fucking great cock to suck." Delving in for the kiss, harsh and demanding.

Jean groaned into the kiss, liked the compliment, loved the kissing. Hand on Dan's shoulder, digging into the muscle. Tongue wrestling his, no fight, not at all, a weird sense of rhythm and harmony, like the other read his body much too clearly.

Then, suddenly, something banged hard against the door, just a yard away from where they were standing. "Jean? Got a minute?" The door rattled. "Hey, you in?"

Dan almost jumped out of his skin, first reaction to delve for cover at the attack and aim his weapon, when his violent jerk head-butted Jean's chin. Jean glared at him and touched his chin, grinning, face gleaming with a sheen of sweat. "Pascal," he mouthed.

"Fuck!" Dan muttered, still standing close, reluctant to step away from the heat of their cocks. Could feel an insane bubble of hilarity welling up inside him, despite his heart racing in the sudden adrenaline rush.

"What's up?" Jean bit his fist to stop himself from laughing, face twitching, eyes brimming with humour at the fucking stupid situation.

"You got time?"

"Bad timing, Pascal. I'm...busy right now."

"C'mon, man."

"Sorry, mate, just fucking a tied-up Mad Dog on my bed. Not sure you'd appreciate the sight. It's a bit of a massacre." Jean fought full-out laughter while speaking. Grinning like a devil as he took Dan's hand and made him stroke him again. "Yeah, baby, just like...that."

Dan immediately started to stroke, adding the grinding of his body into the mix. Harder than before, while biting into Jean's shoulder muscle to stop himself from laughing.

Stunned silence. Then: "You're hitting the fucking bong again."

That was too much, too fucking hilarious and Dan lifted his head, shouting: "Sure thing, mate, coz Jean got it all wrong. Must be fucking delusional, that teamleader of yours, seems to be mistaking his own arse being pounded with mine." Dan delivered a particularly vicious stroke, that made his own cock twitch and his body shudder, adding an unmistakable huskiness to his voice. "Yeah, bitch, you're as tight as a fucking fist."

Jean almost came with that, giving a groan that shouldn't have come out, not like that, lust, desire, needs. Just barely managed to laugh at Dan's game of dare, eyes closed, panting against Dan's shoulder. "Finish me off," he breathed, in Russian, probably so Pascal had no chance to get what he was saying, but Jean was too fucking close, needed to come, whatever the situation. Teeth locked in Dan's shoulder, body tensing up with the onslaught as Dan obliged, thank god, and Jean gave another groan.

Dan shuddered, different, memories. Suffocating. Burning. Language and man and shadows of blond hair and angular planes of muscles and jaw and cock and...stroking furiously with a renewed viciousness. Needed to come as well, to eradicate the image of another man.

"Yeah right, you bastards are taking the piss," grunted Pascal. "Got it. Have the shit for yourselves."

Dan knew he shouldn't shout, too breathless, but the weed was a brilliant excuse. "You can always join us for a threesome, I'd be willing to pop the cherry of your virginal arse." Dan laughed, but only for a brief moment, had to bite hard into Jean's shoulder to stop himself from groaning. Forgetting about the marks he left, his own mauled in return, stroking so hard and brutal it bordered on pain. He came hardly a second later, right after the legionnaire, convulsing and grinding into Jean. Whimpering against the sweaty skin, biting hard into muscles to stop himself from making too much noise.

"Uhm. See you guys later, then." Pascal sounded flustered, probably at the laughter and the shared joke he wasn't privy to. Rapped against the door as a goodbye.

Jean laughed, breathless, helpless, just didn't seem able to stop, even though his knees were weak and he seemed eager to collapse on the floor or bed or anywhere. "Fucking brilliant voice-acting," he laughed, giddy from climax and the fucking risk. Hand running through Dan's hair, taking a handful to force his head into a kiss. "Reckless fucking sexy bastard..."

"And you're a kinky motherfucker." Dan grinned, let himself be drawn into the kiss, bodies still grinding against each other. Contact too good to leave yet. He liked kissing that guy, Jean was good, different to Matt, even though he liked kissing the kid. Jean was somewhat distinguished, somehow deeper, intense.

Entirely unlike to the only other man he'd ever kissed, whose kisses had reached into the depth of his soul and had...

No. Dan broke the kiss, breathlessly chuckling, covering up his thoughts with a smirk. "Want to get stuck to me?"

Jean glanced down between them and gave another laugh. "No fun in that...but I guess we could make the most of it." He broke the contact to reach for his discarded t-shirt and wiped himself down first, then handed the shirt to Dan. "And whatever Pascal says, I'm not smoking pot in camp. Not on duty."

"I didn't expect you to. You're not an idiot." Drugs meant getting chucked out, no matter what; while alcohol on duty warranted a severe warning. Dan took the shirt, eyed it for a moment before wiping himself down, then handing it back. "Make sure no one sees your laundry. Interesting white stains." He grinned, not that it mattered. They'd all wanked into an item of clothing, after all.

Jean picked up the bottle he had set down and drank, deeply. "The medics say I will probably be all set next week. Swelling goes down nicely, and the joint seems to be alright. With a little luck, I'll be on your flank in a week."

"That would be good." Dan waited for Jean to finish drinking before taking the plastic bottle and chugging the water down his neck. "Let's sit down for a while before I need to grab some shut-eye. I demand some of your after-sex speciality." He pulled away from the other and sat down on the bed, inviting.

Jean grinned. "And that would be...?" He sat down while Dan merely grinned from ear to ear. Jean was leaning against the wall, adjusted the sling, then raised his hands. "Docking permit granted, Sir. Welcome aboard." Laughing again. "I would have loved to see Pascal's face. Holy shit."

Dan let himself fall back across Jean's thighs. He rather liked the 'grooming', that human touch he had missed for two and a half years. The Yank kid was great, but was a kid after all, and the depths of non-verbal communication just didn't exist with him. Dan settled in, grinning upwards. "He'd have upchucked his supper, but who knows, he might have joined."

"I doubt there's enough space for three in your hand..." Jean idly traced the hairline with his fingers, then ran them into the dark hair, smirking. "I thought chess was a game for two players, but then, there's still poker."

"Never played that kind of 'poker'." Dan closed his eyes, grinned lazily, "sounds interesting, though."

Jean went down the temple to the jawline, touch almost minimal, just the fingertips, it was still too warm. “And he’s too much part of the rumour mill. No. Good long legs though. He did a lot of marching and running.”

Dan chuckled, “I’m not fucking stupid. The less anyone knows the better—in this case.” He let his arm dangle off the bed, revelling in touch, heat, satiation. “I meant to ask you something. How in god’s name did you get into the legion? What shit happened back in Afghanistan?”

“I was unlucky enough to turn eighteen in the Soviet Union. Got drafted, of course. A couple months later I was sitting in a mountain fortress, scared shitless and homesick. Didn’t help I caught typhoid fever...polluted water, and logistics were appalling. I mean, you get used to being hungry, right? You steal and barter enough to stay alive, share stuff with comrades...of course, all illegal. You were not supposed to do that, but the fucking system fucked us up the ass, every fucking day.”

Jean inhaled while Dan listened attentively, with closed eyes. Didn’t he just know it. He remembered supplies he had brought back for an enemy, to keep that man alive.

“War at a discount. Save money. No idea. I only know there was hardly a day I had enough food to not be fucking hungry. They say it was the same in all the barracks, the Soviet Army likes to keep her bitches lean, but we were combat troops.” Jean’s hand rested against Dan’s cheek. “That’s what I remember of Afghanistan. Being hot. Being cold, being hungry, and finally, being sick.” He paused, as if waiting for Dan to tell him to stop.

But Dan didn’t. Not a word, just opened his eyes at Jean’s pause and nodded. “The medic in our unit. The only man I ever respected in that army. He’d get his steel helmet, get kitted like the others, like the fucking special forces, and raid the trucks with them, for medical supplies, never for anything else. Most of the booty vanished in the deep dark pockets of the officers and the specwar types, especially bandages, syringes, and morphine. Sure, they could use it, too, but they also traded it. So, the medic goes out with them, carries his own shit, laden like one of those fucking bend-legged donkey, takes off the helmet, washes his faces and hands, gets the clean and new gloves, and while everybody else is still squirreling away the booty, he starts operating.”

Dan frowned, dark brows steep over equally dark eyes. He had suspected, never known, and sure as shit never asked. He was still silent when Jean shifted to reach for a packet of cigarettes, pulled one out with his teeth, let it hang between his lips. “Anyway. I caught the fever. No drugs to treat the shit. I got isolated, and that was it. I got the feeling they were just waiting for me to die. Medic could do nothing. Officer didn’t care. That bitch almost killed me, so I decide to leave. And I did. I don’t remember much of that. By all rights, I should have died. I ended up with some villagers that thought higher of hospitality than revenge. There were Europeans, too. Could have been CIA, or reporters, or anybody, really. Those had drugs, which kept me going until I could cross the border to Pakistan. I recovered in a small hospital near Peshawar. But before they could put me on a plane to Moscow, I could walk again, and I was on my way. Went West, did some crazy shit.” He laughed and Dan grinned, murmuring, “I bet.”

“Ended up in East Africa, working any way that would fill my stomach. Happened to stumble across a recruitment office. I needed a new life, a new name, and the Legion offered that, so I thought fuck it, can’t be worse than the Soviet Army. Signed up for my five years, got shipped to Castelnaudry in France, learnt French, and did the whole tour.”

Dan nodded again, “I did the whole Afghan war, but on the other side.” He shrugged, fished for a cigarette for himself. “Did your five years, or more?”

“Almost nine. Got shot after the first two years, could apply for citizenship one year earlier than anybody else, sure as fuck I did. I learnt a lot of useful things, and I liked being a hard bastard. Still like it.” Jean grinned darkly. “But I heard how much private security people make. So I left, could have had a nice pension after fifteen years, but I did the numbers and figured I’d try being on my own. Met Solange right after leaving and was just having a one-man-and-lots-of-women-party in Paris. Thought I could do better with my languages and experience, and figured being a merc was more interesting than the good old ‘march or die’.”

Dan lit his fag, inhaling deeply. “Seems you fell on your feet in the end. Good for you, mate. Thousands didn’t make it.”

“Mainly the officer’s fault. I watched it, on CNN. The bandits getting better, the speeches of the general secretaries getting grander, the fucked idea to launch an offensive in the Panjir. But the worst thing were the granddaddies. Bitches like Krasnorada. Officers could do whatever they liked. I’ve seen men being beaten to

death for stealing food. I don't believe the numbers. Any numbers. No cause of death. I stopped being Russian in Afghanistan. Calling me Russian was a good reason for me to kick somebody's teeth in. I'm French. France has treated me like a human being. Not always, but most of the time."

Dan said nothing, smoking quietly and staring at the ceiling of the tin hut, past the other's face. Eyes not seeing anything other than too much of the past. "Aye, they were gods. At least they thought so." Inhaling deeply, he stalled, feeling the hot smoke enter his lungs, then slowly exhaling. "Vadim Krasnorada is a human being. Always has been. In some corner of their fucked-up minds they all were. Family dads, husbands, sons, and shit like that." He shrugged, felt suddenly drained and sat up. He couldn't gather the energy to try and explain and it was probably of no consequence, no matter what it felt like inside.

"He is. He screams in the night. He bleeds. I guess that counts." No real malice in Jean's voice, just a tired bitterness.

Dan twitched. The screams. Jean mentioned it again. No. No, he didn't care, he couldn't care or it would kill him. Again. "Whatever. Who cares. The war's officially over, but guess it never will be for the survivors." He craned his neck and suddenly bared his teeth in a humourless, dark grin. Feral and close to nasty. "I sleep and never dream. My only guilt is that I have none." Taking another drag, Dan inhaled quicker this time, switched unexpectedly back to the piss-taking, fun-loving Mad Dog everyone knew. "At least this shit here pays damn well. Enough to keep your lady happy and enough to make me stacks of dosh to turn my farm in New Zealand into Crystal Palace."

Jean grinned. "And as many needy guys in camo as you can wish for. Like a great white shark trawling the coastline. Something's bound to show up." His hand returned to Dan's chest, idly stroking the skin, following the lines. "I don't feel guilt, either. It's not like we get forced to do what we are doing, and Iraq is evil, so Kuwait is good. We're helping the good guys, and that makes us heroes."

Dan started to laugh, leaning against the wall to allow the stroking of a hand that damn well knew what to do with a body. "Black and white, eh? If you ask me, there are no goodies and there are no baddies. Just a great big fucking mass of shades of grey. It's all a matter of who is worth more, and fuck, the Gulf is filled with oil. Or do you think the bloody Yanks are doing this shit for the greater good of mankind? Fuck them," he shrugged and finished his fag. "Fuck them and their

‘policing of the world’. But as long as that pays me fucking shitloads of dollars or pounds, I don’t give a fuck why I’m doing this. I’m a war junkie; I’m a soldier. That’s what I do. I chase adrenaline and I risk my life. In return I used to get my countries ‘thanks’,” Dan snorted, “and now I get paid enough to live a comfortable life when I’m too old and my body belongs to the scrap heap.”

“Amen, brother.”

Dan grinned humourlessly, “I’ve paid enough for the ‘honour’ of earning fat zeros behind numbers. I’ve paid with my blood, my pain, my health. I’ve survived until now, I’ve got a few more years in me.” He turned to Jean and smirked. “But I probably won’t if I don’t get some shut-eye now. Double shift tomorrow, it’ll half kill me. So no cocksucking Mad Dog tomorrow night, I’m afraid.”

Jean nodded. “Well, there’s the weekend. And I’m fucking bored, so drop by whenever.” When Dan got up, he leaned in to whisper again. “And if Pascal asks, don’t tell him just how much I begged you to fuck me. He’s still in my team.” Pressing his lips right on Dan’s. “See you after your ass-kicking, Mad Dog. Kill a towelhead for me.”

Dan winked, stood up to find his shorts and t-shirt, even the flip-flops had to be somewhere. He never lingered long and was at the door, working the padlock once he was dressed. “Maybe.” Opened the door. “Maybe I won’t tell—maybe I will.” He was still laughing when he kicked the door shut behind him.

* * *

Couldn’t bear it. Just couldn’t. It was a grinding pain in Vadim’s guts, like somebody had shoved a hand into his innards, grabbed a handful of the stuff and pulled and twisted. Vadim went to bed with how Dan looked, how he moved, how he spoke, but it was too often how he laughed with Jean. Too often when he’d seen him, it was with the legionnaire. It was so damned obvious; all of it. He was amazed nobody saw it. He could imagine them together, entwined, sweating, cursing, fucking each other’s hands, wondered if Dan fucked Jean, didn’t quite think it was the other way round, assumed Dan still didn’t like it, unless he did it out of spite. Because Jean had never harmed him, never forced him.

Had the legionnaire spilled the beans? Vadim waited for it, but it didn't happen. Jean kept shut. Good. Bad. By now, he knew he could only end this one way. And he lay awake and thought about it. Thought about it all the time, before duty, after duty, worked hard to be too tired to think.

But he was alone in his room, alone with the darkness. Knew Dan was less than a hundred yards away. Knew Dan was probably right now sucking the legionnaire, and that made him hard, but in the most desperate, wretched way. Knew too well what that felt like, what Dan looked like on his knees. Knew all of it, the kinds of sounds he made, turned, restless, didn't want to think, didn't want to remember, and couldn't help it.

Fuck SAS, fuck Royal Marines, fuck everybody who had put him back together. It didn't matter. He was unable to deal with it, one ambush, one pounding, one artillery strike that rattled him, rattled heart and mind, and he clutched at thoughts and memories, and they broke when he touched them. What amazing bad idea to come here. What utter stupidity to walk into Dan's war, thinking just because he could walk again, the other would once more accept him as an equal. Dan had found a man who wasn't broken, for fun and laughter, and that was it. Why drink salt water when you could have something entirely more healthy?

Something that quenched the thirst. That easy laughter. Vadim groaned, turned again, felt the anger and pain mingle, like puss and blood. Just couldn't stop worrying that wound. But one question was answered. What he felt for Dan. He had learnt that here. The rage, the fucking loneliness, the helpless anger, the envy. And the pain.

He wiped the sweat off, heard jeeps arrive, checked the time. Ah, the late shift returned. Dan. He knew what Dan did, and where, his duties, his team. Of course he did.

There was only one solution to the pain. He dreaded it. Dreaded it almost as badly as the pain itself, but maybe he could stop prodding at that wound. Maybe the twisting in his guts would stop. Permanently.

He stood, slipped into his boots, the vest, still wore the trousers. And the knife. Reached for the moonshine, emptied the bottle. Felt the alcohol kick. Again.

Made his way through the dust, saw people, didn't greet, didn't pause to chat, People tended to jump out of their skins when he had tried. *You make my skin crawl, Krasnorada*. He'd heard that a few times, different words, sometimes only

as much as a surprised “fuck!” when he showed up. The man who smashed glasses in his hand without provocation. The bastard who had knocked people out in hand-to-hand. The hardass who stood his ground even against the gay-hating crowd. Who asked for the fight. Who got it, every time, and who refused to lose. Who got up when he fell, just to absorb more pain. Who didn’t give any quarter when he was winning.

Now, the last fight in this camp. He saw Dan head for the showers.

* * *

It had been a bloody bone breaking double shift. Dan was completely shattered when he finally returned just after midnight, but the reason for swapping the shift had made it worthwhile. At least the desert was cool now, and the sweat had dried on his body, encrusted with that vile mixture of sticky sand and dust. Having signed his weapons back into the store and exchanged a few words with the QM, Dan dropped his helmet and body armour in front of his hut, to let it dry out from the inside. Shirt and trousers discarded, boots drying as well, he was in his running shorts. Towel slung over one shoulder, soap bag in his hand, he walked towards the shower block, whistling to himself. Tired, but content. If he worked his body to the bone until he was so tired he couldn’t stand anymore, then he didn’t have to think. No memories for him tonight.

Entering into the shower block, Dan hit the light switch. The place was deserted, everyone else had hit them either first thing or was long past their bedtime anyway. Stepping out of his shorts he kept the flip-flops on as usual, the best protection against the dreaded athlete’s foot that loved sweaty boots far too much. Sorting his soap bag then dropping the towel over a hook, he turned towards the first set of showers. Almost asleep on his feet and doing the mechanics of cleaning automatically.

Vadim glanced around, saw nobody in the showers, followed like the hunter. Tiles. Blood. Water. The room in the Lubyanka. Tiled. Buckets of water that turned the blood pink that brought him back around, staring at the swirl of colour in the water running from his head.

Yes. What's good enough for the KGB sure as hell is good enough for me. He followed, saw Dan, saw sudden tension between the other's shoulder blades, saw him turn around.

Dan was staring at Vadim, fucking defenceless. Naked. Bone tired, but suddenly all his senses were alert. Checked the situation, the man—drunk, the danger. Glanced behind, but had the tiles in his back. Fuck. No way out. The darkness came up like bile, Vadim wanted nothing but to scream, scream like his body normally did, instead pulled the knife. Needed to end the pain, couldn't see him any longer. Just one more fight and I'll be free. No more screaming, no more pain, no more.

Dan couldn't even reach for the towel. Had nothing, razor too far away. Just his fists and his sober senses. Adrenaline kicked in, with no where to go, except forward.

"Get a weapon," Vadim said, in English. "Let's finish it. You or me. Think you can ignore me? Think again." Moved closer, teeth bared.

"Fuck you, Russkie." Dan snarled, in Russian as well. Attack the best defence. Vadim was unhinged, lethal, and he believed him when he said he would finish it. "You want to use a weapon in camp? Think again, bastard."

Vadim's grip around the blade was light, insecure, yeah, whatever. He didn't plan to win. Lost ages ago. The battle, the war, and everything else. "Fucking camp mattress. Russian and blond, and that's enough. Fucking your way through the camp, deserters and anybody else. Leaving me to rot, you don't even care enough to fight me. Make me feel one last time, Dan. Come on. I'll cut you open and fucking strangle your bitches with your guts. Don't doubt me for a heartbeat, because I will."

"You fucking cunt!" Dan hissed, seeing red-hot anger. "How dare you, fucktard. Pissing off without a word, not giving a shit. Two years and you just fucked off. Fuck *you*, bastard. You want to kill me? Try it, loser. Try it and suck it and see!" Dan's heart was racing, his naked body in the best fighting stance possible. Would have to deflect the blade, possibly grab the towel and flick the knife out of the lunatic's hand. "I fucking hate you, Russkie. Fuck out of my life for good. How dare you. How fucking dare you!"

No lust for bloodshed. Vadim would go into this fight with no thrill. Had to be done. Just another task. Work. Function. *I want to function, Sir*. What a waste of

effort. Dan's hatred hit him square in the chest, deeper, pressure wave. Couldn't say he had been broken. Couldn't admit the weakness. Didn't want pity. Didn't want any more ridicule. Inched closer, saw the body he had been so desperate to have, recoil, tense, ready to defend and counterattack.

"Sorry for not being your bitch straight from prison...sorry for needing some time to fucking get my head straight," Vadim hissed. "Jean does that quite nicely, the bitch part, huh? Almost as tall, almost as strong. And he's so funny, our legionnaire. Such a sunshine. Pretty boy, too. Not like that piece of cunt you discarded. Tiger and mountain lion, fuck you. Fuck you for getting me out. You should have shot me. But you didn't have the guts to do it. Too weak. You just didn't care enough. You waited two years, and then you stopped to fucking care and tear out my fucking heart. Come on. Promises, Dan. Keep them. Cut it out. If you're a man. Make me scream if you can."

Dan jerked as if punched. Words. Fucking words. Pain. Punches un-pulled. Words that hit, deeper, harder, drilling down into every memory, every thought and each feeling he'd ever had. Words. Torture. Words. Death. Words. Hatred and accusations and guilt and pain.

"No." Dan snarled, stunned and debilitated with a pain like the one back in Finland. Pain, like the day he had been listening to the tick-tock of the clock, counting towards his lover's death. "No, Vadim. Fuck you! You won't make me into who you are." He kicked out, aimed at the hand with the knife. Smashing his heel against the wrist to disarm the Russian.

The knife sped away, clattered over the tiles. Killing a man without a weapon was too hard work. Dan had failed once to tear him to bits. In the mountains.

"Who I am? A walking corpse?"

"A liar, Russkie, that's what you are." Dan hissed, brimming with rage and pain, it suffocated him and turned his voice into a snarl. "Breaking promises, forgetting any- and everything and not having a fucking idea what feelings really are. Loved me? Liar. Fucking disgusting useless pathetic *liar*!" Vadim's face twitched, the mask of rage almost falling apart. Needed to deliver one more blow. Maybe Dan would still do it. "You don't have the guts. For nothing." He turned around. "Last chance. Or I'll take you apart. And I'll start with Jean. And then your other friends. I'll destroy you so completely like nothing has ever been destroyed."

Dan took a step forward, his whole body shaking. “You already did that, cunt. Six months ago. You can’t destroy me twice.” His fists were useless now, trembling too hard. “You touch them and I fucking take you apart and then let you live.”

Failure. It hurt. Vadim wanted to scream. He wanted to fall to his knees and die. Please fucking kill me.

Don’t kill me. We’re soldiers.

We’re nothing.

Vadim nodded, and walked away. No more strength. He didn’t scream that night, but he wished he could.

Dan watched him leave. Stood. Turned on the water. Stepped under the shower. No sound. No gesture. No reaction. Turned his back to the room, didn’t give a shit if Vadim returned. What did it matter if he were stabbed like a pig, bleeding out under the water.

He stood, letting the water drum onto his skin and blind his eyes. Leaning forward, one palm resting against the tiles, he hung his head. Water mixing with salt as he cried.

No one heard. No one saw. No one knew.

* * *

Jean checked the watch. Ten hours should be enough. Besides, it was getting too warm to sleep, he could tell from the sweat gathering in his bandage. He headed over to the tin huts, whistling to himself, flipping the finger to somebody asking whether he was bringing his ‘stud’ some tea—as long as it was not Krasnorada, it would just be the finger.

He rapped the door, which stood ajar to catch what feeble breeze might err in this direction, then stepped in. “Wakey wakey. Coffee.” Not that the Nestlé shit deserved that name, which was the reason why he’d dunked three heaped spoonfuls in there. If his taste buds were going to be in pain, make it proper pain and a caffeine punch to the guts.

He’d seen guys in their morning glory before, but Dan wasn’t there. The soap bag was still there, but so were the combat boots. That could mean the tracks, or the gym. He’d have to deliver the liquid there. He headed out again, strode

across to the gym. The clatter of metal disks on the ground and against the bars. Comrades helping each other, making sure the big weights didn't crush a chest first thing in the morning.

Dan was in the corner on one of the weight machines. Doing butterflies while letting out grunts that sounded positively offensive. He'd put more weights onto the machine than he usually did and was forcing his body into yet another push. Sweating like a pig, he'd already done the leg workout and the rest of the upper body, winding down the torturous routine.

"Don't pull up that shoulder," said Jean, completely useless comment, but Dan was overdoing it.

"Huh?" Dan hadn't quite understood the words nor registered the newcomer, letting his arms move back slowly, wrists resting on the padded bars. Feeling his muscles tremble with over-exertion. He ached, would hurt like shit in a day, but fuck, did that feel good right now.

Jean put the coffee down on the seat of the next butterfly machine. "Breakfast." He eyed Dan, had a quick sweep of the gym. No Krasnorada. Like most biblical plagues, Krasnorada entered when least expected, and Jean did expect him.

"So?" Dan's grin wasn't quite the same as usual, fading too fast. "I grew up with porridge and stale tea. That was the scran at home, the army was worse." Flashed his teeth. "Don't think you got better in the Glorious Soviet Army, eh?"

"No." Jean crossed his other arm in front of his chest. "How was the shift? Alright?"

Dan shrugged evasively. "Aye." Looked around, too many blokes in the gym. He gestured with his chin to the towel out of reach. "Got to tell you something. Will be re-deployed."

Jean picked up the towel, stepped closer to hand it to Dan. His credentials as team leader were going to hell. He placed the good arm on the padding of the machine and leaned in. "Ah. Already fed up with Disneyland Kuwait City?"

"Not quite." Dan wiped the sweat off his face and neck, his t-shirt drenched so badly he had several stages of white salt-lines of sweat, dried, and the freshest one on top, wet. "Fed up with some of the company, rather." He slung the towel around his neck and came out of the machine, chucking the coffee down in one go and the Styrofoam cup into a nearby bin. "I'll request transfer later."

Jean glanced around. "Let me guess." He paused, looked straight into Dan's face and knew the answer before he asked the question. "You're fed up with the two hundred-something pounds of shit that is doing his damned best to win the popularity contest against Saddam Hussein?"

Dan's grimace said it all, he didn't bother to nod. "I had a visit last night, aye. Am not going to put up with that shit anymore. Too much history." Walking towards the exit, he expected Jean to keep up. He needed a shower badly, and they had too many witnesses in the gym for their conversation. "Anything at least ten thousand miles away will do."

Jean's face darkened. He nodded, seemingly thinking unpleasant thoughts. When they left the gym, he murmured: "Something I should know as his team leader?" He glanced to the side.

Dan was shaking his head. "No. It's up close and personal." What else. It could never be anything else.

Jean nodded, decided on a different angle. "You know, I have some shit on him. Some pretty bad shit. I'd rather not bring it up, but he's on probation and he's been acting like a loose gun."

"Shit?" Dan stopped dead in his tracks. "What shit? What the fuck did the cunt do?" The tight line of his lips betrayed the sudden tension.

"That's confidential. No permanent damage and word hasn't spread." Jean inhaled. "I can return him to sender. He's here on my goodwill. CO will bust his ass if I talk to him."

Dan's fist clenched, 'damage'. Not 'permanent damage', but damage, after all. There was only one kind of damage he truly remembered. Bastard. Finally looked at the other, silent for a while. "Vadim has nowhere to be returned to." At least he, himself, had a farm, a friend, medals and honour, and a country that would pay him a pension if he made it to fifty-five.

"I can just about manage to keep my heart from bleeding for him," said Jean. "And I'm sure there is some nice dictatorship somewhere that buys his kind wholesale."

"No!" Dan's answer came fairly quickly, but then he paused once more. Why the fuck did he keep defending that Russian cunt? Why? Damn. His face was thunder and lightning. "No." Calmer, he shook his head. There had to be a rational explanation for it all and he'd cling to it. The rest would fade away again once he

was thousands of miles away. “There’s too much history, too many memories here. Everyone would remember the madman. I have to leave, go somewhere where I can’t be traced. I am sure my employer will make certain of that.”

“Damn shame,” murmured Jean. “Yeah, I guess it’s an option. I’d prefer it the other way, though.” He allowed Dan to step into the showers first, then followed. The place was empty. Still no Krasnorada. Jean hoped the Russian would get shot up today. A car bomb would do just nicely. “You’re an asset, he’s not.”

Dan had already stripped and was turning on the water, realised too late he had forgotten his soap bag. Just water would have to do, at least the sweat was fresh. “You never know, he might become an asset.” Dan huffed dryly, wondered if hell froze over before that happened.

Jean glanced at Dan, then slipped out of his wifebeater and the shorts and stepped into one of the showering stalls, separated by a thin partition from the other. Talking to a naked man under a spray of water when dressed looked a bit awkward. He took the sling off and began to remove the bandage, rolling it into a dusty ball of fabric. Prodded at the elbow, slowly straightened the arm, but made an effort not to move it or use it too much. The round scar on his thigh became visible as he turned. “Let me know when you get your new posting.”

“I’d rather not.” Dan stepped under the hot stream, tipped his head back and closed his eyes, letting the water run over him before moving his head back out of the water to continue. “Vadim has...ways of getting information when he sets his mind to it. You know the old motto ‘know as little as you absolutely need to know and you’re less of a target’.”

“Good motto.” Jean leaned against the partition and watched Dan, thoughtfully. “But I’m not exactly Red Riding Hood that gets ambushed by the evil black wolf. If he does so much as look at me funny, he’s right outside the camp gates, with no security clearance to return.” But he didn’t ask again, instead turned the water on to cool down in the heat.

Dan was still shaking his head with a weary chuckle. ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, indeed. Yet it would be better for everyone concerned if no one knew where he got sent to. He’d have to tackle the issue straight away, then contact the kid to explain and to meet him later. He’d have to turn the regular shag into a good-bye fuck-fest. Possibly with a bottle of booze. For him, not the Yank. He

washed quickly, didn't bother to wipe down with the sweaty towel, slung it around his hips and waved to Jean before he left. "See you later, mate."

* * *

Later that morning, exactly one week after he got hauled in front of the goddamned CO, Dan requested an international phone line, once more waiting for the Baroness' aide to let him through to her. It took several minutes, before he finally heard her speak.

"Dan?" Her voice gave no clue what she might feel. It probably didn't matter He'd trusted her, like he had trusted another, once. Fat good that had done him. "How are you, Dan?"

"Not good, Ma'am." He cradled the receiver in his hand, stared at the wall, then his boots. "I need you to get me out of here."

There was a pause and the line was dead for a long moment.

"Why, Dan?" As if she didn't know and Dan huffed quietly, but said nothing.

Enough to make her continue. "Vadim Krasnorada?"

Dan nodded even though she couldn't see him. "Yes, Ma'am. Who and what else." He lifted his eyes only to stare at the bare wall once more. "Ma'am, with all due respect, you shouldn't have sent him here, shouldn't have interfered. It's..." hesitation, deeper breath, admitting defeat was painful. "It's unbearable, Ma'am."

The line fell once more silent and Dan wondered if she would ever reply, before she finally spoke again.

"I am sorry, Dan." Her voice as posh and classy as ever, but he imagined he heard a different dimension in it. Emotion. A rare occurrence. "I made a mistake. As you so rightly said, I interfered, believing what I was doing was for the better. For your good." A slight hesitation, "I realise now I was wrong and I apologise. Deeply, and from my heart. I consider you a friend, Dan. As close to a friend I will ever have, and I am devastated I have hurt you."

Dan didn't know what to say, couldn't answer at first, had to swallow, then cleared his throat. "No need to apologise, Ma'am, but I thank you nevertheless." He pictured her nodding, in her economic style.

“I will get you out, Dan.” She spoke again, firm and convincing. “But it might take a while. Will you be alright in the meantime?”

He realised she hadn’t even argued, nor asked why she shouldn’t simply take Vadim away instead of sending him as he had requested, and he was thankful for her immediate acceptance.

“Aye, Ma’am, as long as I know you’ll get me somewhere else, whenever that’s convenient. Guess there are enough war zones in the world where I might be needed.”

He fancied he could hear her wry smile in the voice. “Too true, Dan. Sad, but too true, and it’s our business to deal with truth.”

He nodded, drawing formless shapes against the wall with his fingertip. “Guess I’m good at something, even though that’s war.”

“You are good for a lot more,” her answer came without a moment’s hesitation, “I have faith and trust in you.”

He smiled, “I know, Ma’am.” She didn’t answer, except for a gentle huff, and he continued. “Good bye.”

“Good bye, my friend.” A click in the line told him she had put the phone down.

* * *

A few hours later, Dan made his way to the safe house. Unlike any of the other times he’d ventured out of camp, he was unsteady on his feet. Swaying, occasionally hitting a wall of one of the buildings with his shoulder, before zigzagging for a couple of steps towards the centre of the road. Catching himself again, he managed a few more strides that were more or less moving forward.

He’d be the perfect target for anyone wanting to shoot up another of those Brits, Yanks, or whoeverthefuck the war had brought into the Gulf. He finally made it to the safe house, let himself in after some lengthy fumbling with the lock. Matt wasn’t there yet and Dan grunted as he flopped onto the bed, reaching for one of the unopened water bottles. Luke warm, but didn’t mater jack shit, might stop the carousel in his head and the pain in his chest. Maybe. Possibly. If he was goddamned lucky.

Dan had fallen to the side, curled up in an awkward foetal position, when the door opened again and the jarhead slipped inside. Oblivious to the sounds the Yank was making, Dan slept on, drunkenly, which stopped Matt in his tracks once he'd locked up behind him.

Unbelievable, the carelessness, especially from an old dog as Dan, and Matt frowned as he walked closer. Taking the risk of getting jumped at, he shook Dan's shoulder. "Hey, buddy! You wasted?"

With several snorts and grunts, Dan was coming back to himself, blinking sluggishly. "Aye..." yawning, he pushed himself up to sit, swaying, before looking at Matt with a distinct lack of focus. "Good...to shee...see you. Last time. Gonna be gone."

"I know." Matt pulled the only chair close, plonking himself down, right in front of the rat-assed Dan. "You told me. Want to tell me why? Can't imagine, like, you'd be thrown out or stuff. Except for the shit you're pulling right now, bud."

Dan blinked again, then tried an uncoordinated grin, which failed miserably. Waving his hand about as if shooing imaginary flies. "No. No shit. Off duty." His head almost hit the wall when he nodded and tried to sit up straight at the same time. "Just so much crap."

"Hm?" Scratching the back of his neck, Matt put a booted foot onto the edge of the bed, leaning with his elbow on it. Moving forward to study the drunken Dan. "What the fuck's up with you?"

"Not me. Nuh-huh." Heaving a heavy sigh, Dan shuffled upwards to sit at last in a mostly straight way with his back against the wall. "Shit's up with Vadim."

"Vadim?"

"Aye, Russian cunt."

"Russian? Cunt?" Matt shook his head, completely lost by now. "You better tell me what the fuck you're on about, buddy."

Dan blinked at him again, then nodded awkwardly. "Aye." Nodded again. "Tell you."

And that he did. Despite his pissed-up state, or perhaps because of it, Dan told his baby-Yank the whole story. Everything, except for the very first and very worst secret no one knew except for one dead Russian, whose throat he had cut, and two men: Vadim and himself. The rest he told as it had happened. Eleven years

of pain and pleasure, hatred, sex, lust and love, and deepest understanding—until the terror of the end and the ultimate price he'd thought he'd paid, until it all began and ended again. In one single day. Then nothing. Until now, and the unbearable sense of being; being close.

Matt was quiet all the way through except for an occasional grunt, and he remained silent for a long while after. Long enough for Dan to nearly fall asleep.

“Do you hate him now?” Matt asked quietly.

Dan opened his eyes to stare at the opposite wall, unseeing, unfocussed in his drunken state. “No.” At last, “I can’t. Can’t hate him, even though you hate what you love, aye?” He huffed with a half-arsed wry smile. “But I hate him for what he did to me. No, shit. Not him. Don’t hate him, hate what he did, but can’t hate him. Cut me the fuck open and left me to fucking rot.” Dan’s eyes closed again, “Two and a half years. Just fucking hurt.”

The last words more slurred and mumbled than the ones before. Dan dropped his head, staring at his hands which seemed strangely empty.

“What are you going to do now?” Reaching for one of the water bottles, Matt kept watching the drunken man. Expecting an answer, but nothing happened.

Dan kept staring at his hands as if he hadn’t heard the question. Suddenly moving into action with a jerk, he clumsily patted his shirt down, looking for his fags, but couldn’t remember where the fuck he’d left them. Hands dropped onto his thigh, his body weaved to and fro as he tried to sit upright once more, blinking to focus on the Yank.

“You know what, kid? I wanted to die...” pausing, “but one’s not s’posed to, and I promised Maggie.” He drunkenly waved his hand. “You know, Baroness.” As if he’d ever talked about her before. Expecting Matt to understand and ignoring the kid’s confused sounds. “The diplomat, you know, the one I’m working for. Promised her I wouldn’t go on a suicide mission.”

Matt interfered with three quiet words. “But you did.”

“No. I...,” Dan closed his eyes, hand waving about before dropping on top the covers, beat. “That’s open for in...intra...interpretation.”

“I see.” Matt pushed the water bottle into the discarded hand, but it never made it to Dan’s lips. “That’s, like, the most fucking amazing love story I’ve ever heard.”

Huffing with an uncoordinated movement of his head, Dan forgot about the bottle, gripped Matt's hand instead. "Some 'love' story alright."

"But you do still love him, don't you, Mad Dog?" Matt leaned closer.

Dan ignored the question, his hand surreptitiously opening and closing around the kid's for a long time. "Tell you what...you can be strong and keep going for so long, and then...then all hopes and wishes just die. Shatter. And all of the nightmares, too." Shaking his head while looking onto his flexing hand. "The day they let Vadim out...that night he left. Just walked away. No note, no sign, nothing. I knew he wasn't the same, I could see it, feel it, even smell it. But he just walked. No chance, I didn't get one. I would have done anything. Any fucking thing. But no chance." Dan paused again, lifting his head slowly, and when he looked at Matt, he wasn't aware he had tears in his eyes, unable to stop their flow. "I never knew anything could hurt so much."

Matt stared into the face before him, and it was too much to bear. Sliding onto the bed, he sat beside the other. "Hey, buddy..." Trailing off, his hand clenched tightly by Dan's. "And what now?" Quietly.

Dan shook his head, again and again, while those goddamned boozed-up tears kept falling onto the blanket. Like a stupid bimbo, crying like a girl. "Don't know." He finally murmured. "Just don't know. Fucking hurts. All of it." "So you *do* love that Russian." A careful statement, not any longer a question. "Aye." Whispered, "how the fuck could I not."

Matt sat with Mad Dog for a long while. A kid, offering silent comfort to a weary old soldier, who'd seen one battle too many, and had lost himself in the final war.

* * *

Dan had left the safe house after a couple of hours. Still unsteady on his feet, despite litres of water and a session, that had, after all, ended in sex. Predictably. But he'd make his way back to camp even if he had to crawl all the way. He'd proven it before, and almost managed to get himself thrown out of the job for it.

Matt was tying his boot laces while thinking about everything Mad Dog had told him. He couldn't get his head around the whole fucked up situation. How

anyone could still love such an asshole and how that asshole could have once loved the other. Was a mystery to him. Strange thing, that love. Unlike his own relationship, wholesome, simple, if it weren't for him being in the military. Ken, his boyfriend, back home. Safe, sound and normal. Matt huffed, stood up and stretched. The night hadn't quite turned out as intended, but he'd got some pretty damn good sex out of it in the end, so he wasn't going to complain. And fuck, he liked Mad Dog, and being buddies meant sometimes to listen. He'd miss that crazy Brit.

He checked the room and turned off the light before slipping through the door into darkness.

Vadim came down on him like a ton of bricks, his elbow hit Matt's neck, and the jarhead went limp, stunned, unconscious. "Surprise," murmured Vadim, spared a glance for the surroundings, grabbed the Yank by the collar and pushed him right back into the safehouse. Third dimension. Sniper. Ambush. Jarhead never saw it coming.

He closed the door with a controlled kick, then sat the kid down on a chair. It looked solid enough. Weaved the boy's legs back under the chair, flexcuffed them to the legs, hands bent back enough to put pressure on the hips and back, flexcuffed those as well, double-checked the stability of the position. He pulled the cover from one of the pillows, stuffed it in the kid's mouth, took the scarf off his neck and secured the gag. Glanced around, could still smell Dan's sweat here, like a shark tasted blood in the water.

He checked the soldier over, but he was still out cold. Waited a little, then thought he could start with the psychological part of his. Unbuttoned the tunic, pulled it down over the overstretched shoulders, pulled up the shirt underneath. Nice sixpack. Good definition. Fitness freak. The skin was soft, vulnerable. Vadim felt his face twitch. Fuck you. Fuck you, Dan. Tore open the other's belt, bared the briefs, reached inside and pulled out that cock. Thought Dan had touched it. Sucked it. Less than an hour ago. Fuck. His head spun, the anger came back. He stepped behind the kid and waited, just waited for a change in breathing.

Matt's next thought after stepping out of the door and closing it behind him, was the feeling of heaviness in his body, discomfort, and a sharp pain in his neck. His breathing quickened and he tried to move. Completely disorientated. Groaned, but found himself biting down on something obstructing his throat, had to cough—

unable to cough. Began to panic in that state of utter disorientation. Fuck. He'd been caught. Iraqi insurgents. He forced his eyes open.

Vadim checked his watch. Twenty minutes. Not bad. Well within the time frame. He stepped close to his prisoner and placed both hands on the kid's shoulders. "Welcome." His voice so low it would be hard to identify him. He didn't care. "You are in my control now. If you want to breathe, I need you to understand I will cut your throat if you scream. And I mean it. No shit."

Full-blown panic set in. Matt couldn't breathe, couldn't cough, couldn't swallow and most of all couldn't understand what the fuck was happening. Who was that bastard who touched him and talked in a weird voice and...oh God! Only then realised the way he was tied to the chair. Naked. The important parts. Felt air on his genitals and on his abs. He tried frantically to calm himself down by remembering all they had told them in their training.

Matt's breathing was sharp and noisy. Mad Dog. Where was he, what happened? Not someone he knew, the voice. No American, no Brit either. Fuck. No. Panic. Sweat broke out on his forehead, but remembered he had to acquiesce his captor. Nodded. Just nodded. Would stay silent, but needed to breathe. Get out. Survive.

Vadim moved to the side, just allowed Matt to see the glint of the blade. Turned the knife so it definitely caught the light, then brought it up to the kid soldier's face, cut the scarf, pulled the pillow cover free with the left hand, point of the blade touching the corner of those lips. Lips Dan had felt on his body. Lips that had gasped, maybe cursed.

Matt's eyes followed the blade, as if staring at the steel made the weapon less lethal. Repeating in his mind 'calm, calm, calm', had to keep his senses about him. Breathing desperately, in large gulps, once he could, before coughing and moistening his lips. Trying to catch a glance of his captor, who didn't sound like anyone he'd ever heard, but sure as hell it wasn't an Arab. Couldn't stop the sweat that was running down his face.

Vadim stepped into the kid's back, rested the blade against the jaw line. "There. Let's make this quick. I'm sure you want to return to your unit on time, yes?" He smirked, didn't feel a scrap of humour, felt nothing.

"What the fuck do you want. Who are you!" Matt's voice was raspy, trying to ignore the panic. Fear burning like hot coal in his stomach. Vulnerable. Exposed.

“Stuff the bravado, Yank. You will cooperate. You are meeting a man who is called Mad Dog. You’re fuck-buddies.”

Matt’s eyes widened. Mad Dog. What? What the fuck? He tensed, nostrils flaring with every breath. This was an interrogation and he didn’t have an idea why and what for. Mad Dog. His buddy.

“No.”

“Wrong answer.” Vadim moved closer, placed his hand around the kid’s throat, allowed him to feel the strength in his hand. Enough strength to squash the voicebox. “I have seen you. I know. Try again.”

Matt finally managed to get a good look at his captor and he forgot to breathe for a moment. Tall. Blond. Blue eyed. The accent. That man. Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck! Hadn’t thought his fear could rise anymore notches until he realised who that madman was. Had to be the Russian Mad Dog talked about.

“No.”

Matt forced the word out, had to be strong, couldn’t allow himself to break down, but that hand, oh God, he’d do it. He’d just slaughter him like a pig or let him suffocate slowly. From what Mad Dog had told him, that man could be mental, absolutely fanny-fuck crazy.

Vadim smiled at the reaction. The muscles did everything to make it a smile, at least. The baby soldier’s fear came from the stories, the rumours, his reputation.

“What do you want?” Desperate, Matt tried to hide the fear.

Vadim leaned in, met the other’s eyes. “Let’s start with what I don’t want. I don’t want to have to hack off your head and hands with just a combat knife, then put your bits and pieces into plastic bags and bury them somewhere out in the desert.” He read the fear in the kid’s eyes, could smell it on his ragged breath, saw the sweat rolling. “Making men vanish is hard work and I don’t get paid for this. Because this is a personal matter.”

Matt stared at the madman, followed every movement. Personal matter. Oh God, oh God have mercy. All he’d done was have fun with Mad Dog and make the man laugh while having a great time in return. Mad Dog. His idol.

Vadim glanced at the kid’s name tag. “Donahue. I know you’re fucking with Mad Dog.” He brought the knife down, let the blade scrape over that smooth chest, touched the nipple, watched the old poetry of skin against steel. Magical.

Matt shuddered, tried to follow the blade but couldn't lower his head enough. Believed every single thing he was being told. Everything. And worse. "I will release you, unharmed, if you tell me the whole story." Vadim grinned, again, without emotion. He used to enjoy situations like this, but it was as technical as planning how to take a building. A man's mind was nothing but a room with a closed door. "You will tell me everything Mad Dog has told you. Every word. Every...touch. I want to know the whole story."

Matt shook his head. No. No he couldn't. No no no no no! Had given his word. Couldn't do it. Breaking his word, no way, no. Even though he was sweating like a pig with fear.

The knife rested against the taut stomach and Vadim looked at the blade, thoughtfully. "I have made tougher men than you talk. Scream, even. I can make you vomit with pain, Donahue. I can destroy you so completely even your experts will have trouble reconstructing how you died...or what you looked like."

"I...can't." No. Just can't. Fucking fucker of a fucking madman. "Fuck off." Had forgotten the Russian's name. Just remembered what Dan had told him, and those fucking tears he promised he'd never tell anyone about. The anguish, a buddy in pain, a man who didn't deserve that shit and...trying to prep talk himself while so frightened, he wanted to spill the beans. Everything, but couldn't. He'd be a swine if he did.

Vadim paused, stared into the kid's eyes. What did inspire him to do this? Love? He recoiled, then hit the kid in the face, a bitchslap that made the head turn, and another one, for symmetry. Snarling, faced with a sudden bout of feeling. Anger. Jealousy. "Too fucking bad, then."

Matt's head exploded. Once, twice, felt the bruise in his neck protest and his face hurt like fuck. Nothing in his training, not even the worst of his Drill Sergeants, had ever been like that.

Vadim inhaled sharply, turned the knife in his hand and brought the blade around to Matt's balls. "Not very dignified, bleeding to death with your cock in your throat," he murmured, toneless. "Guess it can't be helped."

Matt's whole body tensed, he almost shrieked with panic. "No!" Oh God please no! He was praying now. "I can't tell you!" Tried instinctively to pull his knees together, fighting against the restraints. "I gave my word!"

Vadim stared at him. Strange, it was getting difficult. Word. Honour. The world according to a baby American. As if it mattered. As if anybody cared. “Do you think you’re harder than Mad Dog? You’re not. You will break. I promise, you will break. And nothing will keep me from what I need to know. It’s simple. He wouldn’t want you to die for his secrets. He knows me, Donahue. You stand no chance in hell.”

Matt could hardly swallow, sweat stinging in his eyes. “Why me. I don’t understand.” Didn’t beg, not yet. “Mad Dog’s my buddy.” Couldn’t say it. Couldn’t admit to the sex.

Understanding did not matter. No why. Just how. Above all: when. Vadim shook his head. “Brave little soldier boy. Willing to die for a blowjob. You are so willing to die, you children.”

“I don’t want to die!” Matt started to fight against the restraints with all his strength, while trying to stay away from the blade as much as possible. “No! I didn’t do anything. Let me go!”

Vadim moved in, pressed his hand to the kid’s mouth, shut his nose off, too, waited whether the kid would be able to topple the chair. Matt was breathing hard against the hand, felt like suffocating, but still thrashed wildly, using all his strength until he ran out of air.

Vadim allowed the kid to fight, for a little, the adrenaline would work in his favour. Steadied the chair when it rocked, with a knee between the kid’s knees. “Wrong company, Yank,” he said, calmly, clearly, to allow the information to register properly and sink in. Allowed him to breathe through the nose, but kept the head pushed back so harshly he stretched the kid’s throat. He liked the view of that, healthy, strong flesh. Could imagine the kid arch like this when he came. Damn unlikely he’d ever see this.

Matt’s breath came in frantic, sharp gusts, trying to remember everything he’d ever been told in training. How to survive, how to fool his captor, how not to break. But they’d never told him about a madman who was not playing by any rules.

Vadim wasn’t in the mood for sex, forced or not. He wanted to know. Needed to break into another man’s mind, not his body. There was no struggle involved.

How far are you willing to go, Vadim?

As far as I have to.

Copy that.

He hammered the knife into the chair, close to the kid's balls and Matt jumped within his bonds, half-muffled yelling against the hand. Vadim then took the pillow cover again. "You don't want to talk. Fine. No screaming, no talking. But you have to understand, Donahue, that thing like mine and Mad Dog's does not end like this. Not by you nor deserter stepping between us. Yes, you are pretty, and deserter is such nice man, but it won't end like this. If I am going crashing down, I'll take Dan with me. His life is mine. It cannot be separated. We are like Siamese twins sharing heart of a killer." He gave a laugh that only increased the tension in his chest.

Matt's eyes grew wider with every word. Insane, fucking insane. Completely unhinged, impossible to judge and no way to survive according to any rules he'd ever learned. He almost whimpered when the Russian continued. "Believe it or not, but one of us will die. I know you are hoping right now it's me. You might as well be right. It won't matter, because I will destroy Dan on the way down. You, Donahue, are just collateral. Ah. I thought you'd understand that concept. You're Yank, after all." Vadim took his hand off, then forced the pillow cover back into the baby soldier's mouth, pushed the teeth apart when Matt tried to protest and resist, brought his lips close to the other's face. "I can smell your fear, Donahue. I know you want to talk. I can hear it in your breathing. But you won't. That's where I will fuck you up."

Matt was swallowing on the fabric, sweaty, uniform stained, whatever of it was still on his body. He stank of fear and loathing, while Vadim stepped back, then took off his watch, slipped it into his pocket, watched the young soldier fight his fear. Looked a lot like neither would budge. The kid had guts. Too bad the deck was stacked against him.

Vadim took off the vest, neatly folded it on the bed. Where those two must have fucked just an hour ago. Dan and the kid. He stared at the sheets, remembered a room like this. Remembered a lust that had destroyed his career. Worth it. Fuck it. He was crashing down, had been for nearly three years now. Maybe the day Dan had been blown up. Changed everything. He hadn't been able to stand what he was. Spetsnaz, officer, invader, fuck it. The lies. The subterfuge, treason, committed a hundred times, every time he had left Dan, had allowed Dan to leave. Had denied

what he felt. Had not put everything on that card, that fucked-up feeling of belonging. Of love. This feeling was to love what a ravenous wolf was to a dog puppy. He wasn't even sure it fitted the bill. He pulled the shirt off. He paused for a moment, glanced at the kid. "I don't want to have to explain your blood on my camo at the gate," he clarified, and allowed his lips to curve into a lazy, dismissive smile.

Matt moaned against the cloth. Couldn't help but stare at the crazed bastard, fighting against the restraints once more. Had to get away, please, not die, not like this, couldn't do it anymore. Wanted to break, to give up, but hated himself for that very same thought.

Vadim loosened his belt, opened the fly, fully frontal to the kid. Part of the game. Showing off the body, the engine of destruction. Showing the implements of torture before the torture, a time-honoured tradition. Just wearing his briefs, black, clinging, he placed the camo on the bed, took an extra moment with that. He had time. The kid's time frame was now different. Minutes were hours, trapped like this.

Matt just concentrated on breathing, as hard as that was. Panic went up a notch. Sheer, unadulterated fear of dying like a dog.

Vadim closed the distance again, placed the knife against the kid's left nipple, cool perfection against something just too weak. Tilted the blade and pulled it across the skin. Felt the resistance only in his fingertips, saw a line open, and swell. Matt jerked and whimpered, tried to see what was happening, felt pain, too much, too sensitive, and he started to fight embarrassing tears.

Hardly more than cutting into the dermis, but the kid had no fucking clue. Would heal without a scar, and looked like a scratch. "Ah. I guess I'm already drawing blood," said Vadim, and smiled. Not enough to bleed, or even run, but it did have an effect, he could see that in the Yank's eyes.

He brought the knife lower, and Matt shuddered, stilled, breathed harshly. Vadim placed the knife into the ridge between two muscles. Loved the contrast. "The Mujahideen, as you called them...to us, they were just bandits...they had something we called the 't-shirt'. They liked killing our men like that. Skin the torso of a man, pull the whole shit up, and knot it over his head. We found a few that were still alive, barely. Amazing what the human body can survive." He slowly pulled, another shallow cut, but long, and Matt nearly screamed into the gag.

“Of course, this blade is too broad for it. You need a proper skinner to do it. Takes some practice. I learnt to do it. Sometimes, I was tasked to kill a man and make it look like it had been somebody else. Using trademarks like that one did half the work for me. The first one was clumsy, but that was just a test run. I had it down on the second one.”

Let the blade slip deeper, brought it to the insides of the kid’s leg, felt that body turn to stone, and Matt’s eyes filling with water. Tears he had tried so hard to fight, holding on by the thinnest thread. “Actually, I think I prefer you not talking.” Vadim looked up into the kid’s eyes to judge his reaction. Still not done. Well. The Yank just didn’t have enough imagination.

Vadim took hold of the other’s cock. Clearly not a masochist, ran his hand over it, patient, the touch deceptively gentle, couldn’t help but wonder how Dan touched him. What Dan felt when fucking a guy half his age. “Ah, you hurt my feelings. Now, let’s make this consensual, huh? Think of somebody else. Everybody else does.” He gave a laugh, dark and cynical, when Matt let out a choked sound. Vadim paused to spit into his hand, began to go more seriously, twisted, pressed, pumped him nice and intense, felt his own body grow interested in the quarry, much like the flesh in his hand began to harden.

“Now, that’s better.”

Matt fought. Fought his own body. Fucking treacherous body and its simple mechanics. Could hear nothing but the blood rushing in his ears, the pounding of his heart pounding, and his harsh breathing.

Vadim looked into the young soldier’s eyes, saw a new level of fear. This was hardly something they learnt to resist. He’d be surprised if it was even mentioned in the Marines handbook. Nothing but friction, just like with Jean, nothing personal or intimate about it, no struggle. This was where he was going to fuck the kid up, pretty badly, depending on how strong he was in that area. Hard to judge. And he didn’t actually care whether the Yank healed from this. Life was tough, and unpleasant, and never fair. The flesh was fully hard now, and Vadim looked down at it, kept it in his left hand, while reaching for the knife that was still stuck in the wood of the chair. Regarded the bare tip with a smile. “I’d feel so vulnerable,” he murmured. Why on earth the Americans chopped away the foreskin was a mystery to him.

Matt cried now, pleading. Holy Mother of God and mom and pop and buddies and Mad Dog and please, please, no, not this. Not die like this. Vadim took the knife and laid it flat against the tip of Matt's cock, moved his hand up to take more control, and let the flat blade run across the organ. The kid was sweating like a waterfall. Then, took the knife away and brought it back, tip of the cock in his hand, knife point moving towards it, like he wanted to stab it, and gingerly placed the steel tip into the slit, and turned the blade for just the hint of friction.

Matt broke. Resolve shattered, sobbing with panic and absolute terror. Attempted to shout against the gag, didn't have enough breath. Not dying like this, oh God, no. Shook his head, body tense as a rock, would do anything, anything!

Vadim glanced up, questioningly. "Oh. I almost forgot. Talking, now, is it?" He released the cock to pull out the gag. "Well then, talk. Everything. Each and every word."

Matt coughed, curled forward, relief for a split-second, before he came back up, head high. Still sobbing, goddamned fucking tears of fear and dishonour. "You fucked-up bastard!" He spat out the words with a dry voice. Choking on the humiliation. "You don't need to destroy Mad Dog anymore, you've already done it. Fuck you. Fuck you!" Matt was shouting and sobbing at the same time. Panic, disgust for himself, hatred for the madman and shame, terrible shame. He was shaking and he loathed himself for that weakness. "I promised him not to tell you, not to tell anyone. Gave my word. I fucking hate you. How the fuck can he still love you. How? How could he ever love you in the first place? You are disgusting, you make me sick." Matt was choking on tears and snot, tried to wipe his face on his shoulder. Trembling with rage and terror, but there was something else, an overwhelming anger.

You make my skin crawl. You make me sick. Seemed, Vadim mused, these days he had that effect on people. *How the fuck can he still love you.* Secret. This man was a whole lot closer to Dan than he had any right to be. Somebody to get drunk with and share secrets. That was more intimate than a blowjob, and Vadim felt bitter envy, and even worse resentment. Jealousy. He kept his face impassive. "I'd hate to repeat my question, Donahue." A warning.

"You want to know all he said? He cried, you understand? Damned Mad Dog cried. Drunk, for what? For you. For fucking you! Told me the whole story, told me all about Afghanistan, KGB and the way you fucked him up. Well and

truly. You don't know what you did, do you? You wouldn't care. You don't care about anything." The tears had stopped, the fire of anger was burning now, taking over the fear. Matt had forgotten he was looking into death's face, his cock soft now, wilting against the steel. All he could think of was the shame of breaking down and telling everything he had promised he would never say. Shame, and rage, growing, burning.

Vadim tensed. And even that secret. Those many, many secrets, the shadow years. Dan had delivered them both into the hand of a child, on a drunken whim. Vadim pulled back, broke contact, moved the knife in his hand so it pointed against his elbow. He cried? We all do. Enough vodka, and we cry.

Matt was shouting by now, tears still running. "You don't deserve him. Of what I know of Mad Dog, he's a great guy. So fucking loyal, you wouldn't even know the word, have no idea of honour, do you? What the fuck do you care he'd never gotten over you walking out; he had given his word to that woman boss of his to not get himself killed. But you don't know, do you? The missions he's done? Suicidal. You fucked him up, congratulations, asshole. He's hurting like shit, enough to get himself piss drunk, after all the time you son of a bitch walked out on him. You know he sold everything he owned to bribe those people? Just to get you out. What for, for you? I don't get it, you don't fucking deserve anything."

Vadim stared, then broke eye contact, knew it showed that had impacted, and pretended to get dressed. *He still loves you.* That was the prize he had come to claim. A secret. Dan did feel the same, there was something left. He was clutching at straws and knew at the same time how futile it was. He thought of selection, and the doctor, and all the hard work to get into the camp in the first place. Fuelled by a hope seeing Dan might make things alright for both of them; about saying goodbye, or maybe find out if there was anything, anything left to feel.

Matt was getting so angry, the fear began to fade. "I don't understand what he's ever seen in you. You asshole, you fucking asshole! Accusing him of who knows the fuck what, and now he's getting himself redeployed and none of us his buddies know where to, because of his asshole of a fucking ex!" Matt was seething now, despite his situation. All but forgotten, replaced by something bigger and so insane, he was yelling at the Russian madman. No tears anymore, just rage. Tearing at the restraints again, this time with loathing, despising that man before him.

Redeployed. No. Dan was about to cover his tracks and vanish in a different war. And the woman diplomat wouldn't send him after Dan. Last chance. Wasted. He looked at the kid that was getting himself all worked up, felt nothing for him but envy. He'd live. He'd survive this, mentally. That anger would help him cope. Dan. We ruined it. We broke it beyond repair. Vadim pulled his trousers back up, slipped into the shirt, the vest, closed the belt, sat down on the bed to tie his boots.

"I hope you'll die, fucker." Matt shouted, "I hope you die like a dog, screaming in agony, because you deserve it. But since that would fuck Mad Dog up even more if he witnessed that, do us all a favour and go and die like a fucking dog once he's gone. So that he will eventually forget you, because he doesn't deserve this shit!" Matt spat at Vadim, right into his face, "Fuck you, asshole. Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you! Fucking kill me now if you want to. Do it, just do it already. Kill me now, hear me? Kill me!" Matt was mad with rage, completely out of his mind.

Vadim looked up, wiped the spit off on the arm of his vest, looked at the kid. He had nothing in his defence. Had stopped defending himself somewhere in prison. Don't go there. Honour, loyalty, pride. Yeah, right. He gave a smile, bared his teeth and stepped closer again. Ripped the name tag off Donahue's tunic while Matt glared at him, unable to stop him. Vadim slipped the trophy into his pocket, pulled his watch free and closed the wristband, sneering.

"Welcome to my fan club, jarhead. Run mewling back to Dan and tell him Vadim made you cry." The poison returned. "That's right, you'll live. I know everything I required to know." He brought the knife back out, stepped behind the chair and cut the plastic restraints.

Matt sat still, just as tense as before, the anger still burning, but something else there, big and overwhelming and it wasn't relief. Sat wary. Silent now while breathing hard. Expecting the worst. A knife at his jaw, slitting his throat, or stabbed in the back.

Vadim glanced down, checked, from the look of the Yank's hands and wrists, he'd be alright. They were slightly swollen, a bit raw, but nothing that didn't heal in a day or two. He stepped back, expected Donahue to attack him and the knife was ready. He'd die if he attacked him, simple. His patience was worn thin, and he only needed to be free and alive long enough to finish this. Put Dan and himself out of their miseries.

But there was nothing, no movement, only extreme tension in Matt's body. Live. Over? Matt could feel the cuts burning, and he swallowed the last of the snot from his sobbing, tears still stinging. Fucker. Bastard. He hated that Russian asshole. Hated him so much, he wanted him dead.

Vadim stood, looked down at the kid. Dan wouldn't take him back, love or not. He didn't believe it. Dan would never admit to it. He'd crossed the line, all he had to do was finish walking the distance. Get Dan to kill him, finish him off, thought the other might come to terms with that, and that meant he didn't have to turn the gun on himself. Despair had never been darker, never been more enticing. End this. The nightmares, the envy, the bitterness. He wanted that love. He couldn't have it. No way to take it or force it. It was fucked beyond recognition. Donahue seemed to work as a replacement. Jean was the friend, this was the lover. Dan had everything he needed to survive.

He moved towards the door, put his hand on the frame. "Ah. Rule one in a hostage situation: Don't antagonize your captors. Show respect. Befriend them." Vadim smirked. "I'd grade that as a failure, Yank."

And left into the night.

Matt turned his head, burst into action and shouted, "fuck off and die!" The Russian was gone and he could suddenly move. He had to get out of this place, back to his unit. Grabbed the stale bottle of water beside the bed, chucked water over his face before pulling up his uniform trousers. Standing, he felt dizzy, but he gritted his teeth, inspecting the damage. Shallow cuts. The bastard had known what he was doing. Known far too damn well. Rubbed his wrists and put his uniform back together. His hands were shaking, but he would pretend nothing had happened. Way to go, Matt. Way to go. A fun fuck ending in a fucked-up mess. So much for sex and fun and rock 'n roll. He was out of the room and back in the night, heading towards camp, but he wouldn't sleep that night.

* * *

That night in bed, Vadim stared into the darkness, shifted every now and then to convince himself he wasn't tied up, moved his arms, his legs. Thought of the kid. Strange. No other victim had stayed with him after the job was done. But he did remember them. Remembered Platon, remembered his unassuming

sweetness, his desire to go home, have an education, have a life after Afghanistan. Remembered the smell of Platon's blood. Smelt just like that of anybody else. Red colour. Nothing to it. People die. And this kid. Strength in the face of adversity. Anger replacing fear. Donahue replacing Krasnorada. Two years. Plus six months.

It's me, thought Vadim. I'm trapped in the past. I'm still in Afghanistan. The kid and Dan. Hard to imagine and it still made so much sense. That fresh-faced innocence. Dan, who'd seen and done everything.

Vadim dozed off for a while, had a vivid dream that was about sex, wild, cruel sex, painful, but oh so good, gut wrenching. He thought it was Dan who fucked him so hard he thought he'd have to die, and he cried when it happened, cried during the sex, felt burnt to ashes, his own need impossible to survive, knew there was blood, a knife that sliced through skin, carved him open, heavy bleeding, hoped he'd come before he would be too weak to feel anything, could feel the blood leave him, the last shreds of his life for Dan, felt how he got numb, bleed out with the sweat. Cried with relief Dan would still have him, didn't care he also killed him, and woke up horny and with gunk covering his eyes and lashes, breathing hard.

Too vivid. Too vivid, too intense, feared he'd been fucked with a knife, couldn't remember, didn't dare to. Only knew he'd died in the dream. And how good it had felt, dying.

How much his body liked the thought. He finished himself off, felt miserable, felt it like a loss, and cried, silently. Nerves so bare he felt raw and pained, as bad as after the first interrogations. No. Don't go there. He'd pleaded, just like Donahue. He'd wanted to survive. Just like Donahue. That had changed, now. He didn't care.

Did you ever consider suicide?

Dr Williams. He'd known. It was a normal response to trauma. He probably had put it down to survivor's guilt, some fucked-up misunderstanding. Ten years in Afghanistan can fuck a man up.

I will live. I have something to work towards. That keeps me on target. I am focused, Sir. As long as I have a target, I keep going.

We will have to give you a target, then. But be advised this might not be enough.

Had worked to prove he wasn't broken. Worked to see Dan again, forced that aging body to compete when his prime was over, when he clearly didn't heal as fast anymore, when his body punished him with pain for carelessness. All for unfinished business. Had felt he'd owed him. And had.

So focused on the landing of the plane, so focused on seeing Dan again there was not a single thought that reached beyond that. He'd worked towards it, like he had worked towards winning a war. Victory was supposed to be sweet, the end of all strife. Victory resolved everything. Had relied on Dan's goodwill, on his understanding, on a bond they'd forged with sex and pain and trust. No sex, no trust. Plenty of pain. That was all that was left now. And that had to end.

Vadim burrowed his face into the pillow, cried, he didn't want to die, didn't want to lose this battle, but there was no place he could go. No life. No alternatives. He had no idea how to be free. Dishonoured, disrespected, fucked-up, with no goal, no target, nothing worth fighting for, no country. He thought maybe Katya would take him back, allow him to have a bit of her life, like friends, brother and sister, as awkward as that would be after all that time.

It was the only bit of life he had left, a few things that weren't all darkness, a few things he hadn't ruined. Hoped the kids were growing up to be good people, despite his hand in their life. Two people he hadn't fucked up. Two he'd never touch. He should stay away from them. Another reason to remove himself from the equation.

And the hope that had kept him going in prison. He should have died the night they'd taken him in that hotel. With the feeling Dan loved him, and that he loved Dan, invincible, indestructible, with the illusion he was a worthy man. Honourable, a man who finally did what he was supposed to be doing, one that followed his heart instead of orders. A good man, a lover, a soldier defeated, but with his integrity intact.

A walking dead man. Vadim wiped the tears away, swallowed, looked at the dark ceiling, too close, felt trapped in an oversized coffin. He'd seen death. He knew what it would look like on his body. Had a fair idea what the temperatures would do to his skin, his flesh. He'd fester within hours. They'd bury him somewhere here, no 'home' to send him back to.

He was not an infidel, just somebody who didn't believe, not even a lipservicing Christian. Clearly doomed. He didn't believe in any kind of afterlife.

Didn't think there could be a god sadistic enough to create stuff just to make it suffer. Would resent a god that did that. It would just be over, darkness, with no senses to perceive it. An end to everything. Which sounded like a good deal. Nobody required him, he'd be a lost investment to the boss, eleven years worth of memories to some people. He'd be in no position to care whether those memories were good or bad. He hoped there were some good ones. Knew there were good ones, not all bad, some good stuff before he had ruined it. Hoped his death might counter some of the bad shit, but he'd be in no state to care. He cared right now, but that would pass.

He got up, cleaned his tin hut. Sorted his locker, shined the spare pair of boots, made sure everything was in top shape. Field bed, pillows, everything like he was still in the army, and still did this himself. Soothed his mind. He'd not give any reasons for further ridicule. Arranged the books on his shelf by size, not that he had managed to read any, but that hadn't kept him from trying, pulled the plug on the radio, took out the trash. Checked the letters, made sure they were correctly addressed. One to Katya, another one to Anoushka, and one to Nikolai, to be sent via the Hungarian. How grateful he was, grow up to be honourable people, just in case anything happens to me. I lived the life I wanted to live. It was my decision, all of it. My responsibility. There is nobody else to blame. True enough. Another letter, that passed as a 'will', his pay to be refunded to the place where it had come from. The closest he'd come to admitting this was suicide. I am a wasted investment. Here's your money back.

Yet another letter—he'd written this five or six times and cried too hard the last two times. To Dan. But Dan was the very tool with which he was about to kill himself. Had tried many things, one of them was just 'I love you, I'm not a good man, but I love you'. And: 'Forgive me. Forgive me for being the man I am'.

All that horrible darkness, the bitterness, the relentless pain. He doubted Dan could forgive. No. Disbelieved. Didn't think his love made a difference. Not now, not with Donahue and Jean. Donahue had told him there was still love. Maybe it made a difference. Maybe, in a fucked-up way, Dan would understand. Maybe. But then, it was better to not say anything than saying the wrong thing. It would be like turning the knife in the man's heart. Nothing he could write would take that away, forcing Dan to kill him. It was better when that scrap of love turned into hatred as well.

He burnt that letter, then finished cleaning up his kit. Placed the photos into a bag, labelled it, put the letters on top, what 'personal effects' he had. Would tell everybody he had anticipated death. And being killed by Dan made sense. A last, fucked-up pledge. A last pain. A last satisfaction. He hoped Dan understood it the right way. But it didn't matter. It would end like this. Better than how it was going. Much better. Less painful. Dan would lose control, and he was probably the only man who would manage to do it. One last favour.

Vadim checked and double checked his gear, then went to shower, shaved with the care of a man condemned, shaved the sides of his head, his neck, took all the care that was necessary to make a bit of a dignified impression, at least that, at least leave like a soldier. With a modicum of face.

Then, dressed, impeccably, and went to the Mess when it was time. He wasn't hungry, went for orange juice, shoved token scrambled eggs on a plate he didn't intend to finish. Dan wasn't there. Damn. But Jean was. The legionnaire would do. He'd be a tool for a tool.

Vadim moved towards him, saw Jean's crew glance up, while the legionnaire kept drinking coffee. The tension around the man spoke volumes. Vadim put the tray down on the same table. Saw Jean look up, eyes baleful. "How's the screaming going, you sick fuck?" In Russian.

Vadim smiled. "I slept like a baby." In English.

Jean looked up, seemed almost worried at that, and stared at Vadim as Vadim pulled out the name tag and tossed it on the table. It landed with the right side up, and read 'Donahue'.

"What's that?"

"A trophy." Vadim kept smiling. "You might want to ask your 'stud'." English.

Pascal stared at him, then laughed, like it was some stupid-ass insider joke or running gag, and Jean looked uncomfortable, but just for a moment. "Will do. Now piss off."

Vadim drank his orange juice, then cleaned away the tray. Stepped outside, in the middle of camp. Knew Dan would be able to see him, knew it would happen right here. Dangerous, they might be stopped, but he counted on Dan's effectiveness and speed. It would be done within minutes. Maybe Dan had the

presence of mind to ask him into a different part of the camp. At the moment, the main point was to be visible and easily found.

He looked up into the sky, a pale blue that would heat up soon. He'd be dead before it became hot, he'd die in the morning cool. Good timing.

Dan was crossing the open space in front of the tin huts, showered and shaved, dressed in t-shirt, trousers and boots instead of his customary flipflops and shorts on days off duty. Seemed he had something planned for that day. He rubbed his temples with a groan, fighting off a hangover induced headache, thankful for the shades that kept the worst of the morning sun away. Muttering something to himself before he glanced up and set eyes on Vadim. His stance changed immediately. There was tension, his lips set into a thin line, glaring at the Russian before heading straight into the Mess tent. He needed food. Lots of it, and the company of men who knew nothing about his past. Some stupid jokes, a bit of banter and a good amount of laughter would do just nicely.

Getting his tray laden with double helpings of everything, he spotted Jean and Pascal at a table and grinned, heading straight towards them and plonking tray and himself down. "Morning, mates." Lifting his shades for a moment, revealing red-veined eyes. "How's things?" Downing the first cup of coffee in one go.

Jean's hand closed around a scrap of cloth. "Morning." He saw Pascal was about to say something, and even for an ex-para, Pascal was a little slow to pick up on social interaction. Which could save the day, or ruin it. Mind racing, but then he decided to speak Russian to keep Pascal out of the conversation. Pascal would think he knew what it was about. "Do you know anybody called this?" He opened his hand and dropped the name tag, then emptied his coffee, like this was routine.

The moment Dan's eyes fell onto the name tag, he dropped the Styrofoam cup and the rest of the coffee splattered over the table. "Where did you get that from?" Russian, as well.

Pascal jumped up as the coffee ran towards him and he cursed, which at least prevented him from saying anything stupid, and for once, Jean was grateful. "The Russian. He said it was a trophy. That was all he said."

Dan ignored Pascal, coffee, even Jean. Staring at the name tag, picking it up between his fingers. 'Donahue'. Matt. Fuck, Matt! "Trophy. He said trophy?" Still in Russian. "When."

Jean opened his hand and splayed the fingers. Five. “He just dropped it off.” Dan nodded, took off his shades, had never done that in public before. Handed them to Jean. “Hold onto them for me.” Right fist clenched around the name tag, he stood up. “Stay here.” Said nothing more, just turned and walked out of the Mess. Not running. Not walking. A purposeful march. One goal. One target. Shouting in Russian once he had stepped out of the tent, “Where are you, you fucking cunt!”

Vadim glanced back to the tent, over his shoulder. Like clockwork. Mind over emotions. Strings to pull, reflexes to trigger. Life could be simple. He turned, raised his hands, waved Dan towards him with his fingers. A mocking gesture, like they were already fighting. Waited till Dan had seen him, then broke into a run, to get to the racing track. Out of sight. A good place for a fight or murder. Felt good, running, last good thing he’d feel in his life. He was still faster than Dan, Dan and his fucked knees.

And Dan broke into a run, as expected. He’d run to the end of the next desert to beat that fucking piece of scum into a pulp. Vadim stopped on the wide open ground, a slight sheen of sweat, heart pumping. Felt good, and waited for the other. Thirty yards. Twenty-five. Twenty, Dan was shouting, not out of breath, just not that fast. “Where the fuck did you get the name tag from. Answer me, cunt!” Vadim assumed a defensive position, like he would actually fight. He’d put up an act, not more.

Dan stopped, opened his fist. Not even in a sweat yet. Heat. Dan. Heat and Dan and blood and murder. “Where did you get the name tag from!”

“I took it from his uniform when he was tied up and crying,” said Vadim. “I followed you last night. He was helpless when you were gone. He never saw me coming.” Vadim snarled, felt the darkness roll and coil, the poisonous blood. Predator. Utterly incapable of remorse. “He didn’t give me enough of a fight, but give he did.” He stared at Dan, gave a cruel, rough laugh. “Nowhere near as fierce a fight as it was taking you down. I didn’t even need Vanya to take him prisoner.” Stoke the fire, prodded the tiger. Hate me. Hate me like you did that night. Let’s start at the beginning, and end it right there, annihilate everything. Annihilate me.

“No!” A roar of rage tore out of Dan. Had the presence of mind to stuff the name tag into a pocket before running towards and body slamming into Vadim. “I’ll fucking kill you!” Impact of body upon body, shoulder first, square into the

other's chest, where he was the most vulnerable. Hitting the solar plexus straight on.

The half-hearted block did nothing to take the force out of the charge. Vadim thought that was an excellent way to start it, then the pain was a fist against his heart, eradicated thought, pain like a bullet, impact, heat. He staggered back, fell, body didn't obey, breath, heartbeat, all had stalled, stopped, chest too tight to breathe. Saw people running towards them. Body curled up, automatically, felt his breath come back like yet another impact, hurting like fuck.

"Fuck you!" Dan snarled, had his body more under control than ever before. Dozens of fist fights since he had joined the camp. The fag. The poof. The fucking faggot. He'd learned with every fight. A better killer than even in his SAS days. Bare-fisted, he'd smash the bastard's face in with nothing but his knuckles. Straddling the curled-up body, he hit the forehead once, twice, forcing the head back. "Look at me while you fucking die!" Hit the face, left, right, right again, jaw, temple, working his way to the centre, he'd broken the nose before, could break it again, but that wouldn't be enough. "Die! Fucking die already. Cunt!" Aimed for the neck and throat instead. Killer punches designed to smash and tear the trachea apart. The fucking rapist would die in agony.

Vadim tried to protect his face, saw the rage on Dan's features, knew, yes, he'd done it, finally, the rain of blows would do it. Dan's weight, Dan's rage, Dan's vengeance, finally, for something he'd done so long ago. Fair payment. Lips smashed, an agonizing blow to the side of the throat which hadn't come in true. Felt Dan's punches open the defence, never worked, this wasn't boxing, no gloves to hide behind. His body wanted to fight back, hurt too much, he stared into Dan's face and thought you'll never know. I'll drown in my own blood, will never breathe again, but you'll never know. Felt a blow that came in true, the pain almost blacked him out. Didn't cling to anything, no feelings, no memories, no names. Had said his goodbyes long ago.

Jean came in a full run, freed his arm on the way, tore the sling, lunged at Dan, both arms around the other before any of those vicious blows could kill. "Dan! Don't! Fucking don't!" Felt him struggle, but at least had knocked him off the Russian, who didn't move, face one bloodied mess. Pascal had been right behind him, he hoped he'd have the presence of mind to act. Jean resisted Dan's struggling, felt his elbow hurt, grate like it was rusty, but clung to him, kept Dan's face in his

hands. “Don’t. Put a fucking bullet into his back, but don’t kill him in camp. Listen to me!”

“He did it!” Dan was fighting Jean as if he were still fighting Vadim, but Jean had the better position and kept the upper hand, fucked elbow or not. “He did it again! Let go!” He was like a raging bull, vying for blood. Muscles, tendons, blood vessels beneath the surface of his tanned skin, all raised, hard, ropey. “Fuck off, Jean, this isn’t your war! It’s mine!” He could hardly breathe nor speak, could see nothing but a red haze and blurry vision.

Jean kept Dan under control with his own weight, would take any blow, tried to keep him pinned. “I know...he deserves it, Dan, he deserves it all, fuck I’d hold him down so you can fucking kill him, but not in camp. He’s not worth it. He’s nothing, he’s scum, listen to me.”

“I don’t want to listen!” Dan shouted at Jean, one last effort to free himself, but the rage was starting to subside, draining his body and most of all his soul. “You shouldn’t have fucking stopped me. Fuck.” Jerked in the human restraint, then stilled. “Fuck!”

“Believe me, I’m already sorry...” Jean glanced up to see Pascal check on the Russian, check the throat. Pascal seemed worried, but not alarmed. Good. Bad. Shit. “What the fuck did he do,” he muttered, holding Dan under control, away from the Russian.

Dan was breathing hard, the come-down harsh, like cold turkey with the dirty needle still stuck in his vein. Shaking his head. No. Wouldn’t talk. Couldn’t tell. “It’s not your war.” Repeated, while the tension in his body was draining away, leaving him aching. Sore. Empty. Refusing to look at Vadim. “Used to be ours. Only ours.”

“Damn right,” murmured Jean, releasing some of the pressure, grew tired, felt his elbow throb. Fuck. So much for ‘no strain’. He patted Dan’s face, touch meant tender, but Pascal wouldn’t be able to tell. “How’s the Russian doing?”

“Breathing,” said Pascal. “He’ll come round. Guess that’s a concussion.”

“He fell,” said Jean. “Didn’t tie his shoe laces. I can’t have them both in the fucking brig after an ass-chewing.”

Pascal grinned and gave a thumbs up. Jean got off Dan, released him and offered his good hand. “Come.” But before Dan could take it, there was movement and sound from Krasnorada: “He sucks good cock, yes, Jean?” In English.

Jean covered the distance, wanted to fucking kick the bastard, held back, but Dan was faster. Had got onto his feet and covered the few steps before either could hold him back. Delivering a kick into Vadim's ribs that was meant to break bones, only a slightly off aim prevented the worst from happening. "Fucking shut up and die, cunt!" He didn't get another kick in, Jean moved between Dan and Krasnorada, the good hand on his upper arm. "I need to check with the medic. Arm fucking hurts." Take Dan's mind off the enemy, who had curled up from the kick, smashed lips opened, teeth pink with blood, eyes shut against the pain. Good.

The fight had drained everything out of Dan yet the slightest provocation flared the rage back up again. "Sorry, mate." To Jean, glanced at Pascal. Neither would talk. He couldn't risk it.

Jean waved. "Whatever, don't worry about it." He looked at Pascal. "Make sure a medic checks up on him." Hoped Pascal understood letting Krasnorada lie there for a bit would keep Dan and him separated. He began to turn back towards camp, picked up the sling that lay discarded on the way. "You shouldn't have stopped me." Dan protested, "I'd rather go to prison than let that cunt live." He followed Jean, glancing backwards to where Vadim lay curled up, before forcing himself to take his eyes away.

"We can always arrange an accident by sniper," said Jean on the way to the medic's tent. "But not like this. He must have planned this. He wanted you to do this. That's the single best reason not to do it. Because he wants it."

Dan stopped as if frozen on the spot. "What?"

Jean glanced around. "Do you see anybody out here? Witnesses? And then, coming up to me and tell me I should tell you he took a trophy from somebody? I assume that somebody is somebody you...know quite well. Can't remember the name, but that's me, good old Jean having trouble remembering names and faces. Must be the shit they gave us in case of a chemical attack." Indicated back to Vadim and Pascal. "You nearly did it, and look at you. Not a scratch on you. Bruised knuckles, but that's it."

Dan said nothing. Stared at Jean. Planned. Vadim had planned it. The showers. The knife. The attempt to get him to fight. He hadn't bitten then, but had jumped at the chance now. The fucker had forced a friend into the equation. "Up close and personal." Dan murmured to himself. Fists clenching and unclenching.

Could feel the ache now, where knuckles had connected with skin, muscle and bone. How satisfying it had been.

“Fucking asshole planned it.” He was breathing hard, shook his head, glanced back to where Pascal stood above Vadim. “Fucking bastard wanted me to kill him.” Couldn’t move, couldn’t think. “Why? Fuck, why!” Didn’t expect an answer. “I got to get out of here.”

“Good idea. But that was a suicide attempt and we can’t even get him for it.” Jean shook his head. “And that bastard will have a weapon out there on patrol. Woah, no way. I’ll have a word with the CO. Krasnorada is nowhere near fit for duty, and he needs to get his head checked.”

Dan nodded at the latter. Shit, he couldn’t even get a single clear thought himself anymore.

Jean continued, “Can’t have him out there with my boys. And whatever shit he’ll pull when he’s in his hut. Nope. I want him in the brig.”

“No.” Dan suddenly stopped the other, “You can’t do that. Lock him up in the brig and he’ll find a way to kill himself. Even if that means running against the wall enough times to split his goddamned skull.” Dan shook his head, “I’m not making excuses. I was ready to kill that bastard, nothing would have felt better than spill the fucker’s blood. I swear, if he has done what he wanted me to believe he has done, I will kill Vadim Krasnorada, and no one will keep me from it, but you can’t lock him up. He’s fucked up alright. He needs help alright. But not here. He’s a fucking nutcase, but if you lock him up, like in the Lubyanka, it’d be better to kill him first. Not that I care.” Lie, Dan? Still a lie.

“But you don’t want the blame afterwards.”

Jean groaned with frustration. “And who’s going to watch over him and make sure he doesn’t shoot himself? Or us, and then himself? And how do I sell the whole hog to the CO?” He rubbed the base of his nose. “Okay. I will talk to him about the screaming at night. And propose that man gets his head sorted while on R&R. And if Krasnorada does not show significant changes, I’ll get each and every one of the boys to complain and swear holy oaths he’s been raping baby rabbits out in Iraq. I want him out of here.”

Dan nodded, “just drop the bit with the baby rabbits.” Started to walk, away from the man still lying on the ground, whose blood was drying on his knuckles.

“Damn, that was my favourite part.” Jean laughed, shaking his head.

What has happened to us, Dan thought, and when did it happen. I would have killed you, murdered you, and you wanted me to, and I still will, if I find out you didn't lie.

"You think I got a chance to get into the Yank camp?" Dan asked, "got to have a swift word with someone who lost something." He was flexing his hands as he walked Jean towards the medical tent. He'd have to hide his scraped knuckles, knowing Jean and Pascal would swear the Russian had lost his balance while tying his laces.

Jean smiled, but didn't make eye contact. "I've heard a story they requested some kit from us. Maybe they are getting sick of their MREs and are exchanging some of theirs for ours. I know the QM is involved, maybe he needs a hand or two for unpacking. Talk to him."

"Cheers, mate." Dan didn't smile, just flashed something which could pass for it. "Got my shades? I feel naked." Held out his hand. "Got to clean up first and then have a word with the QM. Need to check up after that, when I can get out and light fire under some arses. Better sooner than later."

Jean nodded and pulled the shades from his breast pocket. Looked like they had survived the small wrestling match. He put them in Dan's hand. "Yeah. Good luck with the guy who lost his stuff. I'll go off to get my ass chewed by the medic and the CO. Pretty sure the CO is a little sweet on me." He winked. "Like all faggots in this goddamned camp." Gave Dan a slap against the shoulder, and turned.

"Not all, Jean. Remember." Dan turned as well, slipped the shades back over his eyes and made his way to the shower block to wash the evidence off his hands.

He'd almost killed Vadim. He couldn't bear it.

* * *

Dan's day couldn't possibly get anymore worse than the morning had started, but it got a hell of a lot more hectic. He remained under such tension and strain he was like a coiled spring, ready to snap any moment. He had to postpone his arrangements for the day off, instead sweet-talked the QM into letting him co-deliver the requested kit into the American camp. Heading straight for the

accommodation tents, he'd been lucky. Matt Donahue was lying on his bunk, chilling out while reading some paperback. Dan had become buddy-friendly with a lot of the kids who came popping down to the bar for a soft drink whenever they were allowed to, and was able to pry Matt away to exchange a few words in privacy, without anyone suspecting more than a quick exchange of banter between mates. There were quite a few in that camp who secretly admired the old Mad Dog for his guts.

Matt was angry, but Dan had expected worse. Had prepared himself for blame and spite, instead meeting anger, hurt and a chilling edge to the kid Dan had never encountered before in the Yank who'd always been a happy-go-lucky twenty year old jarhead. It sobered Dan, worried him, but clung to 'that which doesn't kill us makes us stronger'. He handed the name tag back to his mate and started asking questions. Matt couldn't understand why Dan was adamant and kept asking several times if he had been raped and refused to admit to it, until Matt lost his temper in a short-fused but spectacularly impressive way, leaving Dan absolutely convinced the kid was telling the truth. Shallow cuts, Matt admitted to, swollen wrists from the rope and a spot of beating, but most of all fear and goddamned knife play that had gotten to him. Matt apologised, over and over again, for having told everything Dan had spilled, the love and lies, the hatred and emptiness and most of all the pain, but Dan reassured him it did not matter, and anyone would have broken down and told it all if faced with that lunatic.

He said his good-byes, knowing they wouldn't have another chance to meet again and Matt seemed to be everything but interested in sex right now. Understandable, Dan had a fair idea how much the kid was fucked up, faced with Vadim at his worst, and he wished him good luck with his boyfriend and a bloody good military career.

Dan left when Matt started drilling him for an answer why he had been asking about rape several times and if that fucking bastard of a Russian madman had been known for the shit, but Dan shook his head, refused to answer and left Matt with a slap on the shoulder and an apology for having dragged him into a private war.

Collateral damage.

When Dan arrived back in the British camp, he managed to get an appointment with the CO, demanding the earliest possible date out there, being told arrangements would be made within a week, probably sooner.

They still were not sure where he'd be redeployed to, but there were plans afoot and the CO could not wait for the day Dan, the trouble maker, was leaving his camp, no matter how good he was in his job. Dan grinned, wryly, thanked the poncy arse, then pushed the shades back over his eyes. Finding scran, then solitude and silence in his overheated room, sitting naked on his bunk. Guzzling lukewarm water and staring at the metal walls, thinking. It was already evening when he pulled the shorts on, threw a t-shirt over his head and found the battered flip-flops. His last mission for the day, the week, and the Gulf, would not need protective gear. Not anymore.

Dan was making his way through the dusk, past a handful of rooms in the row of tin huts, aiming straight for one he had never been in before. The lion's den. He didn't knock on the door, just hammered once with his fist against it, before walking inside, unannounced. He needed answers. Simple ones this time.

The door was open. A fan was running, adding a slight whirr to the room. Nothing else. The radio was unplugged, the cable neatly fixed to the side with duct tape. The room impeccable, no personal effects visible, no photos, the books in a line, untouched. No food. No water.

Dan stepped inside, closed the door behind him, allowing his eyes to get used to the gloom. Saying nothing for a long time while looking around, taking in every little detail. He'd never seen a place that was Vadim's own, not in eleven years. Twelve almost.

Vadim was lying on the field bed, wearing the British camo he had adopted since the selection. Had felt odd, but he'd worn different camo patterns in his life, most of them to confuse the enemy. Take on different roles, nationalities, Spetsnaz style warfare. The shirt was unbuttoned, boots shined and off, the only two things that implied the temperature. Dark sweat patches on the undershirt, old burn mark under the throat barely visible in the gloom. One hand was up to keep something cooling to his face, elbow propped against the wall, as if Vadim couldn't be bothered holding it up with his own strength. His face was mostly covered, apart from one blue eye, which opened to reveal a bloodied white rim, the area around it swollen where fist had hit cheekbone. Vadim's gaze focused on Dan and there was

a flicker of tension, body panicking at the potential pain, the brute force, the potential killer.

Dan saw the sudden tension, did nothing, thought nothing either. Silent, still, until Vadim indicated the slightest nod, stoic, fatalistic, and closed his eye again. The left hand that had been resting on Vadim's stomach came to rest on the bed, palm towards the ceiling. His chest expanded with deeper breaths, soundless.

"I want you to answer me a few questions. It's simple. Yes or no will do. Can you do that?" Dan asked into the silence.

Vadim adjusted the cloth on his face to bare the lips, bruised, swollen. They hardly moved. "Yes."

Dan nodded. "You did not rape Donahue." He knew the answer already, but this was no game. It was deadly serious and it was big. Dark. Dangerous and fucking painful. He paused, waiting for the answer.

"No. I fucked his mind, but that's it."

"You lied to me by implying you *did* do to the kid what you had done to *me*." Another pause, Dan was still standing in the middle of the room.

"Yes."

"You manipulated me into killing you, my bare fists as the weapon of your murder, and you would have succeeded had Jean and Pascal not interrupted." Dan was breathing evenly.

"Yes. Fuck them."

"You selfishly decided I would end your life. I would live with the guilt. I would be sentenced for murder." Three questions—three answers? Dan stood still, not a muscle twitched, only a few long hairs moved by a stray breeze from the fan.

"No. Not murder. Grievous assault, resulting in my death. You have witnesses in your favour. A beating that went too far. There were plenty of them. None of those were attempted murder." Vadim paused. "Selfish." That depended entirely on the perspective, the state hadn't liked this, the individual removing himself from the pool of workers and soldiers by his own leave. It was really a question of who owned a life. And who owned his? Not his homeland, and Britain handled him like something useful, but distasteful. Not a homeland. No army, just a job now. Now, Dan hadn't wanted his life, either. As if it weren't worthy enough for anybody to want it. Ironic. "Every decision is selfish. Everything we do is selfish. Dying is selfish. So is killing. I wanted you to hate me enough to do it."

“Because coming back was not what you had expected?” Still no movement, just Dan, dusk, and death.

“Coming back where?” Vadim opened that bloodshot eye again. “The plan was sound. I underestimated Jean. Or overestimated.” He sounded tired. “Coming back from wherever you had fucked off to. Coming back to where I was.” Coming back to me? “Don’t play dumb.” Dan frowned, using his voice like a whiplash. “I don’t even know where the fuck you’d fucked off to, how the fuck you came to the Gulf and most of all why the fuck you showed up here. Why?” He snorted, “No. Don’t think I expect an answer.” He moved, but only to put his hands into the pockets of his cut-off camo shorts.

“The short version: I was caught breaking and entering in Sweden. I got in touch with the boss lady, she offered me a job. I trained with the Royal Marines, and went through SAS selection to prove I can still shoot a rifle. And I was posted here, a mercenary like you. I requested to be sent to the same place.”

“What the fuck were you thinking, Vadim? Half a year. Six fucking months of nothing. You could have been dead for all I knew.” And it probably would have been easier than this now.

I was like dead. Vadim closed his eye again, it felt swollen and itchy, but it looked better than the other one. He shifted the cooling towel to cover it again.

Dan continued, trying to understand. “Two years, fucker, two years I had been hoping and working towards that one moment, for when you’d come back. Two fucking years and you left without a word, no note, not a fucking thing.” Dan glanced over to the bare window, shook his head. “Just one word, anything, and I might not have understood, but fuck, I would have respected your decision. Just one fucking measly pathetic word would have done it. Just one, you thoughtless bastard.”

Vadim’s jaw muscles tensed. “It was not a decision. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t feel. I couldn’t decide. Too much. It was too much. Your guys put me back together. I felt back in control. I came here to...do what I should have done, and couldn’t. It’s not an excuse. I should have been capable of acting and deciding. It was a weakness. I was not in control.” Sounding much like he was debriefing after an exercise to a superior. I blew it. I accept full responsibility. Punish me.

“Then what happened to you? What the fuck happened to you in Russia?”

Vadim's fist tightened, pressed against the outside of his thigh. Solitary. Confinement. He needed to see, to move. He took the wet towel off, couldn't stand the soothing darkness, manoeuvred his body to lean against the wall, face discoloured, one eye blackened and swollen. "Russia told me in no uncertain terms she's finished with me." My country. I was good enough to kill for Russia; suffer, bleed and be tortured for Russia, but I wasn't good enough to be forgiven—for one thing, being human.

Dan shook his head again, pulled his shoulders up before letting them drop. Resigned. "I don't claim I understand, but whatever it is that fucked you up, you got to get help, Vadim. And that help can't be me. You got to get your head sorted."

And I will be gone. Never knowing if you made it, because I can't. Too late.

"I've had help. I'm fit for service." Not for polite company, but for service. Shoot straight, run, march, kill. Suicidal, but fit for service. He wasn't sure he had fooled them, or whether they had made allowances. Something in Dan's voice made him look up, concern, more than accusations, a warmth that threatened to choke him. Wanted to beg. Ask. Hope. Felt his eyes burn.

Dan nodded his head slowly. Fit for service, but not fit for life, apparently not. "I can't stay, because what you've done this time was too close for fucking comfort."

Vadim nodded. "Yeah. That was the plan. It worked halfway. But no plan..." survives enemy contact. He looked at Dan, that sunburnt bronzed dark-haired man he had wanted all the time, and who was already gone. Posted somewhere else. Loving, needing, trusting somebody else. "It's alright. It's good now." I'll live. No. Lie. You did everything you could, I used you, manipulated you, hurt you, and you're still here to ask questions. Courageous Dan. I've done everything I could think of to force you, but that's expended, the last bullet expended, nothing more, no weakness, no link, no guilt. No desire, no touch. Dan was free now, untouchable.

Again that slow, resigned nod. Dan inhaled deeply, dark eyes like pools of black in the gloom of the barren room. He was nothing but shadows. Vadim looked at him, saw him move towards the door. Questions answered. Dan would leave. And wouldn't be there after that. Their rituals of saying goodbye. Be careful. Don't get killed. See you when I do. Get in touch, you know the place. The contact. The

time. The reason. You know. Presents he could find, kit, food, boots. He still wore Matterhorns, different model, more advanced. Anything like that. A scrap of the old thing. He didn't ask for a touch, craved it, yes, but he knew Dan too well. Anything. Maybe forgiveness.

Leave me something, Dan.

"Just don't go fucking up any more of my mates." Dan paused, half-turned, then stopped, looking back. "Not that it will make a difference. I'll be gone in a few days and don't bother asking anyone where I am. They won't know. No one will."

And fuck, I don't even know it either.

Last concern for his friends. Jean. Donahue. It hurt like a blow to the teeth.

"I've done that, it didn't work."

This time Dan walked to the door, a shadow amongst shadows, defeated on a level where only one man was able to touch him—and had touched him. Too many times. He stopped in the door, but didn't glance backwards. "I wish you peace, Vadim." Peace. The ultimate absence of pain, loneliness, anger, suffering. Love or hate.

Vadim's voice broke as he tried to speak. Had no idea what he had wanted to say. Don't go? I love you? Or just "no"?

Then he was gone.

"Peace is cheap. You can load it into a fucking gun!" Vadim shouted, and fell back onto the bed again, crying, stifled the sounds against his fist.

Dan never heard the last words, or perhaps he didn't want to.

* * *

"Thanks, asshole," said Jean, darkly, after stepping out of the CO's tent. Overpaid bastard had been exceedingly helpful. He snorted and headed back to the tin huts, inhaled, cast the tension off. Solange hated it when he frowned and kept telling him if he smiled, things always got easier. Trouble was, she was right. She kept reading stuff in Cosmo and Elle and even though she managed to whittle the articles down to short maxims like "smiling makes you pretty," there was something to it.

He rapped against Pascal's door and the para opened the door, dressed in cycling shorts and a sheen of sweat. Holy fuck. Was he really starting to look at men differently? Was he? Jean stepped back and raised his hands, laughing. "Fuck, man, you getting ready for a date with Mad Dog? You ain't got no shame..."

Pascal hit him square against the chest. "Shithead. What do you want?"

"How's the Russian?"

"Brought him to the medic, seems he's alright."

"Anything he said?"

Pascal shrugged. "Na."

"Heard anything?"

Pascal got a sly expression. Which was about as believable as Pluto the dog feeling sly. "Medic said he's off duty for today and tomorrow. Did stuff to his pupils, so they can see whether his eyes are fucked. Can't have bright light for twenty-four. Had a few stitches. Concussion, so he got some painkillers and they told him to rest."

"Hm. Need to think about that." Jean peered inside. "You have a bottle left?"

Again that Pluto the dog expression. "Yeah." Pascal vanished inside and returned with a bottle Jack. "Pay me tomorrow. I'm busy right now."

"Wanking?"

"Yoga."

Jean laughed and saluted with the bottle. "Too much information, mate." He was still chuckling when he rapped against Dan's door. "Hey, Mad Dog. I bring booze."

"It's open!" Dan shouted from the inside, sounding breathless. "Always is, dickhead."

Inside, there was Mad Dog, on his back on the floor, feet hooked beneath the metal bunk and doing crunches. Sweating like the proverbial nickname as he worked on his abs.

Jean glanced around, couldn't help but notice the tensing and relaxing of muscle under the dark, horribly scarred skin. Shit. Second guy that was nearly naked, as if to tease him with the fact he saw some things. He did. Or maybe it was just about Mad Dog. He placed the bottle on what served as a nightstand, sat down

and waited. Watching the tense shoulders, the curve of chest, pumping motions. Shit, he really missed Solange. He was getting too used to this.

Dan stopped soon enough, just flopped back down onto the ground and lay panting on the floor. The room looked empty, most of his stuff had already been packed up. The only remaining items were a table lamp that cast a yellow glow over his sweat-glistening body, and the pieces of furniture that belonged to the camp. Nothing else, except for a bergan stuffed to bursting and a sports bag. He was ready to move on, at least that's what it seemed from the outside.

"What's that?" Dan gestured with his chin to the bottle of JD. "Farewell booze?"

"Yeah." Jean gave a grin and indicated his arm, a white stabilizing bandage around the joint, but no sling anymore. "Farewell to the damned sling." He broke the seal of the top, offered the bottle to Dan.

"And here I was, believing I meant something to you." Dan smirked, then threw the back of his hand in an overly dramatic gesture against his forehead.

"See if I care, eh?" He reached for the bottle, while still on the floor, lifted up and started to drink, every line, ripple, formation of muscle and sinew on his body a shimmering dark bronze statue in the low-level light.

Jean sat down on the bed and found it hard not to stare at the muscles. Tease, he thought. Only he didn't believe Dan did it on purpose. Okay. I'm slowly turning gay. I was fine this morning under the shower, but this...is a bit much. But truth was, Dan was sexy. Male, yes, but sexy.

"Cheers, mate, just what I needed." Dan wiped his lips then handed the bottle back. Scrambling up to sit with his knees bent, still on the floor, leaning against his bunk. "You heard? I'm off day after tomorrow. Went faster than I thought."

"Yeah. Lucky bastard. Getting out of this fucking desert." Jean took a deep swallow, glanced down at Dan. "I'll stay until this shit is dealt with." Indicating Kuwait and Iraq with a gesture. "And after that, Paris, the city of love."

Dan grinned, "You going to stay in France? Don't tell me you won't be itching to get back into adrenalin-heaven." He reached round and found his towel. Wiped his face. "I want to spend a few weeks fucking my woman." Jean gave a broad grin. "Food, parties, proper drinking, sleeping long, more sex. Air-

conditioning. And then I get bored and sign the next contract. That's the life, Dan. That's exactly the life."

Dan laughed and nodded. "Aye, I can see that. Sounds like heaven, except it would bore me to death within days." He looked at the damp towel, "I must stink like a possum. Meant to have another shower."

Jean sniffed himself. "Don't let me keep you. I might join you." A wink. "So you get a vision of my straight ass. Something to think about tonight, huh?"

"Sure." Dan flashed his teeth. "Your ever so straight-as-fuck arse." He grinned, but then sobered for a moment. "Don't think I'm going to do too much of the thinking tonight. On a scale of one to ten it was a twenty-two pointer of a shit day." Paused, "Week. Month. Years. Life. Whatever." He shrugged, got up from the floor.

"Thinking is overrated anyway." Jean got up as well. "Let me get my towel. See you in the showers." He gave another grin.

"Sure. See you in a sec." Dan waved the other off, took hold of the soap bag and wandered off, while Jean headed towards his place. Got the washing bag, towel slung over one shoulder, headed towards the showers, heard one of them was running, saw Dan already under water, steam rising. He stripped as well, started the shower right next to Dan, let the water run over him, and glanced at Dan's body before stepping behind the partition. Yeah. Definitely turning gay there. Shit. Friend and sexy. Didn't really go together, only that he had already kissed this man, had felt him come against his body, had come against him, clinging, relishing in the rock-steady strength. Dan had something about him that allowed crashing and being weak without threat. Fuck, am I falling like a girl for the strong shoulder? More like a brother, a comrade. He gathered a handful of shower gel, liked being this close to Dan, liked to watch how he washed himself. His hand found his own cock, getting hard from the closeness. Jean leaned against the stall with his good elbow, began to stroke himself.

Dan's head poked out of the stream of water, looking pointedly at the job Jean was doing on himself. "I reckon you fancy a hand." Lifted his eyes away from the cock and towards Jean's face. His own, though, not quite interested. Jean glanced around. Showers. Shit. The best way to ruin his reputation forever. Pascal—or anybody—blundering in. It aroused him, strangely, the open space, the possibility to get caught. Had played those games with Solange. Night clubs, dark

corners, toilets, cars, parks. Few suitable places in Paris they hadn't tried out. "If you...have a spare one." He moved closer. "I didn't plan this, honest..."

"Seems I do have a spare one." Dan lifted his hand, waved it about. "Got two, after all." He leaned against the corner of the thin partition wall, grinning. He had nothing to lose. No reputation, no face, no nothing. They stood close, both touching the wall, both a step out of the actual shower spray, and Dan reached for Jean's cock. "Guess going to me knees," starting to stroke, expert touch, strong fingers, "would be a touch too much," harsh grip, demanding. He was a bloke after all, and fuck, he loved cocks, even though his own right now was only mildly interested, "but you could always claim my throat raped you."

Jean's hands reached blindly to Dan's chest, slid down the wet skin, felt the muscles vibrate, while his body was begging, craving the touch, the attention, the fucking strength. "I...won't claim a thing..." he said, breathless. "Can't claim...I don't want this." Shit. The other's cock, right hand squeezing Dan's balls, moving to stroke the other, giving a helpful hand, more coordinated, stronger. Still felt a little tension in the elbow, sore, whatever, fuck, the heat and strength and Dan reacting to his touch, some odd compliment, and Jean liked that. Liked the thought to think he aroused the other, a game, lighthearted fun, trust.

Aroused, yes, Dan closed his eyes for a moment, while stroking the other, stepped closer. No way they wouldn't get caught if someone entered the showers now. He was stroking Jean faster, harder, while stopping the other's hand on his own cock, instead moving it to rest on his hip. Jean glanced up, questioningly, not quite selfish enough in his need to not care.

"Not young anymore...", Dan was breathless, but just not enough, the edge was missing and he knew he wouldn't make it. "Been a shit day..." doubling his effort on Jean's body, using every trick of the trade while grinning. Jean was a lot of things, but not as straight as he claimed to be. The way he arched into Dan's hand, took hold of muscles and darkly tanned skin, gasped and breathed under strain and stared at Dan's body, spoke volumes. Perhaps not gay, but sure as fuck not just straight either. Making far too much suppressed noise when cumming, for someone who just happened to need a helping hand.

Jean came, shuddering, watched intently by Dan, then rested his weight against the partition, catching his breath. Then, quickly, glanced around again, and gave a throaty laugh. "Fuck. That's what happens when I want to chat a bit." He

gave his body another quick, final rinse, switched off the water and angled for his towel. “You sure you’re okay?”

Dan grinned, had given himself a quick rinse as well. “Sure am.” Turning the water off he reached for his towel. “Didn’t know you were a kinky motherfucker who’s into public places.”

Jean laughed. “But I am. Into public places. But a mercenary camp is a new one.” He towelled his hair and stepped into his trousers, then slipped the wifebeater over his head, let it hang out over the BDUs. He glanced at Dan’s body, as if to check, seeming vaguely guilty. “I think we have some Jack left in your place. I can restore my reputation when you’re gone.”

Dan laughed, fastening he towel around his hips and reaching for soap bag and customary shades. Sure, it was dark outside, but he slipped them back over his eyes nevertheless. His too-long hair glistening dark with specks of grey at the temples, as drops of water caught in the artificial light. “JD sounds good and to be honest,” he delivered a reckless slap onto Jean’s backside, “I could do with some company tonight.”

Jean stared at him, then laughed, surprised by a touch that was fine among mates in camp, banter, but Mad Dog’s banter had a couple more dimensions to it. “That’s alright, then.” Is it? Yes. Spending time with Dan was always a good option, and especially in this odd mood. And he did understand Dan might not want to be alone. Not after Krasnorada’s latest shit. He followed Dan to his hut, waited for him to close the door, still feeling the good, warm tingle in his body. Relaxed.

Door closed and for once locked, Dan pointed to his bunk, gesturing to Jean to sit down. “Wonder where they’ll take me.” He shrugged, he didn’t have a say in where they’d send him anyway. Getting the steel mugs, he poured two generous measures of Bourbon, handing one to Jean. “Here’s to a new job in a new country with hopefully good mates.” But he didn’t want to go, did he?

Shit.

Jean raised the mug. “To plenty more fucked-up places that pay good money.” He grinned, and drank, then studied Dan’s face. “Just remember April and Paris, okay?”

Dan emptied the entire contents of his mug, glanced at Jean over the rim before walking to the bunk and sitting down next to him. “April. You serious about

the wedding?” Realised what he had said, smiled. “Not the wedding, but about me being there.”

“You’re not getting cold feet, are you? I’m getting married, not you.”

Dan grinned, “just making sure. Best man and all that shit. Guess I’ll have to wear a suit, eh? Holy crap.” He leaned back against the wall, smiling when Jean leaned in to kiss the corner of his mouth, checked his reaction to that, but didn’t get any, apart from a somewhat stunned stillness.

Jean paused to give Dan time to push him away, which didn’t happen, then kissed him fully on the lips, broke the kiss only to grin. “I’ll leave you my numbers. Just get in touch when you feel like it.”

“Is it tradition in France, or something like that, to kiss the Best Man?” Dan pushed the shades from his eyes, let them rest on one finger, on forehead height.

Jean shrugged, pulled his lips between his teeth to lick them, then gave a grin. “You didn’t strike me as a traditional person.”

“I’m not, especially when it comes to wearing suits. I’d rather get a kilt.” Dan raised his brows in a toothy grin before letting the shades drop back over his eyes. “But the things I’ll do for your laydee.”

Jean moved forward to take the shades off Dan, dropping them on the bed, looking into his eyes. “Yeah, it’s better you’re leaving. Two more weeks like that, and I’ll start shaving my legs and wearing skirts.” He raised a hand before Dan could burst into laughter. “Yes, I know. You like them male. Just making fun.”

“Actually, that shaving legs bit is damn male.” Dan grinned once more, teeth and all. “Or so I was told. Olympic swimmers and that jazz. Besides, nothing wrong with skirts, or are you trying to tell me a proper Scotsman in a kilt is not the very symbol of manliness?”

Jean laughed. “You guys are fucking weird. I start to get my own theories about why you don’t wear anything underneath, and why it’s skirts. Lifted faster.” He winked and Dan grinned, commenting idly, “good reason, then, to get myself a kilt. In fact, would your lady accept a kilt as suitable evening wear? There’s a McFadyen tartan.” Dan trailed off, musing, while Jean leaned back, stretched, relaxing, placed a hand on Dan’s back, between the shoulder blades. “I’m still wondering what makes you so sexy. Can’t say. Really, I don’t get it.”

“What?” Dan turned his head, laughing with ill disguised surprise. “You’re fucking bonkers. I’m a worn-out, aging, scarred-as-shit battle horse who’s well past his sell by date.”

“Then why do you make me hard? Not because I like scars.” Jean seemed thoughtful. “Not even because you’re gay and a cheap source for sex. Well, cheap is relative, you know what I mean. Plenty of guys who worship the ground under your feet. The younger ones, but I haven’t heard any stupid stuff from my own crew about you.”

“Worship? Don’t be stupid, Jean, it’s just the sandbag tall-tales of past glories and a few stunts I pulled while here. Suicidal tendencies seem to lead to an interesting reputation.” Dan reached for the shoulder strap of Jean’s wifebeater and let it bounce against his skin. “Perhaps you just happened to have found out with me you happen to be a bit more bi than you thought.

That,” Dan smirked, “and I’m a fantastic cocksucker.”

Jean laughed. “You are. Easily up there with the best of them.” He ran his hand over Dan’s neck, shoulders, a reassuring, firm touch. “No idea. You’re... the first guy I do this with. You know, on purpose. Sober. My idea.” He shook his head while Dan laughed.

“On purpose? So you’ve ended up shagging guys before, aye? Claiming every time you were drunk, after all, and it wasn’t your fault.” Dan leaned into the touch, rolling his neck.

“Not...quite. Had a guy rub against me and...was sucked off, but that was different. Can’t say it was memorable.” Jean shrugged, dismissively. “Ah, I’ll survive this. I’ll think about it some other time. I mean, you went from straight to gay. Things change, eh?”

“They do, fuck, yes, they do.” Dan suddenly moved, pulled his legs up on the bunk and twisted until he let himself fall back, lying half across Jean’s thighs, head in his lap, grinning upwards. “Admittedly, I had been a right asshole towards women before and a bastard gay basher, so I guess it wasn’t really a surprise I hated what I was and what I didn’t want, but thought I had to want.” He paused, stretched his legs out, added with a somewhat confused laugh, “or something like that.”

“Makes sense to me. Makes perfect sense.” Jean placed his hand on the other’s cheek, stroked along the jawline, causing Dan’s eyes to close, while he let

out a contented sound. Jean continued, “You should find somebody to love. Your body, looks and pay check? Plus uniform? There must be hundreds of guys wanting to get into your pants. Hell, I want to get into your pants. Take a couple weeks off and look for something, I’m pretty sure if you allow it to happen, it will.”

Dan opened his eyes again, smiled wryly. “Love? There’s just this one little problem, you see. Sex, lust, fucking, no problem, friendship and fun neither. But love? I’m afraid that one’s been done and over with.” He looked at Jean in a strange way. “I’m not exactly young anymore and neither gay mag stud material. Even if I were, that love thing, can’t say it’s quite done and over with.” He pulled a face when he realised what he’d said. “Bugger, guess I’m contradicting myself here.”

Jean looked at him, quizzically, and shook his head. “Oh damn. So, bringing that fucker a loaded gun is not an option, either. CO wasn’t really helpful, he said that guy is my responsibility, I’m his team leader. I told him he’s a loose gun, and I told him about the screaming at night, but it doesn’t look like we can get rid of him.”

Dan raised his hands, palms up. “I don’t want to know. Not my responsibility anymore, alright? I’ve said my farewell and that’s that. He’s been my responsibility for too long. Guess I’d forgotten it’s supposed to be a twoway street and not just a one-way bumfuck.”

“Yeah, sorry. Shouldn’t bring it up. The CO just pissed me off.” Jean’s hand moved to Dan’s chest, the other kept stroking his jaw and throat, veered off to touch the neck every now and then. “Some R&R would be good. Been to a brilliant place in Thailand before I came here...mostly for windsurfing. It’s not the usual tourist trap, more a place where rich Thais go on holiday, too.” Jean grinned, the thought of that place put him into a sunny mood. “Perfect place to relax and think, get shitfaced and laid, and whatever else you want. Stoned, too, and the food is great and not too expensive. I can show you some photos, I have some in my place...tomorrow, after breakfast.”

“Sounds good.” Dan yawned, looked at the ceiling. Quite comfortable in his position, too comfortable perhaps. It would be hard work again, getting to know guys and starting from scratch. Hell, he didn’t expect to ever find anyone again to shag with. Not like that. Not that easy. And sure as fuck not two at the same time.

“Stay a moment? Have to grab a chance while I still can, aye?” Dan smiled and closed his eyes, expectantly waiting for some more of that caress, but hadn’t counted on the fatigue that was starting to drag him under.

Jean grinned. “I think you’re falling asleep,” he muttered under his breath and kept stroking Dan’s chest, but reduced the touch in his face. Solange hated it when he touched her face when she was falling asleep, or was asleep. He waited until Dan’s breath deepened and slowed, the remaining tension leaving his features, then shifted the body to pull his legs free and pushed Dan back into position on the bed so he could sleep. Sleep was a good idea, but short of lying on top of Dan, there was just no space for him, and the implications were too complicated. Spending time together—yes. Sleeping together—better not. It wasn’t quite worth it.

Silently, he padded out of the tin hut for a sleeping place with a little more space.

Dan never even half-woke when shifted, just snuffled and rolled over to curl up on his side. One more night, then a day, perhaps another night and then the Gulf would be a memory. Like Afghanistan. The mountains. The endless skies. Like heat and dust, cold and thirst. And like Finland on a frozen Christmas night.

One day Dan would be nothing but memories of a tall-tale past.

* * *

Pascal, of all people, kept an eye on him. Vadim found himself sneering at the thought. Team leader, yes, superior in no way. If he planned to blow his brains out, Pascal sure as hell would react too late. He wouldn’t see it coming, despite expecting it.

Vadim forced himself to concentrate on work. That was the only reason why he got up, why he convinced the medic he could see with his banged-up eyes. Dan avoided him. He avoided Dan. He went through the motions, his heart wasn’t in it. Not easy to do anything.

He felt removed, detached, too far away, things were around him but never sunk in, unless it was potential danger, which he spotted. There was no fear. The next two days, he volunteered with a raised hand to check things, to do anything. By all means and purposes, he was the stoic Russian who didn’t care enough to

take pleasure in fights, to be thirsty, to talk, or to be scared. He had achieved it finally. He had bled dry. Had taken a lot of time, but he finally was only a mind and a body. He worked, replenished calories and water, and slept, to get up for work again. It was a soothing existence. Finally some kind of equilibrium, only two days after being suicidal.

He'd live for a few more years, he figured, save up the money, then die—whichever way, and ensure the money returned to Dan's account. He didn't want to owe him anything, and definitely not hundreds of thousands of pounds. Houses. Assets. It was the only way left he could get even. He was left with a debt and he planned to repay that. And after repaying, he'd do something else. He didn't really know yet.

He was dispassionate about life or sex or comradeship. Finally bled out. He couldn't cry anymore, couldn't confront Dan, could only feel the time running out and no way to stop it. Dan would soon be gone, vanished, and there was no way to hold him back. The emotions didn't matter. He'd won so many battles, he had lost their war. The masseur's encouragement was all bullshit.

He had lost because of his feelings. They had made him weak, had fucked up his life. Good that the feelings were gone now. Tugged away, at least. He'd take them out so he could feel enough pain to pull the trigger, but for the moment, he existed. Focused on what needed to be done. Life in prison. Focused on taking every moment by itself and surviving that. One breath at a time.

Jean returned to duty on the second day, and Vadim kept volunteering. He had the feeling Jean was too willing to get him into danger, and felt nothing because of it. Maybe it was a small mercy, maybe it was spite. Maybe it was some twisted kindness. The legionnaire kept things strictly to business, and Vadim knew nothing but business. He was as much a person as the jeep. A tool, content in being a tool. It kept the muzzle pointing in the right direction.

1991 Chapter XXVI—Local Hero

August 1991, the Persian Gulf

Two days later, at the break of dawn and after a night of pool, beer and goodbyes to his mates, Dan was standing in front of the tin-clad shithole that had been his home for the last few months. Heavy bergan strapped to his back, sports bag standing at his side. Shades over his eyes, he was dressed in mostly civilian kit. Khaki t-shirt, desert coloured cross-draw vest on top, its pockets filled with the necessities of his life. Combat trousers, webbed belt keeping them secured, and his customary boots—British Forces desert issue, no longer the Lowa ones. No armour, no weapon, no nothing. Except for the trusty assault knife he always carried on his body.

Dan felt naked, missed the protective combat attire, but fuck, he was nothing but a civvie right now, being taken to his next place of deployment by a US Air Force medical supply patrol. He should be thankful to the Yanks that they'd agreed to take the merc.

Letting his eyes run slowly across the tin huts, he stalled at one, then at another, finally glancing at the Mess tent. Too early for breakfast, good thing he'd been friendly with the scran assassin and had a stack of sandwiches in his bag. A bottle of water on his webbing, and a two litre plastic one in the bergan. Nothing worse than getting dehydrated in the heat.

That was it, then, the Gulf was done and over with. He shrugged to himself before picking up his bag and slinging the PLCE webbing across one shoulder. At least webbing and soft kit were his own. Trusty old stuff, from his army days. Outdated and worn-out but still functional, just like himself. Forty-one, not quite on the scrap heap yet.

Turning round, he forced himself to think nothing at all. Empty mind and memories, the only way to exist. His boots threw up small clouds of red dust as he made his way towards the exit of the camp, while padding down his trouser pockets, feeling for the official papers that allowed him into the Yank camp and onto the patrol ride. They'd drop off a couple of cases of antibiotics first, before delivering him to his temporary destination.

New start in old boots, and the memories forever a part of his luggage.

* * *

None of the guys in the Huey, that was chugging along the edge of the Iraqi desert, saw the flash of the RPG launcher that had been camouflaged amongst a low outcrop of rocks. Neither aware of the grenade's smoke trail, racing towards the helicopter.

The US crew and their passenger were instantly shaken when a mighty impact hit the chopper, cracking the tail boom of the Huey in the explosion. "Shit!" Dan exclaimed, half-thrown off his makeshift seat of metal drugs boxes. He stared at loadmaster and winchman opposite to him. The jolt had been hard enough to make him bounce on his unforgiving seat. "What the fuck?"

He got no answer, the two crew members busily gesticulating at each other, but Dan didn't need anyone to explain to him what the hell had happened when the rotor stopped spinning with a horrible grinding sound. He knew, with chilling clarity, they'd been hit by an RPG. Craning his neck, Dan could make out the pilot shouting over the noise to his co-pilot, helped by the intercom, but impossible to hear for Dan who was out of the loop. No uniform, no safety, no helmet. The pilots' voices drowned out by ear-splitting noise from the tail boom.

Controlled action broke out as the chopper kept moving forward, then shuddered and started to spin. First slowly, then picking up speed. Dan was holding on to the open door and looked at the winchman, knowing they were in deep shit, and from the Yank's facial expression, he wasn't the only one who realised the extent of trouble. "Fuck!" Dan muttered, gritting his teeth and cursing civvie clothing that left him with no protection. A soft target of the highest calibre. Both of the crew members were strapped into seats that could absorb at least some of the impact, but he as the third man and passenger was utterly fucked. Sitting upright on the boxes with no protection, the crash would most likely break his spine. Well done, Dan, old dog, what a way to die, smashed into pieces and crushed like eggshells—but he wasn't ready yet. Both pilot and co-pilot were shouting towards the back of the Huey to get down and hold on. Dan immediately scrambled off the boxes and threw himself spread-eagled into the narrow space on the ground, just about fitting his legs between the two crew members' seats, with his head too fucking close to the metal drugs boxes. The chopper was starting to spin so

violently, he hardly managed to get hold of his bergan and stuff it into the space between boxes and himself, trying to keep his head from being ripped off.

That would be another damn messy way to go and he wasn't ready for that one either. He'd survived the goddamned Afghan mountains, he wanted at least a fighting chance now. Trying to spread the impact across his body, pressed flat onto the steel floor.

He was sweating, heart racing. Life and death, too bloody close to death right now, the risk embodied in the metal of an aging chopper that wasn't even fit for combat anymore. What a fucking pathetic way to die after all the shit he'd been through. The spin accelerated and Dan couldn't quite make out what the loadmaster was shouting at him, impossible to understand over the noise of rushing air and blood pounding in his ears. Managed to grab hold with his left to a metal bar behind the pilot's seat, just as the accelerator spin slammed his legs and hip against the frame of the open door and wrenched his wrist, sending a jolt of pain through his entire body. Dan cursed before locking his jaws, somehow managing to get hold of the bar with his right hand as well, hanging on for dear life with his legs half-dangling out of the side door. That was it. If he had used up a few lives in Afghanistan already, this was the last one of them all. He'd pray if he could remember how and if he believed in anything at all, but had no thoughts left except regret, loss, love and hate and all-over love again and most of all the burning greed to *live*! Not die in a mangled mess alongside a bunch of Yanks, who were nothing but fucking children.

Dan barely made out the distress signal above the deafening racket. Frantic radio messages, relayed back to the US Military camp, while the pilot did all he could to bring the bird down with the least possible damage. Repeating again and again "UH-1 going down. Going down. UH-1 hit and going down. UH-1 going down."

The Huey was doing an awkward counter rotation as it fell, making two final turns clockwise, nose up, until its front end was suddenly cast down violently in such an unfortunate angle, the nose hit the ground violently. Dan was screaming in pain when his body was torn towards the left, his entire side crashing once more against metal bars, wall, interior and door frame, and his left wrist wrenched ten times harder than before. He could hear the sickening sound of bones breaking amidst the thunderous noise when the chopper hit heat-baked sand almost straight-

on. The ground was as hard as concrete and the Huey had enough velocity to start flipping over onto its back in what seemed like agonising slow motion.

Accompanied by terrifying screeching sounds of distorting metal. At the moment of impact the main rotors snapped off and went flying, part of the debris crashing through the warped roof, some of it entering through the open door. The body of the helicopter bore itself deeper into the ground, nose first, pilot and co-pilot taking the impact. There were screams and deafening noise, but Dan couldn't make out anymore what was human voices and what was the steel shrieking in agony, when the bird veered towards the left side, destroying part of the cockpit—front and side.

Then there was silence. Sudden. Deadly.

Dan lay still. Breathing in dust and fumes, waiting for an explosion, but nothing happened. For one long second the world seemed to stand still, frozen after the crash, steeped in pain. Agony from his left wrist, pain along his entire leg and hip, his ribs, but he could breathe. Could feel. Felt the goddamned pain and knew he was alive. Tried to move his fingers, toes, hands, knew, then, the left wrist was fractured. Fucking left, again, but he should be thankful.

No more than two seconds passed since the bird had crashed, with Dan still checking out his ribs, arms, legs, when a far worse noise started. Moans, a muffled cry from across the seats, nonsensical stifled screams and more groans, mixed with sounds that didn't seem to make sense.

“Hey!” Dan called out, “everyone OK?” Managed to move, thank fuck, only his wrist useless, left hand hanging at a freaky angle. Grunting against the pain with clenched teeth, he lifted his head and started to scramble to his feet. He wasn't the only one who realised seconds after the crash they had to get out of the chopper. His shout came almost at the same time as the voice from the cockpit. Seemed to be the pilot, in a lot of pain. “Need a little help here, guys. Scott got it I think.”

Dan managed to get to his knees, nursing his hand and looking around. Fuck. Carnage. Saw the loadmaster hanging lifeless on his seat which was half-torn off the chopper wall, and the winchman...shit. Dan's eyes widened. “Holy fuck.” Muttered when he stared straight into panicked wide eyes of the young guy, who had been nailed to the Huey by a broken piece of rotor stuck through the chest, near to his shoulder. Dan raised his good hand and nodded to him. “Hang on, don't move.” As if. Fuck again.

Turned his head before managing to shuffle around, still on his knees and wanting to scream at the agony all along his side, but forced his old and battered body to comply. Nothing except for the wrist was broken. Stop whinging, Mad Dog, and shut the fuck up.

“Give me a sec.” Dan called out to the pilot. “One man unconscious back here, the other injured. I’m alright.” Peered over the front seats. “You alright, Jackson?” Remembered the pilot’s name tag. He could see the co-pilot’s helmet before he managed to get up. The sight of the unnatural angle of the guy’s head told Dan all he needed to know. Jackson had been right, his copilot was dead.

“Not quite alright.” Jackson answered, voice strained. “Got to get the comm. link up, the thing’s fucked.”

“Got it.” Dan answered, stood at last, swayed, got himself under control and used his right hand to check as quick as he could over the co-pilot. “Afraid you’re right.” Glanced at the name tag, “Campbell’s dead.” Turned his head to check on the two guys in the back. “The kid’s not looking good. What about you?” He could see the blood in the pilot’s lap, creeping from the thigh up the fabric of the flight overalls.

“My leg.” Jackson spoke through gritted teeth, nevertheless working on the comm. “Broken.” Messy. Dirty. “Hurts like fuck, but I’m alive.” A miracle he wasn’t unconscious. “Deal with the others, I’ll be alright.” The pilot craned his head and caught Dan’s eyes, who nodded.

“Whatever asshole fired the RPG, they’ll have seen us going down and they’ll be coming for us.” Dan felt an adrenaline rush at his own words. They had to get out and away or they’d be more fucked than they already were. “Hurry up with that comm, mate.”

Jackson nodded, reached to his side and Dan could see sweat patches forming on the uniform. That guy was tough. Full marks for the Yank. Dan turned back, no more than a couple of minutes had passed, when he saw movement from the loadmaster. At least that one wasn’t dead, even though bleeding from the neck. He’d deal with him later, since it was the young bumfuck who gave the greatest reason to worry. “Hang on in there, kid.” Dan moved closer, inspected the entry point of the razor sharp edge of the rotor blade shrapnel. “I have to strap up my wrist first, alright?” Dan kept the kid’s attention and the big glassy eyes focussed on him. He could see the pain written all across the pale and sweating face, even

though he was probably in too much shock still to be aware of the full extent of pain. Pain, and fear. Shit, this Yank really was nothing but a kid, even Matt was a grown up compared to the guy. Eighteen, he had overheard Johnson chatting with the loadmaster earlier, and his first deployment.

Dan ripped the first aid box from the wall. Aware of the irony he had been sitting on boxes with medical supplies, which were bloody useless for them. Managed to open the box with right hand and teeth, fished out the sturdiest bandage he could find and cursed under his breath while trying to open the cellophane. He could feel the kid's eyes on him all the time and looked up, nodding to him. "Just a sec, OK? What's your name? Can't see your nametag from here. I'm Dan, but they call me Mad Dog." Kept the kid's focus, who was starting to fade out of consciousness. Shit, that wouldn't do, remembered that much from his Battlefield First Aid training, a lifetime ago.

"Johnson."

Dan had been focussing on the bandage that was finally open, surprised at the voice. Strained but audible Good, perhaps that little bumfuck would turn out to be a fighter. He was digging his teeth into one end of the bandage, when he heard the voice again.

"Chris Johnson. I..." the kid trailed off, and Dan could see how his fist clenched surreptitiously while the face beneath the helmet was drenched in sweat, pale with diluted eyes.

"Hurts like fuck, aye?"

The kid tried to nod, obviously suppressing a whimper, which caused Dan to forget about his wrist for a moment.

"You got morphine?"

Again Johnson silently nodded and Dan kept the bandage between his teeth while reaching for the syrette around the soldier's neck. Yanking it off, he slammed it into Chris' thigh, who barely twitched.

Taking the bandage from his teeth, Dan murmured, "You'll feel better in a sec. Trust me, kid." As he watched Johnson's baby-blue eyes loose focus almost with immediate effect. Good. He wouldn't scream too much. He suddenly heard another voice, sounding disoriented.

"Need help?"

Dan looked up, saw the loadmaster wiping blood off his neck then testing limb after limb. Dan grinned, relieved. "Aye, need to strap up before I'm useful. Need to hurry up. You alright? Any fractures?"

The loadmaster's eyes were dark in the shadow of his helmet, and so were his features, smeared with blood. Dan could just about make out the name tag. Martinez. That would explain the eyes.

Martinez shook his head, groaned, then stilled the movement and held his head in his hands for a moment. "No, seems I was lucky." He got off the seat, stepped over to Dan and took the bandage and a flexi-tube, strapping both as tightly as possible around the fractured wrist without cutting the blood off. Dan was gritting his teeth at the pain, hitting his thigh with the good fist once or twice, but the Yank was fast and the wrist secured as best as possible in the shortest time.

"Think I got concussion." Martinez finished his task.

Dan nodded, "What the fuck happened here and how did we get into this shit?"

"RPG." Jackson shouted from the front, while working frantically despite his injury. "Martinez, it got Campbell."

The loadmaster frowned. "Fuck." Muttered, started to take full notice of his surroundings and the magnitude of what had happened. Intercepted by Dan who had fished a sterile bandage out of the box, handing it over.

"Get your neck taped up. I deal with Johnson. Will need your help in a minute." Martinez nodded, slowly, began to do as told, and Dan wondered if he'd just found the secret to getting out of the mess they were in. Get them to listen to what he told them to do. Brit or not. Non military or not. The situation was only going to get worse and rapidly so, and he was the most seasoned soldier of the lot. Ex SAS. Twenty years behind enemy lines. It was up to him.

How much time before whoever shot them down was going to find them? The faster they got out of there the better their chances.

"Can you move, kid?" Dan asked Chris, but the Yank was barely conscious, just as expected. Knocked out by the morphine. "OK, seems that dammed rotor went right through you and into the chopper. We have to get out of here ASAP, you understand? We have to move you. Afraid you'll have to grit your teeth."

Johnson's tongue darted out, moistening his lips, but he clearly wasn't with it. Leaving Dan to hope the guy felt nothing at all.

Dan glanced at Martinez, “You into First Aid?” The loadmaster tried to shake his head and Dan cursed when he was told Campbell had been the best trained medic on that flight. Scott Campbell, still strapped into his seat, dead with a broken neck and legs that had been smashed by the impact. “OK, Chris.” Dan chose the first name, never got that business of addressing a comrade with their surname. Fuck their custom, he didn’t care, he was running this show in his own way. British, crazy, unorthodox, and with the ultimate chance of survival. “Listen, kid, we have to leave her little present in your chest for now, until they can get a medevac here and fly you back into camp.”

“Any luck with the comm?” Dan didn’t receive an affirmative, and waved the loadmaster closer.

“Need your help here.” Glancing at Martinez, “what’s your first name?” The guy looked surprised but complied. “Gary.”

Dan nodded. “Alright, Gary, my wrist’s fucked, I need you to take over most of the work. I steady this end of the rotor blade and you pull Chris off.” Martinez was getting into position. Clearly, getting told what to do was doing the trick. Jackson was letting out a muffled cry of pain from the front, but Dan couldn’t be bothered with another casualty right now. Shit, he wasn’t even a medic, he was bumbling along on half remembered facts, years of experience in the field and whatever else he had picked up along the way. “God help us.” Murmured, too quiet to be overhead, and he wasn’t even a believer.

Glancing at Martinez, Dan got into position, steadying the sharp metal with his right hand, planting himself on the ground, legs braced. Ignoring the pain along his battered left side. “On three.” Heard Johnson whimper when Martinez grabbed hold of him, and saw him bite down hard to stop another cry escaping, despite the morphine. “One, two,” Dan took a deep breath, “three!”

Martinez pulled hard, Johnson screamed in agony, out of his head, and then he fell silent the moment the rotor was pulled free. The kid’s unconscious torso fell forward, just about caught by Dan who stumbled backwards, but kept his balance. “Shit!” Martinez exclaimed, caught hold of Johnson, leaned him back against the wall.

“Holy fuck.” Dan wiped his bloodied hand on his trousers, saw the extend of the wound at the back. “We have to get a medevac.” Didn’t think the kid had a chance if he wasn’t treated within a few hours. “Get him bandaged up, we need to

carry him. See what you can find to pad the damned bits that are sticking out.”

Martinez nodded, started without another delay before Johnson regained consciousness. Morphine or not, he’d be in a shitload of pain far too soon.

Jackson was calling from the front. “Got it! Probably only a few minutes. The power is fucked.” The comm seemed to come to life with a faint sound. “I’ll give them our position.”

Dan suddenly woke up, hit by a realisation much worse than the fucking grenade itself. They had crashed about ten minutes ago. Maybe fifteen. Difficult to keep track in a fucked-up situation like that.

“No.” He turned, ducked his head and crouched towards the cockpit, avoiding a twisted metal beam. “You can’t do that.”

Jackson was looking at him as if he had lost his mind, but Dan paid no heed. He knew what they had to do.

“Whoever the fuck blew us out of the sky isn’t regular Iraqi Army. Those guys are done and dusted, they are history. Whoever did that is a renegade bastard who hasn’t cottoned on they are supposed to have surrendered. And those bastards are itching to find the chopper and butcher whoever is still alive. Make an example and all that shit.”

Jackson didn’t seem convinced yet, shook his head. “We need a medevac, like, now. My leg’s fucked, Johnson sounded as if we were doing the butchering all on our own, and we have to get out of here.”

“Aye,” Dan nodded, “we do. But I know a way how, without giving out the exact position over the comm link. It’s unsecured, isn’t it?” Jackson nodded, his face a sweaty mask of pain. “Thought so.” Dan’s eyes narrow. “They’ll be listening in, I bet my eight inches of Prime Scots Beef on that. We need to get away from the wreck within the next ten minutes and we need to keep moving. We can make it harder for those bastards to find us.”

Jackson slowly handed the microphone over when Dan held out his good hand. “Trust me. I’ll get us out.” He leaned against the shoulder of the copilot’s corpse to move it out of the way and reached for the mic, fingers of his good hand firmly around it. “I’m not Mad Dog for nothing.”

Someone had to take charge, and he was going to do just that. Afghanistan, a crazy Russian and years of fucked-up love had to be good for something.

* * *

That morning, back in camp, Vadim had got up and to work like every other day.

But that day, Dan was gone. People looked at him, as if they expected him to go berserk. Jean seemed on the verge of leaving him behind that day on duty, then seemed to decide work was a good distraction. Vadim didn't give a fuck. Life without Dan continued, like it had every time Dan vanished into the mountains. It wasn't different. Some part of him still waited for the other's return. And some part couldn't bear the thought.

He should be grateful he was still intact, he was free, he could repay his debts. He wasn't pondering death that day. He did the job, knowing he could go on like that.

They returned to camp, and Vadim could feel the change in the air. He stood near the jeep, drinking water, when one of the guys came running for Jean, clamouring about a shot down helicopter.

Jean, covered in red dust, gave a curse, then glanced quickly at Vadim, alarm in his eyes, and Vadim knew it was Dan's helicopter. Some knowledge was visceral and needed no confirmation. From the excited noises the man was making, the Americans had lost a transport Huey, and it had crashed somewhere, with its Yank crew and a passenger. They assumed insurgents.

Rogue units. The rumour mill was spinning. Presidential Guard, Muslim fanatics. Uncanny, uncanny resemblance. They knew nothing yet. Vadim watched and listened, the men were talking like he wasn't there, the news sensational enough to keep everybody preoccupied. They were talking about chances for casualties, how big the crew was, and what was the best way to bring a Huey down. How to crash it without killing everybody inside. Dan dead? Impossible. He'd survived a car bombing.

And yet. After all the effort to die by his hand, wouldn't it be ironic if Dan died now? Some kind of "fuck you," but then, Dan didn't want to die. He survived, because he could. Vadim just didn't believe it, even though he had seen men die, too many to disbelieve in death. But if he had, what had his last thought been? His last word? Anything, anything at all. Vadim felt his stomach churn and reached for a bottle of water one of the guys offered him. Alive. Dying?

He knew one thing: They'd go and try recover the bodies and possibly blow up the wreck. And they had to act swiftly. Fucking Americans. They'd do the job, whatever he did. He wanted to set out by himself, but he didn't even know in which direction to march, and nobody in this camp seemed to know that, either. Jean headed towards the command tent. That was the place where the news would be coming in, if anybody bothered to tell them.

It was unlikely, damned unlikely the Yanks would ask them to do anything in the matter, or even share the information. Vadim couldn't decide to hand his rifle in, didn't feel hungry. Just got the water down for the moment, standing there, staring at the tent. Fuck it. If the call came, he'd be ready. He was starting to make preparations. Calmed his mind. Dan. Dead. He'd have to see the charred remains to believe it, truly believe it. And unless the Yanks actively kept him from it, he'd get proof. Invited or not. He had nothing to lose, and he didn't give a fuck about the contract.

* * *

The radio link was up, and Dan knew he only had a few minutes. Crucial moments that would decide about life and death. With one eye watching Martinez work on delivering first aid to the still unconscious kid, the other noticing how Jackson had ripped open a first aid box and was trying to stem the blood of his injury.

"UH-1 calling HQ." Dan listened intently to the faint signal, focussing on his words, repeating them again and again until he finally got a reply. Seemed they'd been waiting for news, probably frantically, no surprise there. His momentary smirk was grim.

It took only seconds before Dan realised explaining to the stupid Yank operator who he was—without using his name—seemed to be impossible. He was forced to hand the mic back to Jackson, hoping voice recognition would do the trick.

"Shit!" Dan muttered, when the damned pilot was careless enough to identify himself, mentioning Campbell as KIA. He could only hope whoever had shot them down and was no doubt listening in on the transmission, hadn't been quick enough to catch up on the information. "Get on with it." Dan frowned,

gesticulating to Martinez to get the pilot out of his seat and see to his injuries, before taking hold of the comm once more.

“The Brit here.” Avoiding names, numbers, dates, times, places, truths, any fucking thing. “You understand? Shot down, as Jackson said. Enemy territory.” No secrets, there. “No more information. Unsecured line.”

“Give me the Russian cunt.”

The reaction on the other end was nothing but sheer confusion. “Did you copy?” Dan’s voice grew more tense. “I will not speak to anyone but the Russian madman. British camp. Do you copy?” Voice getting louder. “The Russian. He will understand.” Dan was met with ignorance or unwillingness, he didn’t know nor cared. “For fuck’s sake, we have a few minutes on battery power and a bunch of arseholes out to finish us off,” not a secret anywhere, “do what I ask you to.”

Silence, they still wouldn’t comply, until he shouted at last: “You stupid fucking piece of a fucking thick Yank plank! Do you want to get us all killed? Your whole precious crew? Get the fucking Russian merc on the comm! Now!”

That seemed to do the trick. At last. They were running out of precious time with every second.

* * *

Back in the British camp somebody hammered both hands against the tin shack. Vadim closed the bergan, stood, crossed the distance, opened the door abruptly.

“Russian? You? Merc?” asked the soldier, and Vadim noticed what was odd about him. He was young and wore British camo, like they actually did. Not a merc, this one. The guy stared up into his face, like confronted with some fairy tale monster then gulped air. “You. They want you over at the other camp. Urgent. Uhm, Sir.”

Vadim waved the rank off and ran after the kid, bergan already packed and by his side. Jean was in the damned jeep, too. Seemed they had rounded up everything that fitted the ‘Russian’ and ‘merc’ bill. Vadim didn’t meet the legionnaire’s eyes, but saw the other was worried. If he hadn’t been so worried himself, he’d be fucking jealous.

The kid drove them over into the Brit camp proper—just a few hundred yards, then ran them towards the HQ tent. A bunch of officers and NCOs stood around a comm unit. Vadim was greeted with nods, and they indicated the radio as if he knew what to do with it. Dan? His pulse went from around normal fifty beats to twohundred. He leaned down, took the piece. “Copy. I’m listening.”

“Thank fuck, at last.” Dan’s voice was audible despite the interference in the unstable signal.

Dan. Heart went from two hundred to nil. Then started beating again, steady and strong and fast, like at the beginning of sex. Alive.

Dan switched to Russian within the next heartbeat. “No names. No details.” Knew there were possibly two men in the British camp who’d understand, but probably none amongst the Yanks. But he counted only on one. When the shit hit the fan there was only one left. Despite everything. Despite pain, hatred and loss. How bloody ironic. “The fucking arsewipes shot us down. RPG. One KIA.” Jackson had already let that slip, but he’d not be making anymore mistakes.

Vadim strained to hear more, breaths, as if he could deduct more from any sensory input. Moans, pain. Dan didn’t sound wounded much, but that might just be the adrenaline.

“I need you to transcribe our position.”

“Copy.” Vadim nodded towards a pad at the end of the table, and Jean pushed it over. Bastard spoke Russian, too. “I’m listening.”

Dan stuck to Russian, eyes half-closed, concentrating on every word while delving into memories. All those memories he had refused to remember, now their only chance to stay alive. “Need medevac, urgently. Status of crew, one, young, probably like India.”

India. Dan in the white bed, the white room, yellow and thin. He put the pen to paper, wrote: ‘Crew #1: young, fucked. Shrapnel/explosion(?)’

“One, older, functional but bound to deteriorate, suffered what you had in 1983, Autumn, when we couldn’t fuck in Kabul, due to your state.” Dan didn’t give a shit right now who could understand what he was saying.

Kabul. He had been wounded in ‘83? Couldn’t fuck. Ah. His head, the nausea, no way he could bear any strain, any shifting of his axis, anything with his neck. Whiplash and concussion. Vadim wrote: ‘Crew #2, older, functional at present, due to concussion and/or whiplash, getting worse.’

He glanced up, saw Jean look at him with a funny expression. Yes, we used to fuck, and yes, I used to get injured, you bastard, thought Vadim, and forced the jealousy down. Tapped the pen against the pad, waiting for more. "Pilot like 1985, when I almost..." Dan was frantically trying to think of how to explain something that had been avoided, "before the R&R before..." stalled, barged on with the next breath, "before you fucked me in Kabul and I left the bergan, but pilot's is open." Dan didn't feel Martinez' eyes on him, nor heard Jackson's moans, as the loadmaster helped the pilot out of the cockpit.

Before you fucked me in Kabul. Damned, six years already. He remembered the taste of the dust, the golden light, the way Dan had surrendered long enough. He cleared his throat, unsure what the other meant. "Can you clarify?"

Dan frowned, rubbing his eyes with his arm, "I'd just avoided..." suddenly remembered, "like 1984 and a pile of Mujas. Not the head. Combine those two."

Vadim tried to make sense, '84 and almost in '85. Bullet. Wound, not the head, leg. Leg! That was it. "Copy." Then wrote: 'Pilot: Fucked bones, open wound, probably leg or near the knee.'

Spoke just one word into the mic. "You?"

"I'm OK. Like you before the Olympics, your dislike of horses, but only left." Dan didn't mention the badly bruised left side, ignored the agony. He'd live. If they just got out of there.

Vadim grinned at that one, if Dan said he was okay, he believed him. Made operational sense. Relief. Fucking relief. 'Dan: okay, left wrist broken. Functional.' He tore the sheet off and let one of the officers have it. "Do you copy?" Dan was praying Vadim would understand his codes. Years of history, lost in the Afghan mountains. Would memories be enough to save them?

"I copy. Copy, tiger." Vadim couldn't, wouldn't speak the name, reached for the fairy tale, hoped it would communicate what he couldn't. About being wild and free, and fuck it, about being equal, and about courage and commitment. All those things in that story. All the things that paled in the light of the Iraqi desert.

Dan's right hand clutched the mic tightly. Tiger. Fuck, tiger. A trip to Hungary, sadness and pain and emotional blackmail. A woman. A fuck. And a piece of paper. But in the end it had been worth it. For love. Where the fuck had it vanished to?

Jerking visibly, Dan had veered off no more than a heartbeat. Couldn't afford those thoughts. "Copy, Lion." For that was what you were.

Vadim smiled. He'd used worse call signs. Nobody knew, nobody guessed. Part of the culture, vehicles and weapons called evocative names, units, operators.

"Sec," Dan covered the mic, turned his head towards Martinez and Jackson. "Map. I need a map of this shithole." Fuck, how could he have forgotten before making the radio call. Martinez understood, the pilot pointed with his chin towards the cockpit while holding his thigh which looked like a bloodied mess despite the bandages, and the loadmaster went to get the map. Dan noticed the way he was avoiding moving his head. Shit, the guy would have to carry one of the injured men, Dan could only hope he'd stay focussed enough until they could get airlifted.

Vadim heard the orders in the background, Jean already placed a map near the pad, bastard was useful and helpful, and why? Don't think about it. Let's get Dan out of there. He nodded his thanks.

Dan moved back to talk into the mic while waiting for the map, having a fair idea of the area even without it. "Lion, you remember the cave, 1980, where I cut your back. We are in the same position from the camp as we were from Kabul."

"Copy." Vadim traced a line from the camp position to the North East. Saw dried out wadis there, oil fields, whatever. The wadis would give cover and protection, at least that much. If the chopper had gone down anywhere near there.

"Any idea how far, Tiger? They should be able to locate the wreck, what direction are you heading off in?"

"Aye." Dan took the offered map, did a quick estimation. He queried Jackson, who had read the controls on their way down. The line was silent for a moment while Dan made his calculations.

Meanwhile, Vadim heard officers say "medevac," and "RPGs," and "insurgents". One even said "Delta operators." Heard people talk about the homing beacon on the wreck, and the pilots apparently had some as well. They were already putting together a rescue.

Dan's voice was heard again. "Lion, the estimated distance from the camp and Kabul is the first compass direction towards the cave in 1984 where you..." this time he stalled for longer. Two heartbeats, then a clearing of his throat, "where you fist-fucked me." Shit, he had no fucking idea who had understood that one apart from Vadim and Jean.

Jean burst into laughter and turned away, and Vadim felt his ears go red. Yes, that was his biggest problem, his ears and embarrassment with Dan out there in the desert with a fucked wrist. He shot a glance at Jean's back that just barely failed to kill him. Wanker. He noted down 'North'.

"The second direction is from the first direction the same distance as from the cave in winter 1982 close to the Soviet garrison, where we jerked off in the snow." So much fucking history, Dan figured they could navigate whole armies across the world, using their intertwined past. "Aye, from the '82 cave to the one in 1986 where we first kissed and..." another heartbeat of stalling, this was all so bloody personal, "where I fucked you slow-tender for the first time." Dan surprised himself at the strange sensation of discomfort—even in this life and death situation he didn't want others to know.

East. Very short distance. In the freezing cold, hunger, solitude, and burning need. And then the other place, Dan fucking him. Mind-blowing. Dan not pounding into his body, but taking him apart, slowly, with all the time in the world. So desperate on a different level, emotionally instead of physically.

Vadim wrote distance and direction down on the map, circled a likely area. He wasn't able to speak.

Dan paused a moment, saw Martinez wipe his brow beneath the helmet before bending down slowly to work on a makeshift splinter bandage for Jackson's leg. Dan saw Chris across his vision still passed out with morphine and pain. "Got an idea, lion, you remember the mosaic in the tea house in Kabul?"

"I do." I remember so much fucking more. Vadim glanced at the officers, and Jean turned around again, with a huge grin on his face that made him look like a madman. I want you back, Dan. I want you back for the memories. I want you back because every yard of distance right now hurts like fuck. "I remember everything."

"Good." Dan looked down, trying to ignore the other survivors, to picture the teahouse. "The place where you usually sat, with the mosaics behind you. Blue and green and red and yellow. We are heading towards the blue and the green, one panel ten miles. If anything goes wrong, the red ones after that."

On the map, that should take them towards the West and towards the wadi. Only a couple of miles before they were able to hide. Only. Two miles. Only. With one man dying and another shot to shit.

Vadim concentrated on the image in his mind. Two sets of mosaic panels, one blue and green, towards the right, red and yellow, the second set after the first, ending in a wall that was to the right of the green leafed entrance. Back in that tea house, when life had been simple. Just about seduction, fucking and getting fucked, danger, unknown territory, in the middle of enemy terrain.

Vadim drew an arrow across the map and wrote down: '2 miles (British)'. "Lion, I expect action ASAP, like you did, from a pile of Muja corpses, but expect goatfuckers and crows."

Vadim remained silent. Medevac, very urgent, helplessness, more towelheads, more grenades. Dan smelling of sour blood in the heat. Dan staring wild-eyed at him. The fear that that leg wound was infected, and Dan would rot away under his hands. The fear. The madness. The fucked-up love. The only way to drag Dan back to the surface.

"The Muezzin will be disabled after this transmission. Do you copy?" Dan wiped sweat off his face with the back of his right hand.

Muezzin. The guy who called Muslims to prayer. Vadim frowned. Calling Muslims. Homing device. Too dangerous; of course. They might have a way to hone in on them. He wrote: 'Will disable beacon'. "Copy, Tiger."

Vadim heard something with one ear, plans, the Yanks were starting to put together a medevac. He wanted to be in there, wanted nothing more than be there and help, but he understood the copter might not have enough space for a fucked crew and doctors and guys to secure the parameter. "Get your ass to the rendezvous point, Tiger." Don't die on me. Good luck. I want you. I love you.

"Will do, Lion." Dan felt the overwhelming urge to continue talking. Just not stopping this transmission To stay and talk, keep the line open, hold onto the voice. The memories, the lost life, this something-anything that was still burning brightly inside him. Despite the hatred, the pain, and the fucking shit the Russian cunt had pulled on his friends.

The love.

"Got to take the cubs across the mosaic." Dan paused, looking from the pale bumfuck with his closed eyes, at the chest bandaged up like a mummy, and a piece of steel protruding out, over to Martinez who wasn't quite steady on his feet, and finally towards the pilot, with his face distorted in pain, holding his leg while

valiantly struggling to stand. "Further communication impossible. No personal radios."

Vadim felt his hand clench around the pen, chest tight. Meant the radio was in the copter. The piece of scrap metal.

"If anything goes wrong..." Dan's Russian was slipping, the accent getting thicker. "Time's running out." He could survive on his own, probably, but none of the others would make it. Possibly Martinez, but the kid and the pilot were doomed without him.

"1989, the hotel, our last night, and the KGB set onto me." Dan saw Jackson talk to the loadmaster and pointing at the co-pilot's corpse. "Lion, I might not be that lucky this time." He had no idea if Vadim even understood. Realisation hit him square in the chest they'd never talked about what had happened. There had only been one fairy tale and a price for its delivery. Dan swore under his breath.

If I die. What if I die. Vadim closed his eyes, wanted to keep that voice, wanted to keep Dan breathing by willpower alone. "Luck's got nothing to do with it," he said, smiling. Hoped to transfer what he could. Optimism. Soothing. Reassurance.

Back in the chopper, Dan nodded. "The tiger might need the lion to get him out." Will you? Would you? Risk your life for mine? For you. For me. For what we've once been and not the shit thereafter. "Do you copy?"

Vadim looked at the officers, thought, whatever they are planning, whatever they are doing, I'll get him out. "Lion has his claws already sharpened and is ready to go." Truth. He was burning, itching to go. "He doesn't take a no for an answer. No disqualification for cheating this time." Nothing, nobody, will stop me from getting the price, the medal.

"Then let's make the Olympics." Dan looked at the mic in his hand, smiled briefly, nodded to the ghost voice. "Over and out."

He put the radio down, took as deep a breath as he could and concentrated on ignoring the pain from his wrist and the bruises. "Right." Dan stood up from his crouch and glanced around. "Time to get going." Awkwardly folding the map one-handed. "Gary, will you be able to carry Ken?" He'd be buggered if he used their last names to their faces. Martinez nodded. Good man, Dan could see he was struggling with the concussion and sweating profusely, but he'd be fighting to the last breath.

Dan bared his teeth in a feral grin. "Disable the beacon so the arsewipes have a harder time finding the chopper." Jackson would know how to, and Martinez could do the swift task. Brute force usually worked wonders. "Gary, take Campbell's dog tag." One for the dead, another one for the living. Proof of the life that was lost on duty. "I'll check the supplies and will carry Chris. They are sending a Medevac, but we have to get away from the chopper ASAP or we'll be sitting ducks."

Dan knelt down with a groan, rifling through his bergan and bag. Difficult with one hand, but he managed to throw out what wasn't necessary, just left wallet, ID and his trusty knife. He filled the bergan back up with the two litre water bottle, the extra bag of sandwiches from his cook mate, a double pack of biscuits and chocolate in a tin, and every bit of useful medical supplies he could find. That, and enough fags to last him a week. Not that they'd survive that long in the desert while on the run. As an afterthought, he cushioned the contents with his parka, believing in being always prepared.

"Got your supplies?" Dan heard Martinez shouting from the top of the crashed wreck, where he had disabled the beacon. "Yeah, got water." Jackson's voice came from outside, where he sat, gathering his strength and checking his pistol.

"I'll take Campbell's pistol." Dan called to the others, then slung the bergan onto his back. He groaned at the movement, but ignored the pain and secured the straps instead. It was light now, contained water, food, drugs, bandages and a blanket from the supply boxes, that he'd stuffed on top as an afterthought. The backpack would make good cushioning for the kid's injured body. Searching the co-pilot's corpse, Dan took a moment to look at the dead man's face. "Rest well." Murmured, he'd seen many dead and dying, enough of them by his own hand. Life and death, it had rarely been personal. This, now, was somehow different, and perhaps he could make good what he'd once failed in. Years ago, in another country and another life. Another young man, another kid soldier. This time it was a Yank, not a German.

"Martinez, got the tag?" Dan shouted, received no answer. Pocketed the pistol and saw the two pieces of metal around Campbell's neck. Hadn't been taken, then, best he'd do it. Dan took one of the tags, let the other nestle back beneath the

uniform before patting the dead man's shoulder. "See you in hell, mate. They say it's a fun place."

Dan turned, looked towards the kid who was stirring, still drugged. "I'll take Chris' rifle. Gary, you geared up?" Martinez called out to him he was alright and ready to get going. Dan knew it would be hard for the concussed soldier, just as it would be fucking hard for him to carry the weight of another man, but tough shit, they'd have to do it.

"Alright, let's get going." Dan bent down inside the wreck, moved his arms under and around the kid while trying not to aggravate the wrist, and lifted the body with a grunt. Fuck, that hurt, and every year of his forty-two was protesting in agony, but he'd be buggered if that fucked-up body of his wasn't going to comply. He managed to get the kid across his back in a fireman's lift and on top the cushioned bergan, making sure he didn't drive the rotor blade any deeper. Shifting carefully, he rested the other's weight on the injured and useless lung. Dan staggered under the weight but found his balance, slinging the rifle across his shoulder. Stumbling when he made his way out of the wreck, he saw Martinez had done the same with the injured pilot and his own rifle. Dan bared his teeth, grinning fiercely at the twenty-something guy.

"Let's see who's faster, aye? You or I, son." Keeping the spirits up as they started trudging towards the wadi.

* * *

Vadim put the mic down.

"The Americans are already putting together the medevac," said one of the officers. "They'll be home in a few hours."

Vadim looked at Jean, who met his gaze. Stupid laughter, yes, no, whatever, they both wanted to get Dan out of there. "I request to join the medevac team." Because, if you say no, I'll steal a jeep and go off on my own. "They need supplies, and most of the team are fucked one way or the other. I've found downed pilots before. I can operate in the territory."

The officers talked to the Americans about it, but, yes, they sent their own medevac, and didn't plan to take a merc onboard, thankyouverymuch. Vadim was

sent out of the tent, where they kept talking, the regular British army guys and the CO in charge of the mercs.

Vadim growled with frustration, worked on stupid plans, most of them had to do with doing things at gunpoint. Listening to the muttering and planning inside, they just didn't really get stuff done, too many if's and when's. He looked at Jean as the legionnaire lit a cigarette. He hadn't been aware Jean smoked.

"Quite a bit of history, you two, eh?"

Vadim grunted a yes.

"You still love that man," said Jean. "Rescuing him could be a way to get him back."

"You're one smart mother," said Vadim, anger rising in his throat. He wanted to go out and fight off anybody even thinking of firing a shot at Dan.

"I'll have a talk with the CO. He's a little sweet on me. I'll present him the facts. A two-man-team, loaded with supplies, two guys have experience, and of course it's nothing personal for you. You just happen to have done this kind of thing before."

"You mocking?"

"Not at. All." Jean took another deep pull. "I'd be teamleader. Nothing personal for me, either."

Vadim's jaw tightened.

"I'll go have a chat. You head into my room and pack my kit." Jean seemed to wait for Vadim moving, but Vadim only stared at him. "Move it. We talk later."

Vadim muttered a curse, then headed off to pack Jean's kit, drink more water, have a quick bite, rearing, eager, absolutely stir-crazy to move.

* * *

Out in the desert, two men were struggling with every step. Heavy loads across their backs, one of them wearing US camo and armoured vest, the helmet giving some shelter against the sun, as he staggered along with slight imbalances. The other man had a rag wrapped around his head, walking out of balance, favouring the right side. The heat was merciless, easily a killer to the inexperienced, but they had almost reached the relative shelter of the dried out river bed. It had taken them far too long for those two miles, but each of them was carrying a

wounded comrade and they were injured themselves. Even to Dan, the Yank kid was a comrade in arms. They'd got into this shit together, and he'd get them out of there. Brits. Yanks. Forces. Mercs. Whatever.

Dan stopped, planted his feet apart, bracing himself to blink into the sky through his shades. The sound of a chopper, no mistaking, and he started to grin as Jackson let out a "Hooray!" from Martinez' back.

"Should all be a bad dream in a few minutes." The pilot grinned despite the pain, patting his loadmaster's flank.

"Damn right." Martinez answered, glancing at the kid. "Johnson's pretty bad, hasn't properly woken yet, and I feel like shit myself. Gonna upchuck in a mo, no offence, Jackson."

Dan chuckled silently, then turned and walked on. Good, as long as those guys were bantering, their spirits were up. He'd never understood the Yanks, couldn't get into the American military spirit of throwing shitloads of ammo and weapons at the enemy—and coalition alike all too often—with a 'bigger is better' attitude. Yet while he looked at them patronisingly, like most of the British Forces, he figured in return they regarded the Brits as a Force held together with shoestring and spit. Neither was all too wrong, Dan mused while getting his body back into gear, and the thought made him grin despite the situation, and those chaps, here, seemed alright. "Hey, keep going," he called to Martinez, we've almost reached the wadi. We can rest there until they find us."

He could see from the corner of his eyes the loadmaster started to trudge on, and only a few minutes later they had reached the relative shelter of the wadi, climbing down into the river bed. The sound of the chopper was getting closer and Dan was surprised at the sense of relief, seemed he'd turned into a wuss in his old age. "Let's wait for them" He bent down, gritting his teeth, to carefully let the kid onto the ground, who was stirring and moaning, eyes half open, lying on one side.

Martinez did the same with Jackson, watching the chopper, a dark speck on the horizon that kept coming closer. Gary was waving, eager to let the rescue crew know their position, and Dan let him. Seemed whoever the fuck had shot them down was now well out of the game. Probably. Or Possibly. Or perhaps he was simply too much of a cynic after all those years behind the lines, to ever trust peace and quiet.

“Fuck, I can’t wait.” Martinez took his bottle of water, held some out to Jackson who shook his head, and gulped down a couple of swallows. Dan didn’t answer, searched one-handed for the binoculars on his PLCE while his wrist was throbbing, and watched the chopper. Good, they were coming straight towards them. Vadim had understood his cryptic clues, not that he’d ever thought anything else. Dan was turning his head towards the kid, meaning to feed him water when he suddenly saw a smoke trail. “Fuck!” He shouted, caught the others’ attention, all of them staring at the disaster before their eyes.

Another RPG, grenade flying right towards the medevac, and then the worst of it all, the impact. “Shit, fuck them. Bastards! Fucking shit!” Martinez was going wild, saw the tail boom of the chopper hit, but not as badly as their own one. The Blackhawk was veering from left to right, almost losing balance, a stream of thick black smoke coming from its rear. Then it caught itself, straightening up, to go on in a straight line for a second, before turning round. Just like that. Medevac hit. Chopper turning back to camp. Gone.

“Fuck.” Dan muttered, putting the binoculars down. “We’re on our own now.” He turned his head to look at the others. “And now they know where we are.” The medevac had shown the bastards the way.

* * *

Back in the British camp, Jean returned eventually, with a Landrover, and beckoned Vadim closer. “They’ve located the wreck and are pretty sure they located the crew, but the area is swarming with insurgents, and they don’t want to lose another copter. That one got damaged in the process, made it back on half a leg. Apparently, the Yanks are now sitting on their hands waiting for Delta.”

“Delta? They have Delta in that camp?”

“No. They are actually in a different camp and will get flown in. They expect them here and ready in several hours.”

“Fuck that! I’m moving out.”

“Alternatively, I got clearance for you and me and this Landrover and try and locate them on the ground. Let’s pick up the rest of the kit from the QM.”

Delta. Tomorrow. Fuck that. Vadim was worried, restless, itching, nervous, worse than in the days in Afghanistan. Seemed he couldn’t take not knowing

anymore, but the worst was he wasn't sure how Dan would react when he saw him. He got into the car, next to Jean.

"It's none of my business, really," said Jean, lighting another cigarette. "But I guess it's better to talk about this now than later or never." He ran his tongue over his molars, opened his lips there, which looked thoughtful.

"Yes, I want him back."

Jean shot him an ironic glance. "You know, seeing you've tried everything else and now try to do the heroic method, not sure you realized one thing."

"Like?"

"He likes being flirted with."

Dan, who rammed him against a wall in Kabul, who hit him in the face, who sometimes mocked him when he was too tired to pretend strength. Flirting. Their flirting had been to get undressed, at least most of the time. Apart from very few, very private, relaxed moments. "He does?" And why, how would the deserter know that? Had they...flirted? Flirted for a blowjob? For a handjob. Hello, handsome stranger. Vadim shook his head.

Jean grinned. "He does. He is great to flirt with."

Vadim's hand tightened. He didn't want to know. Didn't want to see that grin. That grin said Jean knew more about Dan than he did. Something fucked-up and romantic. He was competition. "Is he?"

Jean gave a short laugh. "Try wooing, Vadya. You know. Being nice. Smiling. Compliments. An old friend once said: "You want to fuck, you need to be friendly." Try friendly. It's a change, don't you think?"

"You're right. It's none of your business."

"I am trying to help, you know," huffed Jean.

"And why?"

"Because you were still there, sometimes. When we talked, you were there, in his head. You could see that in his eyes."

"So he fucked around with you because he misses me," said Vadim, and it sounded poisonous even in his own ears. "That what you're trying to say?"

Jean hit the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. "Enough about me to make him remember you, for sure."

“Yeah, and he was calling my name when he came.” Ouch. Fucking ouch. Vadim closed his eyes, bared his teeth. “Fuck you. You needed to take revenge like that, huh?”

Jean cursed. “Fuck you, Krasnorada. No, he didn’t call for you. All I did was make him feel good, for a fucking change. You were there in that room, like a fucking ghost. If I had wanted to take revenge, I’d have jumped you at night, in your bunk, with a few of the guys and beaten the shit out of you. Or shot you out there, on patrol, and claimed I wasn’t aware there was a bullet in the chamber. That shit has happened before. Very friendly fire. Don’t think many of us would have cried at your grave. But I fucking didn’t.”

It drives me insane, you and him. Drives me insane. “Yeah, whatever.”

“You dickhead.” Jean cursed again. “Fuck, it’s none of your business, stuff just happened, I don’t pull this shit to get even with you.”

“You just discovered you like cock.”

Jean groaned. “Now, leave me out of this.”

“Seems you got yourself into it.” Vadim shifted his body to face Jean. “We’ll get him out, that has priority. I’ll fight with you over him when we’re back at camp.”

Jean laughed dryly. “Being nice means allowing people their own choices.”

“You’re not pulling out, then?”

“Dan and I are friends. Old-fashioned friends. Whatever else, but that, definitely. Won’t leave him to rot just because you’re snarling at me. No fucking way, sir. Deal with it. And that’s the last word on the matter. You better do some serious thinking about how you fucking treat him, Vadim, because I can sure as hell see your current method isn’t up to the task.”

* * *

In the desert, Dan was sitting down to feed the moaning kid some water, sensing the desperation around him. “They’re getting us out on the ground.”

His voice was firm, convincing the others. Wouldn’t do to let doubts creep to the surface. “Your lot, the Delta guys, they’ll be here soon, but in the meantime, what do you think I was talking about on the comm? Someone will get us out, the Brits have mercs with more experience than all of the SAS, Delta and Rangers,

Marines and Navy Seals put together.” He flashed a grin while fumbling for his water bottle. Best ration it, they didn’t know how long it would take. They were too many miles on foot away from the Saudi Arabian or Kuwaiti borders and their only chance was to head further to the West. ‘The red mosaics’, to the left, the West, towards the border. Another country, another hope for safety. Just away from those fuckwits who hadn’t realised the Gulf War was over.

“We can’t make it.” Jackson was lying with his back against the slope of the river bed, holding his leg. “Johnson needs medical care.”

Dan shrugged. “Sure he does, so do you. So does Gary and so do I, but I’d be fucked if I let myself worry about that. We have to get going, and we will.”

Looking pointedly at Martinez. The guy was no older than mid twenties, and no matter how much he was affected by concussion and the painful neck wound, he was tall, strong, and young. One of the buff ones, very much like Matt. He’d be able to get going for a while longer.

“Gary, you OK for a little jog?”

Martinez nodded carefully. Wiping the sweat off his face, encrusted with blood, dirt and sand. “Hoo-rah!” He answered and flashed a brave grin.

Weary, worried, but Dan knew the guy would do anything he could. “Alright, then, we’re going West, along the wadi. As shitty as it is to be a sitting duck in this river bed, at least it gives some shelter, if need be. Best keep on the move and hole in if we have to, waiting for sundown.” Dan glanced at Johnson, proceeding to get some water down the kid’s neck, who was moaning, half-conscious. “We should get going straight away, improves our chances we’ll hit the border before they hit us.” He grinned without humour, “if they are not completely stupid they’ll realise we are heading West.”

A combined “Hoo-rah” was his answer and he grinned, drinking a couple of mouthfuls of water. “Right, since that’s sorted, let’s see who’s tougher. Mad Dog Brit or Gary Yank.” Martinez laughed, despite the situation, and they both got ready to pick up their loads once more. Two men, carrying two others. Brothers in spirit if not in arms.

They started at a steady pace, slow, laden down with the heavy weights and the relentless heat of the desert, seeking shelter in meagre shadows wherever they could. They made progress, albeit agonisingly slow. Walking on, step after step and boot in front of boot, for what seemed to go on forever, but when Dan glanced

up at the sun, following its trek through the sky, he realised it had been no more than an hour or slightly more.

“You OK?” Dan glanced at Martinez whose step had just faltered, stumbling out of his trance-like slog. Gary’s face was swimming with sweat. The guy was loosing too much liquid and salt and Dan frowned beneath the rag around his head and face.

“I’m OK, Sir.”

Dan grinned, the dust-filled lines around his eyes crinkling as he did. “Forget about the ‘Sir’ bit, mate. I’m just an old warhound, stubborn enough to get us out of this shithole.” He managed to elicit a miniature smile from the young guy. “How’s your neck?”

“Hurts like fuck.” Martinez grimaced wryly and Dan nodded, both of them still plodding on.

“It would, seems you got whiplash and concussion, but then you know that. I bet you’re nauseous. And kinda dizzy.”

“Yeah...” Martinez tried not to move his head and struggled to walk in a straight line. “You could say that, but I’m OK.”

“Sure you are.” Dan spotted a pile of stones close to a bend in the river bed and stopped. “You’re a damn fine soldier, Gary Martinez, and I wouldn’t know how the fuck to get out of here without you.”

That got a grin out of the loadmaster when he came slowly to a halt, swaying a moment but holding firmly onto Jackson who had been very quiet the last hour. “Just hope they get us out soon. You think they’ll send Delta?”

“Fuck, yes, sure they will, but I know for a fact there are other specialists already on their way.” No, he didn’t know, but he’d bet all those years of danger, sex, and fucked-up love and lust, the Russian was already on his way. “Someone will get us out and we’re doing all we can to meet them closer to the border.”

Dan turned his head to glance at Martinez. “Give me a hand, will you? Steady Chris on my back. Got to bend down. I’ll leave a sign for the ground team that only they will understand.” Only one, in fact. One man. No matter how much shit Vadim had pulled, and how utterly fucked up the Russian was, he’d heard the man he’d known in the voice. The old determination and the stubbornness to do something—anything—instead of sitting on his arse. Like India, achieving the impossible.

Bending down slowly, silently cursing the swollen wrist and his buggered knees that were trying to buckle, Dan took hold of three flat, large stones and a couple of smaller ones while Martinez was steadying Johnson. One-handed placing the three in a haphazard pile, with the two on top of it, forming a random pointer to the direction they were taking.

“Done. They’ll understand. Let’s have some water and get going.” Each of them had a mouthful, carefully rationing the precious liquid. Dan gave some to Jackson and Martinez pouring water into Johnson. Then it was time again to keep moving. Side by side, the weight of the two bodies pulling them down in the murderous heat. One more hour, before they stopped once more and Dan formed another covert pointer, trudging further on. Every so often stopping for Dan to build a pile of stones.

* * *

“We’re kicking up lots of dirt,” muttered Jean, glancing behind. “Let’s hope it’s prayer-time, or something.”

Vadim checked the watch. “No such luck. Start heading towards two o’clock from here, we’re trying to get to that big wadi over there.” He stared out over the barren landscape. Empty country, the kind where every piece of kit was necessary for survival, the kind where a broken bone could spell doom. He touched his wrist, rubbed it. Dan’s was broken and probably hurting like fuck.

“You want to do the driving on the way back?”

“Can do. I got trained for that. Could also man the gun. Should be quite cosy back there.”

Jean grinned. “I know what you got trained to do. Spetsnaz can do just about anything that makes an enemy miserable.”

The country was still completely empty, but there were a few scraggly dusty barren trees standing around. Near what had to be the wadi. The terrain turned rougher, too, the ride got bumpy, nevermind the sweat that was running from their bodies. Vadim was wet under the armoured vest. “Make no mistake,” said Vadim in a monotonous voice. “We’re not brothers or comrades after this. All we do is get him out.”

Jean’s face was dark. “Copy.”

Vadim nodded. “Good. You will not interfere.”

Jean rolled his eyes. “Yeah, whatever. Soft-spoken Casanova.” He gave a short laugh. “Hard to imagine, but you must have been fun once. Your thing can’t have been all kicking and screaming. I disbelieve.”

* * *

It was getting towards late afternoon and the sun was starting to lose its fierceness, when Jackson suddenly hit his hand against Martinez’ leg, trying to alert him. “Over there. Dust!”

Dan stopped, turned slowly to keep his balance, peered at the horizon. He could see the dust cloud, even with bare eyes. “Fuck.” He looked around, swiftly assessing the situation. “We got to hole in. They’re coming.” It could be friend, but he expected foe.

Martinez spotted something. “Over there?” Pointing at a sharper bend and what seemed like darker shadows.

“Well spotted. Come on Gary, let’s leg it.” Dan fell into a trot, faster than ever before. He didn’t manage to run, the body on his back too heavy, and he was just too bloody knackered, overtaken by Martinez who picked up speed. Fuck those twenty-something buff kids, Dan thought, grit his teeth and forced his body into the fastest speed he could manage while Johnson was crying out in pain, jostled with every step. “Sorry mate,” Dan shouted backwards, breathless, “Either this, or getting caught.” His lungs were already burning and his knees? He’d gladly chop them off right now, together with the whole left side and that goddamned wrist. Perhaps he should have retired years ago.

Dan just about made it to the recess in the raised river bed, when the dust cloud was getting closer. Fuck, they had a minute or to.

“Get in! Get the fuck covered!” He went down on his knees, nearly screaming as he did, but he couldn’t just slam the kid onto the ground, bad enough to hear the cries of pain. Managed to put Johnson down without hitting the rotor in his chest, and pushed the body into the recess that formed a miniature cave. Johnson was scrambling with his hands, tried to help, same with Jackson, who had enough strength left to pull himself deeper inside, despite the badly broken leg.

Dan threw the rifle down and the bergan off his back, shouted orders at Martinez. "Backpack, get the blanket." Shovelling sand towards the entrance with his bare hand, boots kicking, pushed the rifle lying across the opening.

"Get in!" At Martinez, who had pulled out the dust-coloured blanket. Their best chance for survival was to camouflage themselves. Dan got hold of the top of the blanket, cursing the pain in his left hand, too fucked to do anything with it. Pulled the blanket over the mouth of the recess, held it down with his left elbow while picking up stones with his right hand, piling them onto the edge to keep the blanket up. Shit, he could already hear the engine of the vehicle, and he wasn't naïve enough to believe it was the rescue team.

"Fuck." Muttered, no more time left. Their disguise had to do or they'd fucking die, and he slipped into the hole himself, this time crying out with pain, unable to suppress it. He'd landed on the mass of bruises on his left side, but was lucid enough to pull close the corner of the blanket. Lying on his belly, right beside Martinez, with the two injured men behind them.

"Good luck to us." He whispered to the other man, before taking the rifle and flicking off the safety. He knew the make, Yank or Brit or Russian, didn't make a difference. A killing tool like any other. He'd be a crap aim with just one good hand, but he'd do what he could if he had to. He saw Martinez from the corner of his eyes, doing the same with his rifle, while Jackson was taking hold of his pistol in the back of the tiny cave. Dan and the loadmaster were peering out from underneath the blanket-shield, muzzles aimed into the wadi.

They were there. Voices, engine, dust and shouts. Slowed-down driving past. Dan saw Martinez' lips moving and knew the guy was praying.

Two vehicles, open topped roofs, men clinging to the sides. One a battered old Landrover, the other a pickup truck. Of course, what else. Paint peeling from the first, which appeared to have been a military vehicle, the truck a rusted ramshackle red. Dan was sweating, watching, fully concentrated. They were so close, he could hear every word, could understand most of it, and what he heard wasn't pleasant. No way in fucking hell he'd let the other guys know what he'd overheard. They didn't need to know what those bastards were planning to do with them, should they catch them alive. Or dead, for that matter. Dan was grinding his teeth when he heard what they had done to Campbell's corpse. No, no way in heaven or hell he'd let the Yanks know what happened to their comrade. The dog

tag was in Dan's pocket, that would have to do. Who needed a grave when nature took care of one of their own, with the flesh rotting in the desert and the bones bleaching in the sun.

Minutes seemed like endless hours, while those men were searching the ground, weapons at the ready. Dan was sweating for once, could only hope their disguise was good enough. One of the insurgents came closer and closer, almost in touching distance, but kept looking just a short distance to the left or the right. Thank fuck to the army, their scratchy blankets and the colour of sand and dust in this godforsaken place.

Dan's heartbeat stopped and Martinez's breath had become barely audible. They were absolutely silent, guessing Jackson had to be covering Johnson's mouth to keep the kid's moans from escaping. The enemy was standing near, looking, close enough to smell him, touch him, sense him. Kill him. One heartbeat, another. One breath, and perhaps never another one if that bastard looked just a little more to the left and then...he turned. Dan almost sighed with relief, glancing at Martinez. Silence, still no sound from any of them.

The miracle happened, the heavily armed man was walking back to the pickup truck, shouting at the others he hadn't seen anything, and they should search further up stream.

Dan didn't think he'd ever heard a sweeter sound than the engines of the battered vehicles revving up and moving away.

"Thank fuck, that was close." He put the rifle down and dropped his head onto his forearm, just breathing for a few moments until he felt a hand prodding his ribs. It was Gary. "Guess it's safer to stay here?"

Dan turned his head, still resting on his arm and nodding. The rag around his head was sweat soaked and he hurt like fuck. Had a fair idea what the others had to feel like, and he could sense from the lack of movement in the kid he was getting rapidly worse. "You're right. Our best bet right now is to hole up. The insurgents might be back and it'll get fucking cold in a couple of hours." Dan pulled the blanket slightly to the side, let air and light into their jam-packed miniature cave.

"Time to get some scran down our necks. Good thing daddy Mad Dog brought din-dins, eh?" He grinned, teeth bared, a valiant attempt to keep the guys'

spirits up. Nothing was ever lost until it was truly over. “Water, dry sarnies and bikkies, anyone?”

“Bikkies? Sarnies?” Jackson commented weakly from the back of the cave. Covered in sand and dust but keeping up remarkably well, despite the bandages around his leg being soaked with dried blood. “You fucking Brits and your weird language.”

Dan laughed, a short-stabbed sound. “It’ll be sandwiches and cookies for you, then, or nothing.” Pulling the bergan close he rummaged one-handed, pulling out the parka, then water and food, together with a few packs of bandages. Martinez took his helmet off, doing the same for the kid. Jackson took his own off, could just about move his arms in the confined space, and wiped with a dirty sleeve over his sweat and blood streaked face. Dan rubbed his sweaty face with the rag, waiting for Martinez to divide the food. Some for now, an emergency ration for later. They didn’t have a clue how long they might have to be on the run. Neither of them was sure what to do about the kid, could he stomach food or even swallow, or would water be enough? They decided on the latter.

They ate in silence, too exhausted and in too much pain and discomfort to talk anymore, while Johnson was slipping in and out of consciousness, until his sounds of pain became louder and Dan checked him over, figuring out how many hours it had been since he had the morphine. Martinez offered his own syrette when Chris started to whimper loudly, hardly able to get down some water, and Dan delivered the shot before another bandage was fastened across the kid’s chest.

They all rested for a moment, nursing their injuries, with Dan frowning at his thickly swollen wrist and Gary prodding gingerly at his neck, before holding his head in his hands. Ken lay still, fighting against the pain, and Chris was knocked out by the morphine.

The sun was sinking rapidly and Dan tore himself out of equally cursing and ignoring the pain his aging body was in. “OK, you guys, I’ll keep watch. Gary, your head’s fucked, you need some sleep before we start walking again in a few hours. I’ll stay awake and do guard duty. I’m used to that shit.” He grinned even though he didn’t feel like it. “Old men don’t need much sleep, trust me.”

Raising his brows when Martinez dared to question his decision, trying to argue with Dan who was struggling one-handed into his parka.

Dan decided to get out the heavier calibre ammo. “Sure you’ve heard about Mad Dog’s speciality? Faggots like me don’t need sleep, alright, guys? You cuddle up to keep warm and this poof here guards your beauty sleep.” He bared his teeth in an exaggerated grin, and it did the trick. The look on their faces was priceless. The reminder had been enough to shake Martinez and Jackson out of their stupor, nodding, complying, and simply doing what that aging merc said. He’d got them this far, he was probably crazy enough to get them even further.

“I’ll wake you in a few hours.” Dan watched the guys rearrange themselves as the sun was going down, speedier than in the Afghan mountains. Johnson lay closest to Dan, he could feel the kid’s still body pressed against his own as he sat crouched. Back leaning against the side wall of their miniature cave, Dan kept mostly hidden behind the blanket that was providing warmth and a barrier to the cold night air. Shelter, like he remembered from too many barren caves.

Afghanistan. The endless mountains and the overwhelming sky. Once they impressed themselves into a man’s mind, eating into the very marrow of his bones, he could never escape them again.

“Mad Dog?” Dan turned his head at Martinez’ quiet voice. “We’ll make it, won’t we?”

Dan’s face was already steeped in shadows, and all he could see from the young Yank was the white of his eyes and teeth.

“We might just live.” He murmured and smiled.

Light was falling rapidly and Dan settled in for the long haul. It didn’t matter if he was in pain or tired or every single bone in his worn-out body was aching. Didn’t matter a shit, in fact, it came in rather useful. Meant he would stay awake, despite the weariness and utter exhaustion. Cradling the rifle in his lap, the useless left hand wrapped inside the parka, trying to ignore the throbbing in the broken bones. Peering at the silent desert night through a small window at the blanket’s corner.

He didn’t mind keeping watch in the silence and the overpowering darkness. It was something Dan knew better than the country he came from. Britain wasn’t his home anymore, and, the place that would always own his heart was the land of vast emptiness: majestic, deadly, and overwhelming under the immense night sky.

Peering into the night, Dan let his gaze get lost in the layer upon layer of stars. He’d made his personal peace with Afghanistan a long time ago. He’d

become part of the mountains, so the mountains could become part of him. And thus they did not swallow him alive, instead had welcomed the insignificant human. Cradling him in heat, wrapping him in snow and ice and giving him silence and more knowledge of himself than he'd ever wanted. That, and the gift of a Russian. A man he'd once loved and despite everything, he was still loving and always would. No matter how much what. He'd tried to run away, hadn't he? Dan huffed, breath steaming in front of his face and he clumsily wrapped the rag once more around his head, to protect against the cold. That's what he got for trying to escape his destiny: a fucking helicopter crash and a broken wrist. His life intertwined with another's. Why did he not just accept they were fucked to hell and back and could never leave the other. Only through death, and even that had failed, hadn't it?

Dan leaned his head back, stared up into the sky while listening to the breaths of the men behind him. Three lives, his charge, and how funny a man like him, who'd been operating on his own most of his life, was now trying to save those three men. The Cold War was over, and suddenly they had all become friends. Him, those kids, and the one he'd asked to come for the rescue.

He didn't even claim he understood the world anymore—nor ever had. He'd just done a job in the name of Queen and Country and what a cop-out excuse that had been for what he had done. Duties. No questions. Killing, surviving, training insurgents, and a whole lot of other shit. But he regretted nothing. Nothing at all, except, perhaps, for the inability to feel sorry.

Dan shrugged, fished for a cigarette, now he rested he was craving the addiction. He managed to light it one-handed in the dark, keeping the glowing end out of the open. He wouldn't be the first man killed at night because of a fag, and he wouldn't be the last, if he wasn't careful.

He had to stay awake, the hours were dragging by slowly, while weighing heavy on his weary mind and shattered body. It was the memories that kept him awake, and after two and a half years he finally allowed himself to just remember. All of it. Every single moment with and without Vadim. All of the last eleven years.

The good, the bad, and the entirely ugly.

* * *

Dawn was breaking at last and Dan was still awake, freezing. Curled up into a ball to keep the body heat in, his head resting against the earthen wall. Glancing now and again towards the interior of the miniature cave, he had listened to the moans of pain throughout the night. Martinez had been snoring, he'd no doubt have a concussion-induced headache from hell when he woke. He dreaded to think what Jackson felt like, with Chris was thankfully mostly out of it.

The sky was turning a dark turquoise from the East, when Dan stretched his legs with a groan. Dog tired, but he couldn't allow himself to drop his vigilance, not until they were found, and it couldn't be anytime too soon. He was still functional, but soon he'd be unable to think straight with tiredness and would be as useless as the rest of his ragtag bunch of survivors. No, crew. Aye, that'd be it. *His* crew, because he felt strangely responsible for those guys, perhaps because he was simply so much older than those kids. Even the pilot was no older than his late twenties. Seemed he'd become a sugar daddy, after all.

Wiggling his toes, Dan accidentally moved his left hand, wincing as he did, the wrist stiff by now, but the pain had turned into a constant, dull throb which was bearable, and at least it had kept him awake. The pain and his thoughts. Rummaging in his bergan, Dan produced some more food, started to cut it up into portions, before checking the water. Enough for all of them to get by for a few hours more. Even taking the kid's unstable condition into consideration. It was time to wake the crew. They had to trek on, no point in waiting like rabbits in a hole, with the chance for rescue being as insecure as it was.

Better to move than to sit and hope. Prayers had never kept anyone alive. The Yanks weren't particularly 'liked' by those insurgents, too similar to the Mujas and their hatred for the Soviets, for Dan's liking. He snorted softly, being a Brit wasn't much better either. He had a funny feeling they'd be considered as nothing better than Big Daddy America's spit-licking lapdog. No more bullterrier, let alone Empire, but Dan noticed with sleep deprived amusement he just couldn't give a shit.

Survival, nothing else counted, and he was about to wake Martinez, when he noticed the faint sound of a vehicle engine in the distance. "Shit," Dan murmured, were the bastards coming back? Or was there a chance for rescue?

* * *

Jean was still driving, manoeuvring the jeep with an uncanny instinct for the treacherous bitch that the Iraqi desert was. Vadim scanned the horizon—the engine sound carried far and if they were unlucky, the insurgents would be upon them like ants on a beetle. He could only hope those fanatics weren't feeling adventurous enough to go out hunting mostly blind in the darkness.

Vadim was somewhat impressed with Jean's skill in the desert, navigating with no light, trusting his all too human senses, eyes and ears, mostly. Finding his way like an ocelot in the dark, a small, nocturnal predator that should somehow pierce the darkness. He murmured something about that, which made Jean laugh: "Picked that up in Djibouti. Apart from a few unpleasant health things."

Vadim had no idea where that place was, and kept scanning the darkness. He was cold, and sweating from the tension. Sitting duck in the vast expanse of what would always be enemy territory. Dan out there, maybe dead or dying, wounded, and he forced that thought down. It was a rescue operation, and he was actually in a far better shape than Dan right now.

"Wadi up front." Jean slowed down, trying to find the best angle to get into the riverbed.

Vadim saw next to nothing, felt almost useless, wondered how on earth he was supposed to find Dan, who, by all rights, wouldn't light a fire under these circumstances, or they'd found them long ago.

"This is the direction they must be heading," murmured Jean. "They must be here somewhere, if you ask me."

But I'm not asking you, thought Vadim, while Jean accelerated and forced the car down the slope, bucking on the stones in the riverbed, the machine roaring.

* * *

Inside the small cave, Dan was crouching, rifle at the ready. He had alerted Martinez, Jackson was awake as well, despite the pain and blood loss, and only the kid continued to hover in semi unconsciousness. "I have no idea who the fuck they are." Dan murmured to Gary, whose face was covered in sweat and had paled considerably, visible even in the faint purple light of the approaching morning.

“I’m hoping it’s the rescue team,” Dan whispered, “but I’d be buggered if I could tell.” Martinez nodded, making the sign of the cross, which Dan noticed with a tickle of amusement. If that made the man feel better, why shouldn’t he revert to superstition. He’d been tempted himself, often enough.

Peering outside, hidden behind the blanket, Dan kept his narrowed eyes peeled on the wadi and the approaching vehicle.

* * *

“Fucking hopeless,” muttered Vadim and slapped against Jean’s arm. “Let me get off.”

“Scouting on foot?”

“They must be somewhere around this wadi. I see nothing.”

Jean slowed down, and Vadim was glad when he felt the stony riverbed under his boots, advancing while the jeep followed slowly behind him. First, Jean’s closeness was hard to bear, second, he assumed he’d see and hear more if he was outside the damned car.

Every fifty meters or so calling out, quietly. “Dan?” Hoped they’d be awake if they were in hiding and would react. The morning was almost there, an odd glow that still didn’t allow a third dimension—everything seemed flat and lifeless.

Dan was concentrating on every sound and sight, adrenaline winning over the tiredness. Making up for his age with sheer cunning and experience. There, suddenly, he was sure he’d heard a voice, certain he wasn’t imagining it. Mouthing to Martinez and the man nodded, affirming Dan’s suspicion. Carefully sticking his head out from the cave mouth and through the shielding blanket, Dan listened intently again, and...yes! A voice. No doubt, and he’d be fucked if he hadn’t heard his name. Taking a risk and trusting his senses, Dan took a small stone and threw it out into the wadi. Waiting, then throwing another. A third one in his hand, waiting.

Clack. Just a sound. Vadim paused, frowning, wondered if he’d kicked a stone lose. Turned to face the side of the wadi, staring into the odd grey twilight. “Dan?” He gestured towards the jeep and Jean stopped, jumping out with his rifle.

“Saw something?”

“No. I didn’t.” Kept staring at the place, a strange feeling in his guts. Like he was being watched, and every caveman instinct told him there was something intent and focused close by.

Jean gave him a frown. “Why are you stopping, then?”

Because I feel something. Bad way to be professional, but Jean was a soldier too, and likely knew about these odd haunches, the feeling at the back of one’s neck. “We should check that out, over there.”

There, movement. Dan couldn’t make out faces yet, the dawn flattened everything until it became angles and planes of shadows. Yet the way the shadow moved, no, two shadows. Familiar, and he nodded to Martinez before throwing another stone, this time even closer. Deep inside, he knew who was out there, moving, but he couldn’t bet the life of three Yanks on that gut instinct.

The rifle still trained onto the approaching men, he suddenly heard that voice again. “Dan,” no doubt, his name, and he’d recognise the voice amongst a thousand.

Placing his hand on Martinez to reassure him, before calling out quietly, “Here. Over here, Vadim.” Dan didn’t quite know what he felt, such an intense mix of jumbled emotion. The biggest one simply relief.

Jean gave an odd laugh, disbelief and something more. “I’ll head back to the car and get the kit.” He grinned. “Well done.” With that, he walked off, and Vadim shouldered his weapon and moved towards Dan’s voice. Knew it was him and couldn’t help feeling elated and almost happy, despite the fact they were still so deep in the shit it didn’t bear comparison.

Dan crawled stiffly out of the cave and stood, grinning. Pale with tiredness beneath his dark tan, exhausted, and there was a pile of men in hiding behind him. Vadim didn’t know what to say as he approached, so instead took the canteen off his PLCE and offered it first, arm stretched out. “We brought you kit,” he stated, looking at Dan all the time, eyes checking him over. Alive. Banged up, but alive.

Dan took one large gulp before handing the canteen back. No way was he going to take more of the precious water even though he suspected they had more in the jeep. It was the other guys who needed it the most.

Vadim held the canteen, not sure what to do with it, expected Dan to take it back. Saw a drop of water on Dan’s lips. Shit. He noticed.

“You have no fucking clue how glad I am to see you.” Dan wiped his lips with the back of his good hand, before slinging the rifle across his back. “We had a close shave last night. Damn close.” Gesturing to the men inside, Martinez came crawling out, swaying as he stood, despite his efforts to find his balance.

Vadim forced himself to look over at the men, while standing in front of Dan, reluctant to move. Unable to fall into the easy camaraderie soldiers shared. He wasn’t a soldier anymore. Just a merc. Different rules. He still followed the motion of Dan’s hand.

“Gary Martinez,” Dan nodded to him, making the ‘introductions’, “concussion.” Martinez just grimaced. “Chris Johnson,” Dan pointed, “worst one of all, we need to get him carried into the Lannie. Ken Jackson, the pilot, open leg fracture, but holding up well.” There was a sound from the cave, like a dry huff or pained laugh.

Vadim gave the others a look, not actually interested in the men at all. For all he cared, they were walking—or crawling—meat. It was Dan, always Dan. And he stood here, not feeling worthless—first time in what felt like ages.

“And I,” Dan shrugged, “I’m just little old me as always. Only more worse for wear than usual.” And awake and on adrenaline for more hours than he cared to remember.

“Krasnorada. Part of cavalry,” murmured Vadim, then stepped towards Martinez and offered him the canteen, who took it with a ‘thanks’, and had a good drink before crawling back inside the cave to share the water out amongst the others. Vadim was turning on his heel the next instant. “Okay. We’ll get you ready to go. Should use time while bitches are still praying and are turned towards Mecca.”

Dan saw the second man returning, and knew the moment he saw him moving, that it was Jean. How damned fitting in a way, and he shook his head with wry amusement without saying a word. Before Jean arrived he switched into Russian, quietly, only for Vadim to hear, “I knew you’d find me.”

Vadim smiled. “Had good directions. Good you’re in one piece.” Would have killed to be able to touch Dan, but it was Jean who did it, clapping Dan on the shoulder.

“Fancy a lift, Mad Dog? Got you guys some water and breakfast. Camping without gear out here is not my idea of a holiday.”

Dan laughed, but winced at the shoulder slap. His whole body was sore, and the left side made every movement an interesting experience. "We should get moving first, need to get Chris and Ken checked over, possibly re-banded. Water now, breakfast will have to wait a moment. We had shared some of my usual extra pile of sandwiches."

Jean nodded. "Sure thing. You relax and have a bite, Vadim and I check on your team there." He handed Dan a bottle and a couple energy bars, giving Vadim a nod when Dan sat down, trusting the Russkies to deal with the mess. "Vadya, Help me with the guys..."

Jean headed towards the Yanks, handed out more water and food, then checked on the wounds, getting the worst casualty ready to be transported to the jeep. All taken care off, Vadim helped, every now and then looking over to Dan.

Jean murmured under his breath in Russian: "See? It's a good start."

"Fuck you," said Vadim, almost silently. He headed back to the Lannie to get a blanket so they could carry the kid that looked more dead than alive but was still clinging on and fighting, while Jean had a look at the big guy's neck. Vadim was glad he could concentrate on the team, doing the things that were necessary, only had to function, not think.

When they had finished, they found Dan still sitting, knees to his chest, fucked hand on the ground, the other arm wrapped around his legs and his head on his knees. Fast asleep.

Jean touched Dan's shoulder and crouched. "Hey. Home express leaves now. We're ready to go." He seemed about to hug Dan, and Vadim checked on the men in the landrover again, swallowing that bitter taste that crept up. The familiarity. That fucking trust. He fished for another bottle and drank, concentrating on what he had to do. He'd rip out Jean's throat later, back in camp.

"Uh...", Dan mumbled, before suddenly jerking awake. "Shit." Wiping his eyes, he shook his head like a dog, in an attempt to wake up. "Sorry. Guess I'm too old for this shit." He held his good hand out to Jean who took it and pulled a groaning Dan up to stand, before he rubbed all over his face with the heel of his hand. "Got water in the vehicle?"

"Not enough for a swimming pool, but enough so you won't piss sand anytime soon." Jean laughed. "Can't have that, now, can we?" Walking beside Dan,

protectively, like he was ready to help the other, should he falter again, and Vadim's eyes spelled murder.

Dan nodded and they made their way to the long wheel base Landrover, with the kid lying stretched out on the floor in the back, the pilot lying on one bench and Gary sitting on the opposite one. Dan looked inside, then back at Jean and Vadim. "Front or back for me? You two got your bearings?"

"Spetsnaz here has the combat driver training. I'll ride with the kids and keep the rear clear." Jean winked at Dan, again one of his stupid jokes, but as expected, it made Dan laugh while Jean climbed in.

"Copy." Dan was still grinning when he clambered into the passenger seat, arranging himself and the weapons, rifle right there, ready should it be needed. He found the two litre water bottle wedged between seat and door, and had at least half of it. Feeling better after re-hydrating properly. Vadim shook his head. "Been some time." He climbed into the driver's seat, got his bearings, started the machine and turned back into the wadi, which was the best bet at the moment. Providing good solid ground and a little cover. Of course, it was also a likely point for a trap.

"Any idea how many miles we are into open territory?" Dan was in the process of unfolding the map one-handed, while being rattled about by the bumpy ride, causing him to clench his teeth now and again, his bruised body protesting. Had to be a hell of a lot worse for the casualties in the back.

"Sixty miles is my best guess," murmured Vadim, going for speed above stealth—he wanted to cover as many miles as possible while the towelheads were still busy with prayer and breakfast—and get the casualties out of the desert.

"I have a funny feeling those bastards haven't quite given up yet." Glancing backwards, Dan saw Jean scanning the rear and Martinez doing likewise, as much as the concussed man managed to concentrate.

"Call it a gut feeling, but I've got an itch and it isn't a good one." Dan frowned, talking in Russian, he didn't want the Yanks to hear. Jean was a different matter.

Vadim cast him a sideways glance and nodded. "Yes. Depending on how well they are organized, they can still fuck us up. We'll grow an escort when we are on safer ground for the others to operate. Fucking Yank cowards won't risk another chopper."

“It’s not just that. Don’t forget the political ramifications or whatever else they call that shit.” Dan switched between Russian and English in one sentence, fluently.

“I prefer being alive to being politically correct.” The last two words were English as well, as if Vadim couldn’t be bothered to translate the concept into Russian. Vadim jerked the wheel to the right to evade a dried out tree trunk, almost knocking Jean off the back and rattling everybody else.

“Fuck!” Dan cried out before biting his lip to shut himself up. Bad enough to hear the cries of pain from the wounded men, he didn’t need to add to that. “Wherever they taught you driving, Russkie, it wasn’t aimed at carrying old ladies around.”

“I see no old ladies.”

“Aye, and fuck you, too.” Dan grinned wryly, then scanned the horizon, before using his finger to trace their route on the map, trying to find the safest way. He had to give up in the end, shaking his head. “Fucking territory. Nothing but open terrain and the wadi’s still our best bet. Seems to be the straightest line back ‘home’.”

He stared at the map again, frowning. “There’ll be a sharp bend in about twenty miles, that’s when we should get out to cross the desert.”

Vadim nodded. “Also a great place for an ambush...but if we don’t take that, we get deeper into their territory.”

Dan nodded, didn’t need to say anything, and even Jean shut up for once. They covered ground fast, Vadim very nearly risking the jeep’s axes at several points when he just barged through rough patches that Jean on the way in had evaded—but back then they still had time, and cover of darkness. The cries of pain abated from the back, perhaps because the casualties were getting weaker. Dan didn’t want to know. As long as the kid lived. It seemed of utmost importance that Chris had to survive. Unlike another young soldier, back in the Afghan mountains.

Vadim drank with one hand, whole body constantly shifting as he drove like a madman. Teeth gritted against the dust they were kicking up, and the constant knocks and jumps and jerks—they’d all be sore tomorrow, but hopefully alive.

They were getting closer towards the bend Dan had pointed out. The river bed was getting narrower, but also flatter on one side, allowing them to take the

Landrover back out of the wadi. The bend turned sharply, though, making it impossible to see ahead, and that's when all of the men fell silent. Concentrating on every little sign, scanning the area, brightly lit by merciless morning sun.

Nothing seemed to be amiss, no movements, no suspicious object anywhere. They were getting closer to the shallow part that would lead out of the riverbed back onto open terrain, when a sudden flash and almighty noise shook the vehicle.

Dan was thrown out of his passenger seat, slamming with his head against the roof, when a grenade exploded right under the left front wheel. "Fuck!" He yelled, by instinct taking hold of anything near the window, but his left hand was useless and he lost orientation as the Landrover began to topple. "Get hold of the wounded!" was all he could shout, helpless himself, falling out of the seat and sliding towards the driver, when the Lannie tipped over onto the right side.

Vadim was momentarily disoriented, got his bearings before the car tipped over onto the side. Managed to kick the door open and throw himself out, before crawling through a tunnel of limbs and blood the way it looked. Grabbed hold of an assault rifle on the way out of the vehicle, while Jean managed to free himself as well, immediately evacuating the wounded –behind that Landrover, out of the way.

The only man still stuck in the vehicle was Dan. Knocked out momentarily when Vadim made it outside. Instead of crashing on top of the other body, his head hit the steering wheel and then the rocks and dust underneath the open door. Luckily getting trapped in the Landrover that presented the underside of its carriage. The metal stopped the bullets that were being fired from across the wadi. He regained consciousness the next second, dizzy, yet already trying to get out of the car. If they hit the tank he'd be a goner, fried to a crisp.

Vadim wiped his face, noticed there was blood, but he didn't feel the sting of sweat in a fresh wound, so he supposed it wasn't his. "Jean, get the fucking rifle!" Snarling as Jean was dragging out Chris, the worst casualty. Martinez only needed to be turned into the right direction and yelled at to get his ass going.

"We're fucked!" shouted Vadim to Jean. Jean nodded, baring his teeth in an exasperated grin. Vadim risked a glance, Dan was still in the fucking Landrover. He should get him out. But that was not the right decision. Stay operational, fuck the wounded if necessary. Stay operational at all costs.

Vadim cursed, took the assault rifle faster, reached for the pocket with mags. He had plenty of ammo, plus hand grenades. That should be enough. Jean was just dragging the pilot out, pulling and tearing despite the moans of pain. At least the fucking deserter worked well under pressure. “Okay. Shit. You stay right here, Jean, and get Dan out.”

“And you?”

“Flank them.”

“You and which fucking Marine Corps?”

“I don’t need the MC to mop up some towelheads.”

“Bullshit.”

“Fuck you. You get Dan out. You want him, you fucking get him out, or I’ll come back to haunt you.” Vadim pushed himself off to run, jump, hoped the dirt and dust covered him enough so he could flank them. Suicide on all counts.

Dan had managed to turn himself around, enough to be able to peer through a hole in the mangled car, where the grenade had torn open the bodywork. He was struggling as hard as he could to get out of the goddamned wreck, but his leg was stuck between passenger seat, gear stick, driver’s seat and steering wheel. “Fuck!” Hissed between his teeth, he was immersed in a cacophony of automatic fire, shouting and cries of pain, while his own blood rushed in his ears. No way he’d give up, had to get out of this goddamned trap, but the leg wouldn’t budge and his bloody hand was useless. He was almost screaming with rage and frustration, when he noticed a man run into the riverbed and past the mangled vehicle, sprinting towards the other side.

“No!” Dan yelled when he realised who was the lunatic. “Fuck, no! Vadim!” Felt redoubled strength come back to him, frantically pushing, pulling and rattling at anything that was likely to give to get him out of the fucking wreck.

Jean cursed. “Keep your head in, Dan!” He pulled a knife and hammered it into the soft top, just glad the Landrover had come to lie on its side, one lucky thing in a string of “fuck yous” from the gods. Slicing the heavy cloth open, working frantically because he should be returning fire to give Vadim cover, and didn’t, mostly because he had no idea whatsoever how many insurgents there were. Reaching inside, he saw how Dan was wedged in, and dove deeper to help free the leg. “We need another shooter. You can rest later,” he murmured, cracking a joke to deflect Dan’s attention from the fact Vadim was just doing something as

brazenballed as if he'd still be Spetsnaz and had regimental pride for lunacy to defend.

"Get me out, get me the fuck out!" Dan didn't care about jokes nor deflection, all he could see was Vadim running, firing, and throwing himself into the lion's den. With combined effort they finally got his leg free, skinning it in the process but he couldn't give less of a shit. Jean pulled him behind the vehicle for cover.

"My hand's fucked. Aim's not as it should be. I cover those bastards broadrange, you pick them out." Dan flashed his bloodied teeth, "the crazy Russkie's taking out the nest."

"Yeah, that's the plan. Doesn't take a great sniper..." Jean checked on the casualties, told them to stay the fuck put, while Dan snatched the rifle that was still in the cab. He looped his arm through some magazine rounds, before crawling towards the top of the wadi, keeping as much in the shelter of the overturned vehicle as he could. Firing at will, protecting the lunatic as much as he could, by making it impossible for the insurgents to lift their heads above their position.

Jean lined up careful shot after careful shot, shooting at anything he could see, any motion, worked completely from his guts, the stress of the fight burning every thought from his brain.

Suddenly, screams, and somebody jumped out of cover to run, keeping his head covered. Jean drew a bead and shot him in the chest, twice, making the man crumple. And another explosion. Hand grenade.

"Holy fuck, yes!" Dan yelled, while he continued spraying the insurgent's area with bullets. The explosion tore across the desert and when the dust settled Dan saw bodies, limbs, torn flesh. He stopped firing for a moment, listened. Nothing. Shouted at Jean to shut the fuck up and stop the shooting, but there was still nothing. The fuckers were dead, he'd bet on it, but all Dan wanted to know was if another bastard was alive.

"Vadim!"

From behind cover, somebody raised a rifle—SA-80, British make, not a goddamned AK—high, then stood up, Vadim, covered all over in red dirt. Looking tired, but grinning, a shit eating grin that indicated adrenaline was in overdrive and every cell in his body celebrated the fact it was alive. He made the 'all clear' sign

towards them, then walked down to where the explosion had happened. There were a couple shots. Twice. Again, two shots. Vadim finished off the wounded.

Dan shot a round into the air to indicate they'd understood, then let himself slide back down towards the wreck of the Lannie. Heart pounding, pulse racing and grinning like a fool. "Fucking bastard did it." He smirked at Jean.

"He's still a lethal cunt." Pure pride shone out those words, his eyes and the grin threatened to split his face, before turning his attention to the three Yanks.

"Yeah." Jean shook his head. "That's something he can do," he murmured, almost toneless.

Johnson was unconscious, didn't even make a sound anymore, and fresh blood was gathering around the edge of the bandages where the piece of the rotor had been jostled, but he had a pulse, albeit weakly. Jackson was staring at Dan, pain written all across his dirt encrusted face, still trying to grin and giving a thumbs-up. Holding his leg that was drenched in fresh blood, which got him a pat on the shoulder from Dan and a "sorry, mate," which the pilot answered with a shrug. Martinez sat, helmeted head in his hand, obviously nauseous, with the concussion in full force, but he had still fired his weapon. A fine soldier, and Dan grinned. "Bet you think we're all lunatics, eh?"

Gary grimaced, "No, buddy, but that Russian. He's fucking crazy."

Dan laughed with the relief of being alive and knowing Vadim had made it. Turning towards the scene of carnage, he shouted, "Get your arse over here! We got to get going." Adding towards the others, "Anyone got any idea *how* exactly?"

Vadim broke into a trot, crossed the wadi again and climbed back up on their side. "The bitches have a pickup truck. Plus MG on tripod." He wiped his face again, red dirt caked with red blood, but he looked fine, no visible wounds anywhere. "We just grab the Yanks and get them across the river. But we need to get going. They had a radio, means they're in touch with others."

Dan nodded. "You two get Chris on a blanket, Gary and I help Ken, alright?" He was looking round the crew, greeted with exhausted stares and tired nods. That wasn't good enough, and Dan used the same trick he'd use before. "I said, *alright*, guys?" In a sharp voice that left no room for questioning, and he earned himself some "hoo-rah," which made him grin and nod.

"Right, then, let's get going." Dan was so knackered, he could hardly get himself to move, but there was no alternative and he'd never let anyone else realise

he was worn down to the bare bones. Helping Martinez, they managed to get Jackson up between them. Carrying him across the wadi while Jean got all their essentials out of the wrecked Landrover to take them across, before getting Chris onto the blanket and into the pick-up truck. Once all of them were in the vehicle, with Dan in the passenger seat, Vadim driving and the others backing the open, he allowed himself to close his eyes for a moment, murmuring, “just get us the fuck out of here.” Adding in Russian, without looking at Vadim. “Please.”

Vadim had started the machine already, hands still slightly unsteady from the stress, then looked at Dan, his stretched throat, the way he swallowed, the stubble and exhaustion, and would have died to be able to kiss that throat, or touch his thigh. Feeling pain well up, and with it, tenderness.

He headed straight towards the base, kicking up a massive flag of dust behind them, driving again like a man possessed and uncaring, but at least the desert was smoother ground, following Dan’s directions, with Jean holding onto the MG on the back and Martinez making sure the casualties didn’t get too badly jostled.

Eventually, helicopters appeared above them. Americans. Jean waved at them and nodded towards the Yanks. “Your friends are here!” Shouting against the noise.

Vadim kept his jaws tense, concentrating on driving, but relaxed a fraction once they were covered.

Dan craned his neck, caught a glimpse of the choppers and relaxed back into the seat, staring straight ahead while a slow smile began to creep across his features. “We made it.” Murmured, then again, when the compound came into view, “we fucking made it.” Louder, until they were racing towards the gates and the first soldiers and medical teams came running towards them. He shouted, glancing backwards at the crew in the truck, “we goddamned motherfucking made it!” He was laughing, despite the pain, the exhaustion, the dust and noise and the fact it was all more than just half insane.

Vadim allowed himself a smile, Dan’s pure joy at being alive—and safe—was contagious, even though he didn’t quite feel the same elation, not yet. It took him a while to let go.

Jean reached for another water bottle and drank, closing his eyes, grinning as he celebrated his triumph—live and fight another day, snatched from the teeth of death.

Dan was still laughing when they stopped and the doors were being opened. He almost fell into the arms of some of the soldiers when he tried to get out of the truck and tripped over his own feet. He grinned, looking for Vadim, couldn't see him, not in the crowd that came running with stretchers and equipment. Finding himself in the middle of an organised chaos.

He was lost in the crowd, calling Vadim's name, shouting for Jean, but he had to concede defeat when he saw British uniforms and a whole team of medics that was adamant to put him onto a stretcher. That's when he gave up and, without further protest, let himself be taken across to the British compound and the medical station there.

Dan lay on the examination table before he could say "poof" and his soiled kit was stripped off him. He meant to make some stupid-arsed joke to the nurse that dealt with the skinned leg and the bruised side, and at the surgeon who checked the wrist, injecting local anaesthetics to prepare him for the x-rays.

But all was forgotten all of a sudden. Too much effort, and he hardly realised how he was slipping rapidly and without resistance into an utterly exhausted sleep while they were still working on him, and before x-rays and general anaesthetic to operate and reset the broken bones.

He didn't even hear the nurse protest and laugh, when she was told she'd have to clean up the casualty with a sponge instead, since he was snoring within a couple of minutes.

Dan was out like a light, didn't feel any of the treatments and slipped from sleep into unconsciousness, and finally back to sleep while he was transported into the air conditioned medical tent.

* * *

Dan slept like a log for ten hours, without even waking once, until early evening. When he woke he was alone in the tent, none of the other beds were occupied and no noise except for the hum of the air con. It took him a moment to orient himself, before he noticed the deep throb in his wrist and remembered what

had happened, and that, in fact, he was alive and so were all the others, as far as he could tell. Pulling the thin sheet away and glancing down at himself, he realised he was no longer dirty, except for a bright red iodine covered leg, but neither dressed, except for a pair of shorts that were clearly not his own. Making some noise while sitting up, there was a rustle close to the entrance and a nurse appeared.

She gave him water, checked on all the vital signs, but Dan was growing restless and hungry. Food was brought soon, which he wolfed down while his hand was checked over yet again. Got the most important information first of all: all three of the American crew were alive, as far as the Brits knew, then listened half-heartedly to a lecture about the painkillers he was to take, his bruises and how he was to deal with them, and the need for this and that and the other, before the inevitable happened: he got summoned to a briefing, or rather, the whole hog appeared in the tent, including the CO.

Dan sighed, gave into the inevitable, and told them all that had happened, while being perfectly aware he'd have to do it again for the Yanks—again and again and again. When they were satisfied for the time being, it had gone pitch dark outside. Dan wanted to get away from medical supervision, needed some time on his own until the next morning, he argued, and he had some personal things to do. Glad when the doc signed him off as fit to take care of himself, after yet another lecture about plaster casts, bruises, possible mild concussion, and goodness what. And, of course, the strict order not to drink any alcohol for at least a couple of weeks.

Dan was muttering to himself when he stood outside at last, dressed in a pair of his own shorts they'd brought him, with t-shirt and flip-flops, and the ubiquitous shades. He pushed them back over his eyes, standing around, aimlessly. The 'personal business' had been a lie, except for the very important business of organising a bottle or two of moonshine. Doctor's orders, he claimed when he cajoled some of his mates into producing the booze for him, diligently omitting the 'against'.

Bottles in a bag, slung over his good shoulder, Dan got himself into his parka against the cold of the night, and kept standing. Dithering. Wondering. Where had the hatred gone to, just dissipated? And where was the pain?

* * *

The doctor had checked Vadim over only briefly, low priority, and he wasn't wounded, had only caught a bit too much sun, and that was it. A shower, dressed to be debriefed, told his story a few times, had the feeling he was only confirming Dan's and Jean's story, then was allowed to go. Stripped again, and lay down, to sleep, lay restless though for a long time. Dan. Dan close. Dan laughing. Dan. He couldn't be angry at Jean, not right now, all he felt was a mild astonishment and regret things had come this far. Mulling over his decision to flank instead of letting Jean do that. He'd been far too willing to leave Dan, hadn't made a stand to get him out and instead went off alone. It had been the right thing, tactically, but he wondered what Dan would think about it.

But then, Dan spent time with Jean, and not with him, so the priorities were set. Vadim groaned, shook his head at the thought. Dan and Jean—that image was enough to be painful. He should be glad Dan was alive, and instead replayed the whole mission in his head, over and over again, questioning every word, every decision, until he wasn't sure what had been right and what had been wrong and he doubted everything. He couldn't sleep.

He stood up, groaning, dressed again, didn't want to be caught out in anything but with gear and knife, then stepped outside to breathe air, and feel the space around him. No cell.

Dan looked up when he heard the noise of a door opening, and a smile ghosted across his face. Of course, who else. How fitting. He couldn't tell how long he had been standing in the dark, unwilling to knock on anyone's hut, unable to bear company in the Mess, and not wanting to be on his own. "Hey, Russkie." He called out quietly.

Vadim turned at the words and saw Dan, who stood there, stiffness betraying the pain. He came closer, gave Dan a nod and a smile. "Couldn't sleep. What about you? Smoking?"

"Aye, that and drinking. Doctor's orders." Dan shrugged lopsidedly, glancing around. "Just don't feel like being scooped up. Do you..." stalled, didn't know what to say nor even what he wanted, "do you know a place to booze in peace?"

Vadim grinned and nodded upwards. "Up on the roof there. Good view up there, and no patrol comes looking. Too lazy." He paused, hesitant for a moment.

Thought, against his will, Jean was probably right. Being nice. Talking. Flirting. Well, maybe start with the second part of that. He'd been relatively nice, he felt. Saving somebody's life was damn nice. "Care for company?"

"That'd be, too, what the doctor ordered." Dan grinned, held out the bag with the bottles. "Vodka and whisky. Cheap crap, but beggars can't be choosers."

"Sounds like we have a party on our hands," murmured Vadim and took the bag to help Dan carry.

Dan was favouring the right side while walking, every bone in his body ached and every muscle sore. Glancing up at the ladder he sighed and muttered a few obscenities, getting up there was going to be fun. "You'd think they have elevators for scruffy old veterans."

"Not up there. We're strictly not supposed to be there." Vadim climbed the ladder after Dan, who took his time, clearly hurting, but Vadim couldn't help looking at the ass and legs in front of him and felt a stab of desire, expected, but nonetheless painful.

Vadim settled on the roof and put the bottles down. They'd been right—it was a good view, and a peaceful place. He should have come here earlier. "Dan...one thing. I made a tactical decision today. It was...about tactics, and nothing else."

"What do you mean?" Dan was groaning as he shuffled to sit in a position that was at least half-way comfortable.

"Leaving you behind. I knew Jean would get you out, so I...just decided to flank them before they had properly locked onto their targets." Vadim shook his head. "I had not much time."

"And that worries you?" Beneath the shades, Dan's eyes were wide with surprise. Dark pools in even greater darkness.

"Yes."

"I hadn't noticed. It was a team effort, it wasn't your specific job to take care of me. Don't need a nanny. What we needed instead was for someone to eliminate the vipers, and that's what you did."

"Good. I didn't want you to think..." I don't care about you. I would have risked your life. "Anything else."

Dan tilted his head, studying the other while clamping the whisky bottle between his knees, to open it one-handed. "In fact, I've never seen you operate in the field except once, the Mujas. It was a first today."

Vadim shook his head. "Strange, isn't it? You know me so well, but you only watched me kill twice. First time, I wasn't very professional about it." That seemed the wrong thing to say and Vadim ploughed on. "It's better that way. I did a lot of bad things. Not much I'm proud of."

"Aye, but first of, anyone in our jobs has done a lot of shit and secondly, that's the past. You'd long changed before they took you." Dan handed the vodka bottle to Vadim before taking a long draught from his cheap whisky. He coughed at the harsh burn, before he could continue. "There were quite a few things to be proud of, back then." Wiping his face with his hand, before gazing into the darkness.

Vadim nodded. He'd exorcised the soldier, only to have to change back into him in order to survive. Proud. Proud of hotel rooms and waiting for Dan. Proud of living almost like husband and wife, making plans for the future. Settling in and calming down. He opened the vodka and took several deep, deep swallows, followed the burn down his throat to his stomach.

"I remember everything, you know." Dan said quietly.

Vadim cleared his throat. "Yes. Not easy...impossible to forget." At a loss for words and thought, just the strong wave of guilt that washed over him. His fault. A waste of time, effort, a waste of breath, and two years. Over two years that had made them strangers. "It went all wrong. Not what I wanted."

"What do you mean?" Dan was staring at the blue-wrapped plaster cast on his left wrist, before taking the shades off his eyes and putting them on the floor beside him. Looking at Vadim without any barrier. "The last two and a half years, or the shit you pulled the last week?"

"Both." Vadim looked at the bottle and took another deep swallow. He wasn't used to the alcohol anymore. A whole bottle of this would make him very drunk, and hopefully very tired. "I don't understand how it happened. It doesn't make any sense."

"What happened in prison to you, or what happened when you went into madman mode?" Dan felt like dragging each word out of Vadim, as if he had to extract a splinter from a puss filled wound. Putting the bottle to his lips, the liquor

was working just fine as pain killer. Inside and out. "It's a good question, actually." Taking a breath, "I haven't got a fucking clue what's going on inside you, what happened to you, and who the hell you are now." Wiping his lips, he leaned back against the low wall behind him, "And I guess you haven't got a clue what happened to me either." Strangers. After eleven years.

"I don't know myself. Things going on in me...make no sense to me. Or anybody else, I guess." Vadim pressed his lips together, fought the despair, that darkness that threatened to well up and blind and deafen him to the world. "You, I recognize. Different, but still you. You seem...happier? More relaxed? You had that during the last...months. When you were working for the embassy. Same...light in your eyes." Same cocksure easy confidence, same easy laughter, same...Dan-ness.

Dan shook his head. "Not the same, not at all." Taking another mouthful, the whisky was doing its job of dulling his senses. "It's like having been taken apart and put back together again." He petered off, once again looking out into the distance, before he started anew after long moments of silence. "When you left in Finland, there was nothing." Dan talked slowly, carefully moving from word to word, like a rock climber, trying to find the right path. "Absolutely nothing, after two years of fighting, and I had no idea anymore how to go on. That's why I came here."

Vadim closed his eyes and remembered his own...stupor. The inability to feel, the sense of strangeness, like nothing was real, there was nothing left to feel, nothing left to remember, all used up for simply staying alive and remotely sane.

Dan took a deep breath, swollen fingers of his left hand fluttering on the fabric of his camo trousers. "Over the years, you had become my home, my sanity, perhaps even my life." He lowered his head, almost immediately jerked it back up. "While you were in prison I could at least fight for your life, all the time keeping up hope. Until it was too late." Dan shook his head once, violently, as if trying to get rid of a memory. "It was Maggie who had the bottle to tell me about your sentence, the execution. And yet, even then, there was still something to do. I had to tell you I was alive, going on living, like I had promised. I needed you to know I hadn't given up on you." Dan huffed dryly, "Useless, hopeless, but fuck, I had to try and tell you I love you, even if all that remained in the end was nothing but death." He scrunched his eyes shut. No matter how much more whisky he'd drink,

he'd never forget the smell and sight and sound of the room where he had waited for Vadim's execution. The tick-tock of the clock, every second moving closer to finality. And then, silence. Inside. Hurt and pain and grief so large and overpowering, he'd thought he would drown.

"Not...useless." Vadim struggled for breath. "My fault. I...I fucked it up. Fucked you up. I didn't mean to, but I had...nothing left. I'm sorry." Choked very nearly on the last word.

"No, Vadim, I guess when you left...it wasn't your fault, even though I can't understand it. But I knew...," Dan's voice lowered, before taking another mouthful of the harsh liquor, "I knew when I saw you in Finland you weren't the man who I'd last seen in Kabul." His fingers moved up and down the bottle, stalled at its neck. "Maggie had tried to warn me, had given me articles, reports, all sorts of stuff from Amnesty International and other places, trying to get me to understand what the KGB had probably done to you. But I couldn't understand, couldn't believe. I still don't." He turned his head to look away.

"I tried. I failed." Dan looked back at Vadim, adding quietly, sincerely. "I don't understand what happened to you, why you did that shit with my mates, and why you tried to get me to kill you..." he shook his head. "I'm sorry."

Guilty, Vadim thought. He was as guilty as sin. Of cowardice, of weakness, of all the things the KGB officer had said. Predatory instincts, exploitation, cruelty, a nature so base, twisted and defiled he was beyond redemption. If there was any redemption, and that was the one small victory, Katya guarded it. Two things in his life he'd done right.

Again he wished he could just have died for Dan somewhere on the way here. It would have saved him so much pain, both of them, and Dan would have never seen just how weak and pathetic he was. Blood and guts. Just flesh. Just a creature scrambling around on earth with no higher purpose, no destiny, stomped on by blind chance. He lowered his head, vodka blunting the thoughts, and luring out the darkness.

"If you...want to know, just ask." He didn't want to speak about it, nothing of it, it would be cutting bandages that kept the wounds closed.

"No...not yet." Dan shook his head, drawing in a deep breath. He needed to try and make Vadim understand. Just as much as he still needed to understand himself. "I need you to understand, Vadim. To truly understand what you mean to

me. You had been everything, Vadim. You'd been the reason I told the Army to fuck off, just to get back to Kabul. You'd been everything I fought for when you were imprisoned. You'd been the force behind everything I did during those two years. I loved you, but when you returned only to leave..." he stalled, desperately trying to find the right words. "Everything shattered. Everything I was, felt, wanted was gone. I was empty. There was nothing left inside of me. There was nothing left."

That meant...Vadim was struggling with it, but the thought was clear and sharp. It meant Dan had been just as broken as he'd been after the prison. Two years, a different kind of torture. A life taken, a world reduced to rubble and pain. Past Tense. Past Perfect. It was over. But at the same time, Dan was sitting there, right there with him, and talking. "Why...why don't you..." love me anymore, he wanted to say, but felt the word and the thought caught in his mind.

"Why don't I *what*?" Dan glanced up, the haphazard fringe of his unruly hair was shielding his eyes. "Why don't I go back to where we were before all this shit happened?" He shook his head softly, while clinging to the whisky bottle. "I can't do it again. If I touched you, I will be back to square one—and if you left me once more...I couldn't stand it. I just couldn't."

Dan laughed dryly, softly. A sound of dead leaves and harboured hopes. "I'm fucking frightened to touch you, Vadim. That's why I've been avoiding you, not because I don't want you. Shit, you have no idea how much I *do* want you. Always have, always will." Shaking his head once more. Forlorn, with wry amusement and too many brittle truths.

"Russkie, if I said I didn't love you, I'd lie, as much as if I said I didn't want you. I'm not a liar, so I won't tell you I don't want you and I don't love you, but..." Dan drew in another breath, "but it's not that easy anymore. You've done so much shit. Up close and personal. I can't ignore it." Blood and guts, Vadim thought. In the end, it all came down to that.

Unbearable to look at Dan cutting himself open like this, unbearable to think he had made him suffer like this. Enough that Dan could feel that hurting himself more could bring relief.

His jaw muscles twitched, and he looked out into the night of a country he had no idea about, would never understand, just like he had never understood Afghanistan.

The beauty of destruction, the basics of life. You suffer, you bleed, you die. Didn't want to imagine what it meant for Dan, all that time, but then, yes, he knew about waiting. Knew about hoping, and knew about the moment when hope had run out. He wanted to speak about it, and then didn't. Dan was the one that was bleeding. Driving the knife home with the things he held inside, gutting him even more was wrong. He wanted to block, hold that hand, wanted to pull the knife away, wanted Dan to stop pushing it deeper, not because of what it did to him, but because of what it did to Dan.

But what Dan said. *I love you.* I love you. I love you. *I want you.* I want to touch you. He'd been reduced to wanting, accepting the feelings were gone. Accepting the little boy soldier, fucking stupid Yank that sounded like he had been harvesting corn in Iowa just last summer, was easier, younger, and not a coward. He'd read something, somewhere. That the difference between courage and cowardice was experience.

Vadim lowered his head, felt his neck tense in this position, stared at the mouth of the bottle. Never a way out. Too much of him. He couldn't fit into a bottle. Seducing him in Kabul had been easy, well, easier than this. Just show him how good it could feel, let him come to his own conclusions. This time, Dan had known what it felt like, and decided against it. But was it a decision?

Mr Krasnorada, he heard the doctor, you must be aware that since your treatment, you are prone to misunderstand—misinterpret. Human interaction will always be tinged with mistrust, fear, caution, and the feeling of emotional numbing. But that doesn't mean you can't function.

He backtracked, went through Dan's words again. Love, want. Those two were easy enough. But. That one was difficult. "No, it's not easy anymore."

"No, not easy." Dan murmured, yet deep inside it was as goddamned easy as reaching out and taking hold, to never let go again. But he'd been too broken, scattered, he couldn't go through it once more. The bottle went to Dan's lips, eyes shut, and he gulped down a quarter of it. Wiped his lips, catching a drop that had spilled down his chin. Shifting position to look at Vadim. Really looked. His quiet voice carried all of the intensity it ever could. "If I touched you now, would you never leave me again?" There was so much hope in his voice and his words, it hurt like hell.

Vadim swallowed, felt his throat too tight to move, then, still staring at the bottle, smelling the desert and Dan, and himself, his hand reached to his side, opened the holster of the pistol. British issue, the exact same kind Dan carried. Merc now even by choice of tools.

Took out the mag, took the bullet from the chamber, clicked the mag in place again, rolled the bullet between his fingers. Nothing special about it, apart from where it had been, and where it could go. Brass and charge. Physics of killing. He looked at Dan, sideways, saw the man stare at him, all eyes, dark eyes, and the way the pale desert moon made his face a place of shadows.

He reached for Dan's hand, opened the fingers and placed the bullet into the palm. "I mean this." Then thought Dan wouldn't get it. Wrestled with the words in English, but he was never sure he said what he wanted to say, anyway. "This is the bullet you'll use to kill me if I walk away again." Because if I walk away again, I'll be in so much pain I'm better off dead anyway. Dan looked at his palm, the bullet, but did not close his hand.

"Do you ever hate me, Vadim?" His voice carefully devoid of emotions. "If you do, tell me. Because if you ever hated me, because of the things that happened to you, I'd rather you use that bullet on myself." Added, "Right now." He wanted to close his hand so badly, warm the bullet on his palm and never let go. "I just need to know."

Hate you? Vadim's eyes narrowed. Oh, Dan. He wanted to hit that hand, make the bullet spin away into the darkness, never find its target, one bullet in this war—any war—that wouldn't kill. Dan had been the water and the food and the boots to get him through there. It was only that he had used him up, the memories, had needed to feed off them, use them to stay himself. Hating water was absurd.

"I never hated you. I don't think I hated you up there in the mountains, when I had plenty more reason. I was scared of you, yes, but all those years? I didn't hate you. Not like you hated me."

He smiled, thought about sipping from the vodka, but didn't. "The things that happened to me?"

The beatings, the insanity of being alone, the scorn, the humiliation, the accusations, the way they had torn his mind apart, trampled on everything. "My decision. I got Katya to leave. I stayed in Afghanistan. I decided to live like I did. Am. There is no space for men like me. I'm an error. I'm not supposed to happen.

And I'm not supposed to get away with it for so long. I'm not supposed to not cringe and hide for what I am. The Soviet Union had no place for me. The Soviet Army..." Vadim shook his head. "Things happen, but they are invisible, especially if you are an officer, especially in my... former position. Nobody raised a voice. Officers got away with murder" Vadim shook his head once more, stared at his hands. "Some men want to win a gold medal, some want a family, some want to be rich, some want to be free, some want to kill other men, and some men want to do the right thing. Me, I only want you."

Dan closed his hand. Felt the metal warming to his touch. He cocked his head a fraction, studied the face he'd known for many years. Aging, just like his, and aging well. Vadim wore the years like a trophy, despite what they had done to him.

He smiled, looked down, left the bottle standing beside him, then just looked at Vadim for a long while, before slowly sliding his hand onto Vadim's thigh. Touching. Firm warmth beneath the cloth, as familiar as the bullet in his hand. "Two fucked up men." Dan murmured, "I haven't given up on them, yet."

Shoot me, Vadim thought, amazed at how sane that thought felt. It wasn't. Death scared him. Just couldn't get why he wanted Dan to kill him, if he had to die. Maybe that would make it less random, give it some meaning, but the thought was so utterly wrong it gave him goosebumps. Why the fuck, why? All he ever wanted. Dan was death, and life, and water, and emotion. Battling that emotion, mourning, sadness. Love could hurt like a motherfucker, he thought, because that was it, just human, unlikely, impossible, a kind of love that defeated him at every corner, every turn. Relief. Not given up.

"No, you haven't given up. Not all the time. You kept me alive inside you. I... failed in that. You...died in my mind, in my heart, when they kept me locked in with just myself," Vadim murmured, staring at the ground. Impossible to say this in Russian, it meant too fucking much, and he hated the melody of Russian. Russian was 'their' language, not his. For operational reasons, yes, but never again to speak feelings. "I took what I had of you with me in there. I did. They told me you were dead, so it was mourning."

Dan's fingers moved slowly along the stretched cloth of Vadim's trousers. His whole attention fixed on the other. Nothing else, no bottle, no aching body, no world existed except Vadim. A Vadim he could not understand, who had gone

through things he was unable to comprehend. A transformation so deep, it had rearranged every molecule. “Did you believe it?” Murmured, his dark eyes almost black in the dim light.

The touch on his thigh nearly made Vadim jump. There was always a promise in that touch, it was always close enough to grab his attention. The muscle tensed, mostly to acknowledge the touch had registered. “At first I didn’t... but then I was...losing my mind. I was losing...myself. Somewhere then I...lost you.”

“Did you receive the message?”

“Yes. My father relayed it. That made...things easier.”

Dan nodded, but did not smile. A price he’d paid, high stakes, but now he knew it had been worth it. “I didn’t know if it would make things worse, but I had to try it. You had to know.” His fingers curled into a loose fist on Vadim’s thigh. Murmured softly, tinged with regret. “Seems I know Jack Shit.”

Vadim wanted nothing more than to cover that hand with his and keep it there. Inched closer just a little, and felt tired, heavy, and weak, like the conversation was draining the blood from him. No, the strength, and the poison, and the darkness, even though touching the darkness was always dangerous. He lowered his head, bent the neck, swallowing hard. Throat too tight to swallow, fuck it. Leaning his head against Dan’s shoulder, asking for strength and support and touch. Dan wouldn’t touch him, not like in the old days, he knew that and it hurt, but maybe Dan allowed this.

Dan’s hand came up, instantly, into the back of Vadim’s neck. Left it there. A steady, warm, calloused presence. Tilting his head a fraction, until his cheek touched the short-shorn hair. Waiting. Patience.

Vadim wrestled with his thoughts, everything racing, things he wanted to say and would never find the words for. I took you with me, but you ran out. I fed on it, and it kept me alive.

“Some point, only I was left.”

Just happened. At some point, I was truly alone. Cold turkey. Worse. Alone with his own darkness, the things he’d done, the things he was. The crimes, and the baseness of his own nature, baser than the vomit and excrement. You were gone, used up. “Like a dog eating its own legs. Twisted dark mirror.”

I was alone with myself, and I looked at myself, and I hated what I saw, thought Vadim, with utter clarity.

Dan's voice a rumbling, low ghost. "You said once that you are not a good man, but that you got by. I understood it then, and I still do now." Tiny movements of Dan's head, minute friction, while his hand remained a stable presence in Vadim's neck. "It does not matter what you did, nor when you broke, and neither why. The things you wanted, the greed—that's been and gone. Done and buried. You're here. You've paid the highest price. Yourself."

He wasn't fully certain what the words meant, just that they somehow made sense. Craning his neck, his lips touching shaved hair.

A strange sound came from Vadim's throat at that touch. He pressed his eyes shut to not fucking start crying with relief and truth and gratitude. The gratitude was the worst, for Dan kissing him, like a brother maybe, like family, like he cared and meant it. He wasn't forgiven, he didn't think Dan could or would, but Dan accepted it. Him.

Vadim fought the crying, couldn't just break down now, no fucking hysterical mess. He should want and need and screw their brains out, make amends, show what he felt. The thoughts of making Dan pay that he had harboured the last weeks, just gone, wiped away, petty ego bullshit. Forced himself to breathe steady, force the screaming and crying down, he'd do nothing like this. Nothing.

I wanted to be strong for you and for myself, and I wasn't.

He swallowed hard, throat still too tight to swallow, fuck it. He fought the tears again, it felt like his head and chest were filled with acid.

It didn't matter. Didn't matter he had been broken, or why, or when, or how. Dan didn't despise him for being such a coward. So weak he collapsed at the true extent of what he was. How he suddenly realized what he had done—relished—was wrong. 'Following orders' didn't even cover it. And all the other faults, the creature inside that was just greedy to live, would bargain anything away, everything. The creature that 'they' had fed, only to kick it, later, when they were finished with him. He wanted that fucker's head, the man who had interrogated him. He wanted to chew the flesh from Konstantinov's severed and shattered skull, wanted to destroy him in ways nobody had ever destroyed anybody. Now, that would definitely kill him. He couldn't get anywhere near Russia without trouble.

Vadim finally managed to get his breath under control, somehow managed to breathe that choking tightness away, then felt how his body relaxed, because it couldn't hold the tension anymore. Not twenty anymore. Not even thirty.

“That bullet’s a promise and I take it as such.” Dan murmured.

Vadim raised his head, sure he had his features back under control—enough control to fake strength, that impassive, stoic face that was natural. Turned away a little, checking their surroundings, another part of the second nature. A sniper could finish them both with one bullet. Impossible to shed that idea. Inhaled. “A promise,” he echoed. “You could have my name engraved, you know?” Tried a smile.

“I don’t need your name on it.” Dan lifted his head to the same level. “I know what it says.” Crooked smile in a scarred face, but he offered no further explanation. The bullet a promise. Real and final. Dan’s hand was slowly sliding from Vadim’s neck down his shoulder.

It felt like a caress. For all intents and purposes, it was a caress. Brotherly? Prone to misunderstanding. Vadim couldn’t risk it, felt too raw inside, and just couldn’t beg for it, couldn’t ask Dan to touch him, please. Comrades. Comrades that had exchanged a bullet.

I know what it says.

What was that? Vadim had no answer, and thinking about it hurt with longing and tenderness and that darkness that was like acid on his brain.

Dan smiled. “You have a choice to make now. Either get pissed to oblivion and fall asleep on the roof, or get pissed to no more than half-way oblivion and climb down and allow my aging, fucked-up, battered body to sleep on my mattress.”

“Nights get cold in the desert,” Vadim murmured. “Let’s...” Yeah, let’s. What. “Rest, You...are injured, you need rest.”

Dan’s hand left Vadim’s thigh, taking the bottle instead. “It’ll be for the best.” What, for your body, your mind, your heart, or what, Dan? He raised the bottle and drowned out any warring thoughts by downing several gulps of the cheap liquid. Feeling it burn down his throat and pooling in his stomach, soon to poison his blood and turn his brain into a fuzzy plain.

“Help me down, aye?” He dropped the bottle, almost empty. The pain in his body no more than a dull ache, thanks to the booze. Whatever he felt in his heart...he’d be dealing with that later.

“A...yes.” Too easy to say “aye” when Dan said it. Infectious, a stupid little linguistic habit that would be embarrassing and wrong now, like he was trying too

hard to conform, to endear himself. He couldn't go further than he had. He stood, offering Dan a hand, far less drunk than Dan was, but Vadim thought to remedy that once he was back in his hut.

Dan's grip as strong as it had ever been, despite the ordeal. "You could do with some sleep, too."

"Yes." To sleep, to sleep, perchance to scream. "I think I'm about ready for some shut-eye."

"In that case, take me down, dog-soldier." Dan grinned, unsteady on his feet, especially when favouring the right side.

Vadim grinned, steadied Dan on the way to the ladder, then went first, pulling the other after him, again holding Dan steady like he was a casualty that was still walking under his own steam, but only barely.

He walked Dan to the tin hut and opened the lock and door for him, then gave a smile. "It was a good evening, Dan. The afternoon was shit, but the evening was one of the better ones I've had." He smiled, didn't feel the irony, but thought he should say something. Something 'nice'. Fuck the deserter. "Just...let me know if you want to talk...or not talk. I mean...not...I mean sit there, not talking." He shrugged, felt stupid, and hoped Dan, who was starting to grin at him like a boozed-up loony, was too drunk to notice. "Good night." And went back to his hut when Dan had crashed in his own, where Vadim finished the vodka, which made him sleep.

1991 Chapter XXVII—Deliverance

August 1991, the Persian Gulf

The next morning, Vadim woke with a blazing headache, not much different from when he'd fallen asleep. A case of dehydration, exhaustion, and, of course, a sun that had hated him all his life. Lying in the stuffy semi-dark, the only sound the electric fan, slightly creaking when it swayed from side to side. At least being the camp bogeyman kept the well-wishers away. The backslapping, the childish Oo-rah, and whatever else mercs and soldiers did to confirm their brotherhood.

I got him out because I owed him, he thought. Not for orders. Not for any sense of decency. No brotherhood for him, fuck that.

Vadim stood, swaying slightly, feeling his stomach tight and empty, weak still, but, he thought with a vague sense of irony, he'd live. He dug for a fresh shirt, fresh trousers, socks, groaned while rubbing his skull, then glanced at the watch. Not a Russian make. No more Volkovs. He thought in English, these days. Sometimes it shifted into Russian, and back within the same thought. Ragtag pile of words. No longer any language. Didn't matter.

Couldn't stand being alone anymore, needed to get out. The sun was sinking, still didn't seem to have lost any of its vicious power, and Vadim stood in the entrance to his tin can and thought, fuck it, whatever he did, both was bad.

Outside, sun, and his head already hurt, inside—darkness. Potential for. Fear. He saw mercs stalling, pausing, looking at him. Camp bogeyman. He might be a bitch, but at least he was the scariest motherfucking bitch they'd ever seen. So much bitch, in fact, that nobody had a taste for taking him on these days. He snorted, settled his face into the usual mask, lodged every muscle in place, didn't even sneer at them. Fuck them.

And fuck *him*, too. Jean must have spotted him, probably lying in wait, only to jump him when he felt like shit, anyway. Vadim decided he still needed some food and headed towards the mess tent. There was always a bite, somewhere. He wasn't choosy, really.

“Hey, Krasnorada.”

Vadim paused, not turning. Let Jean run around him like the barking dog he was. “Yes?”

“Payslip.” Jean actually had a bundle of them in his hand. Did the rounds to hand them to his team. Vadim had thought he’d get it from somebody else. Hadn’t even enquired about it.

He took it, ripped it open, cast a glance. Numbers didn’t compute. That money. That was *actually* in his account? As in, real money, real, black numbers? “Shit.”

“Seems you are worth that much,” said Jean, calm, as he usually was. Vadim expected a snide remark after this, but Jean kept his mouth shut.

Vadim folded the paper and stuffed it in his pocket. Money. He’d never earned that much money. Exchanged it for roubles several times, the sum made even less sense now.

“I’d blow my first proper pay,” said Jean. “Heard it’s custom.”

“Not sure I can drink that much.”

Jean grinned. “You’re on R&R soon. Where are you headed? Still Thailand?” He’d mentioned it. A destination he’d heard about while working on Jean’s team. Hadn’t booked anything, felt almost nauseous at the prospect he could just walk out here and go on holiday. Passport. Travel. Board a plane without orders, with a destination he’d chosen. The world suddenly was a huge place without order or purpose. Felt something well up and realised it was fear. “I guess. Thailand.”

Jean looked at him, far too inquisitive for Vadim’s taste. Did he try to be friendly. Or just friendlier than the rest of the camp? And why the fuck? Why should he care.

“Dan’s off for R&R, too.” Pause. Waited. Vadim gave him a sideways look. “Did you think about anything I told you?”

Vadim inhaled. “Like?”

Jean glanced around, but of course there were witnesses. The rumour mill only waiting for the newest story. “Book your time off, the flights, the hotel, and whatever wellness treatment you want. But I would try to not go alone, if you get my meaning, Vadim Petrovich.” Jean grinned, but it was a mask. Jean didn’t have a single friendly bone in his body when it came to him. No more.

He’d fucked that up, but couldn’t care. It remained on the outside, like everything else. The headache was worse than that. “Guess you deserved it, didn’t you.”

“If you say so, comrade team leader.” Vadim gave him a nod, indicating he was hungry and wanted to eat, not stand here, with the low sun stinging his eyes. But a thought lodged in his brain like a piece of metal in a clockwork. Not alone. Thailand. Dan. He could, for once, afford it. And he owed Dan. Money. Guilt. Duty. Blowing that paycheck on Dan sounded like a great idea.

If Dan allowed him to.

After eating and, most importantly, drinking, he made a few phone calls. Amazed he held credit, that people were willing to reserve and book things just because he gave them numbers.

* * *

After a day spent with a lingering hangover and too many briefings from too many sides, Dan had slept through the afternoon instead of having the intended little nap. When he finally woke, it was late at night. His stomach rumbled, his throat was dry, and the water in the plastic bottle beside his bunk was empty—he must have drunk it throughout his sleep without noticing. His wrist beneath the plaster cast itched like hell, and he cursed the heat in that place. Yawning, Dan pulled on his shorts and searched for the flip-flops, just about bothering to slip his arms into a parka. It got cold at night, but he couldn’t be arsed to get dressed properly.

Getting out of the hut and onto his search for food, water and something—anything to keep his mind off the itch, he pondered for a moment if he should see if Vadim was awake. Stood still, looking at the Russkie’s hut, and did nothing. He couldn’t face it yet, too complicated, and for once he didn’t have the energy for it all.

Making his way to the mess bar instead, at least they’d provide packets of peanuts, crisps, shit coffee and bottled water. If he was lucky he’d snatch one of the elusive bags of pork scratchings. Good old British fare.

He was rubbing his eyes when he opened the door, stepping into the brightly lit place to the sound of voices and the clack of pool balls.

It was mainly Jean’s crew. Pascal was practically lying across the table, trying to reach the white ball that was in an awkward position, and might be shot by a left-hander. He lay splayed across the table, while three more guys were

having a drink, and Jean stood close. Playing idly with his cue, holding it in the middle and letting it whirr around his hands like in a stupid action movie. He looked up as the door opened and grinned, stopping to play around, then slapped Pascal's ass hard. "Ten-HUT. The hero has risen."

Pascal ruined the shot, shooting up and glaring at Jean. "What the fuck?" "Thought you didn't want to be all bent over when the Master Faggot is around, huh?"

"Fucking French git." Dan called over, grinning. The parka hung open over his shorts, showing off a strip of body from throat to waistband, sunburnt skin and pale scars, his very own mixture of texture. "Take no notice, Pascal." Trotting over to the pool table, Dan raised his brows and rolled his eyes. "The bastard's only so cocky since he can boast he 'rescued' Mad Dog." Snorting, "as if I needed rescuing, could have done it easily on my own. Now, the Yank babies, that was a different matter..." He winked, hell, they all knew, and most of all him, that without Jean and most of all Vadim, they would have been fucked. Including himself.

Pascal gave a somewhat cautious grin, he was one of the ones who were Uncomfortable to have Dan very close, keeping a friendly distance. Jean, of course, was a different matter. He swaggered right over to Dan and handed him his own alcohol free beer, straight from the freezer, condense water running down its neck. "Hey, grumpy, relax." Pulling Dan into a bear hug and murmuring into his ear: "You want to talk, I'm free. Too tired to win that game."

Dan winced at that hug, his ribs were giving him hell, but he sure as fuck didn't complain. He just grinned as an answer, then downed half of the beer in one go. Didn't taste too bad, that alcohol free stuff, could get used to it if he had to. "I'm fucking starving. Got anything edible flying around? I'm not choosy. Ran out of water, too."

Jean grinned, moving back. "Hang on." He looked at Pascal. "Amuse our guest a bit, Pascal, while I get him some grub."

The other Frenchman didn't like that idea, visibly. "Ah, shit, I'll get it." Giving Jean a dark glance for it, then put down the cue and left. Jean huffed laughter.

"You alright? Nobody kissed you awake, huh?"

"Holy fuck, Pascal," Dan called after him, "you're not even my fucking type!"

Shaking his head he muttered something under his breath. Something about blokes and cocks and arses and showers and bodies and the fact he wasn't going to jump just about *anybody's* bones, simply because they were male.

"Guess you got some sleep in alright after the briefings, eh, mate?" Dan grinned at Jean once he had caught himself.

"Just a nap, then people thought grabbing me and carrying me out for a small victory party would be good." Jean's eyes were bloodshot. "Had to tell the story a dozen times."

"Guess I was lucky, then, was only briefed for what felt like twelve fucking hours today." Dan grimaced. "Managed to get some shut-eye, just woke up, hungry, thirsty, bored. The usual shit." But the way Dan shot a glance at Jean was everything but 'usual'. Hidden from anyone else, and Jean grinned as an answer.

"Seems the Russkie's asleep," Dan continued, "or at least ensconced in his hut. Wonder what he's planning, he looked funny at me today."

"I have a couple guesses. After all, we spent some quality time together on the mission."

"Ain't you lucky." Dan drawled in a fake American accent before polishing off the last of the cold beer. "And what would that be?"

Jean walked over to the vending machine close by, rummaged in his pockets for a coin, pushed it in, selected Coke, and waited for the machine to oblige him. Then pushed against it with hips and arms, making the bulk tremble, and the can fall.

Dan was watching, with far too much interest, especially when Jean bent down, gathered the can, before turning towards him. "My guess? He'll try something new."

"What, being 'nice' for a change?" Dan laughed, but it all went far too deep, and despite the humour, he didn't want to pursue the subject. He felt still raw inside, every word, spoken on the roof, remained etched into his memory, and the bullet stashed safely in his wallet.

Jean whistled. "You never know." Opened the can, drank it seemingly without swallowing, just down, then tossed the can into the trash. Wiping his lips to hide his smirk.

"Anyway, enough about the Russkie. What about the food? To be honest, I wouldn't mind sitting down." Dan pointed at his bare feet in the flip flops. "Or do

you want me to start whinging on about old age, creaking bones, and war weary blisters?”

Pascal returned with a full plate of stuff, and water, and offered it to Dan, who had to push the empty beer bottle into Jean’s hands. “There. Didn’t know what you wanted. Hope that does it.” He pulled back almost immediately, towards the others at the bar.

“Cheers, mate, that’s great.” Dan stuck the water under his arm and balanced the plate in the right hand. His left useless, the plaster cast was a bugger.

“Guess I could use a fag.” Jean fished in his shirt pocket for cigarettes, brought out a lighter, too and nodded to Dan. “Let’s go outside.” He grinned to Pascal. “Rematch is tomorrow.”

“Sure thing,” said Pascal, waving, then turning to talk to one of the guys. “Right, then,” Dan turned to walk out of the mess, waiting for Jean to hold the door open, “since I haven’t got a fucking clue what happened all day today, thanks to that lovely CO and all of his cronies, anything interesting going on in camp?

“By ‘interesting’ you probably mean what happened to your Vadya, yes?” Jean allowed the door to close behind them, then lit his cigarette, glancing at Dan with those water blue eyes. “Tell me if I’m wrong.”

Dan pulled in a deep breath, pondered all his optional answers, and ended up expelling the air with a resigned shrug. “Aye, you’re right.” Gesturing with his chin to Jean’s hut. “but not completely. I’d also like to know what your day was like. Hardly saw you since we made it back. I assume you got your debriefing straight away?”

“Yeah. Basically in the running jeep.” Jean grinned, making the red spot flare up in the dark. “Well, I told my story, and Vadim told his, leaving out all the stuff we talked about, of course. Then I had a bite to eat, but Vadim went straight to bed. I don’t think he was coherent at that point.” He opened the door to his hut. “Come. Have a seat.”

“Aye, but that was *yesterday*.” Dan stepped inside, glad to be able to put the plate down on a rickety ‘table’, dropping the water bottle. “I was together with him last night, talking.” Sitting down, rather gingerly, Dan stretched out his legs, favouring the right side. The left a cacophony of reds, blues, greens, yellows and purples. “Did you see him today?”

Jean nodded. “Yeah, I did.” He sat down on the bed, reached for a water bottle and had another drink. “He’s different. Nicer. Shit. Like he’s making some effort for once, to get people to not hate him. Trying to be nice. You know. Talking. Saying hello and thanks.”

Dan had started to tuck into the food, a mix of sandwiches and leftovers of cold meat and chicken. He smiled, more to himself than Jean. “Told you so. He’s not an ogre.” Paused, while chewing, “well, he doesn’t have to be.”

Washing the mouthful of food down with some water, he reached out to pluck the cigarette from between Jean’s lips. “I wonder what to do now.” Taking a drag before handing it back and then making himself comfortable as best as he could on the bed, plate balancing on his knees. “Seems I’m staying here for the time being, and they want to send me off to R&R. Wouldn’t be surprised if I wasn’t the only one. Heard anything for yourself?”

Jean nodded. “He’s going out on R&R, too. I’m heading for Paris. Offer still stands, you know. Spend some time in a nice country. I’ll translate for you, because most French people’s English is worth shit.”

“No need,” Dan grinned, chewing, “I speak some French, too, and I bet after a week or two I’d be fine.” Shaking his head, though, “thanks for the offer, mate, but you should go and visit your lady on your own. I’ll see what I’ll do with my time, maybe fly back to New Zealand. I bought a farm there, bloody dilapidated and was cheap as dirt, but fantastic views, and an old orchard. Fancy it as the place I’ll retired to. Bought it only last year and haven’t been back since.”

“Sounds like paradise.” Jean grinned. “You going to repair it yourself? Or hire people?”

“Hire, I guess. The plan is to work in this business until I’m knackered, save all my money, then have the place redone.” Polishing off the plate, Dan rubbed his stomach with a fake burp. “Better, I was starving.” He tried to scratch one of the largest bruises on his ribs, but only winced. “Goddammit, it itches everywhere!”

Jean grinned and reached for the sun lotion. “I can offer this.” Raising the bottle. “Or scratch you. If you fancy.” Turning to face Dan. “You are aware Vadim knows what we’re doing...and he’s pretty jealous. Told me in no unclear terms he’s going to fight for you.”

“But why does he feel the need to fight you for me?” Peeling himself out of the parka, it was awkward for Dan with the bruised left side, and Jean reached out with one hand to help a little, off-handed, almost, without thinking about it.

“You’ve got your lady, we’re just fooling around, and we’re mates.” Dan stopped, looked at Jean, “aren’t we?” Dropping the garment to the floor. “We’re friends, Dan. That’s it. All the other stuff, whatever. No ring from me, anytime soon, so don’t worry.” Jean nodded at the bed. “Get comfortable.”

Dan lay down on his front, right arm pillowing his head. “Vadim...that’s an entirely different kettle of fish. We talked, last night. He knows I love him, always have, and I tried to explain why I hated him, but he also knows he can’t just walk back into my life. The stunts he pulled were too much.”

“Well, we talked on the way and what he said was ‘Stay away from him’. Vadim doesn’t get the whole friendship thing, huh? It’s all or nothing for him.” Jean shook his head, warming some of the lotion in his hand.

“I don’t know if he ever had a friend, don’t think so, but could be wrong.” Not that Dan knew of anyone.

Jean placed the slick hands on Dan’s back, touch firm, but far lighter on the bruises, just working to moisturize the dried out skin. Lazy, gentle touches, up to the shoulders, working half a massage into it, working with thumbs and fingertips, not palms, without strength. “I guess he’s been thinking about that. Probably still is. Just the way he looks.”

“Thinking about what? You? Me? I told him I’ve changed, my life has changed, every fucking thing has changed since he came back, except for the fact I’m still a stupid fuck and love him. Despite everything.” Dan looked up, flicking the flip flops off his feet, while Jean squirted more lotion into his hand. “He won’t touch anyone again, ever. I vouch for that. But I won’t stop what I’m doing. If I get the chance, I’ll have sex. I have eleven years of monogamy to make up for.”

“What do you mean he won’t touch anybody?” Jean kept his voice level, as if asking just for curiosity.

“I meant the shit he pulled with the guy whose name tag he dropped on you. Threatening my friends. He was desperate, and yeah, before you say anything, I know I’m making excuses again.” Dan closed his eyes for a moment, just giving himself over to the touches. Now and then a faint moan at a particularly tense muscle that relaxed under the careful massage.

“Ah, yes. That. Poor bastard.”

Jean slid down to Dan’s lower back, using a bit more force, but still mainly caring for the skin and less about the muscle. “You’d be fucking stupid if you didn’t make the most of it. Life’s short. Love is one thing, but that doesn’t mean tying yourself down.”

“No, but if it really hurt the person you love, what would you do?”

Glancing up one-eyed, Dan stretched under the touches like a cat. “What if your lady found out about someone else and she got really hurt. What would you do? Would you stop seeing the other person?”

Jean arrived at the shorts. “Lift your ass.” He took the shorts and pulled them off, discarded them to the side. Then regarded Dan’s ass—far more muscular than Solange’s, but still a sight to behold. “Well.” Placing his slicked up hands on Dan’s ass, massaging it as well, somewhat bemused by the effect it had on him. “She doesn’t find out. If she did, I’d lie low for a while and then go on. I think people are free...if you stick together because you’re in love, great, and no other person can take that away. If the other person *can* take it away, it means you’re in love with somebody new.”

Dan sighed with pleasure at touch and care, involuntarily opening his legs. Those hands were too damn good. “I don’t think it’s quite that straightforward. It’s not necessarily about someone new, but about something comfortable and good, like this here...,” Dan paused, “something that isn’t about love but about fun. And if that hurt? What then?”

“The way I see it, you’re not back together. And that means you can do whatever you like. Including screw around with half the Legion, Delta, and whatever baby jarhead that doesn’t climb the tree fast enough.”

“Well, yeah, that’s right, and even if we were...” Dan couldn’t help but grin at the mental image of shagging himself through several countries’ worth of regiments. A mental image that had a certain effect on his lower anatomy.

Jean took some more lotion and rubbed it into the back of Dan’s thighs, including the insides, feeling how Dan opened his legs. That usually meant Solange was ready for it. Rubbing the lotion in, he stopped from the crack, didn’t touch the dam or the balls. Wouldn’t have minded, though. Wondered what a man’s...a proper man’s ass would be like. “Well, might be selfishness talking.” He continued with Dan’s lower legs. At this rate, he’d use the rest of the bottle, easily.

“Hmmm,” Dan almost purred, “does that mean you are hedging a kind of interest in me still?” He grinned lopsidedly, peering up, but unable to see Jean.

“‘Kind of interest’ is a nice way of putting that. A very special kind of interest,” Jean murmured close to Dan’s ear. “Why?”

“I can only say, if you keep up that kind of massage, I’m going to be anybody’s.”

“Better keep you in my hut then, can’t have you walking around in that state, now, can I?” Down to the legs and the feet. Sex was a distinct possibility.

“You got a glorious ass there, Dan. Turn over so I fix your front.”

“What if I rather you fixed my back?” Dan wasn’t quite sure where this was going, just that he was too relaxed to turn over. Jean’s hands on his body, working his arse, was exactly what felt right after the shit of the past weeks.

“Then I’d give you an extra special treatment right now.” Jean paused, then squirted more lotion into his hands, and worked up the legs again. Different, this time. Clearly designed to arouse interest, touches changing from firm gripping, kneading, to the teasing sliding of splayed fingers inside Dan’s legs. Spending time on the knees.

Dan spread the fingers of his right hand underneath his face, lying comfortably, eyes falling shut in increments, the longer Jean was touching. Plastered left hand stretched out over his head, the itch beginning to fade into the background. He didn’t know what to think, other than not-thinking, and simply enjoying to be alive. No tension, nothing but his aching body, relaxing under the awfully skilled hands. Dan sighed with the comfort of it all, smiled, his legs opening further to accommodate those clever fingers. What was he going to do and where was this going to go? Didn’t matter, no thinking and no deep emotions. This wasn’t a matter of life and death, not even of gutwrenching desire and heart-felt love and lust. This was Jean, his mate, and his inimitable ability to make Dan simply feel good.

Jean slid up to work on the thighs, marvelled at the strength, all the hard muscle, not a bone under his fingers. All firm flesh and dark skin, with hair, not the carefully epilated and lasered texture Solange sported, not her trim, slim legs that were almost as narrow in the upper leg as the lower leg. Dan was clearly very male indeed, yet opened his legs like she would do, and Jean caught himself grinning as his fingers moved up to Dan’s ass, just as firm and strong, nicely rounded. Thumbs

slipping into the crack, hands massaging both cheeks. “Hope you don’t mind if I wake you up in a few minutes...” he murmured.

“Mmmmm...” Dan mumbled, “depends on why you’d want to wake me.” Still smiling, it was too good, floating in a cloud of tranquillity. Damn, that man had the knack, and for a moment Dan envied that lady of his, for going to marry those hands. And lips. He sighed once more, stretching his body slowly. Moved his arse into the hands, completely relaxed, not a shred of tension in his body.

“Okay, that’s it,” murmured Jean, giving a near-silent laugh. “I should lock the door. Don’t run away, mon cher.” The French sounded affected, slightly mocking, when Jean got up and locked the door.

“Hm?” Dan mumbled, couldn’t be bothered to open his eyes. “Whassup?”

“Nothing. Relax.” In an afterthought, Jean switched on the radio. Just for any stragglers of his crew to potentially check on him. He glanced over at Dan, a picture for the Gods. Solange’s many photographers would lick all their ten fingers to get Dan in that position, with that expression on his face. And get their camp little cocks up. The line of shoulder, the waist curving with muscle. Well, he knew the score, and slipped out of his usual wifebeater and shorts, cast them aside, then opened the locker. Solange smiled at him. Miss you, baby, he thought, and fished for the pack of condoms.

Dan was stretching his legs, all the way from hip to toe, feeling every muscle contract, tense and relax. Taking a slow, deep breath, he cracked one eye open. “Hey, Frenchie...” murmured while grinning lazily, “what takes you so long?” He wanted those hands back and the bliss of just letting go. He could, because nothing bad would happen. Not with Jean. He just knew it.

“Nothing much.” Jean returned, slyly slipped the pack under the bed, within reach, and straddled Dan’s thighs, squirting more lotion into his hands. The white stuff made him think of something else, and he grinned again, returning to work on Dan’s ass. Right thumb sliding between the cheeks, down to the dam, teasing, mainly, and touching Dan’s balls, as if by accident. “Ooops, sorry.”

Dan jumped at the touch, in the abso-fucking-lutely best way possible. “Fucking liar.” He murmured and grinned, lifting his arse half an inch off the bed and into those hands that made him quietly moan with pleasure. “But I don’t mind another ‘accident’.” His whole body moved gently while he chuckled, creating friction of his cock against the bed sheet.

Jean whistled. “Now, how should I interpret that, Mad Dog? Like this?” He slid more of his hand between Dan’s legs, teasing his balls, rubbing and pulling them slightly, while his free hand kept massaging Dan’s ass.

“That’s...not a bad interpretation.” Dan’s low voice was getting breathless, yet that grin never left his face. Smug, like the cat that got the milk. Not bothering to suppress any sounds, he moaned softly, moving his hips in fractions, to keep up the delicious pressure on his cock.

“Damn, here I am, trying to make you relax, darling, and what happens, you get all squirmy.”

Dan chuckled, stretched out his left arm, before relaxing even further into hands and feeling. “No one ever called me ‘darling’.” He rubbed his face against his arm, barely murmuring the last words, “trust you to be the first one.”

Jean shook his head, grinning. Seemed the Russian didn’t even know how to do that part right. But mentioning Vadim would likely not have a great effect right now. “I just believe in good manners in bed, that’s all.” He grinned, enjoying the sight of Dan squirming, slowly, few things that were as sexy as Dan wanting, sensuous, relaxed. His left moved to the crack again, thumb rubbing the hole, but without pressure, circling it. He could do that for hours to Solange unless she was crying with need.

Dan’s body was shifting, with slow, unrushed movements of his hips, enjoying hand, fingers, and most of all thumb, right *there*. He could feel his heart beat, the blood course through his body; a body that reacted to stimulation in more subtle ways than he’d thought he was capable of. Alive and breathing, once more jumped off the grim reaper’s scythe, and it felt fucking good. “Damn good bed manners you have.” Murmured, breathing through parted lips. “I envy your wife to be.” His lips curved into a smile while he let out a sound of utter contentment.

Jean grinned, leaned in, decided it was worth checking whether Dan liked this, too, and opened his mouth and bit tenderly into the muscle, breathing through his nostrils, noticeably for Dan. Then moved his head, biting again, a bit down, a bit harder, while his thumb kept the pressure up, not breaching, just stretching, skirting the edge, never enough to actually slip in. “Yes, she could have found a worse lover, I suppose.” Jean grinned. “But your ass is better than mine, clearly.”

Dan shuddered with every bite, drawing in hissed breaths, letting them out in long, pleased moans. “Better?” He moved his hips in slow, undulating motions, completely shameless and with relaxed abandon. “Not from my perspective.”

Jean placed another bite, harder, moving his jaw as he made Dan feel more of his teeth, enjoying how Dan moved, and the way his voice changed.

“course not, you’re attached to yours.” Jean grinned, then changed the angle of his thumb and breached the muscle, again only stretching, not pushing further than half the first digit. “You turn me on, you know that?”

“Shit.” Dan breathed out, couldn’t control his body that jerked at the minimal breaching, and he pushed back, involuntarily seeking more of the thumb. Hazy memories behind his closed eyes, of cave and fire, heat and skin, and of fingers that had turned into a fist, consuming him inside and out. “Seems...,” his voice turned rough with an entirely new shade of need, “I’m turned on by you, too.”

“Of course you are,” murmured Jean gently, half-joking. “Not that you have much of a chance against my devastating charms.” Moving against Dan, slipping the thumb further in, granting the unspoken request for more. Hooked the thumb and slid against the wall, pretty sure he’d soon find what he was looking for. “That good, sweetheart?”

“Oh fuck,” Dan laughed under his breath, while moving with and against the digit, “must you call me sweetheart?” Didn’t mind, just chuckled again, whatever Jean said, nothing diminished the desire, nor touched the lust. Especially not since that long thumb was moving so damned clever inside of him, it made him buck and want to take hold of his cock, to jerk himself off.

Jean laughed. “Just checked whether you were still listening.” Unfair, yes, but then, keeping things light and playful was exactly what he was planning.

“Wouldn’t mind...,” Dan gasped when that thumb touched places inside, he knew all too well, “...ah...,” momentarily losing the ability to form words, “... some more.”

“And just checking whether you like the same stuff.” Jean eased up, grinning, pulled the thumb towards the hand and out, not without circling the hole again. More lotion, just to time things right, and the stuff was still cool when he brought index and middle finger in, again, circling, playful, as if he had all the time in the world and was just fooling around. Leaning closer, he noticed two small

scars on the outside, old and pale, and frowned. Flicking them across the place he'd found earlier, he opened the fingers against Dan's muscles and rubbed both sides of it.

The sounds Dan let out made no sense and had no meaning. Pushing himself up, a little on his knees, unabashedly lifting his arse and stretching it towards those fingers. Inside his body, movement. Hand, no threat. This meant, no danger. And fuck, but the stimulation was just like something he only remembered hazily, and only once. When he had lost himself completely, then found again. "Yeah..." Long drawn out moan, his body spoke his consent, didn't need any words.

Hot. It was damned hot to see and hear this, different, but good, and Jean licked his lips, a touch nervous. That now, that was pretty damn gay, too. Of course he'd wondered, and Dan was sexy, but it was a step up from what they'd done, and Vadim would likely rip his head off if he knew. Well, he likely suspected it anyway. And there was a slightly nasty thought for a moment that had to do with Vadim, and revenge, but Jean shook his head. Fuck that.

Nowhere near what Vadim thought, and frankly, it didn't matter right now. Just about making Dan feel good, and take his own pressure off, too. The position was just right as well, he preferred ass, Solange, of course, but even before her. He reached towards the pack, found a condom and tore it open with his free hand and teeth.

Dan was too far gone to hear anything, concentrating on the fingers inside of him, fucking himself in slow, smooth motions, and moaning. He still hadn't touched his cock, up on his knees now, and with his left hand useless, he couldn't stroke and support himself at the same time. Hard and weeping, almost flat against his stomach, he didn't want to cum yet, lost in the drawn-out lust.

One-handed, Jean fumbled around with the condom, oddly remembered the worst situations he'd had to deal with that basic protection, jungles, deserts, stoned out of his mind, drunk, absolutely, or sharing some dark-eyed whore in a nameless place in the dead and rotting heart of Africa. He'd stopped smoking because that was barter for pussy. Or ass, as it were. Pulling it down, then shifting his weight. Removing the fingers, causing Dan to groan, getting himself to the entrance that should easily accommodate him now. Dan murmured something unintelligible, but

he could hardly reach backwards to slap Jean's fingers into the position. Eyes still closed, he protested when the Frenchie shifted. "Hey..." mumbled.

Jean was about to enter, slow, lips open, both hands on Dan's body, pulling him closer, trying to ease himself in.

"Hey!" Dan's eyes suddenly opened, tensing from one second to the next. Clenching his muscle, but he was trapped, could hardly crane his head enough to catch a glimpse of Jean. Kneeling behind him. Between his legs. About to..."What the fuck are you doing?" Torn between immediate tension and the lingering mellow lust.

Jean pulled back, something alarmed him at the back of his mind, but couldn't place it. The sudden tension more that of a straight guy than that of somebody who flaunted being gay and, he had assumed, enjoyed getting fucked. "Not... okay?" He asked, feeling strange that Dan could object. "You don't like it?"

Shit. What to answer. Dan's mind was in no way functioning as normal, his cock still hard and the lust still there, and he did 'like' it, yes. With one man. Never anyone else. And with that man only with suffocation and brutality and..."Don't know." Truth, as crazy as it sounded. Didn't know right now. Did he like it? Didn't he? Or was he just one fucked-up old guy who was too damned hung up on some shit from the past. "Don't know." Repeated. Half-cocked permission, curiosity even. A lie, yet none. He knew, yet didn't.

Shit. What *did* Dan do with that hulking Russian, with his other conquests, baby jarheads and other guys? Jean just couldn't believe he, as the straight guy in this, would teach a gay guy how to take cock. The thought was hilarious, but Jean only felt a mild, somewhat shocked tenderness well up. Very much like Solange's "please don't hurt me, non?" that had gone straight to his heart even drunk and stoned and half delirious with freedom on that fateful night in Montmatre. "s okay," he murmured, grinning despite the weird situation and the condom hanging off his cock. Instead brought his slicked hand forward and took Dan's cock, stroking him. "You're still fucked up from that mission, probably hurting in all the wrong places." Giving Dan a readymade excuse.

"Aye..." Dan closed his eyes once more, willing his head to fall back onto his hand, making his body relax. That hand on his cock was damn good, but hell, those fingers up his arse had been better. Both together, that's what he'd wanted.

He drew in a shaky breath, concentrating on his body and its reactions. “Is just I don’t let myself get fucked.” Adding, “usually.”

The scars. The answer. Something. Somebody. Had torn him. Anal trauma. That was...the solution, and Jean felt his face grow cold. Paled. Cursed himself for not having drawn the right conclusion before. Still. Dan had liked it.

Shit. Oh shit. Pushing for something that must freak Dan out. Hell, he’d be freaked out alright if anything—anybody—had done that to him. Dan would suck him off, eagerly. Wasn’t like he’d lose anything if he did the decent thing, overplay it, make a joke, to put Dan at ease and make him come with a few fingers up his ass and pumping him. “What do I know about gay stuff anyway,” muttered Jean, light-hearted.

“Pretty much, actually...,” Dan breathed out, “for a straight guy.” Concentrating with that hand on his cock turned out to be difficult.

Jean knew. He knew who would be capable to do that—and that gave the desperate hatred between Vadim and Dan a completely new edge. How fucking stupid to kind of get those two back together, even giving the Russian bastard hints. Dan had plenty of good reasons to hate him. “Fingers alright, though?”

“Aye.” Dan’s hips were moving again, in sync with the strokes, and he suddenly found it all so incredibly absurd. He was forty-two years old, and the shit happened eleven years ago. The world had changed in the meantime, and so had he. “You just threw me.” This was too precious to let the past be a hindrance. Kabul, eleven years ago, a night of pain, terror and blood, held no sway over him anymore. It was long over.

“Yeah, was...assuming too much.” Shit. Jean entered Dan with his fingers again, rewarded with a gasp and a more enthusiastic movement of those hips. Nearly apologetic for this whole seduction thing not having gone completely to plan, not just one thing after the other, natural and nice, one logical step after the other.

“I didn’t mean ‘no’.” Dan murmured, “I’m sure you know what you’re doing, what with your lady-love...”

“I’d think so.” Jean smiled, wasn’t quite sure he wanted to go ahead, despite what his body said, then thought, fuck it, he could always pull back in case Dan didn’t like it. He was hardly Vadim, not brutal, not a fucking rapist, and he sure as fuck wouldn’t injure Dan. “Can I try?”

“What do you think my body is telling you.” Dan brought out, had to focus hard on each word. His cock and Jean’s hand slick with precum, and once those fingers were back inside his body, he couldn’t stop moving towards them, making irrepressible noises. “Holy shit!” Dan exclaimed when Jean managed to hit a spot just *right* while stroking with the perfect pressure and speed. “All that’s missing...,” groaned, “is a cock...,” drawing in a shuddering breath, Dan’s cock jumped at the mental image, “to suck.”

The memory of one of the whores he’d shared flashed across Jean’s brain, bent over, him deep inside her ass, another Legionnaire stuffing her face with cock, and the bitch loved every minute of it. And Jean had loved the way she had squirmed, and seeing his comrade fuck her face. Not a very straight thought. “Oh fuck,” he murmured. “Don’t think Pascal would oblige us, eh? Even though he has a good size.”

“Pascal...” Dan forced each word out with a moan, “is worried...to be in the same...room...with me.”

Jean grinned, pulling his fingers back. Horny enough to try again, shifting, then entering Dan slowly, gently, proper angle, allowing Dan to move back against him, groaning deeply.

Almost the same as the fingers. This time there were no dark thoughts, no greed, and no need to exorcise any demons. Dan easily fell into Jean’s rhythm, able to accept the intrusion. Slow, steady and he could feel his body accommodating the cock, the muscle yielding with barely any pain. “Not...bad,” he exhaled.

Not bad. Yeah right, Jean thought. Like hell was not cold, heaven was not close. One thing to fuck a girl, or one who’d be a girl, soon, more girlish than most girls, another to fuck a man. Dan was completely different. For once, the power in the motions. Not a body he could direct, steer, goad into following him, but quite powerful enough to have his own mind, starting from the strength with which Dan held him there, to the play of muscles on his back, and the sounds. No endearing girly squeals, nope. Instead low, male sounds.

“Yeah...not...bad.” Moving slowly, tilting his hips to hit Dan right, teasing him with minute movements that made him sweat.

“Ah...yeah...shit...” Incoherent sounds and senseless words, Dan’s lips parted, eyes shut, just breathing. Letting his body take over, giving full reign like he’d never done before—not without the violence and the choking. His own

rhythm in sync with Jean's, but pushing back and urging the other's body to increase the pace. Muscles tensing, relaxing again, like whipcords running along his back, up to his shoulder and back down again, ass cheeks clenching, powerful thighs spurring the movements.

Dan was demanding it, oddly powerful, nothing like the frantic 'please fuck me' he was used to, and Jean struggled for control, every now and then throwing the rhythm to change something. Twisting his hips, laughing breathlessly as he realized how good they worked together, going faster when Dan demanded that, and slower when he felt he was getting there too fast. "Easy does it," he murmured, touching Dan more slowly, more intense. Taking his hand away to run it across Dan's sweaty, scarred stomach, feeling him tense there, goddamned deadly bastard, cocky, courageous, gentle, smart, funny, trustworthy, and how fucking sexy in all that.

Easy, fast, slow, whatever. Dan didn't care, cared only about the hand on his cock and the...yes, the cock inside his body. Not Vadim, not his Russkie, the only man who would ever get him to take it up the arse, but...a friend. Fun, easy-going, and it was all suddenly so bloody simple. Dan was getting further and higher and wasn't going to be holding on much longer, yet that hand wouldn't speed up and the man didn't either. "If you don't...make me come soon..." he forced out, managed to get the words together in his befuddled brain, "I'll fizzle out. Am not fucking thirty anymore." Groaning with frustration and entirely too much need.

Jean nodded silently, speeding up, his hand found Dan's cock again, and thrust harder, faster, feeling his own pressure mount—decided to let it go, hoping to drive Dan over the edge first. Pulled every trick in the book, harsh strokes on Dan's cock while his thrusts just remained this side of intense, gritting his teeth.

Jean's technique was rewarded soon, when Dan's movements became more erratic, simultaneously more forceful, and all the power in his body seemed to be contained in his middle. Turning his head to muffle the cry, he came against his belly and chest, convulsing involuntarily, taking Jean with him and over the edge.

Jean cursed as it hit him, thrusting deep and with force, that searing moment that went on for too short, but instead of collapsing on top of Dan he forced himself to pull back and out. He had only enough coordination left to pluck the used condom off without spilling the stuff all over the place, tossing it into an

empty Styrofoam cup near the bed, while Dan crashed down, lying flat on his stomach once more. Jean stretched out, half lying on top of Dan, shifting to not lie on the bruises. “What a nice way to...say...good you’re alive,” he murmured.

“Mmmmm.” Dan mumbled, a slow grin spreading across his face, while his eyes remained closed. Still breathless, he slightly shifted his weight. He’d done hell to his bruised ribs, but heck, it was worth it. “Interesting massage technique you have.” Peering one-eyed, grinning.

Jean grinned, running a hand down Dan’s flank. “Yeah. There I was unsuspecting straight guy, and then you get me to massage you, only to...finalise my corruption.”

“I think you’re talking bullshit, Frenchie.” Dan winked, stretched slowly, deliberately, with a wince at the rare ache deep inside. This wasn’t what he usually did—but when he did it, it was damn good.

Jean laughed and yawned, which was quite an accomplishment. “Fuck, I made it through the Legion straight, and then comes Mad Dog.” Reaching out to turn the radio down.

“Why, had any opportunities in the Legion?” Leering, Dan ever so carefully started to move, he had to change his position and get his limbs to function again. Sooner or later it was time to leave Jean’s hut anyway.

Jean shifted, rolling over on his side. “Of course not. All straight, and hormones and closeness are not a problem, at all.” He grinned. “What do you think?”

“I think I rather like the mental image of a whole ‘straight’ orgy in the Legion. All buff bastards, one arse more muscular than the other.” Flashing a toothy grin, Dan made it to sit on the bed, hand on Jean’s hip, stroking the smooth flesh without thinking.

Jean laughed. “Thanks...that gives my happy memories a new dimension. I’ll show you some photos if you want. Just come down to Paris, and I show you more ‘muscular arses’ than you could shake a stick at.”

Dan laughed, “Short of me trying to twist and bend down, which is going to be awkward and painful, what about you coming up and doing your speciality?” He pointed at his lips with a grin.

Jean got up into sitting position, legs dangling over the edge now, but kissing again, stroking Dan’s face and chest, suppressing a grin every now and

then, the kind of pleasantly exhausted tender grin that showed Jean's world was just fine, thanks very much.

Dan's was, too, and when he left the hut an hour later, he was humming to himself, when he stopped to look at Vadim's hut for a long time, smiling. He fell asleep within seconds that night.

* * *

Lunchtime the next day, Dan was ambling across the US base, heading towards the gates of the compound. He'd just finished his latest briefing. Taking his time, he grinned to himself, in high spirits despite the boring meeting. The bruised ribs freshly strapped up, his sore leg and side reminding him of every single one of his forty-two years, but the strangely pleasant ache in his arse reminded him of something else entirely. He was whistling crookedly to himself, left arm dangling, grubby-white plaster cast scrawled all over with signatures and silly doodles, right hand in his trouser pockets. Customary shade over his eyes, he nodded a greeting and grinned good humouredly here and there to guys he'd never seen before. Seemed he had turned into something of a celebrity amongst the Yanks. Saving comrades' lives seemed to have a mellowing effect on those guys, not a one had mentioned the word 'faggot'. Not yet anyway.

He stopped when he first noticed a shadow, then the bulk of a man come into the centre of his vision. Lifting his head, Dan flashed an easy-going grin at the guy. Didn't know the man, but recognised the insignia right away. Delta. US Special Forces. Army. Fairly tall and dark and strangely reminding him of himself. Ten years or so ago.

"You're the one who jumped." The Yank drawled.

Dan nodded, shrugged.

"You crashed with the kids."

Dan flashed a toothy grin.

"You're the faggot."

Dan huffed with a short stab of dry laughter. "Aye." Raising his brows above the shades. "And you?"

"I'm the opportunist." The Yank pushed his chewing gum from one side to the other. Tongue darting out from between his lips.

Dan smirked, baring his teeth. “In that case, I’m ‘waste not want not’.” The Delta nodded, pulled a pair of polarised shades out of his tunic pocket, and slipped them on. “Name’s Hooch.”

Dan nodded in acknowledgment. “Dan.”

“I know.”

“You would.”

“Am off duty at 1600 hrs.” The Yank gestured with his chin towards the vehicle area. Rows of bloody big trucks and armoured personnel carriers.

“Aye.” Dan nodded. He had a temporary pass for the US camp, and no more briefings scheduled in the afternoon. That would do just nicely.

Hooch nodded, tipped his temple with one finger and Dan flashed one last grin before he continued on his way, whistling loudly.

The deal was done.

* * *

1600 hrs, on the spot, Dan was sauntering through the gates of the American camp. Once again whistling to himself, this time with anticipation. Seemed he was getting himself a nice little harem in this godforsaken place. Who would have known. The Gulf, a gay bloke’s wet dream.

Chuckling to himself, Dan nodded to a couple of jarheads, and he just about dodged the attempt at buddy-slapping his bruised left shoulder. “Hey, careful, this old guy’s knackered.” They laughed, and once again Dan marvelled at the youth of those kids. Babies, no more, just like Chris.

Shit, Chris Johnson, he hadn’t managed to find out how the chopper crew was doing. He had to risk being late for his ‘rendezvous’. Picking up speed, he made it to the admin block, finding an Officer who was able to give him the latest stats. Johnson had been flown back home once he was stable enough, and all they knew was that the kid was going to make it. Martinez and Jackson were doing well, with the pilot in a military hospital, and Gary still in camp, taking it easy with the concussion, waiting for some well deserved R&R back home. Dan smiled with satisfaction, thanked the man, who was about to express his gratitude once more. Cut short with a nod and a “cheers” from Dan, before he hurried back to the vehicle park.

Damn, 1615 hrs, he was late, and if he was unlucky, his chance for a quick stint of mutual wanking had come and gone. Still, he was in a damn good mood, humming to himself, as he passed through the rows of trucks, personnel carriers, and light armoured vehicles.

The sudden sound of metal being beaten, once, caught his attention. He'd counted on the Delta guy finding him, rather than vice versa, and wasn't disappointed. The flash of polarised shades glinted in the sun, then a movement, right where a row of armoured personnel carriers was parked.

Dan made it to the second to last one, furthest away from the hustle of the camp, before he dodged a fist in a split second, which just about missed him. Probably deliberately.

"You're good." The Delta drawled, chewing gum while peeling out of the shadow. "And late."

Dan shrugged, didn't attempt to defend himself. "Aye. Old but good." His eyes followed the movement of the Yank's chin, indicating the open door at the back of an M113.

"Like wine?"

Dan followed the Delta, who climbed into the vehicle. "Cheese, rather." Pulling himself inside with his good hand, he was sore, but managed.

The door slammed shut behind him and he found himself in the gloom, watching the other man sit down on the metal floor, in front of the jump seat. Dan glanced to the side, made out the five seats along the side he'd known would be there, and sat on one of them, facing Hooch. Making himself comfortable, legs braced apart, desert boots firmly planted.

Two men sitting opposite to each other, both wearing shades, both dark haired, both deeply tanned. One of them chewing gum noisily and dressed in US fatigues, the other in t-shirt and shorts, made from cut-off old BDUs, plaster-cast left hand and a slow grin tugging at the corners of his lips. Regarding each other, checking the opponent while guarding their territory.

Dan broke the silence first. "How much of an opportunist are you?"

"Depends on what you offer."

"Not my arse."

"Mine neither."

Dan grinned, lifted his injured hand. "Jerking only one handed."

Hooch nodded, flashed a grin in return. “What else?”

“I suck cock.”

The Delta’s eyebrows raised beneath the shades. “OK.”

“OK?”

“I do, too.”

“Good, but 69’s out. Whole left side’s knackered.” Dan gave a short laugh. Lying on his side or kneeling, or in any other strenuous position and one-handed giving head? Wasn’t worth it. Far too acrobatic, anyway.

Hooch nodded, shifted the gum from one side to the other. “OK.” He went from the floor onto his knees, moving purposefully closer to Dan. “Show me.”

Dan’s grin grew and he shrugged one-sided. “Sure.” Deftly opening waist cord and button with one hand, he fumbled a moment with the zipper, then lifted his arse off the metal seat to pull the shirt up with his hand and let the shorts drop down to his ankles. He had to stay bent in the troop carrier, too tall, so he sat back down and opened his legs as wide as the shorts around his ankles allowed.

“Passing inspection?” No underwear, as usual, and his already interested cock nestled in dark curls above smooth-shaved flesh.

The Delta said nothing for a moment, presented with not only the cock but a mess of scars. He hooked a finger beneath his shades to push them on top of his forehead. His eyes almost as dark as Dan’s, the two men odd mirrors of each other, just a decade apart.

“Shrapnel?”

“Aye,” Dan grinned, amused at both the lack of reaction and the acute perception. “Suicide bomb, Afghanistan.”

Hooch nodded, shuffled closer until he knelt between Dan’s legs. His callused hand cupped heavy flesh in a strong grip, weighing the goods. “Shaved nuts. Convenient.” He commented while he let Dan pluck the shades off his forehead, placing them safely to the side, where they were joined by Dan’s own. Hooch’s head lowered, studying Dan’s cock without touching, watching it harden and grow beneath his gaze.

Dan was intently staring down at the head. It felt a bit surreal, but his body seemed to take it in stride, reacting to that weird-ass Delta with interest.

“Good dick.” Hooch took hold of Dan’s cock at last, pulled the foreskin back, studied the crown. “Never had an uncut one.”

Dan chuckled, but the touch made him gasp, wanting more within split seconds, impatient. "Get on with it, mate."

Hooch looked up at the demand, dark eyes meeting in the gloom, and both men understood that moment how much akin they were to the other. He silently nodded and spat out the gum before sucking in Dan's cock, most of the way.

Pulling in his breath with a hiss, Dan let his head drop forward, watching the Delta. His face, lips, cheeks hollowing, head moving, the whole damned skilled technique, and most of all the mind-blowing sight of his cock vanishing down the man's throat, to reappear with a strong hand wrapped around its base. Stroking, before sucking down again.

Gripping the edge of the metal seat with his good hand, Dan didn't utter a word, except for nonsensical, suppressed sounds and his ever increasing, harsh breathing. The sight was intoxicating, the man a complete stranger sans few words and gestures, kneeling between his legs. The Delta was giving head like a pro. One thing Special Forces across the world seemed to have in common: they never did anything half-way.

Despite trying his best to hold back and savour the sensations, Dan felt his abs tighten when the Delta took his balls into a firm grip, simultaneously rolling, kneading, the other hand stroking. Those goddamned clever lips and throat of his, with just the perfect light scrape of teeth, drawing his cock into the tight and wet heat with a strong suction.

"Shit!" Dan forced out between clenched teeth as his hips involuntarily lifted off the bench, pushing towards the mouth that came down onto his cock in one last, hard, near punishing move, allowing Dan's cum to spurt down the back of Hooch's throat. Dan's whole body shuddered in the moment of ecstasy, all muscles standing out in hard ropes beneath his skin.

"You...swallowed..." Dan managed to gasp out when he came down from the high, while his cock was licked clean in one long sweep of tongue and lips. The Delta's hand still closed around the softening flesh.

"Figured you're clean." Hooch drawled, "like me." Flashing a grin. Unspoken the underlying understanding they were both professional military men, and neither of them would be so stupid to get themselves killed by their cock.

"Aye." Dan looked at the man, faces at the same height, when Hooch drew up, straightened, and sat on his heels.

“Want to fuck my throat?”

Hooch raised one brow and one corner of his lips. The lopsided grin told Dan the answer to an offer no man could refuse.

“That’s a ‘yes’, then.” Dan flashed a grin, gesturing for the other to stand up, which he did, taking hold of a metal rail along the roof of the vehicle. Hooch had to stoop as well.

One-handed fumbling with the Delta’s fatigue trousers, Dan’s efforts were quickly aided by the Yank, helping with the unfamiliar buckle, then pushing camo and briefs down. The cock that sprung free right in front of Dan’s eyes was nicely sized, cut, of course, and he grinned in appreciation.

“Don’t know why you Yanks chop bits off your cocks, but never mind.” He didn’t wait for an answer, let alone expect one, rolled his neck, flexed his shoulders a moment and took a breath, relaxing his throat muscles before he placed his good hand on the Delta’s arse, pushing him forward and between his lips. Dan lifted his eyes once, met by a gaze from equally dark eyes and the silent understanding that he was ready and perfectly prepared to take that cock like a good soldier. And taking he did.

Encouraging Hooch to use the strength of his hips, while guiding the man with his hand on buttocks and hip, allowing the Yank to let loose and fuck his throat, while Dan concentrated on relaxing and adding suction and tightness as much as he could.

He’d have never thought he’d enjoy this no-nonsense raw power so much, the abandon of strangers. The sounds the Delta made, as suppressed and restraint as his own had been. The near-brutal force behind the thrusts and the sudden erratic snap of those lean hips. Dan knew the guy was close and he pushed his head forward, took the cock as far down as he could without gagging, accepted—demanded, and let his hand slip between Hooch’s legs, applying harsh pressure.

Hooch came less than a second later, his head thrown back and his whole body taut and arched. Silent except for mindless groans and thrusts, completely out of sync, while Dan swallowed. For the same reasons of fucked-up logic as the Delta had done.

He let the man calm down for a moment, before pulling back with a light slap on one of those smooth and muscular cheeks. Wiping his lips, Dan looked up with a broad grin. “Not bad for an afternoon’s entertainment.”

“Yeah.” Hooch drawled, still gathering his breath, before he appeared as cool and collected as he had before. “Had fucking blue balls.”

Dan grinned, pursed his lips with a clucking sound. “Leave the army, join the Mercs and fuck what you like.”

Hooch shook his head while pulling briefs and trousers up, working on t-shirt and belt. “The job’s good.”

“Bet it is.” Dan stood up with a wince, his left side was aching, but hell it had been worth it. “I loved mine.” He felt he had stretched the extent of possible after-sex conversation to the limits. Working silently on his own shorts, pulling them up.

“Two days same time?” Hooch suddenly asked.

“Not sure if they’ll still let me in, mate.”

Hooch flashed a grin, fishing for a chewing gum. “They will. Delta requires briefing, too.”

Dan raised his brows while closing the shorts, fiddling with the waist string. “Do you?”

“Yeah, like I said, buddy, I’m the opportunist.”

“And you don’t miss an opportunity.”

“Fucking correct.”

Dan grinned, picked up his shades and slipped them on. Moving towards the exit hatch, which Hooch pushed open. He looked around, but the area was still deserted, so he scrambled out of the M113. Turning his head before walking off. “Two days, 1600 hrs. And keep that thought.”

He was whistling all the way back into camp.

* * *

Vadim rapped his knuckles on Dan’s metal door. Scrubbed up a little, shaved, clean clothes, not too obvious, and he was fucked, because Dan would still see he’d made an effort. Had struggled what to wear, whether he should just cancel the thing and go alone. Felt stupid with the manila envelope in his hand. Feared Jean would be inside, he’d interrupt something there, and felt a stab of nauseous fear at the thought. Not Jean. Not him. Anybody else, but not fucking Jean.

Inside, Dan looked up, surprised, didn't expect anyone to come along at that time. Barely 1800 hours, the guys would still be at work. He was naked, just about to jump under the showers, the plastic bag for his plaster on the chair.

"Aye?"

Didn't have a god to ask for mercy or barter with. Instead, Vadim rapped again. "Dan?" Not Lapushka, not Teamleader McFadyen. Just Dan. "Have...a word?"

Vadim. Dan stood still for a moment, warring between relishing the voice and a strange sensation of dread.

Vadim.

"Just a sec!" He called out, snatched the towel he'd been about to wrap around his hips and did exactly that. Wearing nothing else except for the obligatory pair of flip flops as he opened the door.

"Come in." He smiled, couldn't help it. Oh shit, since when had he turned into Pavlov's dog, either snarling, biting or tail wagging and tongue lapping, depending on what his Russkie was set for him to feel?

"Haven't seen you since the night we came back." Waiting for Vadim to step inside. Dan noticed everything. The clothes, the smell of freshly showered skin, the hair and eyes and skin...again...just skin...like an LP stuck on repeat.

"How are you?"

I'm fucking scared. I'm so fucking scared, thought Vadim, and looked away. "Getting better. Got...too much sun, is all." Saw Dan's toes and shins, the beginnings of the scars on one leg. Forced to look up. Remembered English meant no real answer was expected. How are you was answered with I'm fine, thank you, how are you. "I mean, I'm good. You?"

Closing the door behind them, Dan tilted his head, regarding Vadim from head to toe. Looking, truly looking, without hatred and without emotions threatening to drown or suffocate him. Just looking and seeing a man he hardly knew. His voice softened without being aware of it. "I'm fine, really am. Just the bruises and stuff." He shrugged lopsidedly. "You wanted to talk to me?" Indicating the bed, the only place to sit down.

"Yes." Vadim looked at the bed, knew he didn't want to smell Dan, didn't want to imagine him lying there. Made a step towards the bed. Didn't want to sit down. "I...just..." Hard, fucking hard, worse than pulling a bullet out of a mess of

blood and splintered bone. “Have a look at this, and...let me know what you think.” Adopting the pattern of the doctor, the easy, noncommittal, but heartfelt way to present evidence—or anything else. His case. Offering the envelope to Dan, who took it with a quizzical look on his face. “All booked, paid, if you...want to. No...pressure. Nothing. Just...R&R.”

“R&R?” Dan stood for a moment, staring uncomprehendingly at Vadim, expecting further explanations. When none of them came forth, he sat down on the bed. Indicating the chair when Vadim remained standing. “Just put the plastic bag to the side, it’s for the plaster.”

Vadim took the plastic and sat down, slowly enough to look reluctant. At least not the bed. He just knew given half a chance—no, no chance at all, he’d still try to get more. And that was not an option. Dan didn’t belong to him anymore, whatever the feeling, whatever the history. We can try and be friends, thought Vadim, knowing he was clutching at straws. Just spend time together—just be like we were, bantering, silent, comfortable. It was the comfort he missed most, feeling at ease in somebody’s presence when his own presence was often unbearable and sometimes pure horror.

Opening the envelope’s flap, Dan shook out a stack of colourful brochures. Blue skies, sea, sun and palm trees immediately caught his attention. Beach, sand and ever more sun. “What the fuck?” Murmured under his breath, he stared at the brochures in disbelief when one word jumped at him. Thailand.

“Oh my....” Breathed out, he began to smile, somewhat bewildered.

Vadim noticed his own tension, shoulders and chest stiff, stomach a knot of tightness. Looked good, but he feared the ‘no thanks’. Feared the mockery that this was exactly the place some others of Jean’s crew used to unwind.

Dan was leafing through the letters of confirmation, then flicking through the colourful pages. ‘R&R’ was not the proper term for this luxury: two bungalows, all inclusive, right at the beach, and the flight was in three days. Leisure and beauty treatments, food, drink and sports. Not that he could do the latter, and he chuckled at the idea of frequenting a beauty farm. Yet it all came back in a flash: the way Vadim had liked to be shaved smooth, and how he had loved the water, back in the Hamam. Water and steam, the laughter, the tenderness, the...*Lapushka*. Dan felt a long-drawn pain in his chest, but when he finally looked up, his smile had grown.

Two bungalows, two. There really was no pressure and he had time, at last. *They* had time.

“Two weeks in Thailand? You’re blowing your first pay check, aye?” His dark eyes gleamed in the half-dusk, catching the filtered light. “It looks fantastic. Better than anything I would have come up with.”

Not my idea, thought Vadim, but was strangely proud. The place had sold him in an instant. “Might...help you carry your luggage.” He tried a smile, wasn’t sure it looked natural, felt relief that washed everything else away. “Took liberty to tell them you’re not...vegetarian.”

Dan scrutinised the smile, before catching the words. He suddenly laughed. Easy to remember the light hearted moments, he just had to cling to them. “I sure as hell am not. ‘Vegetarian: ancient word for lousy hunter’.” He winked.

Vadim gave a laugh and shook his head. It hadn’t occurred to him people could be that, vegetarian, and he had to check a dictionary when they had asked.

“Did you also tell them I take two desserts, at least?” Dan grinned, joking. Yet unable to shake off one thought: Vadim, I don’t know you anymore. The man sitting there felt like stranger. But hell, he was going to get to know that man. Nothing would keep him from it, and the bullet was a promise given and accepted.

“From what I read, it’s eat as much as you can.” Vadim gestured towards the brochure. “They call it ‘Thai Fusion’, whatever that is, but the buffet looked good, and there’s room service.” All fearfully slickly organized. What drew him was that he didn’t have to think or plan while there. All provided, all taken care of. They promised the service would be all but invisible. Sounded good in his book. He didn’t want to see many people, least of all mercs or soldiers or towelheads. “They have fruits there I’ve never seen,” he murmured. “Not even read about. And the sea.” The sea. Water. Swimming. Diving. Being carried, and a crashing surf. “No desert, no wasteland.”

Water, the one constant. Once again the memory of the night in the Hamam. “It sounds like a paradise.” Dan gathered the brochures and put them onto the bed beside him. Standing up, the towel slip, but he caught it, just at the line of dark hairs. Pulling it back up. “Thank you, Vadim.”

Vadim’s eyes had darted there, he knew the body, so much, and right now wanted it so much. The smell. The taste. Even the cock down his throat. He looked up, his name had a strange effect. Dan had noticed, of course, and kept things

formal, just by mentioning his name. “You’re welcome.” He looked away again, to not see the abundance of naked skin, the bronze colour, the muscles, and the scars, each of which he had licked. Except for one. The ‘V’ on the arm. V, for...

“I realise I’ve never seen you swimming.” Dan smiled. It was easy to smile, much easier when remembering what water meant to Vadim. I know how you loved it, you told me. Told me so many things.

Vadim looked up, wondered why that hurt like a missed opportunity.

Somewhere, in some archives, there was coverage on a Soviet model athlete—not because Pentathlon was that interesting, or even the pinnacle of athletic achievement, since most people looked down on it—but because he had been plain good on camera.

“I am looking forward to it,” Dan nodded. “Guess I have to buy swimming trunks, eh? No chance to find them around here.” His wardrobe consisted of t-shirts, shorts, jumpers, parka, BDUs, flip-flops and combat boots. Nothing else.

Vadim nodded. “Kuwait’s fully stocked, but there are shops. Can get things at the airport, on the way.”

“Just a bit tricky to get *into* Kuwait. Only got two days before the flight and I’m a bit busy. The Yanks still haven’t finished their paperwork.” Dan rolled his eyes. “Wouldn’t surprise me if they thought about some tinsel, for you and Jean as well.” Dan shrugged, because that thought was positively hilarious. Former arch enemy. Cold war and all that shit.

The prospect was fearsome, Vadim thought. After all ranks and decorations had been stripped from him, including his citizenship, possibly offering him something from the enemy wouldn’t do. Let alone the fact Vadim was quite relieved to have vanished under the radar, under his stone, where he wasn’t exposed anymore. “Stupid Yanks. Can live without background checks on me.” Jean, however, the man with the blank slate, Frenchman without past nor allegiance, he’d relish that. Just another of his small victories. Bastard.

Vadim looked at the towel again and stood. Dan was about to shower. Shower. Water. Dan. Treacherous thoughts. Jean? Nothing he could do about it. Nothing at all, short of cutting the deserter’s throat. He glanced at the watch. “I...should lift my weights.” Precious little alternative evening entertainment. Pumping iron felt pointless, but he did it anyway. He needed any possible way to get tired, get his body to relax, and calm. Exhaustion was a great method.

“Before you do that, can you fix the plastic bag over the plaster cast for me?” Dan gestured to the bag that had been on the chair, a bundle of elastics close by.

Vadim took the bag and nodded. As close as he stood, he could feel the warmth emanating from Dan’s body. Could smell him, and had to keep his eyes on what his hands were doing. Making sure it was properly fastened, like he’d check kit before going out into the mountains.

“Well, I...have a good time and recover with that arm. I know broken wrists can be tricky.”

Dan’s brows rose. “Surely, I’ll see you before the flight?”

Vadim nodded. His presence wasn’t exactly a sought-after commodity and he kept to himself, nothing but the most casual contact with anybody. Couldn’t deal with crowds, not after a tense day, and likewise couldn’t deal with being alone for too long, but not exactly welcome anywhere. He felt homesick after Russians, if anything, he could read those, knew about hospitality and sticking together, and at the same time, the sound of Russian hurt him. Weak, pathetic, gloomy. Knew it and couldn’t help it. Hated himself for it. “I’m here. Where else. I’m usually free.” Wanted nothing but to stay and talk, but he was keeping Dan from his shower, and from meeting one of his small harem. Wanted to pat Dan’s shoulder, and couldn’t bring himself to touch his skin.

“I’ll be in the Mess tonight. Can’t risk the bar, a brawl would kill me right now.” Dan flashed a grin. “I’ll be playing pool, one-handed, but the guys tell me I’m crap even with both hands.” He looked around for his shower gel and the shades, clamped the bottle under his arm and slipped the latter over his eyes. “Do you want to come? You never told me, do you play pool?” He couldn’t imagine, didn’t sound like a Soviet pastime.

“No, I don’t.” Jean did. Pascal was better than him, but Jean could be found ‘chasing balls across the green’, as he called it. Chasing balls alright. “We used to play chess. I was usually reading, though. Back in those days.” And lifting weights. And, in the first years, looking for fresh meat to press into the mattress and fuck. “Not sure it’s the greatest time to start.” Not with Jean’s crew laying siege to the pool tables. They did tournaments.

Dan nodded. “If you want to, I’ll teach you when I’ve got both my hands back and my ribs stop giving me grief.” He smiled.

Vadim nodded. "I'll give it a try."

"OK, I'll be away from camp some time tomorrow, but I'll look out for you."

"Aye." Vadim paused, then tried to overplay the faux pas when Dan's smile changed to something wistful. "Doing...some hand to hand with some guys. Someone wants to pick up some basic Sambo." Good excuse to beat the shit out of somebody, usually, but he'd keep it civil. As much as he'd have relished the opportunity otherwise.

"Guess they found a good teacher, then." Dan found it was simultaneously easy and hard to skirt around everything that lay beneath and between their civil conversation. Eleven years. Intertwined lives.

Vadim shrugged. "I'll pick up basic boxing, so it's fair. But...I don't want to keep you." He almost winced at the English turn of phrase. Keep him—yes.

"See you later." Dan made his way to the door, with Vadim following. Adding, before he walked towards the shower block, "and thank you again. I can't wait." For more reasons than he was able to put into words just yet.

"I heard it's custom to blow the pay check. Alone I can't manage. Too much." Vadim gave a somewhat pained smile. Making far more than he'd ever possibly earned in a year, including money plucked off dead turkeys or with some harmless smuggling on the side. "Customs must be honoured."

"Aye..." Dan stalled, looking at Vadim for a long moment, eyes hidden beneath the shades. "Customs must be honoured." His voice carried ambiguity, and so did the ghost of a smile on his face, before he turned and left.

* * *

Two days later, Dan was sitting on the sole chair in his tin hut. Feet propped up on the bed, he had found a slouched position that was as comfortable as he could be, at least for a while. Eyes half closed beneath his shades, he was smoking leisurely. Relishing the heat and burn of the nicotine, as it travelled deep into his lungs. Exhaling slowly, watching the smoke curl towards the ceiling. Sun beams cut across the dingy room, smoke and dust dancing in the shafts of light.

So, here he was. Body bruised, wrist fucked, lives saved, while being considered a 'hero' by most and sundry. But not all. Not by himself, for sure, and

Dan pulled his lips from his teeth in a self-mocking grin. Time off to relax and heal, too much time on his hands to be comfortable. Alone. Thinking. Almost off on R&R with...Vadim. And hell, he didn't know what to think about that one. A bullet as a promise. Just like the scars they both wore? A 'V' on his arm, a promise to live and love, and...too much thinking. Too much time alone and too much opportunity for confusion.

"Fuck it!" Dan murmured and jerked upright, wincing at the movement. He kept forgetting those goddamned bruises. Stubbing the fag out on the ground, he deliberately kept going until he had ground the butt into dust and ashes.

Too many thoughts. Thoughts he didn't want to be thinking until he could make more sense of them. Feelings, hopes, wishes, and so many bloody wants, if he left it all to his body, he'd just head over to the Russkie's hut and not take no for an answer. But for once he couldn't ignore his mind, nor those thoughts, determined to interfere with the needs of his body.

Not anymore the man he had once been. Not any longer the reckless squaddie, driven by testosterone.

Dan shook his head and stood up, groaning. He felt stiff, and old, if he was honest with himself. Used up. A body abused during a life on a knife's edge, but hell, he'd do it all over again. There'd been only one way to live his life: up to the gills in adrenaline.

Rolling his shoulders, he tried to ease his stiff muscles. Carefully moving the bruises, while his eyes remained fixed on the small square of light in the wall of his tin hut. The sun stood high, mercilessly belting down, and his room was more akin to an oven than an abode. Grinning, though, despite heat and confused thoughts. At 1600 hrs sharp he'd see the delta again, and that was a good thing in his books. Sod gloomy thoughts, meandering memories, and the ambiguity of the future. One thing was certain: he'd have a cock in a few hours. Shame he probably wouldn't see that particular Yank again, when he came back, and a real shame of man material, unless...

A sudden thought crossed Dan's mind and his grin turned into a fully fledged smirk. Baring teeth and all, from ear to ear. That was it! Perfect. Two Yanks, both horny, and Mad Dog off on R&R. Now he just had to light the fuse, stand back and let the touch paper blow up.

Glancing at his watch, Dan figured he could easily make it to the US camp, get in with his temporary pass, have a quick chat with Matt, hoping he was around. If he could only set up the right time and the right place... Lighting another fag, Dan slipped his feet into the obligatory flip flops, couldn't be arsed with the one-handed struggle of tying the boot laces, and grinned a Cheshire cat grin to himself. What better way to celebrate his rescue. He strode purposefully out of his hut and into the glaring heat of the midday sun.

Dan was about to start whistling as he turned the corner towards the Mess tent, when he walked into a man, who came seemingly out of nowhere. "Shit!" he exclaimed, taking a step back. He'd jarred his bruised side, cursing expletives under his breath. "Can't you look where the fuck you're going?"

"Yeah, faggot, I know damn well where I'm going, and you're in my fucking way."

Dan groaned at the sneering voice. Of course. Who else. No one other than Midge to piss on his parade. His face hardened as he looked down, glaring at the short-arsed bastard.

"Sure, wanker, and the camp's so small, you had to walk into me." Angrily inhaling a drag from the cigarette, Dan blew the smoke deliberately into the other's face.

Midge had both hands on his hips, a mocking mask of hatred on his face. Displaying the stance of a man ready to attack. "Consider myself lucky, then, having found you right here."

"So what? Fuck off and out of my way, I'm busy."

"Getting soldier cock up your arse?"

"Midge," Dan exhaled harshly, "I told you before, I'll smash your fucking face in, if you don't shut your trap."

"Oh, really? Can't see anyone here to help you. No French joker and no Russian cunt. Not a single mate here for the rescue. Poor Mad Dog."

Dan took a deep drag on his fag, before throwing it to the ground. "Funny, isn't it? I've always known you're a fucking coward, but waiting till I get shot down? Nice one, Midge." Dan scoffed, "but you got it wrong, wanker. I take you on, even in a wheelchair."

“Oh really?” Midge’s laugh sounded nasty and far too triumphant, while his stance shifted towards a fist fighter’s balance. Defence, attack. He seemed all too ready. “You and what bunch of faggoty cunts?”

Dan couldn’t afford losing face. Lunged forward, despite the injuries. His right fist flew towards Midge’s chin, but the bastard had expected the punch from the uninjured side. The fist did hardly any damage, while his aching body was too slow getting back into a proper defence.

Midge shouted something Dan couldn’t make out, and the next moment his ribs exploded in agony. The fucker had punched the bruises, knowing damn well, like anyone else in camp, what the fuck had happened in the crash.

Dan curled over, holding his side, unable to draw in a breath. Pain exploding behind his ribs, he staggered, but managed to stay upright. “Fucking... coward...!” Forced out between his teeth.

Midge was laughing, an ugly, grating sound. “Look who’s talking. Come on, Mad Dog, fight!”

Dan barely managed to lift his head, trying to breathe the pain out of his body, with no success at all.

“What, no fight left in the faggot?” Midge mocked, dancing around Dan, who struggled to straighten up. “Come on, make me laugh.”

Dan forced himself upwards, with gritted teeth, didn’t manage to put up his defence, before another fist came pounding into his ribs. Once, twice, straight into the worst bruises. This time he went onto his knees. Doubled over in the dirt, the shades clattered onto the ground. He nearly blackened out, the pain too great and he couldn’t breathe. No way.

All Dan could hear was Midge’s laughter over the rushing of blood in his ears, as rage crept into his bones. Unspeakable anger that had no words. Brought down by a fucking arsewipe like Midge, and all he could do was crawl in the dirt, every breath wheezing in his lungs. Dan lifted his head, eyes ablaze, but couldn’t get enough air into his lungs. Shallow, desperate, yet so angry, he didn’t notice the man who was coming towards them in his back.

“Hey, Midge!” Dan suddenly heard another voice, accompanied by even more ugly laughter. “What’s up? Having fun with the camp faggot?”

Dan was too winded to turn around. Knew the voice and the thick Irish accent. One of Midge’s goddamned cronies.

“Hey, Dave! Want to have a go as well?” Midge burst into laughter, as Dan struggled upright onto his knees, to get out of the range of that bastard. He didn’t make it in time, just managed to shift to the side, preventing the worst of the booted kick Midge delivered to his ribs. Dan almost bit his lip bloody, forcing the scream back down. If he didn’t get the fuck away and damn soon, he’d be minced meat. But he still couldn’t breathe, and moving became impossible when he fell back down, holding his side, trying not to black out.

Dave’s laughter mixed with Midge’s, as he came to the front, looking down at the man in the dust. “Having some fun faggot-bashing? Mad Dog doesn’t seem that loudmouthed now.”

Dan lifted his head, glaring with all his rage and utter disgust at both of the men. It took an almighty struggle to press the words through his clenched teeth. “Great...fight...wanker.” Pulling his lips from his teeth, he snarled at them like a rabid dog. “Knowing I can’t...fucking...fight!”

“What?” Dave took a step back, but his expression was drowned out by Midge’s spiteful laughter.

“Who the fuck cares, faggot. You’re a shitstabber, you deserve what’s getting to you. Just means less work for me and my mates.” Turning to Dave, who was staring down at the wrist in plaster and the bruises that were visible along the left arm and leg, dark purple where the t-shirt had ridden up. “Right, Dave?” Midge let out a sound that was meant to be laughter. So full of hatred, he almost choked on it. “Come on, mate, have a go yourself. This is fucking funny.” He lifted his foot, and Dan struggled once more to get out of the line. Had to get back up onto his damned knees, and out of the way. Out of the dirt. Out of this fucked-up situation!

The boot never hit him, and when he looked up, ready to defend himself best he could, he saw the big Irish guy holding onto Midge’s foot, who hopped angrily on one leg, cursing his own mate.

“Get up.” Dave gestured with his chin at Dan, “get the fuck away before I change my mind.”

“Fuck you!” Dan snarled, spitting sand and dust onto the ground as he scrabbled onto his knees. “I don’t need a fucking minder.”

“I can see that.” Dave’s laconic reply betrayed his effort of holding back an irate Midge.

Dan let out an angry snort, picking up his shades. Getting off the ground would be the next task to tackle. "What-the-fuck-ever. I can deal with anyone. Most of all an asshole like your mate, here." Onto his knees, then onto his feet. Dan stood at last, but couldn't straighten up. Right arm wrapped around his left side.

"Yeah." Dave laughed, pushing his mate a few steps away, who stumbled backwards. "Arsehole is right, but you're a stupid bastard, if you don't fuck off now."

Midge came barging back, yelling, "what the fuck's the matter with you? He's a fucking faggot, he deserves it! Eat dirt, lick shit, and on the ground. That's where the bastard belongs."

"You're out of your fucking mind, Midge." Dave shook his head.

"You one of those pussy-boys yourself? What the fuck's up with your shitty attitude?" Midge was about to attack Dan once more, who'd managed to get into a half-arsed defence stance, shades back over his eyes, when he saw a figure coming through the gap of two of the largest tents.

Dave shrugged, stepping aside, "all yours." To Dan, but the man who was approaching began to shout. One of the Sergeants, especially keen on keeping the camp in order.

Midge stopped the attack at the last minute. "Fuck you, Dave!" Midge shouted at his mate who was walking away as if nothing had happened. "You're just as bad as the arse loving shit stabbers!"

Dave didn't reply, and Dan saw him shake his head and flipping the finger back at Midge, before disappearing around the corner of the cookhouse tent.

Dan took a sudden step closer, before the Sergeant came too near. Keeping his voice down, he growled, "I tell you what, Midge. You be careful. Once that plaster's off I'm going to fucking smash your ugly face in, until even your mother won't recognise you. You got me, asshole?" Adding with more venom in his voice than he'd thought possible, "you fucking coward!"

Midge was about to reply, when Dan cut him off again, hissing once more. "Fuck you. Fuck! You! When you least expect it." He shut up, right at the moment when the Sergeant arrived.

It took him a considerable amount of will power to calmly lie to the Sergeant, pretending nothing had happened, just a verbal stand-off with a fellow

Merc. All the while neither Midge nor he were looking at the other. Dan managed to get away within a few minutes. Still holding his side, and forcing himself to stay upright. The afternoon would be 'fun' but short of getting his head blown off, nothing was going to keep him from plan nor encounter.

Dan was in too much pain to be able to make his way straight to the Yank camp. Pissed off to hell, still struggling with shallow breathing, his ribs hurt like buggery thrice gone wrong. Heading for the Mess tent, he decided to grab an over-stewed coffee which was always brewing away on the large machine, probably had been for hours, but he didn't care. Nothing three spoonfuls of sugar couldn't cure.

The place was deserted, just as expected right after lunch, with both the morning and afternoon shifts being busy. He was glad, the solitude gave him the space and time he needed. Dan sat down, planning to smoke a fag while waiting for the pain to recede. Nothing better to let off steam than an orgasm, and the Delta was going to be just perfect for that.

Still breathing shallow, Dan sat as comfortably as he could. Staring at the opposite wall, he drank his over-sweetened coffee. The encounter with that bastard had rattled him more than he wanted to admit. The fact the cowardly wanker hated him so much, he wanted to wipe him out, and for only one reason: because he shagged men and wasn't quiet about it. That had shocked him more than he liked. The sheer extend of loathing. The willingness to destroy, and all because of what? Sucking cocks and loving muscles.

Dan snorted to himself, watching the smoke curl out of his nostrils. He should have expected something like this, but when faced with blind hatred that had no reason other than who he fucked...it rendered him speechless. hat a bloody tosser! Dan shook his head and stubbed out the fag. He decided it was pointless to dwell on that arsewipe. Besides, he remembered hearing those who complained the loudest were trying to drown out the truth with their shouting.

Interesting thought. Interesting enough to make Dan's lips curl up into a nasty grin. The mental image of fucking Midge's ginger arse? Enough to help forget the throbbing pain in his bruised ribs. Midge, on his knees, begging to be taken roughly like the bastard dog he was. Ah yes, highly amusing.

Dan finished his coffee, lukewarm by now, and pushed himself up to stand. till sore, but it'd do, no way he'd give up on his plans for the day. Stepping outside into the blinding sun, he readjusted his shades and took a careful breath, as deep as

he could, while straightening up. Damn the bruises, he wasn't going to let on to anyone what had happened. Bad enough he had a witness in Dave.

The midday sun was searing, but he couldn't care any less, as he sauntered across the compound. Making sure the fresh bruising was no more visible in his gait than the chopper crash injuries warranted. Exchanging a few words with the soldiers in the guard house, he shared his packets of fags, smoking while chatting with one of the Sergeants. The guy was in the same Scottish infantry regiment Dan had been in, before he'd become part of the SAS.

A giant Scots, who didn't give a shit about who or what Dan shagged. Heading off after fifteen minutes, Dan was on his way to the US base. He fished the temporary pass out of his shorts pocket, hanging it around his neck, ready to field the guards at the gate and their inane questions. They knew who he was, but they were Yanks, and some of them, Dan reckoned, were as thick as planks, adorning a farmer's shed in Iowa.

* * *

With his pass acting as a magic wand, his worries had been unfounded and he was almost waved through. Answering a few questions, he exchanged several friendly words with the guard, before gaining entrance quite painlessly. Sauntering over to the work area, he was on the look out for Matt.

The kid had to be somewhere, just a question of prying him away from whatever he was doing, to get a few undisturbed words in. Couldn't be seen talking too long with any one guy, or the 'faggot' rumours were going to spread, after all, and it was far harder to dispel the truth than a lie. Funny that. He spotted the kid after a few minutes, chatting with a couple of other guys, seemingly relaxing in between chores. With fifteen spare minutes before he was going to meet the Delta, Dan figured it fit just perfectly. He wouldn't need long, if he could only convince his baby Yank that doing what he was going to tell him to do, without asking too many questions, would be a damn good thing.

Dan was greeted by the young Jarheads like a long lost mate, which made him grin once again at how he'd become their 'bestest buddy' within a day and a night. He should do this puppy rescuing business more often. He quite liked the company of those kids.

It was Matt who managed to find an excuse after a few exchanges of shoulder slapping pleasantries. Steering Dan away from the others under the pretence of showing Mad Dog some of his kit, wanting advice from the experienced soldier.

They both kept their heads down over the equipment, while talking quietly, as Dan inspected the Yank's webbing with interest and care.

"You still trust me?"

"Uh?" Matt looked up, "why the fuck shouldn't I trust you, buddy? It's just the creepy dickhead I wouldn't trust from here to the shitter."

Dan grinned, nodding to himself, while inspecting the contents of Matt's first aid kit.

"Good. Because if I told you to be in the safe house in two days time, at fourteen hundred hours, would you be there?"

Matt blinked, took him a moment to compute the info. "You're on R&R by then. You just told me." Blinked again, "and how the fuck did you know I got a couple hours off?"

Dan tipped his finger to the side of his nose, just like he'd done before. "I told you, kid, I'm old, cunning and resourceful."

Matt laughed, taking the re-assembled kit out of Dan's hands. "OK, buddy, but if this is anything freaky, I'm going to have your ass."

"Oh...really?" Dan wagged his brows above the shades, smirking in a face-splitting grin. Showing each and every of his teeth. "Don't tempt me."

Matt simply laughed again, glancing backwards when he heard his name, and shouted a greeting to one of his comrades.

"Got to be off, Mad Dog, but whatever it is you're planning, you sure I like it?" "Damn sure. It's a gift." Dan grinned. "Just trust me, and...trust yourself. Aye?"

Matt didn't look convinced, but he nodded nevertheless. "Aye. See you around, soldier." He took some of his kit and the weapon, flashing a bright grin before turning to join the others. "Have a good time off. Hope you'll have some *fun*."

Dan gave a wave and a grin, murmuring to himself when Matt had left, "if only you knew, mate." With thoughts of a certain Russian and whistling as he walked, he was on his way to the vehicle park.

Hooch waited at the same M113, at exactly the agreed time. Not that Dan would have expected anything else. He didn't tell the Delta about the fresh bruising, didn't want any holding back, and just went with the ride. Short, intense, and no-nonsense, with the understanding between two men who knew exactly what they wanted—and how to get it. They exchanged bodily fluids, orgasms and suppressed groans, but very few words. Until the comedown of the aftermath, when Dan struggled not to reach for a fag, to avoid the suspicious smell in the carrier, while Hooch was readjusting his shades.

“Can you get off base in two days, at 1400 hours?” Dan asked out of the blue while one-handedly closing his shorts.

Hooch's brows shot above his shades.

“I got a safe house, outside.”

The Yank's brows steepled.

“And I got something in there, at precisely 1400 hours, that would be of interest to an opportunist.”

Hooch finally opened his mouth. “No shit.”

“Nope,” Dan grinned. “None. Just be there.”

“*Safe* house?”

“Damn safe. I fucked my way through the Soviet war in Afghanistan. With a Russian. I know what safe is.” Dan's grin widened as he stood up, stooped, and moved towards the exit.

“OK.” Hooch shrugged, pushing the rear door open. “You there?”

“Afraid not, mate. I'm off to a Thai beach. R&R.” Dan waved his plastered hand about. “But here's the map.” Pushing a piece of paper into the Delta's hand.

Hooch hesitated, seemed he wanted to say something, but merely shrugged in the end and let Dan lower himself out of the vehicle.

“You be there?” Dan looked up, readjusting his shades.

“Yeah.”

“Good.” Turning round, Dan gave another grin. “You'll like it.” Adding, before he stepped away, “unless you got something against jarheads.”

He left Hooch staring after him for a few seconds, while he whistled once more, weaving his way through the vehicle park and towards the exit. Damn good day, after all, and he'd already forgotten the ginger bastard.

1991 Chapter XXVIII—Rest and Recovery

August/September 1991, Thailand

The civilian clothes were the strangest thing about it. Vadim still had the set of clothes he'd bought in England to not stand out too badly, nothing special, dark blue jeans, a grey tee. Carrying a bag in one hand, determined to get anything else he needed when they'd arrive. The main things were passport and wallet, and that alone was enough. Beat the hell out of body armour and stuffed ammo pouches. He didn't wear the sunglasses, they reminded him of the desert, had even changed the watch—for the same reason. What he needed easily fitted into a light bag, no bigger than one used for fencing.

Waiting for Dan to show up, Vadim noticed how the other mercs noticed. Occasional stares from somebody who had never seen him in anything but camo, naked, or a towel. Krasnorada has a life, is what it seemed to say. Nevertheless, Vadim was strangely optimistic. Travelling wouldn't be too bad with Dan, he figured, would give them time away from all this shit here. Mildly optimistic. He didn't expect much, didn't expect anything to grow back, apart, maybe, from respect. Dan had made clear whatever he felt, he just couldn't, and Vadim knew his safest bet now was to find enough to live for, somehow, to make this worthwhile. Two weeks should be enough time to work out if there was anything left. At least no Jean, no Donahue, no duties. Repay Dan a small amount.

When Dan finally came out of his hut, whistling, he looked exactly as he always did. T-shirt, knee-length shorts he must have found in an army surplus store—at least this time not the cut-off ones, and desert boots. He didn't actually own anything else, had left everything that reminded him of the past in storage in the embassy. He wore an open shirt on top, in a non identifiable faded olive green with darker rectangles, where the torn-off patches had lived.

And, of course, the obligatory shades. Bergan thrown over his shoulder, he had a water bottle clamped under his left arm, while the right resided in his shorts pocket. Grinning as he came closer, ignoring anybody else and their curious stares. “Ready for take-off, Russkie? Let's just hope I won't get shot down this time.”

Vadim grinned. “Ready for take-off.” Dan's ‘traintracks’ distracted him, the massive scar across his leg. He turned and headed towards the waiting vehicle

that would get them to the airport. He wondered what the others thought, all this was too much out in the open, too visible, but that was the timing of the plane, and of the camp, and why should he care. It had made the rounds so often, the novelty had to wear off at some point.

Dan re-shouldered the bergan, lightly packed, there wasn't much he had that was even worth taking, and climbed into the Landrover. Opening the door to hang out at the last minute, shouting across the camp, "See you in two weeks, girls, keep your blue balls for me, don't think I'll miss your pretty arses!" Laughing his head off as he slammed the door shut, getting the driver to speed off with screeching tires.

There he was, then. Sitting in a Lannie once more, right beside Vadim. "Beats the last time, aye?" Dan grinned sideways, "no insurgents as far as I can see."

"And no stuck Yank pigs bleeding all over my camo," said Vadim, and showed teeth to take the sting out of the words.

"Fucking bastard." But Dan's grin bordered on tenderness. "The kid's surviving."

Vadim knew Dan had a tender spot for them. Well. Screwing with one of them likely did that. He shook his head, tried to not think of Donahue, nor how pretty the kid was. He stretched out his legs, used the space he had, but couldn't keep his eyes from searching the landscape. A habit. Professional paranoia. "Thanks for coming along, by the way."

Dan simply shrugged. "As I said, thanks for inviting me. It'll be good...." He paused, eyes behind the shades flickering off the other's face, fixed for a moment on the landscape that went past. "Good to be, away, you know."

"Yes." Very good to be away. He had to tread carefully; 'be nice' as Jean had called it. Be friendly. He'd make an effort. Vadim inhaled deeply, scanned the landscape, while his mind was thankfully blank.

Dan didn't say anything for a long time, settled back in the seat, the airport approaching. Just before they arrived, he said added, quietly, "Fucking missed you, but you know that."

Vadim gave a smile, didn't trust his voice to keep stable. Missing didn't begin to cover it. He nodded, throat tight, then got out to carry the bags again.

Things from there went smoothly. A connection to Dubai, then with civilian airlines towards Thailand. First class—and all the privileges that came with it. Better than a Herc, and Dan, for one, enjoyed himself with the free drinks, the nibbles, the comfort of the extra cushioned seats, and the fact they treated him as if he was wearing the suits that the Baroness had him wear, although he looked as scruffy as an aging squaddie.

The moment they set foot onto Thai soil, Dan was taken in by the heat and the colours. Those damned colours seemed to glow in the sun. Blues and yellows, greens from luscious vegetation, and even more blues from sea and sky. He hardly had enough time to look around before they were chaperoned into a waiting taxi to take them to their waiting bungalows.

Phukeet airport, and then a 50 minute commute in air conditioned busses to the Mukhdara Beach Resort. Secluded bungalows, two of which Vadim had reserved, and he couldn't believe how easy and how different everything was.

From the small, oddly friendly people to the whole relaxed gracious place. “Well, that's it, then.” Vadim nodded to himself, acting as if he actually had expected the photos to tell the truth. He hadn't, and it was hard to bear.

“Holy shit.” Dan dropped the bergan right there and then, looking around the huge airy room of his bungalow. Two identical ones, with over-sized beds which were large enough for tall men like them. Everything light, made from warm coloured wood, open sky and the sea. “I'm going to get lost in here.”

Vadim smiled, enormously pleased it had some impact on Dan. He crossed the room and opened the blinds, so the ocean became fully visible.

Palms. White golden beach, cast into dramatic light by the dying sun. “Just call them for food. There's the buffet somewhere...near the central pool...or order something to the room.” He inhaled. “Think I'll start with a shower. See you later.”

“OK, yes.” Dan was too distracted to answer coherently. Everything was too big, too grand, and just about too much luxury. It had been fun in the plane, but this? Heaven and hell, he wondered if he should buy himself new clothes straight away, to fit into the décor, or if he should just run around naked.

Vadim headed to his bungalow, maybe, what, sixty yards away, and found a very similar place. Different décor, different wood carvings, the bungalow facing the sea at a different angle. He set the bag down on the bed, then headed into the

bathroom—hardly smaller than the bedroom—for a shower. Feeling mellow and tired, and above all, not trapped for fucking once.

Dan in the meantime took a shower as well, fiddling with the plastic bag over his hand, at least they had renewed the sticky bandage and given him a few more to make sure the plaster wasn't going to come off. He'd been asked to check back that week, but heck, if that meant he'd have to stay in camp they could stuff it.

Freshly showered, wet hair tousled and body back in the other pair of shorts that he had taken with him, Dan found a shirt that didn't look too ruddy, but couldn't manage to fiddle the small buttons into the button holes one-handed. He had to leave it open, then. As long as he had his shades he could ignore any ill-disguised stares at his scarred stomach. He pondered going over to that buffet thing to catch food and booze, but mostly, he was bored. Already. Where to go and what to do? It was beautiful, peaceful, stunning in fact, but there he was, standing on the patio, staring at the sea and...everything was just so big and...empty.

Back in the other bungalow, Vadim slipped into the bathrobe, which amused him, because he was clearly too tall for it. They were generously cut, but it still looked like a miniskirt. He leafed through a short guide to the park, and apparently, everything was provided, and what wasn't would be at the drop of a hat. He opened the doors to the veranda, and glanced over to Dan's bungalow. Neatly arranged that he couldn't actually see what was going on.

He frowned, thoughtfully, then headed back to Dan's place, walked across the white sand and rapped on the veranda door. "Dan?"

Dan turned, couldn't help the relief showing when he saw Vadim. Noticing far too quickly what Vadim was actually wearing—and that was damn little. Shit.

Vadim stepped in, showing Dan the leaflet. "What about ordering the tailor for tomorrow?"

"Why?" Tipping the shades up over his eyes, they balanced on Dan's forehead. "What for? Don't they have swimming trunks on sale?"

"Yes, but you travel just as light as I do. Having something to change into would be good." Vadim grinned. "Swimming trunks they should have in the tourist shop. I need some, too."

"Aye, but can't imagine I need anything tailored."

"It's not about needing." It's about wanting. As always.

Dan shrugged and grinned, while lighting a cigarette, “Fair enough, I go with the flow.” Pointing at Vadim’s attire, “you sure as hell aren’t going to the tourist shop in that, are you?” Slowly walking around the other, as if checking the goods. He tried to crack a light-hearted joke, but all that came out in the end was a quiet, “never saw you in one of those.” Not even in the hotel room, the last night. So many firsts, he hadn’t realised they had a whole lifetime’s worth of firsts—they’d never had the chance.

Vadim stood, felt his shoulders and back tense, like an inspection, funny, that, and funnier he didn’t mind. “I think I’ll put on something more. Just didn’t want to put the same clothes back on.” He turned his head, and grinned at Dan. “You’ve seen me with nothing on. Does this look so...ridiculous?”

“Actually, yes.” Dan grinned, exhaling the smoke away from Vadim, without thinking. The habit had stuck, and the deep seated knowledge the other didn’t like the nicotine smell. “Maybe not if it fit, but this one makes you look like wearing a skimpy dress. Not a good look on a hairy bloke.” Not that the legs he saw were particularly hairy, nor the arms, nor...oh shit. He hadn’t seen the body for two and a half years. Didn’t know if he wanted to—lest it felt like yet another sucker punch to the guts.

“Was good after the shower,” Vadim murmured, and gave a self-conscious grin.

Dan grinned back. “Anyway, come shopping with me? Need something other than combat boots or flip flops and I guess the ragged old shirts I got aren’t really for general consumption either.”

“Yes. Let me change—will be one minute.”

Dan took a deep drag, watching the smoke curl out of his nostrils, “and if I don’t wear anything I’d probably make the food go off and the children run away screaming. What with the scars and all. I’m not what one could call particularly pretty.” Unlike you, Vadim and your goddamned perfection, except for a word cut in blood and flesh.

Vadim shook his head, already retreating towards the open door. “Pretty is different,” he murmured. “Pretty has no scars. You are...” Jaw muscles tensed again. “Like the morning sky in Afghanistan. Not ‘pretty’. Word’s ‘breathtaking’.” In more senses than one. Choking, strangling, intense pain that forbid breathing.

Dan stared at him, silenced by a few words, forgetting the fag that burnt between his fingers, even forgot to breathe. He remembered. Remembered everything, no matter how hard he'd fought to forget the memories. Too painful. *You are*, and then Vadim had stalled, *beautiful*. Beautiful. Lapushka.

And every touch and kiss still echoing in his body. He watched Vadim leave without another word.

"I'll pick you up. Two minutes." Somewhat hurriedly, Vadim retreated to his bungalow, cursing himself for saying that. Jean called it 'flirting', but it was gut-wrenching, really, speaking his mind when he had very little hope of getting anywhere near what they'd had. Not that it had to happen, nor that it was even very likely: whores were easy to come by—he knew the stories from Jean's crew—youths, children, even, both genders, and a couple very odd combinations if he trusted the stories that floated around camp. Finding something to blow steam with was easy, and if he didn't want to go out hunting, there was always the number of porn channels. But of course, he couldn't help feeling that most poisonous of feelings, the one that had been almost worse than the isolation, that small, resilient hope Dan would one night be drunk enough, so he had a chance. Even if it was just that night, or the holidays, before they'd return, and Dan would also return to Donahue and Jean the bastard, and maybe get posted somewhere else. It was nostalgia, thought Vadim, shrugging into his clothes and giving himself a last glance in the huge mirror with the carved wooden frame. He didn't look like a civilian at all, the tightness about his features, the unblinking, impassive gaze, like a soldier on parade. There was still the nagging hope.

Dan was standing on the terrace, smoking, already on the second cigarette. Staring out over the beach and its sun drenched beauty. Sky and sea, more blue than he could ask for, and yet it would never compare to the endless skies above the unforgiving mountains in Afghanistan. *Breathtaking*. Beauty, that's not what he was. Beauty was what he remembered—Vadim.

"There you are." Dan turned when he heard the other approach, tried a smile, but the light-hearted fun was coming harder. "I tried to close the shirt, but the damned buttons are a nightmare one-handed. You either help me, or you'll have to go out with me scaring children away."

"You'd find children are far tougher than you think." Vadim stepped closer, into Dan's personal space, close enough to smell him. Keeping his eyes on his

hands, not on Dan's skin, not on Dan's face, not the throat that moved when he swallowed. Closing the buttons. Remembered Katya dressing him, a few times, brushing over his shoulders. Odd tenderness from one so tough. The thought helped doing this.

"Let's go, then."

Dan nodded, said nothing, the lump in his throat made talking difficult. The shops were open late, Vadim couldn't see any opening times, small wooden huts with reed roofs, stacked in gaudy colours, as crammed and colourful as he had expected. Diving gear, bright shirts, bracelets, card and board games, drinks and snacks, and so many things that Vadim's eyes needed several minutes to take them in. Sort information that was important from information that wasn't. A tiny Thai woman gave them a bright smile, and Vadim had the feeling the smile for him was brighter, which was strange.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?"

Dan hadn't noticed her, he was staring at all the stuff on display. Just like super markets back in Blighty. Too much, and the choice was getting annoying. At least when it came to food he just grabbed anything, and he figured he'd do the same with clothes. What else could he do, since his staples at the Army Surplus shop weren't available in this place and they didn't seem to have straightforward denims, either.

"Uh..." Dan stammered and shrugged. Eyes hidden behind the shades, desperately trying to pick things out. "I need something to wear." Something—anything. What did it matter, unless..."I haven't got a clue. Shirts, shorts, swimming trunks, some kind of shoes. Just stuff." He shrugged.

"Of course. If you would follow me, gentlemen." Assuming, unspoken, Vadim and Dan belonged together. She led them deeper into the shop—it was a smart design where the small huts were interconnected and the actual shopping space filled several of them, while it looked smaller and picturesque from outside. Here were actual clothes, leisure things, mainly. Shirts, shorts, swimming trunks and bathing suits, security belts and neck pillows, and she stood there, smiling, ever so willingly helpful.

Vadim decided finding trousers was the main issue, and spotted some light trousers that were suitable for jungle expeditions but also looked presentable.

"What's your size?"

“I have no fucking clue.” Dan stood stunned like a nun in front of a nudist club.

“Hmm. Think you should be close enough to mine.” In trousers, anyway. Shirts would be slightly wider on Dan, but still fit nicely. After careful consideration, Vadim handed Dan a selection of colours—tan, sand, grey, olive. “Try these. I’ll have a further look.” He glanced at the shop assistant, who gave him a little bow, lingering a very polite distance away so she could help when necessary.

“OK.” Like a meek raw recruit who was all too thankful to obey orders, Dan vanished behind the curtain of one of the changing booths. Stepping out with the sand coloured pair of trousers on, which fit perfectly, the grey ones over his arm. Looking around for Vadim, who came back with more garments, which made Dan roll his eyes.

Vadim had found jeans—dark blue and indigo, and those colours worked well for Dan, too. Checking the prizes, all seemed fairly affordable anyway, and he spent some time rifling through clothes, selecting those he would want to see on Dan.

“I don’t like grey.” Shaking his head, Dan held the pair out to Vadim. “Shit colour.”

The right shade of grey would be great with that darkened skin, thought Vadim, but that thought ceased when Dan, standing like a very awkward mannequin, lifted the shirt above the waistband. It seemed to say: Look at my scars, and I’m sure you’re willing to suck me off now. Lacking, as usual, underwear, and the trail of dark hair was visible.

“OK? Didn’t bother with the button. Too awkward with just one bloody hand.” Dan’s voice sounded long-suffering, even though he’d only tried on one pair. “Are the others the same size? In that case I’ll just buy them. I hate shopping.” There was a definite whine creeping in.

Vadim took the pile of trousers and handed them to the shop assistant. “Shirts.” He’d found some he liked, T-shirts, undershirts, proper button down shirts. “Put on just one and get the ones you like the colours of.”

“Cheers.” Dan grinned, relieved, managed to wriggle out of his shirt without having to negotiate the buttons, and tried one of each of the items on, except for undershirts, he refused to wear such things. Wifebeaters belonged onto

the legionnaire, he'd stick to t-shirts. Picking the same colours as for the trousers, with the addition of charcoal. Arguing with himself it wasn't really grey, when several blues caught his eye, and he held one out to Vadim to add it to the pile. "Here, that one as well." It was a special blue, lapis lazuli. The same colour as the string of prayer beads, left with the Baroness in Dubai.

He'd chucked them into the bin in his room, before he'd left to catch that Herc. At socks and underwear, Dan protested, claiming he wouldn't need more than a couple of pairs anyway, refusing to wear such things as briefs, let alone boxers. Vadim then investigated about a different set of shades. The ones Dan wore still made him look like a merc, reminded him of 'Mad Dog'. Too utilitarian.

Dan shook his head, "What's wrong with mine?" He liked them, they'd survived sand, heat, brawls, fucks, halo jump and helicopter crash, yet he grudgingly chose a pair that made him—in his opinion—look the least like a pretentious twat, failing to realise they gave him a rather sophisticated air, which Vadim relished.

Piling everything up, Vadim pulled his wallet out and flicked it open. It was a new thing, the credit card still stuck to the black leather. "I'm paying this. All inclusive, yes?" While the shop assistant folded everything and explained there was laundry service available and lovely tailors that would tailor suits, linen, wool, cashmere, whatever they wanted, and they were happy to come out here.

"What?" Dan came to the checkout a moment later, wearing the sand coloured trousers and a khaki shirt, the new shades over his eyes, while the transaction was already underway. "I thought I'd pay. I wouldn't have chosen such a fucking great pile if I'd known you paid. Besides, when should I wear all that stuff? Sure as hell not in Kuwait."

Vadim shook his head. "I said all inclusive. You can always throw the stuff away when you're done with it." Doubting Dan would lug the clothes around the world, but that was no reason to not get them. Watching the shop assistant deal with his credit card. As good as cash. Covered, with credit.

"I could get used to this," Vadim murmured. "And don't worry, I'll get my stuff tomorrow morning, before breakfast." Feeling oddly happy about how easily some problems could be solved, and about Dan's new looks. And the fact he could pay him back—if just a little.

Looking over the pile Dan sighed, pointing at it, “You know what’s missing? The swimming trunks. And shoes.” God, he bloody hated shopping.

Vadim grinned while the shop assistant wrapped the purchases up and took the number of the bungalow. Everything would be delivered. “Back over there.” He pointed in the direction where he had seen the trunks. Not sure he wanted to see Dan that exposed. Yes, he did, of course, but seeing a body he wanted and couldn’t have...? “Or do you absolutely need help?”

“No, I’ll be fine.” Dan shrugged, wandered over, “I’ll just pick some, they should fit, but what about shoes? I don’t care what I wear, but figured these flip flops are falling apart.”

“I care what you wear,” muttered Vadim under his breath, then louder: “Let me have a look.” He headed towards the area of shop, ever shadowed in the most friendly manner by the shop assistant who had taken a liking to him—or the credit card, which made more sense—and went through the shoes.

Sandals, trainers, light loafers, nothing great, but better than military boots. He selected some for Dan, knowing he wore two sizes smaller than Vadim’s ‘paddles’, as Katya had called his feet semi-affectionately. Found a different design for himself, and they did have his size. All that went on the pile as well.

Dan picked two pairs of swimming trunks at random, all in black. One was shorts and the other a briefs style little thing. He had no idea how comfortable any of them were.

Vadim waved the things over and paid again. “There. Kitted out for holidays.” He’d do his shopping without Dan. More time, more calm, and too much of Dan’s attention made him wistful.

He left the pile with the shop assistant, then looked at Dan. “Have a walk towards the buffet? I could use some protein.”

“Sure.” Dan left his battered flip flops on the pile, refusing to throw them away, and slipped into black canvas trainers, liked the fact they had an old fashioned feel to them and a round white logo on the side. On top of that they turned out to be rather comfortable. “I’m looking forward to check out their cocktail and dessert menu.” He grinned while walking beside Vadim, couldn’t help but looking at him, now and then.

“Cocktails is a good idea. I think I’ll get wasted today. And sleep long.” Ultimate luxury for Vadim: being in a state unfit to fight, and breaking through the

five o' clock waking. He'd wake up, unless he drank too much, but he would just turn round and sleep on. Decadence.

"This is odd." Dan gave another glance, "walking like this," he peered, "in broad daylight, and no one there to threaten either of us." He could get used to this, if only...if only he'd have a fucking clue who Vadim had become. Was this man beside him still the man he had craved and loved? Yes, and no. And it drove Dan slowly mad.

Vadim grinned. "Wait till we get to the buffet. But yes, guerrillas and bombs are unlikely." Still, part of him expected something, anything, some primal part of his brain was always tuned into his environment, expected sudden movements, and checked passer-bys for concealed weapons. Paranoia was a habit. He saw access routes, fire corridors, escape routes, and noticed and evaluated cover.

"Any..." Vadim paused, and the sentence 'any plans for tonight' didn't come out. Drink, eat, sleep, that was the plan. Anything beyond that was none of his business. Frowned, looking to the side to hide the sudden insecurity. "I hope you'll enjoy this place." Whatever you do, have fun.

"Aye," Dan grinned, "I sure am determined to, and think you've got an excellent idea. Getting pissed on cocktails sounds just brilliant. Race you down and up the cocktail menu?"

Vadim nodded. "But we have wildcards, just in case one of them is really horrible." Knowing Dan's taste for sweet stuff, Dan would be fine. He himself wasn't too sure, even if he had no idea what the vast majority were.

They reached the buffet area, where just about everything imaginable was spread out. Small tables scattered on the patio, all in view of the beach and the sea and the spectacular sunset that was beginning to approach.

Vadim looked at the piles of lobster, ice sculptures, daintily carved carrots and melons that looked like exotic plants, and prepared fruit he had never seen in his life. Nowhere. No magazine, no nothing. Just completely alien. "Let's grab some food, and then get wasted."

Dan grinned, snatched a plate and started on the seafood end. After the first helping he went onto the chicken and other winged birds, and the third round dug into the meat selection. Only nibbling on the odd piece of fruit, he preferred dead

animals, as he lovingly called his platefuls. Vadim mainly stuck to fish and lobster and seemed almost guilty at the amount of lobster he ate.

Ravenous, Dan stuffed himself, ending up at the dessert bar, and heaping a helping of each of the delicacies onto his plate, as if there was no tomorrow. They sat on one of the small two-person tables, candles and flower arrangements between them. The spectacular sunset bathed beach and sea in a fiery glow, and the gentle sound of the surf was lapping against the sand. It was fucking picture postcard perfect, so good, that when Dan sucked on the double-straw in his garishly coloured and decorated sixth cocktail, he took the shades off. Looking at the man opposite to him, who licked some lobster juice off his fingers. "Another first." He smiled, busied himself with his drink.

"First what?" Vadim wiped his lips with the back of his hand, then saw another tourist look disapproving at him and took up the cloth napkin to wipe his lips again.

Dan was licking some running chocolate off his hand, that was threatening to make its way into the cuff of his brand new shirt. Lapping with his tongue at the sticky sweetness. "Eating, like this." He rubbed the last bit off with his napkin. "Eating outside. Just this..." he put his spoon down, looking at Vadim for a moment, "together. Not having to hide." That was it, that was what kept getting to him: they didn't have to hide, they could just *be*.

Vadim looked down at the lobster mass grave. "And not being ashamed." He paused, curious how that feeling had crept into his life, but then it hit him, and he shook his head.

Dan's head shot up. "What?" His stance suddenly changed, alert, uncomprehending. But he should, really, shouldn't he? Understand. He knew what they charged Vadim with in the end, but he just couldn't go there.

"I mean...I'm not...a traitor, you are not collaborating. There is nobody who...will fuck us up. Still, we..." manage quite nicely on our own, fucking us up. "...have reflexes, yes? It's too deep."

"Of course you are not a traitor." Dan's hand clenched into a fist, involuntarily. The booze was keeping him somewhat mellow, but hell, he couldn't just let this slip past. Shaking his head, "you are right, though, everything is too deep. You are, I am, we are. You're in my bones, my blood, and in my being."

Covering any other thoughts by quickly turning round and waving to a waiter, ordering two more cocktails of whatever was next on the list.

Vadim watched the waiter clear away the plates and the last big glasses with their remaining fruit peel and residue of sugar, and some mint leaf amidst melting shards of ice. “I...” He looked up, then shook his head. “Shouldn’t make this mistake. I shouldn’t. I should fucking...keep things...civil. Normal, but...I can’t keep it up.” Muttering under his breath, while Dan looked at him, alarmed, yet Vadim’s thoughts went straight to the tongue. “You’re the only thing I...miss, the...one thing that makes sense. If you...can’t...can’t stand me anymore, that’s...alright, if all you want to do is fuck, that’s alright, if all you want to do is talk, yes, but...more difficult. You call the shots. You call all the shots. Your decision. Your call.” Vadim felt his chest was too tight to properly breathe with. “And I fucked it up again. Bravo, you stupid fuck.” Groaning.

“Oh shit.” Dan’s hand surreptitiously opened and clenched, needing to feel the polished wood to gather his thoughts. Damned cocktails, they made everything so much brighter, and muddled the words at the same time. “It doesn’t work like this.” He hardly noticed the waiter who put two more glasses down, neon red this time. “I can’t just fuck around with you, it would finish me off. Didn’t you listen to what I told you on the rooftop?” He felt desperate, no matter how much he understood—or tried to—Vadim’s own desperation. Yes, but it didn’t make any sense. Wanting and not wanting, hating, loving, it was all a mess and Vadim was unable to think clearly, not with all the contradictions, not with Dan being there and not being there. The past, fucking past, and the inability to start over or break it off, trapped in stasis like insects in amber. Vadim bit his teeth together. Still some kind of no. He wasn’t good at it, and he had ruined the evening, the meal, the plan to get pleasantly drunk.

“If I touched you, that’d be it.” Dan shook his head, “Damn, how the fuck am I going to make you understand?” Pleading, almost, “You are everything, don’t you get it? You are the Afghan mountains, the damned red dust, the endless sky. You were my home, and more often than not, also my reason. You are unlike all the others, unlike anyone I shag, because when I touch you it’s not just a touch, it’s eleven years of heaven and hell.”

The others. And again the past. Vadim wished it had never got that far—they’d just met, different circumstances, indeed nothing but two men with a taste

for other men, strong ones, without all the shit, the darkness, without the guilt and shame and debts. Only then he would never be able to compete with guys like Jean, or Donahue. In the looks department, and in the charms area, he was pathetically outgunned by either of them. "You are same," he said, tonelessly, felt like he was being choked, and noticed he'd dropped the article.

Dan looked down onto his hand that had flattened on the surface, palm pressed against warm wood. "I told you I love you and that's why I hated you; only you could bring me that far." His voice quietened, "I'm not even saying it is your fault. I realise there is too much I don't understand, and that's why I need to get to know you. Who are you now, Vadim? I want to know you, I need to understand."

But I don't understand myself. I don't know how and why I broke and why I just don't heal. I don't get what they did to me, and what I allowed them to do. Understanding was impossible. How did Dan expect to work him out after all this?

Leaning closer, Dan's voice had softened to almost a caress, "Give me breathing space, and give me a chance." His smile bordered on sad, "that's why I came with you, hoping here, away from everything, we can scrape the shit back together."

Time. More nights, more longing, more of that aching, empty, pointless pain. "You have time." Two weeks. Pathetic. It wouldn't work. But then, a week could be forever, if spent alone in the mountains. Torture only took a few hours. Who are you, Vadim? I have no idea. "They just...fucked me up worse than I ever was. This is...not me. This is my broken bones."

"I am beginning to see that." Dan said quietly, "but I haven't had a chance yet to really understand. I was too hurt and too angry; I was too blind."

Vadim forced himself to breathe, looked at the cocktail, and swallowed dryly. He wanted to be safe, and sitting here exposed didn't work. He should be scurrying for safety, and knew no hotel room was big enough that he wouldn't feel trapped. One thing he could do to not feel himself that badly right now. Go swimming. Escape into the ocean. He was drunk, but not too badly. If he could walk, he could swim. "You have time. I'm sorry. Was a mistake, bringing it up."

Dan shook his head but said nothing, didn't know what. He'd verbalised his thoughts best he could, but even the thoughts were confused. What he did know for certain was how hard it was to sit that close and not to touch, while all he wanted

was touch. He settled back in the chair again, tried another smile at Vadim, before sampling the cocktail. He'd get drunk tonight, come what may.

Vadim nodded at that smile, didn't have enough control to return it, and stood. "Thanks for the company. I...appreciate it." Sounded wrong and formal, but he needed the distance now, and could only fall back on his manners. "Jet lag. I...should lie down." Placed his hand flat on the table for a heartbeat when Dan nodded. "Give me a call when you want. Good night."

He moved away, forced himself into complete stoicism on the way to the bungalow, where he shed the clothes, again sickeningly pulled towards the mirror, looking at himself when he undressed. Didn't look broken. Nothing showed what was going on inside, only that haunted, pained expression in his eyes. "Fuck you," Vadim muttered, and meant the torturer, and himself.

Then he headed out onto the beach, kept his shorts on, he didn't want to expose himself completely, bad enough as it already was, and headed into the ocean that lapped at his feet, ankles, knees, thighs, warm and alive. Much, much better than he remembered it, and he dove into the waves, the moon bright enough to find his way and tell land from sea.

* * *

Dan watched Vadim retreat until he could not see him anymore, then emptied his glass in one go, before starting on the one Vadim had left, while ordering another. The sun had long set and the terrace was aglow with the light of candles in coloured glasses, creating jewelled patterns on the wooden decking. Dan sat, his shades back on, looking out over the beach and the ocean, listening to voices around him and the sound of the surf, the one constant amongst the chaos. Sky, sea, and yet he was missing the mountains.

At some stage, a lady came up to his table. A tourist like him, smiling and asking if he minded company, but while he tried to be polite as he declined, Dan couldn't bear to sit and attempt small talk, least of all when there was no chance of suitable sex afterwards. But even sex seemed stale. He wasn't sure if right now he'd want to fuck around with Matt or Hooch, not even Jean. They all had either someone or no one, black or white, and not this fucked up sense of longing, need, and equal measures of dread.

When he was drunk enough and the coloured lights began to swirl with the rhythm of the ocean, he made his way back to the bungalow. Couldn't help but look out for Vadim, or at least light from the windows, but saw nothing. Perhaps it was simply too late; the night, the time and their lives. He fell asleep on top of the bed, naked, sprawled across, not anymore noticing the itching beneath the plaster cast, and hardly neither the one feeling that had been increasing steadily since they'd boarded the plane: desire.

* * *

Dan slept long the next morning, was neither woken by sunshine streaming into the vast room, nor by an attempt to deliver the clothes Vadim had bought the day before. Not even by birds chirping as if there was nor tomorrow, and neither by hunger, thirst nor heat. Booze was a great tranquilizer and he'd done his best to kill himself off.

When he finally emerged into the sunlight, smoking a cigarette on the veranda, he blinked into the light, despite the shades. Half-woken by a shower, he wore the new swimming shorts from the pile that had waited in front of his door, and a t-shirt over it to avoid curdling milk and blinding innocent children with the scarred look of his body. Feet in brand new flip flops, the old ones reluctantly discarded at last, he pondered to search for brunch himself, ask for room service, or get down to the beach to soak in the sun and do just about nothing, or to try and see if Vadim was around. He was cursing himself when, predictably, he went for the latter and was calling out Vadim's name from the veranda.

Vadim was still in bed. He had managed to sleep through the five o' clock threshold. Doors and windows were open, a gentle breeze coming into the bungalow, making palm leaves rustle outside.

Dan calling his name got him awake instantly, and he cursed himself for not having followed his original plan to go shopping before Dan would, most likely, appear. Then again—no schedule, no fixed times, no deadlines. "Come on in." He got out of the bed, grabbed the pile of clothes on a carved stool and vanished into the bathroom, earning himself a perplexed look from Dan, who didn't get the haste.

"Bored already?" Vadim called, starting to get dressed. Knew his body would betray him if he was too close, and he wanted to keep things...less intense.

And showing Dan what lying semi-awake and somewhat lonely did to his body, with blood in the wrong parts, would be a great way to ‘be friends’ for the moment.

“Why?” Lighting another fag, Dan scratched his stomach, looking for somewhere to sit and settling on the bed. Drawn to the tumbled sheets, still warm from the body, and still harbouring the scent.

“Just...asking.”

“Wondered if you wanted to go for brunch, didn’t expect you to be still in bed.”

“Took me a while to fall asleep. I was swimming.”

Dan’s hand kept gliding over the sheets, “I won’t be able to do much other than lying around on the beach, anyway.” Smiling to himself. “Woe is me and all that.”

Vadim checked himself in the mirror, tried a number of different ‘positive expressions’—grin, smirk, smile—then opened the door. “Well, there’s a number of activities. You don’t have to get fat and lazy here.”

Dan grinned, “wouldn’t mind a bit of the ‘fat’ thing. It’s a hell of a job to keep the weight on.” Fuck, that reminded him, he’d forgotten to take his pills, two days in a row.

“Well, you certainly gave it a go yesterday.” Vadim stepped out and gave positive expression number three: a smile—which faltered a little with Dan sitting on the bed. Would love to kiss him and get him to stretch out, with him on top. “I was planning to get the whole full body traditional Thai massage.”

“Sounds good to me,” Dan turned his head to look at Vadim, smiling in return. “Unless they go heavy handed on the bruises.” Fag between his lips, he used his right hand to swiftly lift his t-shirt, showing off the truly spectacular arrangement of blues, greens, yellows, purples and browns. “Think it’d do that stuff any good? I look like a human camo pattern.”

Lines of muscles, and scars, and...well, more colours than was painless. “It would. There are few things in the world that a good massage can’t make better.” Vadim grinned, and his grin broadened suddenly. Afghanistan. Mass grave. And ‘massage’. Too precious an opening to not use. “Of course, the Thai girls have much smaller hands.”

It took Dan a second to cotton on, but when he did he almost choked on his own fag. Dropping the shirt back down, he didn’t know what to do with himself.

“Aye.” The most intelligent answer he could find, “guess so.” He remembered to take the cigarette out of his mouth, gazed at the growing ash, and got up. Flicking the ash off was a great excuse to get onto the veranda and away from the memories. As if. “Food first, then. Massage after that, and whatever those Thai girls can come up with.”

Vadim kept his features carefully neutral. Embarrassing Dan, even if it was just an attempt at banter, wouldn’t get him further. “I need to buy a few things...clothes, so if you want to start with breakfast, I’ll join you in a few minute ?”

“Sure, I’ll see you later, then.” Casting a swift smile at Vadim, Dan headed off to the buffet area, where he started a long and complicated meandering pattern through all the delicacies that were laid out amongst fresh flowers, crushed ice and beautifully carved fruit. He was taking his time, working his way through plateful after plateful, as if he were a hoover. Never satisfied with enough food, yet never gaining weight.

Vadim forced himself to go to the shop, where the little Thai woman tried her utmost to help him without being pushy, and he found himself relish the kindness that was both completely innocent and heartfelt—without the trace of idea what he was, or who he was, or what he was capable of doing.

It might be like that one day, he thought, when retiring. The old men in the Moscow Metro, some of them had been killers once, killing Germans, but now they just were old and spent and some of them kind, but no one thought of them as killers anymore. Or maybe in a place as far removed from everything as Thailand. A country without Cold War, and without the memory of one. He bought what he thought he needed, rather one shirt more than too few, swimming trunks as well, clinging things that traced the lines of his hips and sat there like second skin. Dark blue, two of them, because he liked the cut, and a somewhat more daring one with far less cloth and far more expensive. Now, that was displaying the wares.

Dan was getting dreadfully bored with looking at the scenery through his shades, when he finally caught a glance of a tall, blond man. Strange, how suddenly something jumped from stomach to throat, his insides entirely occupied with churning over while gazing at Vadim.

Vadim found Dan almost immediately and headed towards his table. “This place available?”

Dan's face broke into a grin and nodded, while pointing at the bag Vadim carried. "Took an awful long time to buy very little. Anyway, what is it?" Trying to take a peek.

Vadim shook his head. "Just swimming gear." Keeping the bag covered when Dan shrugged. "I thought about a swim after the massage. If I can get up again. You're finished already?"

"I'm stuffed full, you better play catch-up before the little Thai girls get their hands on us."

"Good idea." Vadim left the bag with Dan, didn't think he would actually check it, and gathered a pile of bites—some of this, some of that—before returning. "Not a real English breakfast, hm?"

"That's probably a good thing. After all, if you can't have square sausage and black pudding for breakfast, then you shouldn't bother." Dan grinned, lit a fag, but kept it out of Vadim's reach and blew the smoke the other way.

Vadim shook his head. Square sausage? What was that supposed to mean. And pudding. Typical of Dan to start breakfast with a dessert.

"How long did you swim last night? I checked if there was light when I got back, but your place was dark."

"I don't really know. A couple hours?" Yes, the moon had been somewhere else when he returned, and he remembered nearly crawling through the surf, deliciously exhausted. "I tend to lose track of time. Like in the athlete school. You were finished when the coach said 'finished'."

"The coach... that's not the masseur, is it?"

"Oh no. No." Vadim laughed and shook his head. "The coach was a bastard. He said we'd become proper swimmers, or drown. We were young enough to believe him."

"How young were you anyway? And how the hell did you get into swimming, or sports, in the first place?" Dan was leaning closer, beginning to realise there were whole worlds worth of information about Vadim he didn't know. "I was good at sports in school. And there were...head-hunters around. I don't know how exactly all that worked in my case, but they offered us a 'special school', 'special training', and the potential to join the official team, while still finishing school properly. Well, I trained to become a swimmer. And I was then later mustered for the two years military service, and kept up my training—becoming

spetsnaz and an officer was a way to combine both. Many Soviet athletes had a military background, it was their idea. But I wasn't good enough, overall. Not as a swimmer, anyway, and the Pentathlon team...well, you know the story. But I was an officer, and spetsnaz, so they sent me to Tajikistan, later Afghanistan."

Dan listened attentively and nodded occasionally. He wanted to ask questions about Vadim's family, and most of all The Bitch, but he couldn't, lest his painful secret should ever come out. "Aye, and that was that, then. We started our story eleven years ago, on a goddamned horrible night in Kabul." A small smile ghosted across Dan's face, twisting the scar into darkness. "I never asked...but is it correct you were taken out of Afghanistan the very same morning of the kidnapping?" Two and a half years in blindness.

Vadim put the fork down, didn't want to eat with that subject between them. Would only taste ashes and dust, anyway. "Yes. Straight to Kabul airport. Rushed out of the country, left with what was probably the very first plane leaving. I couldn't see anything."

Dan nodded, his voice lowering, as if using too much volume would make the past even more unbearable. "I thought so. I just about made it to the embassy, but we could not find any trace of you anymore, and I wasn't able to get out of the compound." He had just about finished his fag, lighting another. Taking a deep drag, Dan stared at the smoke. How apt, it all curled in tendrils into nothing. "They had KGB killers in the hotel."

Vadim looked up. "They were comrades. If you killed them, you killed men that were trained..." along the same lines as I was.

"If they lived I wouldn't be alive." Dan looked at his hand that was holding the fag.

"They deserved what they got. If I'd had any chance to kill any of them, I would have." Vadim rubbed his neck, remembering the horror of being dragged around half the world only to enact some petty revenge for a crime he'd never committed. Pure spite. No justice being served. Just because they could. Just the KGB saying 'fuck you' to the Interior Ministry.

"I have always wondered for how long they had known. The whole setup..." Dan trailed off, it made him sick to think of the camera, of others dissecting the pictures like vultures. "Fucking film." Murmured.

“Yes. Might have been my superior. Might have been somebody wondering... I have no idea. I was careful. Maybe they didn’t expect us in that room, or were spying on you as the head of security. They never told me...” Of course not. Keep the interrogated guessing as much as possible.

Dan shook his head, “I don’t know, have no idea. Maggie was the only one who knew about us, but fuck, she’d go down with the Titanic if she had to.” He shrugged, inhaled the smoke, “I just don’t know.” It took him a while to get up the courage to ask, and Dan’s voice was getting flatter. “So your...father told you the ‘story’?” He swallowed, and a thought crept into his mind. If it was too hard for him to talk about this, how would it be for Vadim? But there was so much that had never been said, how could they go anywhere if they were stuck three steps behind?

Vadim looked to the side. Sun, beach, tourists checking their cameras, smiling Thais. Not Moscow. Not the Lubyanka. Not trapped, beaten, fucked up. “He did.” His father. Tears of shame for the man, tears of sorrow for the son. Vadim struggled. “It was...relief. They were fucking with my head. Getting confirmation you’d made it...I thought I was ready to die...when I heard you’d made it.”

“I...,” what, Dan. Are glad that the father told the story? Thankful for The Bitch that she had kept the end of the godforsaken bargain? “I wanted you to know I loved you.” Funny, swallowing had become nearly impossible. “It was...the last thing I could do, when...” you were about to die and I was screaming inside, ready to give up living and instead just exist. “I could never thank your father.” Barely above a whisper.

Vadim closed his eyes. “I knew. At some point...all I did was hope you’d...go on. You know. Find...somebody and live.” He inhaled deeply. “My father asked me what it meant...why I...” was crying like the most wretched soul on the planet. “I told him it means...if they kill me, that’s the price to pay. I never believed in anything he believed in, all his ideas about Russia’s true soul...he was disappointed I was unprincipled, with no higher aspirations in life. He said I was a true Soviet, and that was not...a compliment. I told him I finally knew what I wanted, and had for a while.” Vadim swallowed. “He asked me whether it was correct that...I’d, you know. Had sex with an enemy. Whether it was true. That I’d lied all the time.”

Dan didn't want to interrupt, hardly dared to move, let alone make a noise. Waited until nothing further seemed to be forthcoming before he quietly asked, "Lied?" Vadim's family? The wife? That life that had nothing to do with him, Dan, except for those dreadful hours in Hungary, one and a half years ago.

"Lied about...Katya, and who I was." Vadim kept his eyes in the distance. "I told him yes. I'm a liar, a faggot, a killer, a war criminal...and not the good man he tried to make me. That I didn't have his convictions. His faith. That all I had was my...emotions." Vadim shook his head. "He said he couldn't understand how I could shame him and my family in this way...on top of all the others. But that he'd forgive me...I'm his son, whatever I do."

"Shame?" Dan felt cold anger creeping up on him, from behind and right through the heart. "What fucking shame? The fact you fucked me? Loved me? Wanted me? Or the fact you are gay? I remember distinctly you told me once, a long time ago, that that was just the way it was and I shouldn't get uptight about it." Or maybe he just imagined it, probably, but what the hell did it matter.

"That I admitted to being gay. Publicly. I have no idea what it meant to my family. There were...lots of emotions involved. Spite. There is no free press. Not even the other Afganets got involved, or the 'peace activists'."

"You are not a war criminal, Vadim. You're just fucking gay, that's hardly a crime." And they would have thrown him out of the British Forces, dishonoured, if they'd ever known. "Whatever lies are on a piece of paper with your signature, I know as much as you do, you never committed any crime. Not with me anyway."

Vadim looked up. "No. The other things I did. A disgrace to the Soviet Army and my fellow officers."

"'Other things', you mean the sex? And raping silent conscripts wouldn't have been a disgrace?" Dan's eyes were on fire, but hidden behind the shades. "No. That was one of them. One of the crimes." Or a few dozen. He had no idea how many. Couldn't remember. They'd been just bodies, not even numbers. Something he had committed because he was gay.

"What were those crimes? I want to know." Demand even. Needing to bloody well understand.

Vadim shook his head. "Fighting the war the way we did. The conscripts were just tools. The murders, the assassinations, the...meatgrinder. The beatings. The fact we put these children into this place and watched them get...fucked up."

“And your family? They used you as much as you used them.” What about them, what about the fucking Bitch whose head Dan still wanted to rip off. “That’s too simple, Dan. Family sticks together. My children. My father. His family, cousins and uncles...It’s all connected, all one. It’s not about using, it’s about helping.”

“Then, answer me , how much did you help them, and how much did they help you in return? It’s damn easy to be self righteous when you get money sent from the fool out there in hell.”

“It’s my duty as the son and husband to provide if they need something. My father raised me. I owe him respect, as much as we disagree on politics. And there were good things, too. He taught me a lot. It’s family, Dan. The money doesn’t matter.”

“Fucking bullshit!” The cigarette long finished, Dan’s fist slammed onto the table, causing some of the patrons to glance over, perturbed. “A man fucks a woman.” Or vice versa? Not go there. “A child grows in the woman. The child is born. And the child is supposed to be bloody thankful for that? So, would it have been better if you had topped yourself, way back, when you realised you were gay? Because then you wouldn’t have brought the dishonour of having a homosexual son, cousin, uncle, father, goodness what into the family?”

Vadim swallowed. “This way I could belong, Dan. It was my shot at a life. Something more than killing people. Be...respected. Have a part in something.” He shook his head. “They would have never known about me, if they...if the KGB hadn’t decided to make this agony. They tried to kill me in all ways. Even in...the hearts of my family. Of course they asked what they had done wrong. How they could have helped me.”

That shot right into his guts and poured acid in Dan’s heart. *Agony* and *killing in all ways* in his heart as well? “Who asked, your family? Your father? Your...ex-wife?” He could hardly say the word.

“My father. Katya knew. Katya always knew. She was the only one who knew. Played along for the family, too. Hers, and mine.”

“Hers, as in *her* children?” Too thin the ice, and Dan shook his head. No, not this subject, and he looked at his hand, flat on the table now.

“Her parents. She fooled everybody.” Vadim shook his head. “I just hope it didn’t catch up with her. But she should be safe.”

Dan shook his head, couldn't go on. Not this subject. Too close, and far too personal. He looked up and shook his head again, like a wet dog. "Anyway, the Thai massage?" Yes, he was a coward for changing the subject like that, but there was too much he had to think about.

Vadim nodded and stood. Relaxing would be good now, just maybe drift off to sleep, and forget all that. At least for a little. Until he could face it again. They headed towards one of those reed covered huts, carved, golden shimmering wood, where the Thai girls awaited them.

Just a little later, Vadim was flat on his back on a wooden massage bed, a towel wrapped around his waist, and smelt oil and something more aromatic, herbs, flowers...sandalwood? He had no idea.

Dan was lying close by. Two of the four massage beds were unoccupied, and they were alone, both stripped, and lying down. Dan had his eyes open, watching the girls, the shades still on his face. They hadn't reacted much to the sight of his torn body, the politeness impeccable, and nodding with understanding smiles when confronted with the bruises. Dan was trying hard not to look at Vadim, too great the temptation, but eventually, while they were working on him with skilful hands and warmed oils, his head fell to the side and his eyes drooped onto half-mast, unable to stop looking. The body, just as he remembered it, yet different to the thin and pale man who had come out of the woods at the Finnish border. No, not thinking about that night. If he did, he wanted to carve the loss into Vadim's flesh and he'd done that before. A decade ago.

Vadim relaxed almost immediately—and it was very different from the massage he had known. The small girl used her whole body to work on him, moved him around, at some point she was using her feet, standing on him, and he groaned when something in his lower back moved into place, a locked vertebrae, most likely, or something about his hip bone. After that, he was hers.

They were a lot gentler with Dan, working gently on the bruises and giving his body the symmetry back that his muscles had lost when he got battered in the crash. He couldn't help but relax until he fell asleep, lying on his front, and snoring quietly.

* * *

The rest of the day was spent with doing ‘the touristy thing’ as Dan called it, taking a ride inland to look at temples, statues, and whatever else was considered to be worth gazing at, until Dan had enough after a few hours. His attention span clearly overstretched after the third temple and the umpteenth sculpture of smiling gold. When they got back, he opted for an afternoon on the beach, lying in the sun and sipping more of those sweet cocktail concoctions. Soaking up sun while covering up the worst of his scars, while Vadim went out into the ocean once more, swimming.

That night, at dinner, Dan had made an effort after his shower, and dressed in something other than shorts and flip flops. Instead he had gone raiding the pile and pulled out a pair of khaki jeans, more or less blindly searching for a top, deciding on a sand coloured shirt, and went for the Chucks once more. He even stopped for a moment to look at the mirror before heading out to the buffet area to meet Vadim. He even took the obligatory shades off, once he had reached the table.

Vadim was wearing a pair of light trousers and an open white shirt which showed his skin was reddened, but not burnt yet. Another day like that, and he would, so he planned to have more ‘treatments’ as they called it, massage, waxing, he might even take part in a couple of the classes, meditation, and yoga, which seemed to be a very fashionable thing to do. He looked up from the Thai interpretation of a Caesar’s salad. It was already easier to be around Dan—no awkward formality. It just seemed to fall back into ways he knew—or at least could deal with.

Dan smiled, grinned at the reddened skin, remembering all those times Vadim had complained about the sun, back in Afghanistan, then sat down. He wasn’t going to skirt around the subject tonight, and when he tucked into a bowl of shrimps, he launched the first attack. “I think it’s time we find out what on earth happened in the meantime. For example, I’d like to know, how the fuck did you actually get here? I mean, how did they put you back together? You look like you used to look, not the pale skeleton from over half a year ago.”

Vadim put the fork down and reached for the water, drinking a huge glass of cold water, gathering his thoughts. “I think it’s the baroness who’s to blame. I had some...trouble in Sweden, and somebody there convinced me to...face my past.” Vadim grinned, shaking his head, when Dan rolled his eyes. “Or something. To deal with it. I...found her and was in touch, to...let you know, and maybe find a

place to live, somehow. She was far more generous than I hoped, and gave me a...chance to live. Passport. Something to do. I was trained with the Royal Marines, and passed SAS selection. Wasn't easy on these old bones. Apart from that, I improved my English, too."

"You fucking bastard!" Dan exclaimed with a grin. His equally surprised and impressed expression contrary to the words. "You passed selection? At forty-one?" Shaking his head while muttering, "only *you*, you butt-fuck crazy Russkie."

"I had a head start over the kids, though. I know survival. The interrogation part, that was hard. But they prepared me well: Medical supervision, diet plan, counselling. A very nice older doctor made sure my nutbox of a brain complied. Training was hard enough to forget a great many things...not thinking is a luxury. Be all you can be, isn't it? They got me back into...well, almost back into what I would have been like if it hadn't happened. I hoped they would send me where you were...to...apologize. To...tell you I'm fucked up and that's why...I left you. I just couldn't walk, let alone...run, I could feel nothing. I didn't feel myself. I couldn't even think, really, wasn't the...wasn't me. And I hated...myself for having...these problems. I kept thinking of the bullet. Would be a great deal...less difficult."

Dan swallowed, put the fork down, wiping his greasy fingers. "And here I was yelling at you, calling you a fucking cunt and being ready to smash your face in, even wanting to kill you. All because I was so goddamned hurt." He dropped his gaze, taking in a deep breath before looking back up. "I am sorry, Vadim. I did not...could not understand."

Vadim lowered his gaze and felt his throat constrict. If he wasn't careful he'd start crying, and he just couldn't. "It's alright. I fucked it up, too. I should have stayed. But I just couldn't feel."

Dan dropped his eyes once more when Vadim looked away, staring at the other's hand, which lay curled into a loose fist on the table. His own so close, palm flattened, all he wanted was to reach out across the few inches and touch. But he couldn't, knew what would happen if he touched Vadim. He'd never let go again and he didn't quite dare yet. "I don't know...what that's like. It's hard to understand...to understand you. What I can do, what I can't; what you feel, what you can't stand, and why...you scream." If he touched, would it all cease to matter? Trying to catch Vadim's eyes, and Vadim seemed reluctant, no, *ashamed* to meet his gaze, on the verge of turning away.

“I don’t remember when I wake up. Only...hazy things, like...fear. I fear going mad. I fear nothing’s real, and I’m still in that...box.”

“I wish I could tell you what I felt since you were taken.”

Vadim nodded, silently, fighting that wave of nausea and pain, the darkness that welled up. “Yes.”

Yes? Dan frowned. Yes. This time, that meant a ‘no’. “OK.” But it wasn’t. None of this was, neither he nor Vadim nor the whole situation. If only he could free himself from this man, but he had drunk the poison, all those years ago, and he would never be able to wash it out of his system. Best face it, Vadim was in his bones, his blood, his thoughts and his heart. The crucial question was simply ‘how’, not ‘if’.

“I guess I...get some more food.” His plate still mostly full, Dan stood up and turned away.

Vadim suddenly reached out and put a hand on Dan’s arm, trying to hold him back before he turned away. “I just...feel guilty as fuck.” He stood while Dan stared silently at his hand. Sitting there, eating, Vadim couldn’t manage. He wanted to run, to swim, to exert himself. “And I shouldn’t be...jealous. I wanted you to find somebody else. Now that you have...I should be glad for you. No use trying to force anything.”

“I haven’t ‘found anyone else’. What the fuck makes you think that?” Vadim’s hand on his arm felt like a searing presence. He wanted to claw at it, take it, hold it and press it against his skin. Did nothing instead. “I’m blowing off a bit of steam with some guys. Hell, how many blokes did you fuck with, raped conscripts excluded, with whom you were nothing but mates?”

“Four.” Sasha, Vanya, Gavriil, Platon. But Sasha had been far more interested in Katya. Platon had been the only one with whom he’d spend any significant amount of time—up to the point that Platon’s comrades had thought them friends. That memory didn’t hurt, didn’t trigger shame, it was just there, with a faint bit of regret, didn’t really touch him. “But Jean is better for you. Or the Yank. They don’t hurt you.”

Dan’s voice was getting angry, “where in all the fuck’s name did you get that idea from?”

“I have eyes. And there’s always the bullet, Dan. It’s not just words. I have no idea how much it cost you. I guess it was worse for you...all I had to do was...somehow get through it.”

“What?” That was it, and Dan exploded. Shook the hand off his arm, and caused several of the tourists to turn their heads. “Are you fucking mad? Don’t talk to me about suicide, you bastard. Don’t you dare take yourself out of the gene pool, not now, not again. And what if it was ‘worse’ for me? Who knows, I don’t, and we will never find out. I wasn’t tortured. Fuck, all that matters is that you are alive. Remember the bullet? The one you gave me on the roof? You’ll live, you understand? Fuck you, to all hell and back, you’ll bloody well live!”

Several people had dropped their forks and knives, and conversation in their immediate surroundings had stopped. Vadim was too stunned to do or think anything. Dan even forgot his shades when he stormed off, towards the beach, fuming with frustrated rage.

* * *

Dan was roaming the beach in moonlight, until he had calmed down enough to gather a coherent thought. He couldn’t understand Vadim just wouldn’t get it, that no matter what he said, the other would only understand a strange gobbledegook, some weird-ass transliterated meaning that kept coming back again and again to ‘you are a failure you lost him you hurt him he doesn’t want you’ or similar shit. It was like speaking in an alien language that no matter how hard Dan tried, would only ever translate into something negative.

How could Vadim misunderstand everything? Words like ‘I love you and always will’ or ‘if I touch you I am lost, I want you I need you’, and ‘they are buddies, the sex means nothing except for fun’, how the fuck could they all end up translated into something Dan had never meant and did not even understand. It hurt, and he was helpless, but when it came down to it, he knew he would never be free from Vadim. He could either make this hell, or take at least what he could.

Dan finally made his way into town, found some night clubs, tried a pussy one first, then ventured into a ‘ladyboys’ one, not quite sure what on earth that meant, only to fend clusters of beautiful ‘girls’ off, who, no matter how male they were beneath, did not spark his interest in the slightest.

It was well into the early hours of the night, when he returned to his bungalow, with several drinks inside, but no closer to clarification, let alone a solution.

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Vadim sat on the veranda—not his own, but Dan’s. Simply because he couldn’t really observe Dan’s bungalow from his own veranda. Dan was gone when he’d checked, and Vadim assumed he would be back. He hadn’t checked out, hadn’t been on any transfer buses or taxis to the airport. For all their unobtrusive near invisible service, these Thais sure saw everything.

He had tried to read, but couldn’t concentrate. It was like the words went right through him, like concentration failed, his mind didn’t grasp the words, and he didn’t want to read something that didn’t require attention, so he sat on Dan’s veranda, watching the oddly luminous surf lap at the beach, and the stars above. Didn’t feel hungry or thirsty, just sitting there, shorts, shirt, swimming trunks underneath just in case he needed to escape into the ocean. What he liked about the ocean was the fact it was the direct opposite to a wall. Or a room. It just went on, for as far as he could reach, and further.

He heard steps.

Dan had just lit another cigarette, the sizzling sound of burning tobacco and the smell of nicotine preceded his arrival. Walking up the couple of steps he stopped dead, seeing a shadow sitting in one of the chairs. No, not shadow, too light the hair, and those eyes reflected the starlight.

“Hey, Russkie.” He murmured a greeting.

Vadim turned his head to face Dan fully, then smiled. “Hey, Dan. You alright? I couldn’t sleep.” Hey, stranger, fancy meeting you here. Any plans for tonight? If it only was that easy.

“Aye.” Blowing smoke into the air, Dan looked at those eyes and the smile. There was no escape, that was it. He’d better accept it. “Been to a couple of clubs. ‘Ladyboys’ are a strange thing.” He shrugged, leaning against the railing.

“Are they?” Vadim had no idea what they were, only knew Thailand catered to the most bizarre appetites. He studied Dan, thought it didn’t matter if he’d visited a whore, didn’t matter at all.

“Aye.” The Dan fell silent, smoking, until he finally offered some more of an explanation. “They look like beautiful girls but are boys. Not my type. Boys do nothing for me, only men do.” Another plume of smoke, “real men. Even Jarheads don’t quite cut it. Too young.”

Vadim smiled, again. He couldn’t imagine Dan with a boy. Let alone one in female dress. How weird was that? Something one wanted dressed up as something that one didn’t want. “Donahue? Very young.” Conscript age, slightly more than that. Not very satisfying, but he had been able to make do with it. Or Platon. Yes, they could be young, but they had to have courage and willpower and they had to be smart.

“Matt. His name is Matt, and he’s been gracious enough to still talk to me, but I don’t think he’ll ever go for the tall blond Slavic types.” Dan shrugged, and somehow he didn’t care anymore what he was saying. Didn’t matter, did it? Since whatever he said was misunderstood anyway. “Still, the kid taught me a lesson.”

“He did?” Vadim paused, wondering what that lesson could have been. Faltered, and finally asked. “What did he teach you?”

“That sex can be fun. Just that: fun. No more, no less. No strings attached and no hidden depths. Just plain old fun with someone who doesn’t own your body and soul.” The fag was almost finished, he chucked it over the railing into the sand. “You should be thankful to him, actually. Because frankly, he came at the right time. I had just got myself into the habit of suicide missions and fights with really bad odds against myself. Seeking every scrap of fucked-up adrenaline I could find, when he showed me there’s something else worth living for.” He shrugged again, “Fun. Sex. Laughter.” Fishing for his pack of fags to light another, “friendship.”

Vadim had his elbows on the table, lowered his head to rub his neck with both hands, kneading there, and felt uneasy. Thankful to the Yank? But Dan bent of self-destruction? Didn’t like either thought. “Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that, not the way I did. He...was fairly tough, for one his age. I felt... almost sorry for him. I know what it’s like to be...scared.” He frowned, darkly. “Especially if he’s good for you.” That was the most he could do.

“It doesn’t really matter if he is good for me or not. What you did was serious shit. Full stop. To anyone, unless they deserve it.” Dan shrugged again, quietly smoking. “But I understand now you weren’t—or are?—yourself. So I guess that’s OK, then.” He fell silent.

Vadim found it hard to decipher the last sentences. As if Dan was excusing what he had done with the fact he was fucked up. “I always...accepted my consequences,” he muttered. “That’s part of my fucking problem.” Marriage meant sticking to the family. Officer meant integrity. He shook his head and stood. “This...is far worse than SAS selection. Like I have to...pass some kind of test and don’t even know what the scoring system is. I’m trying to be honest. I want to pass. I want...I want you to respect me.” He heard the last words ring in his ears and shook his head. “Anything I can do, anything at all, I’ll do it. I’d kneel, I’d beg, I’d die for it. I’m even fucking living for it.” He shook his head again, felt helpless nausea where he would have felt rage, once upon a time.

Dan stared at Vadim, cigarette forgotten between his lips. “You really want to die, do you?” His voice sounded like ashes.

Vadim shook his head. “Only some of the time. I want to live like a human. That’s what I want. I want to be respected. I want to find some way to live with myself. But most of all, I want you.”

“So do I.” Dan’s quiet voice hardly cut through the sound of the surf, despite the stillness of the night. “But I’m frightened as all fuck.”

Vadim stepped closer, raised a hand and covered most of the distance with that. “I won’t leave. I won’t kill myself. I won’t harm any of your friends. I’ll stay with you for the rest of my life, however much is left. All...all you have to do is...respect me...and take me back. We can...work with the rest.”

“I do respect you.” The burnt-out fag long discarded, Dan stood motionless. Not even daring to blink. “I only lost respect in between. When you tried to make me kill you, and what you did to my mates, and...and the fact you had left and come back,” hastily adding, “but I understand now. Well, I try, I do.” Yet he still didn’t move, not one muscle. Tense and rigid as a statue.

Vadim nodded, painfully, dropped the hand, which didn’t want to become a fist. No anger, just darkness, and nothing to get him through that. “Respect’s a start,” he murmured and forced himself to smile, and it was a gargantuan effort to not just break down and cry or beg. “It is something,” he repeated, as if to convince himself.

I will teach you the true depth of shame, Vadim Petrovich. I will break you in so many places nobody will recognize you—and then I will break you some more. And even if you get out of this place alive, you will have to live with what I left of

you. I'm convinced you can forget the scars on your back. But you will never forget what I will do to your mind.

"I'd be the same, in your place. Likely worse." Vadim glanced out over the sea to try and chase away the memory. "The doctor said it would be hard."

"What 'same', and what am I like?" Dan's eyes followed the hand that had dropped, still lingering, "and what did that shrink of yours mean?" Why was it that all he wanted was to have that hand back on his arm? Oh, yes, he remembered. That goddamned love thing, and not to forget the desire. That one would never wane.

Vadim shook his head. He didn't want to accuse or beg. "He said...alienation. That's what happened. I...lost touch. With everything. He said including myself. He said it would be hard to...even pass for normal, and harder to find a way I can live with this."

"Did he also say what to do? I mean, is there anything others can do? Anything *I* can do?" The frozen stance suddenly unlocked, and Dan was able to move. "Tell me, is there anything at all I can do? That fucking helplessness is killing me." And that was the crux, wasn't it? He was faced with this stranger, who was so obviously hurting, and he couldn't reach him. He had lost the ability to read Vadim.

Vadim shook his head. "He called it trauma. I have his phone number. Maybe...call him. I told him about you. Us." The 'us' seemed almost reaching too far. There wasn't really an 'us'—apart from the time they'd shared just before the arrest. Living like people. "He said...it's complex."

"OK," Dan nodded, clinging to this as if it meant a lifeline, "I'll call him. I want to know, I *need* to know, because I need to understand. If there is anything to read, to learn, I'll do it. Heck, Maggie gave me stuff, tried to warn me and make me understand, but I fell into all of this as naively as a goddamned stupid-faced fresh recruit." He unexpectedly took a step closer, invading Vadim's space, who inhaled sharply. Dan, so close. "Anything, Vadim, do you understand? I'd do anything."

Dan so close, and out of reach, but eager, and close. Vadim nodded, throat tight, wanted to touch him again, and knew it wasn't welcome. "I have the number in the bungalow. I'll bring it over." Didn't move, just stood there, didn't increase the distance. "He's a good man. Wise."

“I’ll call him tomorrow.” Too close, because it wasn’t close enough.
“Tonight ...” Dan trailed off, unable to stop his hand from moving. Not much, mere inches, but his fingertips found their way, connecting with fabric, warmed by the skin of Vadim’s chest.

The sensation amplified into a rifle butt, a punch, a bite. Vadim closed his eyes and inhaled, expanded his chest. First willing, purposeful touch in what was forever. Couldn’t beg, couldn’t...didn’t want to ask for more time, or grant more time. They’d had mindblowing sex while hating each other’s guts. That at least was something he could rely on...his body understanding Dan’s. “Your call,” croaked Vadim. Please say yes.

“You have to understand, Vadim,” Dan’s voice had dropped to a whisper, yet the intensity increased. “What it means for me to touch you.” He couldn’t stop it, though, simply couldn’t. As much a victim of his hand connecting, seeking, palm pressing against solid muscle, as a victim of fists, knives and bullets.

I understand. I do. And how could a simple touch make him sweat? Vadim opened his eyes, saw Dan, the intensity in his eyes that didn’t accept any maybe or perhaps. Do or die.

“I asked you, on the roof...,” inhaling, for Dan, such a simple task seemed painfully difficult right now, “if I touched you, will you never leave me again? Because I won’t. There is no way. Whatever happens. You’re mine, and I wouldn’t survive it any other way.”

“I won’t leave you. I’m yours. Body, heart and mind. Everything.”

“Oh fuck,” Dan breathed out, tilting his head just a little bit, just that perfect angle. This was Vadim. No Frenchman, no Yank, but his Russian. Eleven years, more pain—and more pleasure—than should fit into a lifetime. His lips touched the other’s, and it was like every feeling under the sun had gathered to form a supernova. The touch was like searing agony, stabbing through mind and heart.

Vadim reached to touch Dan, elated and surprised, for once there was something he hadn’t messed up completely, and had hardly believed possible, but Dan was always difficult to predict, always stronger, and better, and fiercer than he was given credit for. Fucking SAS. Made to excel, and he smiled against Dan’s lips, the tenderness nearly breaking him.

“Can’t believe you are alive,” Dan whispered, before his body took over, and lips parted, tongue seeking entrance and heat, as it had done, so many times before, since a goddamned cave in the motherfucking mountains.

Vadim opened his lips, it was almost too much, too intense, but exactly what he’d wanted, only more intense than his memory had yielded, or it was the time, or whatever, and he leaned into the kiss, hands on Dan’s shoulders, arm, running down to his flanks and pulling him closer.

Dan wanted to cry out, or scream and yell and destroy with fists and boots. Anything, anything at all to break through the onslaught of emotions, but all he had was his lips, two arms, and one hand. Tongue, teeth, as well, and the most gut wrenching sensation of feeling, physical, mental, gathering deep in his guts, spreading and searing through his body, travelling across blood. ‘Vadim’, it hammered through his being, ‘Vadim. Alive. Vadim.’ And he was lost. The kiss taking on intensity within nothing but heartbeats, as he tried to swallow sounds, bite down on taste, and crawl right into the other’s body.

Taking possession. Owning. Wanting.

Vadim moaned, pressing against Dan’s body, desire flaring up, worse, more intense than he remembered, the ‘tomorrow’ digging with sharp claws under his skin. Tomorrow. This was more than he had hoped for, more than one night, more than trying out each other’s bodies, but actual planning for whatever future they might have, and no more longing and separation. Hand against Dan’s neck, fingers splayed to cup the back of his head. Smelling him through flaring nostrils, lips open, hungry for tongue and touch and everything else. The bed seemed too far away. He had no idea how to get there.

Two and a half years of pain and hope, fighting and loss. Love, longing, hatred and confusion, all culminating in this, right now, touch, scent and taste. Tearing at fabric, clawing at Vadim’s body, knowing each angle and plane, remapping the terrain while desperately trying to feel more. Dan wanted to rip the other open to envelop himself within skin and flesh, until their hearts beat in sync, inseparable. The sounds he made were full of distress, it was too much, wanting everything at once, and couldn’t ever get enough.

Vadim slid his hand between their bodies, pulling at the buttons of Dan’s shirt, damn near ripping a few off, only broke the kiss for a moment to concentrate on one button that seemed especially resilient, then kissed Dan’s neck, the side of

his throat. Slipping the thing down over Dan's shoulders, who stood transfixed, near trembling, kissing the taut, curved flesh there. The pale, round scar. The one where he had gambled Dan's life on the chance trajectory of a bullet.

Discarding the shirt, he kissed downwards, Dan's chest, his warm smell hitting him in the pit of his stomach, and he went deeper while Dan shuddered, hardly keeping himself upright. Kissing the bared scars over Dan's belt, jagged lines of flesh, a trail of dark hair pointing him into the direction.

If you had the chance, Vadim Petrovich, would you like to suck me off.

Vadim gave a small start at the memory, suddenly, the torturer teasing him.

Dan felt the jolt beneath his hand, against his skin, "What? What's wrong?" Rough voice, his hand roaming where it could, he was bereft of lips, teeth and tongue, trying to tug Vadim back up.

"Nothing," murmured Vadim, "important." He straightened again, met Dan in another fierce kiss, pressing him against himself, the naked skin tantalizing, warm, smooth, powerful. How much he'd missed that, touching somebody like this, without reservations, with nothing but trust and need. Pulled his own shirt free, wanted to feel Dan closer, and pulled it over his head. "Shouldn't be rushing it, but fuck, I want to rush it. Badly."

"I..." Dan stammered, couldn't bring his tongue to form words, "I...bed...you...." He was trying to walk while kissing, cursing his broken wrist and the useless hand, stumbling as he went backwards, desperately clinging onto bare flesh.

Vadim nodded, exactly what he felt, wanted, and the beds were great for sex. Plenty of space. He followed, pushing Dan almost; thankfully, the huge room was mostly empty, or they would have stumbled. Towards the bed, opening Dan's belt, the button, wanted to bare him, touch him, kiss him, suck him, just wanted to see and smell and fucking have him again.

Dan's calves hit the bed before he realised he'd made it inside. Wasn't paying attention to sight nor sound, just the sensations of skin against skin and Vadim's hands on his body, his own clutching at flesh and muscle. The trousers were sliding down his hips once they'd been opened, and he let himself fall backwards, trousers at ankles, feet still in the canvas trainers. "Fuck." He was working on Vadim's shorts one-handed. "Help." He couldn't get their clothes off fast enough.

Vadim grinned, sharply, helped Dan with it, opened his shorts and pulled them down with the swimming trunks he wore underneath. No swimming tonight. Maybe later. Afterwards. He knelt down, pulling the shorts over Dan's shoes, who watched, then opened the laces and pulled the shoes off, just dropping them, and kissed Dan's knee, moving up to his thigh.

Stretched out Dan was too tempting to resist, sliding on top while kissing his way up, staying away from Dan's cock for the moment, skin on skin, chest to chest, kissing and devouring Dan's lips, tongue, feeling the hard stomach shudder and breathe against his cock.

"Oh fuck." Dan groaned out, tried to dig into the bared flesh, as if he could become one and feel Vadim forever. Trying to hump their groins together, like a goddamned teenager, ready to cum at the lightest touch. His hand roamed, wanted both, but had to make do with five fingers instead of ten. Used his lips and teeth instead, breaking the kiss only to move down the throat to suck hard at the burn mark. Unashamed of the needy whimpers that came from somewhere deep inside of him.

Vadim groaned, hand and knees taking some weight off Dan, too close to the edge of the bed. "Move...move up." Nudging Dan with his knee, who slid upwards, keeping over him, savouring the sucking kisses against his throat. Fuck, how much he wanted to feel him, around him, inside him, taking his breath, everything, if only he'd stay, if only they could stay together, wake up like they had done far too rarely. Sliding down again, pressing against Dan's groin, thrusting against him.

The enemy's bitch. I can't believe how you could fall so low. That how you made major, Vadim Petrovich? By taking every officer's cock?

Dan relished the weight on top of him, could feel more that way, felt Vadim was truly there, not just his torturing imagination. "Alive..." murmured against Vadim, "alive..." skin under his lips, "alive!" Breathless while clinging to the body on top, devouring.

Vadim closed his eyes, concentrated just on the body underneath, the gasps, using more weight and strength, too impatient, too needy to make it last, or go about it with any kind of restraint or finesse. Just pushing and sliding, increasing friction with every motion. Could feel his own sweat in the warm evening breeze, the hot, needing body, Dan breathing, Dan's heart racing, his breath catching.

You've always used your beauty, Vadim Petrovich, just like any whore that ever lived. For your advantage. For your own, selfish ends. I never thought Vympel trained honey traps, or did they send you to London to suck some degenerated politician's cock and make photos of it?

Dan stopped to think, was nothing but a body, hands, skin, and most of all cock, engulfed and enveloped by heat and scent, just Vadim. Forever Vadim, nothing but Vadim, and two and a half years of agony, terror, loss and hatred, were gone, erased, washed away with the crashing surf that went from cock to mind, and all through his body. He came against Vadim, didn't know he was yelling his name, as if trying to fix the moment of complete ecstasy. Never to let go again.

If I touched you, would you never leave me again. And when I cum against you, I make you mine.

Vadim dove into another deep kiss as he felt Dan come, thrust harder against Dan's shudders, forced the torturer out of his mind, only for a little while, managed to not see himself through the KGB's eyes, but Dan's, and that was enough to get him there. Feeling tears in his eyes from the intensity, the tenderness of it, the abandon he'd thought he'd lost. Cumming hard, every muscle in his body taut and shuddering, pressed in deeper, harder, then, slowly, relaxing. Wanting nothing but to fall asleep on top of Dan.

Dan said nothing, just couldn't. Only holding, arms wrapped around the other's body, breathing hard. Wasn't enough, and he moved his legs, lifted, bent, until he could wrap them around Vadim as well. Didn't mind the weight, it was reassurance. Enveloping, keeping. "Mine". Whispered hoarsely.

Vadim opened his eyes as Dan shifted and clung to him, and gave a tender smile, one reserved for his children, and now Dan. "Always." Sometimes, life could be so simple. Dan made it simple, just bulldozed through all the shit, never compromising. "Till death doth us part, as they say." Only too likely in their career.

Dan saw that smile, a smile he'd never seen before, and something shifted inside. Opened, melted, and gave way, like a knot unravelling, and a pain simply dissipating. He could feel tears creeping into his eyes, and he didn't even care. "Aye," he smiled back, crookedly, "you want to marry me, Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada, and make me an honourable man?"

Vadim's smile turned into a grin. Don't be fucking stupid was not the answer, suddenly. "You are an honourable man already," he murmured against

Dan's lips. "Honourable, and loyal, and courageous. But you're not pregnant, so no reason to marry." Keeping on the safe side. "Even if I would."

"Damn," Dan tightened his hold and rolled both of them onto their sides, lying on his good side. "And here goes my plan to snatch a big fish to provide for me, so that I can retire." He grinned, and even that was tender. The urge to cry was passing, but emotions remained on the surface, raw and bare, despite the joking.

Vadim laughed. "Yeah. Like this merc's pimp." Touching his chest. "You'd have enough pretty mercs for a stable, but that's not how it works." Joking, lightly, and Dan's dark eyes lit up, he hadn't known how much he missed this rare side of Vadim.

"I want you with me, Dan, out there. Through good times and bad times."

Dan smiled, shifting his arm that was trapped beneath Vadim, drawing lazy patterns on sweat damp skin. "I'll never let go again. I hope you realise, you're in it for good." He flashed a grin, "Still, I'm sure I'd look pretty in a dress," chuckling, while his lips moved in light kisses along Vadim's face, reacquainting himself with every shape. "I've got the legs for it."

Vadim rolled his eyes, but stretched his throat to get more kisses there. "The legs, maybe, but not the shoulders."

"I'll wear a cape over it." Dan's low laughter made the skin beneath his lips shiver. "As long as you carry me over the threshold of our tin hut."

Vadim laughed. "You crazy fuck." Touching his forehead to Dan's. "I do hope there will be more than one of those for us, one day."

"What, tin huts?" Dan's grin mellowed into a smile, softening his features until even the scar in his face seemed to blend into the tanned and stubbly skin. He stretched his legs, making a face at the sticky dampness between them. "We need a shower."

Vadim nodded, rolling over on his back, stretching his arms out over his head, but Dan's hand never lost contact. "Think we both fit, or should I swim a little over there?" Pointing vaguely towards the ocean.

"No, you're not leaving." Dan's expression grew more serious, "you've got to understand what you got yourself into, here. You'll stay. I won't let you out of my sight if I can help it." Dan realised how fucked up that sounded, bordering on mental, but he didn't care. "The shower's big enough."

Vadim turned his head to grin at Dan. “Aye, if you say so.” Too relieved, relaxed and happy to worry about the possessiveness. He didn’t mind. He didn’t want to leave, either, not now, not ever. He got up, then padded towards the bathroom, followed by Dan. Deciding against the full bath, or the Jacuzzi outside. A quick shower would do it. Vadim checked the water temperature, and the shower was like hot rain, plenty of space for two men.

“I can’t be bothered with the plastic bag.” Dan watched Vadim, already under the spray. “If I hold my arm outside, will you wash me?”

Vadim wiped the water from his face and grinned. “Come on, then.” Stepping to the side, offering a hand to steady Dan. Reaching for the shower gel and squeezing a good amount into his hand. Drawn to how the water made Dan’s dark skin shine. Both hands on his chest, soaping him up, watching the suds run down the smooth skin and over the scars, over the cock, down his legs.

“Oh fuck. Can’t say how...how much...”

Dan was watching intently, each movement, every facial expression. “How much...what?” Water was running over his face, through wild hair and into his mouth. Trickling off the tip of his nose and gathering close to his chin, dripping like tears and rain alike.

Vadim ran his hand over Dan’s hair, smoothing it back out of his brow, taking a handful and closing his fist, then stepped closer to brush him. “...I missed you. I wanted you. How much you...make me feel again.”

Dan smiled, the first word and thought that was coming to his mind seemed not to make any sense. “Ditto.” His ‘harem’, his mates, the fights, the games, the laughter and sex, the fist fights, and even Jean, nothing reached him as deeply as Vadim. “One touch from you...,” water coated his lips, gathered in thick drops on his dark lashes, “makes me feel more than a whole goddamned orgy.”

Vadim grinned and kissed him again, feeling, for once, perfectly normal. Not two mercs, not two killers, for once he could imagine they were perfectly normal guys that had fallen in love. Pulling Dan’s head back to nip at his jaw, his chin, the lower lip. “Keeping me around for tonight, stranger?”

“You fucking bet on that.” Dan grinned with closed eyes, head tilted back, trusting completely, enough to blind himself despite strange surroundings. Another first, the shower, the R&R, together—in a place that didn’t know who they were.

No past, only present and perhaps, at last, a future. I love you, he thought, and revelled in the luxury of not having to rush.

Vadim grinned, running teasing fingers down Dan's flanks, to his ass. Dan had an ass to kill for, all taut muscle and curves, slick skin, and only reluctantly breaking the touch to get more shower gel. Washing Dan's legs, and back up, cock and balls, licking his lips as he did. Tried to keep the interrogator out of his head, this time, but the man lingered. "For fuck's sake," he muttered silently, exasperated.

"Hm?" Dan was jerked out of his silent enjoyment, thought he'd heard or felt something, but perhaps it was just the water running past his ears. "You alright?" With those hands on his arse, cock and balls, though, how could he gather a coherent thought.

"More than alright." Vadim shifted Dan's body to wash away the soap, then got some more of the gel to wash himself down quickly. He'd just forget the interrogation. He'd just forget the man. Forget the accusations, the cutting of his mind, the vivisection of everything he was. He had Dan. He'd won, in the end. Reached out to switch off the water. "What about room service, and some more...frolicking on the bed?"

"Aye," Dan grinned, convinced he must have misheard. "Haven't really eaten much and I could do with a cold beer. They got some funky brands around here, had a few in the ladyboy bar." He stepped out of the shower, dripping wet and standing with arms outstretched, as if waiting for personal towel service.

Vadim reached for the bathrobe and put it on, but left the belt open, then got one of the massive towels and flicked it open, looking bemusedly at Dan's cocksure posture. He couldn't help but flick the towel across Dan's ass. "I think we can do something about that."

"Hey! You bastard." Dan jumped at the towelled slap. "I have you know that I've started and won fist fights for less than that." Flashing a toothy grin, as long as Vadim was there, close, what else did matter?

Vadim laughed, and then proceeded to towel him down. Some orders were easier followed than others, and he loved showing Dan just how much he wanted him, enjoyed him, his presence. He put the towel to the side and ran a hand down Dan's cheek, but couldn't speak, and didn't want to, really, felt too raw already.

Food was quickly ordered—a plate of cold bites, various kinds of meat and fish and fruit, all washed down with a selection of beers, while Vadim had water.

Lying stretched out on the bed, naked, the food within reach, Dan always touching, and then, finally, falling asleep, almost wrapped around him.

Vadim took the beer bottle and pulled it slowly from Dan's hand, put it down on the ground, and shifted to find a good position, staring up at the ceiling. This, then, was bliss. He had forgotten what it felt like, this sense of completeness.

1991 Chapter XXIX—Off Duty

September 1991, Thailand

Five 'o clock. Vadim opened his eyes to the grey pre-dawn room, felt Dan wrapped around him, Dan's face against his neck. Spooning. Dan. His. Life and living. Mission accomplished. He had him back. No more feeling hollow and empty and hurting, no more. Peace. Till death doth us part. He turned, looked at Dan sleeping there, and thought they should stay out of the wars, the Gulf, or whatever fucking place decided to blow up next. Stay the hell away because these wars were just inviting disaster to happen. They should try and live in peace.

He idly ran his fingers through Dan's hair, then turned some more and kissed him on the brow, nose, lips. "I'll go for a swim."

Hardly any reaction from Dan, just a nonsensical mumble, before he rolled into the warm space vacated by Vadim. Curled up into the thin bedclothes, his wild hair entangled on the pillows. Dark and silver streaks, barely visible in the murky light to come.

Vadim found the speedos, glanced back over his shoulder, but Dan was sleeping on, relaxed, except for one fist, the right one, that lay beside his head. Couldn't help but smile at the image, and more at the thought Dan would be like this when he returned. Like he'd never been a soldier, just somehow had shed all military time keeping. He'd order breakfast on the way back.

* * *

When Vadim returned, the sun was lighting up the entire room, creating swirling patterns on the wooden floor, with the breeze blowing the light gauze curtains into the room. The smell of cigarette smoke was wafting across the wide open space, a sign Dan was awake. Lying in the very middle of the vast bed, legs open, pillows in his back, and arms flopped by his side, lifting his head at the noise. His face was expressionless, until he caught sight of Vadim and his lips began to curve slightly, brighten, light touching his dark eyes, finally smiling.

Vadim shed the speedos on the way in, walked past to toss them into the bathtub and gather two towels, one of which he slung around his waist, drying himself with the other. "A penny for your thoughts."

“I’ve never seen the scar.” Dan’s answer came as swift as a bullet. Didn’t move anything but his eyes that followed Vadim’s movements.

Vadim paused, feeling oddly self-conscious about the scar. He knew at once which scar. The other scar Dan had given him. It had healed pretty well, all told. “I guess...you want to?” Cautious, not sure how to read Dan now. Didn’t want to lie down and open up and get fucked. Not now. Too fast. The bitch that lay down at a mere gesture, ready to take it and get fucked.

I wonder if I can make a masochist suffer for real. Does this make you hard, Krasnorada? Should I be less gentle?

“Why not?” Dan smiled, confusion flickered across his face, before it was gone again and he pulled himself up to sit. As unselfconscious as ever. He held a hand out, palm up, open. Beckoning. “You were gone when I woke.” His voice didn’t hold accusation nor question.

“Yes, I was swimming.” Vadim stepped forward, then lay down next to Dan, one towel still in place, but he let the other slip from his hand.

“No, really?” Dan rolled his eyes with a grin. “I wouldn’t have noticed, with you all wet and in those things that are a mere excuse for swimming trunks.”

“There will be breakfast in half an hour.” Vadim turned his head, looked at Dan and smiled. Felt slightly reluctant as he took the towel off, still wanted Dan and always would, but at the same time that submission, that acceptance, just didn’t come. Like his body had forgotten how good it felt. Like he was some weird kind of virgin again, reluctant, but willing.

“I missed you, waking.” Dan turned his head, but remained on his back, merely lifting his arm to lazily run his hand down along Vadim’s shoulder, arm, flank.

Vadim placed a hand against Dan’s chest, saw the ‘V’ scar on Dan’s arm when he moved it, and thought all will be good, we have the scars to prove it.

“How did it heal?” Dan murmured, as if reluctant to breach anything that touched the subject of Vadim’s imprisonment.

“Took a while.” Vadim felt that tightness in his throat again. “They gave me an examination after they brought me in. They were thorough.” Bend over, bitch. They’d checked everything, every place inside and outside. As if he’d hide a gun in any of those unlikely places.

Dan twitched, had been too late to hide the reaction. “That means they saw...knew...” he shook his head, “Fuck, they knew anyway. That Colonel bastard told me about the camera.” He wanted to shudder, instead just narrowed his eyes.

“Yes.” The trial. The transcription, read out to him, to mock and humiliate him further.

That makes a man want to be cut? Explain to me, Vadim Petrovich, how you could possibly have wanted to be treated like that, used and abused and injured by an enemy?

“After the medical, they put me away for a few hours, and then warmed me up for the first...talk.”

Dan’s hand rested on Vadim’s hip, a heavy, warm reminder. “Did they break anything?”

Vadim shook his head. “I wasn’t raped.” He felt himself choking on the next words. Couldn’t say them. Couldn’t.

“I didn’t...” mean that, Dan meant to say, but never finished the sentence. Waited instead, still, except for his fingers, curling and uncurling on the tautness of Vadim’s hips. Waiting, for what, he wasn’t sure, but for something that couldn’t but should be said.

Vadim forced himself to breathe, keeping his eyes closed, body went rigid without him noticing, like bracing against a kick or punch. “...they said I’d enjoy it too much.” He tried to turn over, lie on his side, wanted to get the words back, and couldn’t. What a fucking faggot.

“Huh?” Speechless, Dan held onto Vadim’s body, kept him from rolling away. “Fucking *what?*”

Vadim was glad to be held, pressed against Dan but couldn’t look at him, wanted to die, or crawl away, hide.

You will never recognize yourself, Vadim Petrovich. Never again. If you walk out there to be shot like you deserve, they will only finish you off. Because I am here to kill you. You’ll be a dead man walking. I will kill your mind, your soul, your emotions. You will never again function. Never again will you pass for normal or even human.

“He said...they won’t put me into prison because I’d enjoy...too much. Nobody there...touched me. Same reason. Because...I’d like it.”

“That’s the biggest fucking load of fucking bullshit I have ever heard. Did you believe that shit?” Dan’s fingers curled on Vadim’s skin until his hand formed a fist. “I don’t claim I understand much of what Maggie told me about isolation, but it’s goddamned motherfucking *torture*, Vadim, it’s not because you like it. Who the fuck told you that?”

Torture. Yes. Vadim forced himself to breathe. It was hard, but he remembered how to. “I’ll...be alright. Don’t worry. I’m better than I’ve been in ages.” Vadim forced every muscle to relax, turned to look into Dan’s face, hoped he’d not see disgust, and what he saw looked like anger and worry. “I can function. It’s...just the shit they did...with my mind. I’m operational.” And that means soldiering and sex.

Dan shook his head in bewilderment. He didn’t understand, just that something had happened there, which was beyond his comprehension because it had dug so deeply into Vadim, it couldn’t simply be extracted. He was angry, wanted to slam that useless fist into the bastards’ faces, smashing the skulls of those who’d done this...this whatever it was, to Vadim. This *thing* he could not understand, far greater and worse than anything they’d ever done to each other.

He lifted his hand, forced the fist to relax and open, touching the ridge of Vadim’s nose. Asking without words if they’d broken any bones. The physical realm he could understand, but the mind?

“The doctor says I’m in fairly good shape for a man my age.” Vadim reached up and took the hand, kissing the wrist, while Dan felt like trying to hold onto a slippery fish. Vadim still had not answered the question he’d asked for the second time.

Dan would make it whole again, Vadim thought. Nothing he couldn’t cope with as long as Dan was there. Just forget it. Just try and find his feet again, and these sudden attacks would cease. He’d sleep like normal, would be able to do everything again. Free. He’d made it, shown he’d made it, and had escaped. It would all be good. Better not talk about it. The doctor could give better explanations anyway. “I brought the phone number. It’s over there.” Nodding towards the table. “And I think I just heard our breakfast arrive outside.”

“OK,” Dan nodded, “I’ll phone the doc, soon.” He turned his head towards the door, the breakfast had indeed arrived. Still, when he watched Vadim wrap himself into the towel once more, letting the waiter in, Dan kept thinking. He’d

still not seen the scar, not even any kind of ‘close-up’, as if the other somehow avoided the scrutiny—of body and mind.

Vadim stood there and watched the waiter set up the table outside, gave a tip, and they were left alone again with enough food to feed a squadron of soldiers. He glanced back at Dan lying on the bed. Dan, who wanted to see the scar, and who was watching him. “Just didn’t want to be interrupted,” he murmured, and came back to the bed. Suddenly nervous, he took the towel off again and sat down on the bed, while Dan moved to sit. Vadim lay back, pulled one leg up and stretched out completely, relaxing.

Dan suddenly felt a strange awkwardness, as if he had to reacquaint himself with the other’s body, his physical presence. Seemed Vadim felt similar, or perhaps even worse, in ways he could not understand. Despite the night before, for one painful moment Vadim felt like a stranger to him. Eyes on the scar, the one letter, the cut that said ‘mine’. “Are you?” Dan looked up, merely touching the scar with his fingertips. Tracing the clear-cut lines.

Vadim smiled at him. “Yes.” Opened his legs further, knew it was an invitation, had the feeling things would be easier if they did. Wanted Dan to know it wasn’t really all that different now, the basics were still in place. Didn’t want to be hard to get, or hard to keep, mostly, not with Jean and Donahue only too willing to snap him up. Dan had other places to go. Other people. The fingertip tickled there, and Vadim studied Dan’s face, who smiled.

The smile spread from Dan’s lips to his eyes, until all darkness disappeared from his scarred face. “I do really fucking love you, you do understand that, don’t you? With bells and whistles and ‘till death’ and all that shit.”

“And I love...you.” Whatever’s left of me loves you. It’s all I have left, Vadim thought, but it’s enough to get me to the end. I know it will.

Dan dropped his voice while scooting closer, almost covering Vadim’s body with his own. Lying between the open legs, his hand still resting on the scar. “If I touch you, back in camp or wherever the fuck else, I really don’t give a shit what anyone thinks.”

“You’re just itching to get into trouble with the CO, aren’t you? You know they will talk about it.”

Dan shrugged, a feat in his position. “The CO can’t do jack shit to me. As much as the bastard dislikes me, he doesn’t have a chance in hell he’ll ever get me

kicked out. Anyone else? It's not like I'm eating your face off in public. Neither do we go on out on duty together. That'd be fucking lethal." He lowered his head, lips touching Vadim's chest, kissing his way slowly across and down. "No masks, comrade." Murmured, "No lies."

Vadim looked down, following Dan's trail of lips. Fuck. He'd forgotten how fucking good this felt. "No...lies." Live as a 'couple' in camp. There would still be weird comments, that was the general tone and feel there, but apart from sneering and the odd comment, what could happen. They'd both stood their ground alone...would anybody dare to challenge them once Mad Dog and...the crazy spetsnaz were 'back together'? Vadim groaned softly. "Dan..."

Lifting his head from Vadim's body, Dan murmured, "Aye?" He had reached the abs, and his path downwards allowed no hesitation.

Vadim breathed hard, muscles tight, lines forming under Dan, his body responding without questioning, without second thought. "I...missed...missed this so much..." He let his head fall back, pulled his legs up and kept them open, in case Dan wanted to fuck him like this. He didn't mind. Would be good. Would be so good.

"You have no fucking idea how much I missed this, too." Dan barely more than whispered, before concentrating once more on his task of kissing every inch of the exposed skin. Taking the open legs for an invitation, even though he was not sure anymore if the old signs were still valid.

He took his time, because they had this now, finally: the greatest luxury of all. Time. Reaching the smooth skin, softest silk and warmth, with recoiled strength beneath. Lips and tongue tracing the lines he had cut, over two years ago, making Vadim groan, cock hardening, in full view of Dan, who suddenly stopped. Lifting his head and peering at Vadim's face from across his body. "I've always used protection since...just so you know. I'm still clean." Vadim glanced at him. Strange to say that. Clean? Oh. The AIDS thing. That disease faggots and junkies got. Always used protection. Donahue. Jean. And whoever else besides. Would have preferred to not know, not be told. Never spared a thought for that. "Doc says I'm clean, nothing...nobody...after that."

"After me?"

"Yes."

Dan moved his head, hair sweeping across skin. "I never had anyone before you." He chuckled softly, lowering his head once more and looking, really looking at that cock before his eyes. Appreciating the sight and inhaling the scent.

"Perfectly monogamous." Murmured, before tasting skin, hot-smooth hardness and precum once more. After so long, Dan groaned when the taste hit his palate and the feeling of perfect fit, as much as absolutely knowing Vadim. What would create the greatest lust. Which movements, touches, how his tongue slid, his hand steadied and stroked, his teeth gently scraped, then harder, steady, and it all came back to him, each and every tiny detail. They were inextricably intertwined, how could they ever have believed they could be parted. Even death was not enough.

Vadim moaned, louder than he used to, thoughts wiped out at that feeling he'd remembered, but was even better now. Dan sucking and teasing him, better if that was possible, the same relish, the same devil may care heartfelt intensity that had never failed to blow his mind. He didn't care who else Dan had had, like this or any other way, because Dan wanted him back and was willing to keep him, and fuck everything else, there was a solution, no problem, none at all. Every motion made him groan and hiss, eyes closed, knew the sight would drive him insane, the sounds Dan made and the sensations.

Dan took his time, reacquainting himself, indulging himself with taste, touch and sound. Cocksucker, that's what he was and what he wanted to be, but no one other than Vadim could get to all his senses so deeply and completely.

Vadim was panting by now, thrusting up, a sheen of sweat on his body, which just reacted, just moved with no interference from his brain whatsoever. Reaching blindly for Dan's shoulders, just touching him there with his fingertips, groaning and allowing the sensations to wash through him. He'd do anything. Confess anything, commit any crime.

Dan finally raised his head, lips and tongue moving up the length of Vadim's cock, his good hand closing around the shaft, strength pitted against lust. "I want to fuck you, Vadim." His voice was rough with need, "is that OK?" Didn't know why he felt he had to ask, never had before.

Vadim opened his eyes, looked at Dan, his wet lips close to his cock, still, that strangely serious expression in his eyes, asking something, and Vadim felt so motherfucking grateful it sent shivers up his spine. "Please, do."

Begging for it, are you, Krasnorada? Like a good bitch?

Vadim shuddered, came up, took Dan's shoulders and pulled him closer. "Do it. Don't...make me beg."

"Beg?" Confusion, but then Dan forgot all about the thought, when cock touched cock, and everything was different all of a sudden. Not just a body, no mate nor friend, no casual encounter, nothing and no one like this. This familiarity, this knowing. This owning.

Bodies touching, Dan's knees between Vadim's legs. "Shit," he murmured, "where is the lube?"

Vadim gave a breathless laugh, Dan across him like this, the sight of his cock, heavy and hard and veined, and he found it impossible to speak. He glanced around, didn't see the lube, not right away. "Try...nightstand," he whispered, couldn't resist and came up to nip Dan's throat, grinning.

Dan nodded, but the nightstand was to his left and his hand was still in plaster. "Damn." Rolled over and off Vadim with a grunt when he hit the fading bruises, until he could rummage in the drawer with his right. Finding the tube of KY, kept it between his teeth. He needed his hand to touch Vadim, run fingers down a shoulder and back to the flank, the lube landing beside his head. "I want to fuck you like I did in that cave...Been dreaming about that.

Remembering. Everything, every goddamned little thing."

Vadim nodded, rolled onto his side in front of Dan, craned his neck to kiss him, hand touching Dan's leg, firm grip as if testing the muscle underneath. Suddenly had the strange feeling Dan didn't do this to any of his other lovers—not this spooning, not fucking them slowly on their sides. Couldn't imagine either Jean or Donahue like this, but of course he might be wrong. "So have I...everything. You were...are worth that...that fucking, stupid war..."

You are worth everything, Dan thought, but couldn't say it. Felt his throat suddenly constricted. Worth that ex-wife of yours, worth a smashed room, worth suicide missions, worth hatred and hell and worth all the money and more. Said none of it, instead moved even closer, handed the tube to Vadim, his own palm open. "Help me?"

Vadim nodded, flicked the cap open and squeezed a good amount of that stuff into Dan's palm, then put the lube down near the pillow, and lifted his leg, which exposed the scar there. He swallowed, curved his back to give Dan a better angle, just falling back into it, wanting Dan and what he'd do. "Good... good I

found you in the desert,” he murmured to cover the moment of nervousness. Been a while. Fuck.

“Aye ... damn good thing.” Dan rubbed the cool gel all over his cock, before swiftly but thoroughly working it between Vadim’s cheeks, stalling a moment to relish the sensation of his finger sliding unhindered through the readily yielding muscle, making Vadim push back against his hand.

“There was a time...” Dan murmured close to Vadim’s ear while his good hand worked him open. Insistent, gently, yet unrelenting, and Vadim’s breath went harder, lips open, trying to speed things up and be ready.

“A time when I couldn’t...even...wank...” Drawing in a deep breath, Dan found it hard to hold himself back like this. “Too painful, then...but not now” One finger was met by a second, the third almost there as well.

Vadim nodded, sex had become impossible, some point he didn’t even feel any arousal, or anything but dread, and the wanking in camp had been nothing but some kind of waste disposal, a vaguely embarrassing function of his body, nothing more. “Not...a virgin. Just...do it, like you...ah, did.” He glanced over his shoulder, leaned back to rub his head against Dan’s for a moment. “Come on.”

Dan shook his head, though, and smiled. Tender, despite his flushed face and almost feverishly gleaming eyes. “It’s been so long.” Murmured, while his fingers pulled out, before pushing back, three this time, making Vadim groan and buck back, unable to control the building lust that washed away what disgust he’d felt at the thought. Disgrace, shame, filth. None of that, now. Not now, not right now.

“No one else, like this. No one else...” Dan did not finish the sentence, kissing the back of Vadim’s neck instead.

He’d been right. Not Dona...Matt, not Jean. Vadim shook his head, banished the thought, wanted more of that, deeper, harder, wanted to feel thrusts and Dan’s length sliding inside and out and accept him as deep as he could, with as much force as he could. Dan’s fingers stretching him and teasing, slicking him up, a slight burn, but no discomfort. Last man touching him had been the doc, and he didn’t count. Just clinical. “Same...here. I’m...clean.” Healthy. Functional.

“I didn’t mean that.” Dan’s voice barely a murmur, as his lips curved into a smile in the back of Vadim’s neck. Fingers at last replaced with the tip of his cock. He didn’t know where in heaven and hell he took this restraint from, just that it

was of utmost importance he didn't rush anything. Had to draw out, relish and engrave in his mind forever each and every endless second. "I meant...not like *this*." And he pushed forward, stretching, demanding, moving until he felt yielding and acceptance—agonisingly slow.

Vadim's lips opened wider, a choked sound came out, feeling this, so damned good, just so good, his body responding on its own with his mind still outside like a guest that was not allowed in. Lost the thread of conversation, just felt the slick heat and the stretching and Dan moving inside him, hand reaching behind him, trying to pull Dan closer and deeper, but most of all touch and feel him. Dan. Dan like in the cave, Dan like in those days when there had been nothing to fear and nothing to regret. Dan was everything that mattered. Struggled hard to think, but couldn't, just felt the warmth and the skin and Dan's strength and control. "I'll...beg...before...this...is over," he murmured, "but...I don't care..."

"You'll never need to beg with me. Never." Dan found it hard to talk, consumed by the sensations. All feeling concentrated in his cock, flaring from the centre throughout his body and mind. Synapses firing lust across his brain until he was hardly able to think at all. Nothing but Vadim's body, Vadim's heat, Vadim's scent. Eleven years reduced to a blur of memories and emotions. Nothing else mattered but the here and now. "Whatever you want ..." words tumbling, while his body took over. The good hand roaming across muscles and skin, until they found Vadim's cock, curling around it. Could feel every vein beneath his calloused palm. "Whatever...wherever...I'd do it for you...no begging...ever..." His body was rocking into the other's. Smoothly and steadily, their bodies combined, and his stroking in sync with the same perfection.

No begging. He didn't need to beg. No humiliation, no submission, no shame, no disgrace, not even when Vadim could think clearly again, not in his memory, not when they'd both be mercenaries again. Vadim closed his eyes, one hand rested on Dan's wrist, moved with it as Dan brought him further, stroked him, no begging, just equals as they'd always been, sometimes at each other's mercy, but never less than themselves. "I...know," Vadim breathed, flexing again as the lust built up further, but he took over Dan's rhythm, trusting him so completely he wouldn't beg, knowing Dan didn't want that and would just listen to it anyway. Knowing he didn't truly *beg*, not on his knees, not for his life, not for his pride, but whatever he'd say would only truly be 'I love you more than I can say, than I can

even think and what you give me takes my breath away, but breathing is overrated when I can kiss you', and he suddenly smiled, while he could hear his own groans, sensuous, and, he thought, damned sexy, as they had to be. Dan sexy as he was, doing sexy things, himself, in prime shape, and they were a feast for the gods, and no shame whatsoever. "I love you," Vadim muttered, barely coherent.

Dan was smiling, at nothing and no one and both of them. At words and feelings, and the sheer utter perfection of everything. Shifting his body, the angle of his hips changed, and his entrance became deeper while the speed increased slightly. Still as intense, and just as *perfect*. "Never stopped..." loving you, wanting you, even when I was about to kill you and hated your guts, your very sight. Picking up speed and strength once more, his thrusts still as smooth and controlled, but deeper and harder. "And always will." Breathlessly murmured, Dan's eyes closed, starting to fuck in earnest, with all his strength, yet the strength remained controlled by their position and by everything he felt. No wild, insane coupling of greed like the night before, but years worth of emotions expressed in lust, moving further towards orgasm.

Vadim wanted nothing more than change position, himself pressed into the mattress, or on his hands and knees, this slow, drawn-out love making wrecking him from the inside and outside, stripping everything away. His pretences, the bitterness, the darkness, and for a while even the interrogator's voice. Just emotion and feeling, and he glanced over his shoulder, too close to see anything, but felt Dan's hot breath against his ear and neck, and every thrust that went right through him, up to his chest and his throat while tension built up. At least that was something that still worked, and something he remembered and that had been nothing but good, and Dan finally there where he wanted him, where he remembered him, and where he fucking needed him. Relief so powerful it hurt as his body tensed, close to orgasm, but never able to get there on its own, always needed Dan's help to get him there, his groans sounding desperate now.

Close, so damn close, Dan could feel nothing but the pressure building, almost unbearable in his cock and balls. He shifted once more, angle steeper, and he sped up, increasing strength. His hand remained in the same rhythm, same sync with his body's thrusts. "Aye..." whispered, without thinking nor seeing, "I'll take care of you." His hand gripping tighter, harsher, his strokes as demanding as his thrust, now.

Care. Overwhelming gratitude as Dan took him over the edge, and Vadim's fingers dug into Dan's hip as he felt himself fall, pressing back, tensing as he just let go, coming with breathless groans, into and against Dan's hand, against his body. Absurdly surprised at the depth of emotion, the intensity, the clarity as if the darkness didn't exist, as if everything was still clear and simple, and for a long moment it was, just him and Dan.

Dan followed almost immediately, his whole being had just waited for that moment when he could finally let go. Felt his cock clench, deeply embedded in the powerful body that was all his, and his alone. That very moment, there was no past—no future, just present. He felt himself drained of more than just total ecstasy, his entire being crushed and elevated at the same time. Felt emptied of every memory and emotion, like an infected wound: drained of everything that had turned bad. Finding himself with eyes scrunched shut and his arm wrapped and holding tightly onto Vadim. Emptied so much, there was nothing left but a shell, like it had been before, the day of Vadim's execution.

But this time it was not pain that filled the empty shell, but feelings, flooding back, bringing knowledge and realisation. Here, and now, and *his* once more. Vadim. Forever and always. Vadim. His.

And Dan cried, helplessly, while his good hand clawed at the other's body, his body pressed so close, as if he was trying to crawl inside.

Feeling Dan shudder and the tension that didn't leave him, Vadim glanced over his shoulder, feeling and hearing the odd pattern of breathing, and what seemed like despair to him, the sounds wretched. Suddenly realized just how much he'd fucked up Dan, and felt a wave of tenderness come up that took his breath. Moving, separating only to turn around and grab hold of the man, feeling him tight and close and helplessly crying. Small sounds for such a powerful man, and Vadim swallowed hard, pressing the other man to him, knowing nothing really could stop that and all he could and wanted to do was hold Dan through this, help him deal with the pain. Fingers running over his skin, feeling tears himself, an echo and a shadow of Dan's. Feeling so fucking sorry for having got Dan this far and breaking him up so badly. "Shit, I'm sorry. I'm so very...very sorry," he murmured into Dan's ear.

Dan shook his head, repeatedly, trying to say 'no, not your damn fault', but he couldn't get a sound out, let alone a coherent word. Couldn't stop those

motherfucking tears either, completely helpless and resigned to whatever they were doing to him. ‘They’: tears, emotions, and two and a half years of shit, but he had no idea why he just couldn’t stop. Just couldn’t. No chance, and when he finally gave in, the tension flew out as his body capitulated to tears and old, so very old pain. Sobbing like a broken child, while memories were fading. Death, fear, blackmail, hopelessness and hope. They became nothing but past.

Vadim’s tears were silent, just running from his eyes into Dan’s wild hair. Hardly painful, they came, and went, bringing an odd sense of relief and cleansing, but most of all regret as he held Dan, stroking his back and shoulders, thought they’d rushed it, should have been more careful, and at the same time felt like things could be good again. Not just sex, not just friends, but something similar to what they had been, plus comrades. Finally on the same side, their own side, with nothing else to fall back onto.

It took a long time before Dan calmed, and he never realised he had fallen asleep in the other’s arms. Utterly exhausted. Vadim rolled onto his back, shifted Dan to lie on his shoulder, could still feel him inside and listened to the rustle of palm leaves, eyes half closed. It could be good again. All they had to do was stick together, whatever came—Jean, Yank, whatever. They were far away, and they weren’t important, not when Dan had cried like that, and Vadim felt embarrassed and proud and full of regret—too many shifting emotions to examine that feeling.

You will see some people might react strange to things you do or say, Mr Krasnorada. Guilt will only deepen that gap. They are entitled to their responses, some of which might seem strange to you. It won’t be your fault. Don’t take them personally—trauma quite significantly shifts our perception of self.

Dr Williams.

“I’ll try,” he murmured, looked to the side at Dan’s eyebrows, smooth forehead, looking relaxed and peaceful, and looked down to Dan’s scarred hand, partially in plaster. It would be good. It would be a battle fighting it out, but they’d win this. They’d leave the past behind and use what they’d left. All of it.

* * *

When Dan woke about an hour later he stretched his muscles and moved his arms and legs long before his mind was engaging. Pure luxury of not having to

be awake from one second to the next. Even though he was still half asleep, his mind knew no danger was near, and his body revelled in slowly returning to the surface. He felt warmth—human warmth. Skin, and arms, a body that was hard and smooth and simply perfect. Held, resting, and lips close to skin, as he breathed in the other's scent. Dan's lips curved into a smile while his eyes were still closed. Moving his head a fraction, his wild hair brushed across Vadim's chest. "Mmmm..." Dan almost purred, completely at peace and more relaxed than he could remember. Except for his eyes, they felt somewhat swollen, but it was of no importance. What had been, had been, and he felt no shame for the display of emotions. He had merely functioned, and functioned well, until now, and from now on he could live again.

"Any chance for breakfast? Am famished."

Vadim twisted a bit, rolling onto his side to kiss Dan's forehead—that was the only bit of his face he could reach without moving too much. "The food is still there," he murmured and smiled, running a lazy hand through Dan's hair. Soft. The length made that hair too soft to keep his hands away. "I might dredge up enough strength to...get up and feed you," he murmured.

"Depends on the incentive."

Laughing, Dan rolled over onto his back, able to twist his head up, peering at the other. "And that would be? Let me think...sex?"

Vadim grinned. "Not just yet, but...yes." Predictably starved after steaming alone in his tin hut. Remembered Dan's skills too well, going savage or skilled or teasing, slow, harsh, enthusiastic.

Dan rubbed his eyes, still swollen. "The coffee's cold, though, aye?" Adding, while pulling himself upwards to half-sit. "I have no idea when I conked out nor for how long." It didn't matter, and he shrugged while searching one-handed for his packet of fags.

Vadim reached and found Dan's shorts, pulling them closer so Dan could get to them. "We have time. I think...a bit more than an hour." He rubbed his face and yawned, stretching. "Plenty of time, though. My next treatment is at twelve, that gives me time for breakfast."

"Treatment?" Finding his fags, Dan fished one out and lit it, all one handed before picking the shorts up with his toes and with a deft flick catching his foot in

it. He grinned while inhaling the nicotine deeply. “What’s that for?” Smoke curling out of his nostrils and mouth.

“Yes. Massage, exfoliation, and epilation...” Vadim smiled. “Mostly treating the scars, though, and the girl yesterday said some parts of my spine are locked and I should go for the full treatment and bring time.” He shrugged. “Guess they know their thing better than I do.”

“Scars? Sounds good, you think I should do the same?” Dan looked up while the shorts kept slowly sliding down his lifted leg.

“Absolutely. If nothing else, it feels really good.”

“OK, book me in for the whole hog as well. Oh, and are we ordering more tea and coffee?”

“Just a moment.” Vadim nodded, rolled over again to reach for the phone, ordering another set of tea and coffee to their bungalow. Turning back towards Dan. “Should be here in five. I better get dressed—at least shorts.”

“Damn right, that’s what they were for.” Grinning, Dan kept the burning cigarette between his lips while reaching for the shorts. Struggling one handed, he ended up laughing, while lying on his back like a stranded beetle, the twisted shorts somewhere halfway down his legs.

Vadim grinned and bent down to take hold of the shorts and pull them up. “Lift yer arse, soldier boy,” he mimicked one of the PT instructors, and pulled them up for Dan. Even zipped him up and closed the button, leaning down to kiss the mess of scars peeking out over the cloth. “Can’t wait to peel you out of those again,” he said lowly and flashed another grin, getting one in return. Then found his own shorts and slipped them on as well, managing to be partially dressed at least and not entangled with Dan when the Thai waiter appeared and served the tea and coffee pots. The young man didn’t move a muscle in his pretty face, even though the situation was absurdly clear, and Vadim marvelled at the way everything seemed normal here.

“Well,” Dan remarked when the guy was gone, “they are rather stoic, aye?” Remembering the ‘ladyboy’ bar, and the fact he’d been told there was nothing one couldn’t get for money in this country. Even things that made his stomach turn. “Stoic, or polite, or plain and simply incredibly tolerant.”

Vadim shrugged. “I like them for that. Seems to create less trouble.”

Dan reached for his clothed crotch, scratching vigorously, before he swung his long legs over the edge of the bed. “You do realise we haven’t even showered yet, aye? Feel a bit of a sticky mess and bet you’re not any better, but food first...” a thought suddenly occurred to him as he stood. His eyes lighting up. “A bath! We’ve never had a bath together and I’ve got addicted to bubble baths. Back in the embassy.”

Vadim gave a laugh. “Sounds good. Jacuzzi? There was the hamam in Kabul, but that was different.” He watched as Dan padded over to the trolley that held the breakfast and now the fresh tea and coffee, pulling it towards the bed. “Breakfast in bed, Monsieur?” Moving into an exaggeratedly deep bow, Dan lifted the first of the covers off the food. “Would you like me to feed you, Monsieur?” He grinned before letting himself fall back onto the bed.

Vadim smiled and reached out to touch Dan’s side again, feeling mellow and tender and like he couldn’t touch and hold him enough. “Yes, why not? If you want to?”

“Only if you do the pouring of tea and coffee. I don’t trust my hand right now, too much sex, you know.” Dan waggled his brows, grinning.

Vadim smiled. “Then let that hand recover some.” He leaned in to kiss, a short, gentle touch, then began to sort the cups and prepare tea and coffee. Black coffee with sugar for Dan, more sugar than seemed right, while he stuck to black coffee. Too many tea jokes, too much history. He offered Dan the cup, and sat down on the bed, pulling one leg up.

Sipping the hot coffee, Dan let the over-sweetened concoction roll slowly over his tongue, savouring every mouthful. “Since when do you prefer coffee?”

Pointing at Vadim’s cup before putting his own down, picking out bits of different breads, toppings and fruit to place on a plate.

Vadim glanced up. “Too Russian; I’m trying to break the habit.” Carefully dropping the definite article into the sentence. Just keeping away from anything that reminded him of the state that had fucked him up, and its people that had allowed it to happen.

“Hm?” Dan looked up from what he was doing, studying Vadim for a moment. He had to learn to decipher the other anew. Signs and signifiers, unknown and waiting for him to make sense of. “You could drink your tea with milk,” smiling, “that’s a very British way to take tea. Or you could have Earl Grey. You

can't get anymore English than that." Moving the plate onto the bed and scooting closer to Vadim.

Vadim shook his head. "Not sure I'm ready for that habit." British passport, and as British as blinis, and vodka, and Siberia. Not very. The only place where he fit in was gone, and the place that saw some worth in him was so very alien to him, and he shared that sentiment. "Coffee is fine. Smells much better than it tastes, but the smell is very good."

"Well, in that case, I let you test out if the food smells better than it tastes. And, of course, if you can figure out what it is." Dan grinned, gently poking Vadim's chest with a finger. "Close your eyes and open your mouth."

Vadim smiled. "Don't make me guess." Felt oddly embarrassed about it, and relished the weird tenderness—a strange and new situation. He opened his lips to invite the bite of food.

Dan chose some lightly toasted white bread with butter, a smidgen of cream cheese and freshly smoked fish on top, holding it to Vadim's lips. "It's pretty straightforward." He grinned, couldn't help but laugh. "Nothing 'straight' here, eh?" Murmured, while preparing a bite for himself.

"Hmmm...no. Try as I might, I can't come up with anything straight, not after..." you fucked me like that. He let the words trail off, thought Dan probably could hear the complete sentence. The bite was moved between his lips, as if to tease, bread and faintly salty slick fish, something like cream came out at the sides as he closed his mouth. "And? Don't tell me you don't know what that is."

"A second."

Dan was chewing, too, while watching the other's face. Every movement of those jaws, the dark blond lashes fanning over high, Slavic cheekbones. The closed eyelids, fluttering, as if Vadim was forcing himself to keep them closed. Watching the throat as it swallowed, the strong tendons and muscles, and the scar...*his* scar, right there in the hollow. All Dan wanted was to forget about the food despite his stomach's rumbling, and to dive into Vadim instead.

"You're so fucking sexy." Reverent, his voice was barely more than a rumble Vadim's eyes opened, licking his lips to make sure he had the whole thing. "Well, tastes a bit like you. A bit salty, and like more. A lot like more." He ran his finger across Dan's lips, pretending he was wiping crumbs off, but of course he wasn't, merely wanting to touch, so he knew he was allowed to touch again, it was

his right again, he had been accepted again and would be, in future. In camp. He wouldn't lie there with his heart and mind torn open, knowing Dan was with somebody else...or even preferred being alone to being with him.

"There's a lot more where that came from." Dan smiled against the finger on his lips. "Both food and me." Catching the tip of the finger to suck it into his mouth. His dark eye alight and smiling all the time.

Vadim stared at Dan's lips and his finger, and suction, heat and wetness made his guts tighten in a good way. Just barely breathing. Dan playful. Dan sexy. Dan teasing. Mad Dog Dan. "I...we...breakfast?" Knew he made no sense, but didn't care.

"Aye..." Dan reluctantly let go of the finger. His voice husky, it seemed anything took his mind from no-matter-what right to sex. Or had it ever been any different? With Vadim? "Considering I'm forty-two and not a spring chicken with endless orgasms anymore..." he swallowed, his body trying to contradict his own words, "and fucking hungry...I guess...breakfast..." But he made no attempt to actually get to the food, despite the loud rumbling of his stomach.

Vadim gave a laugh. "Chicken no, cock yes." Loved the ambiguity of the word, while Dan chuckled at the pun and Vadim wondered who had ever decided to call the male part the same as a male chicken, but would ask about that later. He reached up to bring a tray of food closer, not too bothered to place it on the plates first, instead took it with his fingers and offered Dan some rolled-up cold cuts, and pieces of fish, and fruit, all in a mix he thought worked well in succession while he got fed by Dan in return. "You're different from Kabul, too, you know that?"

"Hm?" Chewing, Dan tilted his head, looking up in surprise. "What do you mean? I thought I was back to what I was like those months before...ah..." Trailing off, "you know." Deciding to quickly go for another mouthful of food instead of talking. The balance act on rope or thin ice was not over yet. "Hard to put into words...seems you've grown into the boots you were wearing then. No doubts. You're not much of a doubter anyway, but now you look like you never were. All balls."

Swallowing his latest mouthful, Dan looked nothing short of utterly confused. "I don't get what you mean." Then shrugged, "I just got older." Offering a smile.

“We both did.” But it looks good on you. You wear it with a cool and confidence that makes my heart thump in my throat. How can I not want you like that? How could I not feel anything?

Dan just smiled brighter, offering another mouthful of food to Vadim’s lips. “I reckon we have a fair few more years in front of us and that after all this shit we deserve each of them.” Leaning down to take some more fish and fruit from the other’s hand, “unless one of us, or both, get KIA, we’ll just keep on living. Together. But I don’t think we will. Got it in me waters, you know.” Tapping the side of his nose.

Vadim took the bite, chewing, and pushing away the thought of death. Working on different teams was really the only thing they could do to keep the job running, because he knew with absolute certainty Dan would always choose him, no question, and the CO knew that too, and thus kept them both from making that decision, ever. And this meant it would be one of them that got KIA, and the other would go on. They’d managed once before—if it ever happened, it couldn’t be worse than the last two years. “We are too good to let that happen. And, all told, we are fairly lucky, too.”

“Aye, damn lucky in a sea of shit.” Dan laughed, washing the food down with the rest of his coffee, before he turned more serious. “No, you are right, we have been damn lucky, all considered. It’s a miracle we are both alive and that’s worth for something, isn’t it?” Picking up a piece of honey smoked fish, he looked at it for a while, pondering, before he grinned. “By all what’s right I really shouldn’t be alive anymore. Just look at this ragtag bag of scars.”

Stuffing the fish between his lips, he lifted both his arms as if he crucified, offering himself for inspection. “Yes, you attract pain,” murmured Vadim and bent down to kiss Dan’s abs, back up to his pecs, to his shoulder, the scar. “Pain, and more pain...” He wanted to kneel and give Dan a blowjob, just compare tastes and sensations. “No...you’re not pain.” Not anymore, “and it seems...” Dan’s breath hitched, “that you’re pretty much attracted to me.”

“Can’t...think anything else, sorry.” Vadim looked up and smiled. “Do you... want me to...”

You were nothing but his bitch, and you made yourself that willingly.

“...give head?” Seemed the best term to what it was, less crude, maybe. Vadim didn’t know why it jarred him, only of course it was on his knees and part of him wanted to be there, and another part shied away.

“Hm?” Again, that confusion, as Dan felt a strange twitch inside. “Why do you ask?” Since when, and how, and why, and...the thin ice felt like breaking underneath.

“Don’t want to distract you from breakfast, but it’s...difficult.” Difficult to not end up in bed all the time, pretending things were normal and they’d do things slower, not rushing, but Vadim was head over heels and wanted to touch and keep and confirm, over and over, the old vows and promises were valid again. Still held true.

“Oh...” Dan started to smile, felt himself slipping across the ice instead of breaking through. “I just wondered, because you asked, and you didn’t use to.”

No, I sometimes did when the mood struck me, or when there was a knife, or pressure, or hands around my throat. Vadim watched Dan lean towards the plates, hastily stuffing himself with a few mouthfuls, chewing while grinning. “You can do with me whatever you like.” Swallowing quickly before managing to pour himself another cup of coffee without spilling too much and ladling the sugar in, as Vadim went down onto his knees between Dan’s legs. “Don’t ask, just do, and if I don’t like it,” Dan grinned, then washed down the food with the whole cup, quipping his lips, “I’ll just punch you.” He laughed and winked, “gently, that is.”

“I wonder how much is gentle...” retorted Vadim, and then thought he *did* wonder how much was gentle these days. They’d gone from brutal to savage to passionate, and he wasn’t quite sure where they’d end up. “...or how gentle I *want* you to be.” Slipped out, not on purpose, surely not, not with the trauma and the doctor telling him to be extra special careful in his interactions with people, even those he knew, as he could take nothing for granted.

“Don’t give me ideas.” Dan grinned, reaching to place his hand on Vadim’s shoulder. Just resting and feeling the heat of the skin beneath his palm. “Or, at least, give me some time to reacquaint myself with you, the ‘vanilla’ way. Then we’ll see from there.” He chuckled while leaning forward, resting his lips on the top of the other’s head.

“Vanilla?” Vadim’s hands rested on Dan’s thighs, and he opened them. Running his hands towards Dan’s knees, knew the scar and its place, remembered it from long ago. A different man, a different Dan.

“It’s something I heard the guys talk about.” Dan lifted his head, watching the progress of the other’s hands. Whenever he was touched like this, no matter by whom, he wondered every time what the hell anyone saw in him: a worn-out battle-scarred old war horse with no other talents than waging war. “They were boasting about their birds, back home, and how some of them took it up the arse and wanted it rough, while others were into cuddling and missionary-style sex, and the guys called that vanilla.”

Cuddling and missionary style. Vanilla. Okay. Strange. Vadim suddenly smiled. “But I take it up the arse. So vanilla between men is different?” Dan snorted, throwing his head back, hair whipping around his face as he laughed with abandon. “Guess us blokes haven’t got much option, aye?”

Vadim shook his head, but he was grinning. Dan’s laughter finally quietened down to a chuckle. “Now, what about a bath and, or, your proposition?”

“A bath is always good...” And you. The way your skin tastes when it’s wet. “And, not or.”

“That’s alright, then, because I guess we both could do with a bath, even though I’d lick every crevice of yours, would bite every inch of skin, and suck every part of your body—washed or not.”

Vadim shook his head. “Bath. I prefer you clean. Had too much Afghan dust between my teeth to be into not-clean.”

Dan nodded, holding his hand out to Vadim to pull him up, despite the prospect of a blow-job. “Let’s get the bubbles started, and I’ll let you play ‘uboot and torpedo missiles’.” Grinning like a kid, his dark eyes flashing with delight and his whole face relaxed. They had time, for the first time ever. Truly time. They’d deal with the past later.

* * *

In the bathroom, which was as big and as airy as the whole bungalow, Dan sat down on a cushioned stool, eyes fixed on Vadim. “Guess it’s your task to run

the bath water.” He grinned broadly, while waving his plastered hand around. “Big bubbles, if you would.”

Vadim sat down near the tub and stretched to reach the levers, sealing the tub with a twist of that, and starting the water with a twist of the other. Running the water over his hand, choosing a good temperature, then reached into a little woven basket at the side to add bath oil—it said something about Tahitian monoi oil on the little bottle—and turned to face Dan. Looking at him in wonder, and a relaxed happiness that felt alien but too damn good to disturb.

“What, why are you staring at me?” Eyes sparkling with mirth, Dan pointed impatiently at the bottle Vadim was holding. “You think bubble baths aren’t manly?”

Vadim pulled off the cap, and peeled off the foil seal. “You could wear a dress and like chocolate and you’d still be manly.” He glanced up, keeping his face impassive.

“I *do* like chocolate, as you damn well know, Mr Peanut Butter Energy bar, and I *am* Scottish, and thus prone to one day proudly wear my national attire: the kilt.” Dan tried to look stern and menacing, but could not hide the grin all too well. “And if you ever call a kilt a ‘skirt’ or a ‘dress’, I am going to fucking strangle you.”

Vadim poured the oil into the bath, watching it form a glistening film on the rapidly rising water. A nice, clean scent rose with the steam. “If you do it tenderly...” A quick glance to Dan.

“Hmm...that means not the way you used to do it to me, aye?” The memory brought heat to his face, and Dan’s lips parted for a moment, transfixed on the way muscles shifted over tendons and bones in Vadim’s body. His breath hitched. “But is there...any other way to strangle?”

Shit. The teasing—flirting, Vadim heard Jean say—went right inside his body again. Vanilla. He had the vague idea strangling wasn’t vanilla. He took pains to put the cap back on, fitting the little bottle back into the woven basket. “Well, dropping the garrotte and using...hands would be ah...a start.”

“Does a neck cloth count as a garrotte, though?” Dan’s head tilted, leaning closer. “You used to use one.”

“I...did.” Breathing grew a little harder. “I liked,” breath, “that power.” The power to let you breathe or gasp for air. The power to kill you. Or let you live. The

feeling of controlling your body. And at the same time, that cloth was part of the uniform, had been used to stem blood flow, or support a fucked arm around the neck, or any of the one hundred uses a piece of cloth could have during a war. Strangle his lover.

Dan's breath caught once more in his throat. "And I...goddammit, I liked it." Felt as if his voice had suddenly turned rusty for no reason. "Was the only way I could let you. You know." Didn't know why words got stuck, nor where hesitation came from. Had to physically jerk himself upright, to finish. "Only way I could let you fuck me." Past, or still present? He wasn't so sure anymore.

The only way I could let you fuck me. Vadim nodded, inhaling deeply, felt regret at that, the thing he'd done that made Dan resist him at every turn, certainly his body, a deep terror he had started himself, and that would always linger like a nightmare, like the taste of rotting meat. Vanya had paid with his life, and he, too, in a way, if less literally. He stared into the water, and thought again of Dr Williams who'd warned him to be careful, question every reaction that was too dark, too violent, too bitter. Might all be perfectly harmless. Still, it remained rape, a crime, and what the fuck had made him do that? What was that thing nesting inside his heart and that made him force and violate and fucking revel in it?

My best guess is, Vadim Petrovich, you are punishing yourself for your debased urges.

Konstantinov.

"Vadim?" Dan leaned forward once more, reaching out to touch the other's thigh, whose reaction once more felt alien. "It's okay, Russkie. It's a long time ago, doesn't matter anymore." When Vadim looked up, Dan smiled, did his best to, at least. Steered his own thoughts away from lust; the deep, dark coiling lust that was fed by blood, pain and aggression. "It's okay."

Russkie. All wrong, for a moment, and then Vadim felt the touch and thought of the roof in the merc camp and what that touch meant. Covered Dan's hand with his and pressed it, glad for the touch. "Do you...ever feel like punishing me for that?" Because if Dan didn't, why should he? Or what else had he done that deserved punishment? Or had Konstantinov created that doubt? "Don't you think I have already done that? Eleven years ago." Dan kept his hand in Vadim's and stood up. Reaching to trace with the fingers of his left hand across the scarred back. He lowered his head until he was eye to eye.

“You bear the scars of my revenge.” His voice had softened, “and I wear mine. We’re quits. It’s done and over, a long time ago.”

Vadim leaned forward, cheek against Dan’s scarred stomach, just touching it with half his lips, half his mouth, while Dan continued to caress the broad back. The warmth of Dan’s body, the trail of dark hair—what was left after the scarring. “I sometimes don’t trust my mind.” That was it in a nutshell. “I’m thinking, and then I’m thinking that’s wrong. And then I think *that’s* wrong.” Vadim inhaled. “He screwed me up,” he murmured. Dan froze for a heartbeat, before the slow meandering of his fingertips continued. “Who is ‘he’?”

The other man who tortured me, thought Vadim, and dug his forehead deeper into Dan’s body. He remembered kneeling at the man’s feet, remembered being patted like a dog. He jerked up, needed to see, see it was Dan, and hated himself for that same instinct. “Not...a lover.” He tried a smile but nearly lost it, his face twitching. “The man who...made me sign the confession. He screwed me up. Like he said he would. He said so from the start.” He wanted to stop the words and wasn’t sure he could.

“KGB?” Dan moistened his suddenly dry lips. The running water forgotten, the bathroom was filling with steam. The heat oddly soothing. Dan lowered down, despite stiffness and lingering bruises. Getting onto his knees to be close. Figured, instinctively, nothing else would do.

With an effort, Vadim met Dan’s gaze, felt tense and scared and knew at the same time he was perfectly safe. Knew he was going through something, but this time, Dan was right there with him. He just didn’t know whether that made it easier or not, dealing with it. The dread, yes, the shame, no.

“That man, who made you sign the confession. Who...” broke you, “said he would. That was that man’s job, aye?”

“Yes. Konstantinov. That’s his name. What the judge called him.” Speaking the name felt surreal. He hadn’t even told Dr Williams the man’s name. “He was a professional, then.” Dan’s voice lowered even more. The rare, rumbling depths, reserved only for a few occasions. “A professional, like us, just he wasn’t trained to destroy bodies. Was trained to destroy minds.”

Tilting his head to look at Vadim.

“I know, but...” My brain knows, but nothing else does.

“Shit, Vadim, if such a man was out to destroy you, goddammit, he *had* to succeed. With anyone. It’s a testament to your strength you signed so late.” The hand in Vadim’s back had stilled, but contact remained. “But that doesn’t make any of it any better, aye?”

“No. He knew me. He knew what I was thinking, feeling, have...ever felt. Digging around in my past, my crimes, my weaknesses, the people I was ever close to.”

“But did he also dig around in the good things? The love, the caring, the fact you would have torn yourself apart for your family—and that you almost did?” Vadim gave a wry smile. “He was less interested in that...he made it all sound like it didn’t matter.” Insinuated I’d raped my own son. Sasha’s son. Our. Whatever. Nikolai. How was he? Better now? Katya would protect her kids with her life. “Sometimes it just feels like he peeled the flesh from my bones. He skinned my soul. And I don’t even believe in a soul.”

“Nor did I.” Dan murmured, “until I met you.” Studying the other with dark eyes, “don’t you want to seek help to sort things out?”

Vadim shook his head. “Dr Williams put me back together. He said it might decrease in intensity, but most only learn how to live with it. He said I’m coping well, all told.”

Dan nodded slowly. Had to take Vadim’s words for what they were, but a slither of doubt lodged itself even firmer in his mind. “I wish I could understand all this. I did read those articles on trauma Maggie gave me, but I don’t think I understood the stuff. I’m...I’m not a brainy man, but shit, I’m here. Whatever happens. I gave you my word by accepting the bullet, and I’m not going to break it. Ever.”

Vadim pulled Dan into a tight, powerful bear hug, hearing the water gargle into the sieve that prevented spill-over. “You wouldn’t. Just...don’t pity me, okay?” He felt ridiculous asking that, and even worse for how it sounded in his throat. “Act like I was alright.”

“I should punch you for asking that.” Dan murmured, “or did I ever ask you not to fucking pity me for that rag tag body of mine?” Casting a glance at the dangerously high water level, he couldn’t get himself to give a damn. “Mmmm ...,” his low voice rumbled, “seemed we are making a perfect pair. My body’s fucked and your mind’s knackered. Together we should be unbeatable.”

Vadim breathed laughter, and was so grateful for Dan just taking it in stride, like he'd taken everything in stride. Courageous Dan. Mad Dog Dan. Dan McFadyen, SAS, merc, survivor. He felt oddly proud for having Dan, and proud of Dan, and thought, yes, they could tackle that shit together. Not the worst they'd gone through. He slowly relaxed, willed himself to relax; it was less difficult now. "Let's keep the thought with the strangling, but...not just yet."

"Aye," Dan grinned, his normal self returning: irreverent and easy-going. "I'll keep the thought, beside all the others. I have a whole damn bucketful of thoughts." Glancing once more to the side, he heaved a deep sigh before straightening up. "And if we don't do anything about it, we'll be drowning soon."

Vadim grinned. "I can swim. To Olympic standard. Maybe not to compete, but this small thing will not drown me." He reached over to pull the lever that stopped the water, feeling strangely better, like he'd bandaged a wound. It hurt like fuck and was still bleeding, but there was always something reassuring about being patched up.

* * *

After a long bath in the overflowing tub, talking about nothing darker than SAS Selection and their respective youths in their home towns, Vadim rubbed Dan dry once more, who was chuckling at the care and relishing the touch. They had just about time for lunch and Dan opted for a snack at the buffet, keen to call Dr Williams, while Vadim booked him into the same beauty treatment. A treatment Dan had no idea about, except that it was about dealing with scars.

When Dan returned, after a phone call that had lasted three quarters of an hour, he was quieter than usual, and somewhat absentminded. Smiling at Vadim, he shrugged when asked how it had gone, needing time to digest the information. He wasn't stupid, not even slow, but by no means an intellectual. Dan's intelligence was practical, coupled with sheer bravado to survive—and an astonishing depth of emotion. And he wasn't going to forget a single thing he'd been told.

* * *

In shaded huts right at the beach, a tiny woman handled Vadim's body with a mix of skill and effectiveness that awed him, and he relaxed into her stretches, just going with what she did, as every motion and every strange position seemed to loosen him up more, and he lost track of time. There was no muscle in his body she didn't somehow work with, she even pulled his toes and ears, and Vadim could just feel parts of his body he'd never been conscious before. Felt warm and good and taken care of, no urgency in anything, he learnt to trust her fingers, and elbows, and feet—something he hadn't expected. Maybe because of Dan, maybe because of the sex and the worry that had left him. He could feel the vertebrae shift and slide into position, his 'locked' back relaxed, and he closed his eyes, just allowing her to handle him.

Dan lay right next to Vadim, separated only by a paper thin partition. The combination of gentle breeze, soft rustling of palm leaves, the scent of oil the woman was using, and her skilled hands that carefully worked on his bruised and abused body, had sent him off into such a peaceful state, he had fallen asleep. It was pure bliss, lying prone and snoozing, while she worked on his back and legs. Dan smiled to himself in his slumbering state, as he felt something warm glide over his skin, covering his thighs and arse, and he subconsciously parted his legs a little further, just to feel the luxurious warmth that spread all over him. Face cushioned on his arm, he let out a soft sigh, completely at peace with himself and the world.

Until...a sudden, almighty pain ripped all the way up from his knee, along the thigh and across his buttock. Dan jerked up, pulling the bruises, and screamed blue murder. "*Fuck!*"

At that, Vadim reacted without thinking. Age-old reflexes that had been honed by words like "incoming!," or screams, or just a comrade going down with a headshot. He rolled off the table and went for cover before he even realized anything, putting the fear of god into the little Thai girl who jumped back, a shocked expression on her face, hands raised and speaking something, but he didn't know one word of Thai. Half kneeling, half crouching, Vadim peered past the massage table. "Dan?"

"Oh shit, shit, fucking goddamned, bloody shit!" Dan was cursing, curled up on the table. Holding simultaneously his bruised side, his hand, and arm and leg and arse, and just about everything else. His own Thai girl had pressed herself into

a corner, looking absolutely terrified, with two long white linen strips in her hands, coated with sticky wax.

“What the fuck was that for? Why the hell is she skinning me alive?”

Vadim glanced around, then saw his own Thai girl had been preparing the same stuff for him, and he couldn't help but laugh. “Hot wax. It's harmless.”

“Hot wax?” Dan managed to sit on the table, peering over the partition to try find Vadim, who had decided there was no RPG incoming and it was safe to stand and walk over to Dan, who was staring at his naked body far too blatantly.

“But why is she doing that? It hurts like fuck.” Dan frowned, but when he realised the girl looked petrified, he raised his hands, trying to placate, apologising time and time again while nodding. Trying to explain without being able to talk the language he was sorry and it wasn't her fault. Even though he still didn't have a clue why the hell she'd done that. “Did you book me into a torture chamber, or what?”

“It's hair removal.” Vadim tried to control the laughter, but it was just too funny, Dan sitting there in all his injured pride, flabbergasted this could and actually did hurt. “You wanted the whole hog. My wax is just being heated.” “But I didn't know what ‘the whole hog’ meant! I thought it was massage and stuff.” Eyes narrowed, Dan pointed accusingly at Vadim. “You did that deliberately, didn't you? You bastard.”

Vadim laughed, but raised his hands. “No, Sir, I didn't. I booked the same treatment twice. I didn't think it...would have that effect.” Trying again for the straight face approach, but it was funny. Dan's wool clinging to the waxing strips, and the girl still out of reach and not getting what the problem was. “It'll be better once you get used to it. I guess you were just startled.”

“There is no way I am going to get used to this.” Dan huffed, shaking his head for emphasis. “That's it. Never again. I'm dark skinned and dark haired, and most of all, I'm a bloke. Blokes have hair, especially dark haired ones.” “But she started.” Vadim waved for Dan to get up, and walked around him, seeing the patch of reddening, hairless skin the Thai girl had cleared. “Well. It's a bit irregular, but I'm sure the other mercs in camp won't mind the patchy look.”

“What the fuck do you mean?” Dan's brows raised as far as they could go, trying to twist backwards to see what Vadim was referring to. Didn't manage, though, his ribs protested.

“There’s a patch of hair missing already. If you leave it like that...well. It’s not the best look in the world.” Vadim reached for a mirror and held it down beside Dan’s tortured backside. “See what I mean?”

“Oh...fuck.” Dan breathed out in heartfelt misery, as he saw the extent of damage. “I look like a fucking idiot.”

“That’s about right,” said Vadim, but smiled.

Frowning, Dan turned back to Vadim. Would have crossed his arms before his chest, if it hadn’t been awkward with the wrist in plaster. “Alright. I got it. I have to get through with it. Just one thing, she’s not going to go anywhere close to my cock and I shave my nuts anyway. Pubes are out. Is that clear?” He raised his brows again.

Vadim grinned. “Explain that to her. I’m not giving you the treatment.” He shook his head, thinking how Dan could even make such a situation into something it hadn’t meant to be. “Hope you don’t mind if they get rid of mine, though,” he said, winking, and turned to lie down on his side of the partition. It was hard to relax as silent laughter kept coming back. Oh Dan.

Dan was about to huff an answer, but shut up and pressed his lips together instead. Okay, he’d been caught out, well and truly and ‘insult to injury’ came to his mind. He sighed when the girl was looking at him with wide eyes, and proceeded to explain in simple English what he wanted. She began to smile, as if nothing had happened, and kept nodding, especially when he promised not to scream again. With heavy heart and shitloads of trepidation, he lay back down on the table, prone once more. Cursing himself for not having noticed what the ‘whole hog’ entailed. Was just pain and he’d had plenty of that, but goddammit, this was a pain he could do without. “Blokes are hairy.”

He muttered to himself, completely ignoring how he liked a muscular smooth body, and most of all Vadim’s, before the torture started once more. Suffering with gritted teeth through the ordeal that seemed to go on for an eternity. Vadim kept his mind firmly on the far worse stuff he’d been through as he was getting waxed. He liked the warmth of the substance, less when it cooled and tightened, and the ripping felt like a layer of skin was taken off as well, but he relaxed, knowing it was worth it, and also knowing the speed she did it with was the real mercy. Every now and then chuckling when he heard sounds from beyond the partition, and determined to make it worth Dan’s while...once all witnesses

were gone. Thoughts came back of Dan hairless in the hamam, taste and texture of smooth skin, and he smiled, content, and with a good dose of humour.

Dan had rarely felt that much relief, when she was finally done, rubbing some gritty oil all over his body, and gently massaging it into his tortured skin. It felt strange, he had to admit that, strange and good, if what she was vigorously rubbing in would have been less exfoliating. He didn't utter a sound, though, just let it all be done and over with, starting to relax a little when she wiped off whatever she had worked in before, only to finally start massaging warmed oil into his skin. Now that was better! After ten minutes, Dan was ready to grudgingly admit it felt good, and after twenty minutes he was inclined to forgive Vadim. When she finished after half an hour he was once again so mellow, he would have fallen asleep had she not signalled they were done.

Dan sighed and smiled, nodding his thanks and taking the offered towel. Fluffy, big, more a sarong than anything, he wrapped himself into it, before trotting over to Vadim's partition.

Vadim just lay on his side, trying to work up enough tension to get up, all covered in warm towels, while the girl started to clean things away and gave him time to slowly drift out of that delicious stage of utter relaxation and weightlessness. He glanced at Dan and struggled to sit up. "I think I'll sleep for a few hours," he murmured, and stood, shedding the various towels and tying one around his hips as well.

"Mind if I join you?" Dan grinned, "after a fag and a drink."

Vadim smiled. "Won't be able to fight you off," he murmured, thanked the girl with a bow, and began to make his way towards the bungalow. "Apart from that, I'm really curious what you look like under your skirt."

"You did it." Dan said gravely, and stopped dead in his track. "You said the word. The forbidden word." If only he could remember what he had threatened Vadim with, should he ever say it. Oh, strangle. That was it. Damn.

Vadim paused, smiling, arching an eyebrow. "I did. But I didn't think a towel qualified as 'kilt'."

"It might. Technically, it well could. After all, it is a true Scotsman wearing it." "That means—hypothetically—if I ended up in that discotheka, and I'd move as random and accidentally as any other drunk tourist, it would be pureblooded Trepak? Good to know."

“You’re an insufferable arsehole, Russkie, you know that?” Dan tried hard to suppress his laughter as he started to walk again, “luckily for you, I am too strung out after the ‘ordeal’ that I shall leave the punishment for another time.” He flashed a grin as he shrugged. “And as for what I look like under the *towel*, if you don’t know that by now, I have no idea where you’ve been for the last eleven years.” He grinned once more. They had almost reached Vadim’s bungalow, and he headed straight towards it. Didn’t care where they ended up.

“Let’s say, I’d like to refresh my memory.”

“In that case, you can order a couple of drinks and I check if there’s any rugby on the telly, while lying around naked and more or less decoratively. Means you can ‘refresh’ your memory of what a bloke looks like under a towel.” Dan winked and looked around for his packet of fags, which he had strategically left in Vadim’s bungalow.

“You watch rugby?” That was just one of the puzzling strange sports the British were so fond of. Not that he’d had much time to watch it himself, looked much like American football to him, and he didn’t get what was so interesting about it.

“You don’t? I would have thought it might be one of the things you’d picked up by now. Real men. No padding, and more or less a free for all. Big, heavy, muscular men, all piling into each other.” Dan grinned while lighting his fag, inhaling the first drag with pure bliss. “I used to play it myself, back when I was younger.”

Vadim closed the door behind them and went to the fridge to check what was left. “Hmmm. If you sell it like that. The boys in the barracks talked about rugby a lot. Mostly about the English side. Andy defended his Welsh honour, and the Scots their side.”

“But of course, and in the world cup, if us Scots got thrown out, I’d cheer for the Irish before I’d cheer for the English.” Dan grinned. “Got to have national pride.”

“That’s what Andy said about the Irish and the Scots.”

Dan pondered, while smoking. “Don’t think Russians play rugby, or do you?”

“I don’t think so. Not to my knowledge, at least. Hockey, and ice hockey, but I wasn’t very good at that.” Vadim peered into the fridge, but found nothing

that tickled him. “I think I’ll get that assortment of freshly squeezed fruit juices again. What do you think?”

“If those juices have vodka or similar in them, I’m all for it.” Dan sat down on the bed but kept the towel on.

Vadim smiled. “I’ll call the bar for some of that, too.”

Dan grinned and nodded, before scooting back on the bed with the TV remote in his hand, ready to channel-surf.

Just a little later, room service arrived with what was pretty much a mobile bar with properly cooled vodka, several jugs of cooled fruit juice in colours ranging from the pale rose of watermelon to the rich tone of mango, and Vadim tipped the guy, closing the door again. “Right. You’ll waste a perfectly good vodka with fruit juice?”

Not having found what he was looking for, Dan switched off the telly and put the remote onto the bedside table. “Depends on the make, and to be honest, feels like luxury to have a vodka and orange. Not bad, getting plastered on long drinks, instead of downing illegal moonshine.” He grinned. “Are you going to mix one for me or do you refuse such a vile task?”

“Vile?” Vadim glanced up from the assortment of liquids. “I think I’ve done worse.” He reached for the glasses—and they were already sugar-rimmed. How strange. He opened the vodka bottle, poured two fingers, and asked, with just a hint of revulsion: “Ice?” Then filled the glasses up with mango juice, when Dan shook his head.

Dan patted the space beside him. “You wanted to have a kip, didn’t you?” “What’s a ‘kip’?” asked Vadim, before he consented to anything that carried an unknown risk.

“I keep forgetting you don’t know all slang words yet. A kip is a snooze, some shut-eye, a slumber. A kip is a quick nap. Sleeping, but not for too long.”

“Ah. Yes.” Vadim handed Dan a long drink and mixed his own.

“Cheers.” Dan took the first sip with relish. “And what was it about this refreshing of memory?” He gazed straight at Vadim’s groin, “I wouldn’t mind a refresher myself.”

Vadim sat down, drank half the juice, then found the knot that kept the towel together, opening it. His skin was still red, and tender, and he looked at Dan, pointedly. “Now yours.”

Dan's eyes widened at the sight of the completely smooth and hairless groin. Thighs. Chest. Legs. Everything. "Ah, damn. I knew there was a drawback."

Putting the glass down, so he could use his good hand, Dan lifted his hips off the bed and slid, pushed and shoved the towel down and open. "Don't laugh."

Nothing to laugh at. Smooth—the trail up towards Dan's chest was gone, everything was gone but for neatly kept pubic hair, legs bare, only now revealing completely how toned and strong they were, as the lines and shapes of muscles underneath became more visible. "Should have you photographed...I doubt you'll let this happen again," murmured Vadim.

Dan blinked, surprised at the reaction, but then why shouldn't Vadim like on him what he liked on Vadim? "Well, if you want to, you can get a camera. Suppose I could pose for you." He flashed a grin. "And you are right, this is not going to happen again. Especially not *this*!" With that he rolled himself over, lifting his perfectly smooth arse a couple of inches into the air.

Impossible to resist. Vadim set the glass down and moved with enough speed to keep Dan from turning or defending, even though Dan yelped in non-too convincing protest. Getting on top of Dan's legs and between them, Vadim dipped low to lick him, prying the cheeks apart with his thumbs, with Dan too surprised to react at all. Finding the hole and, without much thinking, pushed his tongue in, while one of his hands went for Dan's balls.

"Holy fuck!" Dan bucked up and towards the tongue. Entirely unexpected, the sudden onslaught of sensations was too much to deal with. But he remembered, the next moment, when Vadim's tongue moved and pushed, fucking him with wet and heat, causing his cock to harden the same instant.

Remembered a hamam, heat, shaving, Kabul and an enemy's mercy. Vadim gave a short laugh at the cursing, and pushed Dan's legs further apart with shoulder and elbow so he had better access to his balls while delving as deep as he could. The musky taste, Dan's taste, but above all, the smooth surface against his cheek and shoulder, and arm, and knowing how sensitive it was right now. He delivered a playful slap to Dan's muscular ass, which had an unexpected violent reaction, when Dan's body jerked, despite bruising and all. The sounds Dan made were almost too loud in the wide, empty room, while Vadim went on to fuck him with his tongue, turning and twisting inside, probing against the muscle.

Driving Dan into incoherence, with a sensation so rare and new, it was unlike getting fucked and yet the *good* things about having something inside his body were all there. That, and more. The tongue invasive but not intrusive. Its movements unpredictable, while Vadim's hand was kneading his balls.

Occasionally brushing his cock. "More!" Dan pleaded breathlessly. Needed more friction, wanted more sensation. Wasn't above begging, not if it meant his cock would get stroked; not if it got him higher and further.

Vadim leaned into Dan, hand moving over to his cock, thick and heavy, stroking it in time with his movements, tight, strong movements, pumping Dan with the only intention to get him off because his tongue was tiring and he loved the sounds Dan made now.

Rewarded with erratic motions, and even more urgent sounds, Dan was pushing into hand and tongue. Caught between the two, he bucked and shuddered, letting out a stream of curses as he tensed, then let loose, cumming into hand and sheets while pushing back, back, towards that tongue, until he collapsed with a groan.

Vadim let him go as Dan fell back on the bed, loosening his jaw and grinning. His own desire less urgent, something that didn't demand release right now. He wiped his hand on the sheets and sat up to reach for his glass, finishing the rest of the drink, while studying the smooth behind, bottom, thighs, all as perfect as if arranged for a photographer. "You think it was worth it?" he asked.

"Uh...what?" Dan's brain hadn't clued on yet. Short-circuited from his orgasm.

"Shaving." Vadim ran his hand down Dan's back, tracing the spine under the bronzed skin. "Worth shaving if you..." he paused, then thought, what the hell, he could call it what it was, "have your ass eaten?"

Dan grumbled something beneath his breath, while stretching into the touch, cat-like. "Aye," he turned his head, one-eyed glancing up at Vadim, "but that wasn't shaving. I wouldn't mind *shaving*, not for..." he started to grin, one-sided as well, "for 'having my ass eaten'. It's just damn difficult to shave between the buttocks. On your own..."

"I'm willing to help. You know that." Oh yeah, because shaving, stroking, fingering would all lead to sex anyway. Any excuse, any opportunity.

“Let you shave my arse?” Dan pondered less than a second. “Deal.” The grin grew, baring his teeth. “And while we’re at the ‘ass eating’, do you want yours to be eaten?” Surprising himself with that, had always figured it was pretty... yeah, pretty what? Disgusting? Ridiculous. He’d swallowed Vadim’s sperm and blood, and that had been damn good.

Vadim swallowed. “If you...want to.” He’d liked it when Szandor had done it. Damn, the Hungarian had shown him a few interesting tricks, but that was ages ago. What, fifteen years?

Dan lifted his head, grinning fully at Vadim. “Fair’s fair, aye? Just can’t promise I’ll be as good as you. Haven’t done it yet.” He scrambled onto his knees like a man with a purpose. “But remember our old motto? He who dares wins.” Reaching for his vodka and mango, Dan finished the glass before pointing to the sheets. “Best get into position, soldier-boy.”

“Boy?”

“Well, okay, man, then.” Dan grinned.

Somewhat dubious, Vadim got onto hands and knees, debating with himself whether he should tell Dan it wasn’t about fairness or pay back, but then thought Dan always recklessly barged on, whatever happened, and he’d find it out himself whether he liked it or not. “If you happen to think it’s not your kind of thing, you don’t...have to,” he murmured.

“I know that.” Dan delivered a light slap onto one smooth cheek, then shifted until he knelt between the open legs. Marvelling at the smooth flesh beneath his eyes, hands, and...tongue. “You also know you are fucking perfect, don’t you?” Running his right hand across skin and hard muscles, before fingertips lightly touched scars across the broad back.

Vadim shuddered. The scars. In Dan’s eyes, they doubtlessly were part of that perfection. Like a signed piece of art. “Good for the camera,” he murmured, closing his eyes to concentrate on the sensation.

“Fucking perfect.” Murmured once more, before Dan leant down, kissing his way from the base of Vadim’s spine, down the cleft, then back up and across the buttocks, all the time caressing the smooth thighs, which opened further. Dan’s tongue trailed a moist path down to Vadim’s balls, spending his time sucking and laving, rewarded with heavy breathing and sighs. Lifting his head, Dan rested his good hand in the cleft, feeling the heat beneath his fingers. “I won’t ask you to stay

smooth like that.” His voice had dropped, had become husky. “But if you did, fuck, Vadim, no one and nothing could be more perfect, and hell, your cock looks fucking great like that. Even bigger.”

“Was...planning to. I like it like that, it’s more sensitive.”

“Good...” Dan smiled, before lowering his head once more. Vadim was still far too coherent for his liking. Twisting his head to counteract for the fact he only had one good hand and couldn’t pull Vadim’s buttocks apart to get better access, he pushed his face as close as he could, until his tongue found what it sought. Slipping between and inside, coaxing, demanding, making Vadim groan suddenly, as the massive body shuddered.

“Fuck...forgot...forgot how...” Szandor drove me insane with this. Vadim couldn’t suppress the sounds, didn’t want to, this was great, just hoped Dan didn’t mind, didn’t stop.

Dan didn’t find scent nor taste in the least offensive, couldn’t understand why he’d never done it before. Trying to emulate Vadim at first, remembering what had felt best, until he forgot about any of that and just trusted his instinct. Harsher, harder, pushing himself to the limit, as he always did. He tonguefucked Vadim, while stroking the cock in sync. Not caring if his neck was aching, or his tongue got tired. He wanted to do this, and as intense as he could manage.

Vadim bit his lips, head back in his neck as he arched and pushed, just reacting to what Dan did, no force, just that fucking tenderness, that trust, that being one. Hand stroking him just right as he climbed higher, and faster, body tensing as he came, spilling over Dan’s hand, stomach, breathing hard and sweating, then fell to the side, not eager to lie in the wet patch he’d created. “Wake me...in a week...or so.”

Dan chuckled, wiping his lips and stretching his tongue far out, wiggling it, as he massaged his jaw. Lying down beside Vadim, he groused with a grin, “leave me some dry space as well.” Pulling Vadim closer, they lay face to face, kissing tenderly. “Don’t think I’ll wake you. Think I’ll join you instead.”

Dan was still grinning when he drifted off to sleep, holding onto Vadim, their bodies cooled by the breeze.

* * *

One day turned into the next. Sun, smiles, beach and sky. Touching and holding, laughing, caressing, spending time to just sit and talk, or drink cocktails in the shade, and enjoy the buffet. And sex. Shagging like rampant eighteen year olds. Starved for physical contact and each other's body, they were insatiable.

One morning during the first week, Dan came triumphantly back to the bungalow they were now sharing, waving a bag around. He'd had a brainwave: found sturdy plastic bags, elastics to hold them closed, and most importantly, surgical tape, to seal the bags over his plaster. It was finally time to get into the water.

Watching Vadim fix the bag, Dan was blowing smoke away from the other, while musing. "You realise I've never seen you swimming. Not since a few seconds on a tape, a long, long time ago."

Vadim checked whether he'd properly sealed the protective cover, then looked up. "And you thought 'what a bastard, he is probably shot full of chemicals', eh?" He'd been nothing but a kid back then, oblivious to the world, of what it meant to fight for his country, and sadly, horribly in love with the wrong thing, and encountering the right thing at night, at the hands of that Hungarian fencer.

"No, I was thinking 'I'm going to destroy that fucking cunt for what he has done'." Dan shrugged.

Vadim nodded, smiling wistfully. "My technique is probably shot to bits by now."

"At least you have a technique." Dan grinned, inhaling smoke. "I just swim. Used to be fairly fast, but only because they taught us if you don't move forward, kit and all, then you're fucking dead. Makes you swim faster, I tell you." He winked, knowing Vadim's combat training wouldn't have been much different. Possibly worse, if anything, a different attitude towards the soldiers.

Vadim laughed. "Aye. I got a lot of shit for having taken part in the Olympics. 'No points for style, Vadim Petrovich'. Ah, well. Doesn't matter. I always liked swimming, though."

"I prefer running. And climbing. But then you've told me often enough I'm stark raving mad for missing the Afghan mountains." Dan winked again and took a step backwards, checking the bag. It seemed perfect. He was dressed in the swimming shorts that covered at least some of his scars, and slipped the shades back over his eyes. Towel under his arm, he was as ready as a man could ever be.

“Lead the way, I haven’t had a swim in the sea since forever. Dimly remember it used to be fun.”

Vadim headed down towards the beach. The surf was far down, as the tide was out, with manageable waves licking up to the beach, leaving a wet shadow on the brilliant white sand each time they retreated. The sound alone calmed Vadim, deeply, nothing quite like it, he could listen to that forever, not thinking just standing there and watching. He dropped the towel on the beach, shed the sandals, and walked towards the water, until it reached his toes.

Glancing to the side, watching Dan, and feeling the sun beat down on his head and shoulders. “Don’t tell me you’d prefer Afghanistan to this?”

Dan stood with his feet in the water, eyes narrowed against the glare of the sun, he hesitated before turning towards Vadim, smiling and shrugging his shoulders. He didn’t answer, for once figured it was wiser not to. “Race you!” And he suddenly broke into a run towards the water, laughing aloud.

Vadim grinned, and ran, too, sprinting, running with long jumps as the water got too deep, and dove under once it reached his hips, in a smooth arc diving beneath an incoming wave, then swam, propelled by his feet and the occasionally, almost lazy stroke, to launch himself back up into the old, favourite butterfly stroke. Breathing when he broke the surface, arms and whole body working to cover distance, coming out of the water, and sliding back underneath, his body remembering, having never truly forgotten. He probably wasn’t as precise or powerful anymore, but he’d never lost the pure pleasure of swimming.

Dan, on the other hand, was just throwing himself into the water, to swim in any style that came to his mind. On his back, then going under once more, laughing and spewing sea water, when making mighty splashes. Calming after a while, he started to tread water and look around for the other. Spotting Vadim, he watched the powerful strokes, the elegance. If anything, age had matured his style, a pleasure to watch and Dan grinned to himself as he enjoyed the view.

“Hey, Russkie!” He called out at last, waving his bagged arm in the air. “You still look like a pro!”

Vadim heard Dan just as he was diving down, and switched styles in mid-motion, coming up and looking around, seeing the waving arm. “Water’s gorgeous,” he shouted back, feeling the salt on his skin, tasted it, too, and he wiped

his face with a wet hand, then swam back towards Dan, waves carrying him easily.
“You okay with that bag?”

“Aye, no problem.” Dan threw himself backwards in an arch, splashing under the water. His legs paddling wildly in the air, before he twisted himself around, under water, swimming the couple of strokes towards Vadim, and coming back up right in front of him. Touching. He was laughing and shaking his wet, wild hair like a dog. “Go to admit, there’s something to say about the sea.” He pushed himself up and wrapped his legs around Vadim’s hips, grinning.

“Something to say? You could write a novel about the sea.” Vadim gave a laugh and twisted a bit when Dan used him for support, and increased his swimming a bit to carry both their weight. “But you’re clearly not SBS material.”

“SBS? Who the fuck is that? One of your depressing Russian authors?” Dan let himself slide down, but only to drop back into the sea, twist around, and come back up in Vadim’s back. With his good hand hanging onto one shoulder, while floating lazily.

Vadim followed Dan’s movements with his eyes, himself swimming in the same place. “Special...Boat...Service. The other special forces of Britain.”

Dan started to laugh so hard, his whole body was shaking and he almost lost his grip. “Damn. You caught me out there. But they’re a bunch of pussies anyway.” Huffing with another burst of laughter.

“And apart from that, the most depressing book I’ve ever read was British.”

“And that would be? The Financial Times?”

“Book, not newspaper. No. It’s called ‘Nineteen-Eighty-Four’, and it’s about a man called Winston Smith, who ends up...” Destroyed by the Party, “loving Big Brother.”

“Aye, I remember the title. We had to read it in school. Is a hell of a long time ago, though.” Dan let himself drop back down, leisurely paddling alongside Vadim, with no effort at all. Just floating. “It had rats in it, didn’t it? I thought it was cool, when I was a lad. They found his greatest fear and thus the perfect torture.” The moment the word was out, Dan winced. Engage mouth first and *then* brain, as usual.

“Yes, the rats bit was intense.” Vadim gave a slightly pained smile. “What struck me was the beauty of the language, in stark contrast with there being no

hope. No refuge in the past, no hope for the future. The human mind and imagination shackled, and how could a British writer write about that.”

Dan just looked at Vadim, while floating in the water. His eyes narrowed for a moment, which gave him an expression of a man who was either thinking hard, or about to take a crap. “That went right over my head.” He finally admitted. “But I think I remember Orwell wrote the book during the war, or right after. I Britain in the war was a shit place to be.” He shrugged, “mind you, all of Europe was. Probably all of the world. Guess that, and the Nazi shit, made him write what he did. All dark and full of terror. And, hang on, aye, I remember something about a book, a diary, and a hair, carefully placed inside. That struck me as totally crazy back then, that they even replaced the hair. Holy shit, sticklers to detail, I tell you.”

Vadim inhaled. “I could tell you some stories like that from the GDR...the German Democratic Republic. Their secret service was like that. Germans. They always do everything to perfection, even the spy business.”

“Aye, I know. They told us all about them in the Forces. Cold War, enemy number one and number two and all that shit.” Dan shook his head, while moving his arms to stay afloat, peering up at the sunlit sky. “Ah, damn, I’ll get back to the beach, I think there’s water creeping into the bag. See you later?”

“I think I’ll have a quick swim further out, just a few minutes.” Vadim moved closer for a kiss, unhurried, unhidden out here in the water, then allowed himself to fall to the side, diving, and went for a fast, short swim that made his body buzz in all the good ways, while Dan swam back to the shore.

* * *

Deep in thoughts, triggered by memories of an all too recent past. Dan was lying on the beach, towel across the scars on his abs to protect the sensitive skin, otherwise roasting himself. He looked up through his shades when Vadim approached.

“Been thinking about what you said.” Dan smiled and patted the large towel beside him. “All of the squaddies who got stationed in Germany, having a jolly good time with bratis and beer, knew they were meant to hold up the evil comrade USSR for three minutes. That was all they’d have, knowing they’d be run over. But those three minutes were enough to get the nuclear missiles out of the

ground, 'hidden' all over Germany, poised towards the enemy." Dan huffed a dry and humourless laughter, while Vadim sat down. "What a simple black and white world, aye? And how bloody lucky we were it never happened. It's too late now, they've dismantled most of that shit by now, and they're far too busy in the Gulf and other places."

Vadim nodded. "A mad world. I remember thinking...thinking about that whole nuclear business, about the fire and the storm and what happened in Hiroshima. I'm not sure I ever fully understood what it meant or would have meant. I wanted a heroic war, something like Kursk, or Stalingrad, or the battle for Berlin. Thinking that those missiles would have wiped out armies... and I had small children. I wondered whether the Americans would bomb Moscow first, and turn my family into shadows of ash against the wall of our apartment."

"People in Britain were just as scared." Dan nodded, "and definitely in Germany. All those peace protests and anti nuclear weapons marches. I used to think they were pathetic, and that they should stay home and be thankful we were protecting them, but I guess I didn't think very much in those days." Letting himself roll onto his side, Dan looked at Vadim. "You think it's over now? I don't. I just think they are looking for the next big enemy. No one seems to be able to live without their black and white. Wonder who the next one is. Everyone against Saddam?"

"America won the race. My..." nation homeland whatever "The old enemy is going to its knees, but Russia is proud. She may rise again. With everybody declaring independence, there's always a chance for civil war. And there are the Chinese, biding their time, they look back on a long history of cunning. Saddam? He has that convenient likeness to Hitler with that very unfortunate liking for small black moustaches, but it's a small country. Last time the West had to fear the Persians was during the Roman Empire. I'm not sure."

"But they've got oil. Control of the oil fields is all that counts. Or do you think anyone went into Kuwait and Iraq to save those 'poor' people? Bullshit. The Allied Forces did that as much as the Soviets intended to save the Afghans." Dan watched Vadim rub sunscreen into his fair skin.

"There's plenty more oil...but yeah, I guess the Americans will be getting discounts for their...humanitarian efforts." Vadim shook his head. "Some people

say it's the end of history, but, honestly, I don't think having just one superpower is a good thing. Who keeps them under control?"

"I think all superpowers are shit. All wars are crap, and there are no winners. Just old battle horses like you and I, who devoted their life to the fighting." Dan quirked an altogether weary grin. "We are all losers, Vadim, but in our small worlds, we can be winners. You and I, we are winners. Of the hardest kind."

"True. But I'm betting we will see the Americans swing their big dick just for the hell of it. Winning the Cold War must go to their heads. Their history is too short to learn the true price and responsibility of victory. And I, for one, would rather cut my throat than work for them."

"I've got news for you." Dan laughed dryly once more, before holding his good hand out for a squirt of lotion, gesturing to Vadim to turn over so he could rub it into his back. "You already *are* working for them. Or what else do you think Britain has become since the 80s? Uncle Sam's spit lickers."

Britain as an extension of the USA. Vadim had thought that was just grim joke, or Dan had the same kind of black humour, or it was, indeed, the truth. The old link between motherland and colony, but these days the Brits were the dog that was wagged by the tail. It grated, grated to think that was where, ultimately, his money came from, and it was their cause he furthered. Funny, really, one day he'd been glad to be alive, and the next he started to worry whose agenda he killed and bled for. "Ah fuck."

Dan shrugged, "I don't care. One government is as corrupt as the other, one country is as shit as the next. I just do my job, cling to the good people, and fuck my way through life. I got you, what the hell else do I want? I got money, am alive, and all of that against all odds. And..." Dan leaned closer, hand on Vadim's shoulder, "and I got a farm on the other end of the world. In New Zealand. Away from all the shit."

"A farm where? All I know about New Zealand is that they are famously nuclear free."

"North island." Dan grinned, excitement springing into his eyes. "I haven't been back yet, too busy, but I bought the farm with shitloads of land for a pittance. Bought it when Maggie sent me off on R&R after your..." hesitated, "your mock execution. It's dilapidated, but fantastic. You got to go through a valley to get to it,

and it has an old orchard and views of the mountains. I fancied it as the place where I wanted to retire when I am finally fucked up. And now, aye, would you want to retire there with me? A Russkie in New Zealand is nothing special. Apart from the Maoris they come from everywhere and no one cares. Great people, as far as I could make out.”

“You do see us sitting together on a porch looking out on the mountains, holding hands when we’re old, don’t you?”

“Aye, I do. But don’t forget the booze and a fag in that picture.” He leaned so close, he could kiss the back of Vadim’s neck. No people anywhere to be seen.

Vadim couldn’t help that smile and felt his heart tighten with a painful tenderness. “Shit. Dan. Even if I had any other place to go...I wouldn’t.”

“That’s settled, then. You and I, like a bloody conventional couple, are going to retire on the farm. Next R&R I’ll take you there. But for now, what about a bit more sunning, before going back to the beach, or, if you fancy, back to the bungalow for a nice slow fuck?” He was grinning from ear to ear.

“Good idea, and then we go back and change the covers—or fuck in your bungalow while the room service takes care of my bed.” Vadim lay down, confident, smiling to himself as he thought about that. Retiring at the end of the world. It didn’t get any further away than New Zealand. Impossible.

* * *

The next days and nights continued in the same laid back and relaxed way, filled with never-ending sun, sky and water, and sex. Every time of day and night, whenever they could, whenever they wanted, with no one there to frown nor interfere. No one cared, no one raised a brow. The Thais always smiled and the other guests did not care much about their fellow holiday makers. Enjoying every moment, right into the middle of the second week.

That was when Dan came sauntering back from the reception area. Shades over his eyes and the shirt hanging loose. He grinned at Vadim as he climbed the steps to the veranda. “We just got us an additional week’s holiday in a nice, sunny climate.”

Vadim put the book on the table by the side, still not much use reading, but he thought he was making progress. He looked at Dan’s scars that were not

completely covered by the shirt. He'd said he'd wanted to make a phone call and pick up something from reception. "Yeah, will be good to leave this chilly, dark place." He gave a grin. "What's up? You bored, and hired us out to Monrovia or Sierra Leone?"

"Aye, right. I'm bored, can't you tell?" Laughing and rolling his eyes, Dan flopped himself into the other chair, legs stretched out, slouching. "I just called Maggie." He lifted his good hand, produced a bag he'd been carrying behind his back, and handed it over to Vadim.

Vadim's stomach tensed as something cold in the bag touched his heated skin when he peered inside. Two very large tubs of particularly exquisite ice cream, happily melting away. "Strawberry and..." He glanced up. "*Not* peanut butter. You're merciful." He inspected the packs and found plastic spoons attached, then handed Dan the strawberry one. Felt too warm to try and tease Dan with the cold, but, he thought, that was something he'd try remember. Walnut and Belgian chocolate. Not bad. "Maggie?"

"Well, Her Excellency." Dan winked, "she invited us to spend the last week of R&R in Dubai."

Vadim laughed. "Seems you need towelheads around you. Dubai?" But of course, it was about meeting 'Maggie'. He'd rather not. Every time he'd met that woman, he'd felt miserable, small, powerless, guilty as sin, or a combination of some of those. Something about her always put him on edge—and of course she only helped him because of Dan. Gratitude, most likely, or just the fact Dan made people generous and pleasant. Some of the time.

"Dubai." Dan nodded, balancing the ice cream on his knee while tugging in with relish. "It's the Las Vegas of the Muslim world." His speech got slurred when a particularly large spoonful of cold ice cream played havoc with his teeth, sending jolts through his palate. "Gambling, boozing," he grinned and nodded, emphasising, "oh yes, boozing, if you know where to go. That, and beautiful ladies." He laughed, as if that interested either of them.

You're trying to sell this to Jean, or to me? thought Vadim and didn't like the pang of jealousy that went straight through. "Well, should have more action than here." He didn't want to keep Dan in a place that bored him for too long, even if that meant hearing Arabic again, the mournful call to prayer, naan and whatever else his mind connected with Muslims. Still didn't like them.

Precious few people he actually did like, reflected Vadim. “Should we book accom, then?”

“She said we can stay in the embassy if we like, or get a discount price in one of the luxury hotels. She happens to know someone whom I happened to know as well, who...” Dan winked.

“As long as we can be ‘unnatural’ and they don’t stone us, I’m game.” Vadim peeled the lid off the ice cream, and opened the little plastic thing that held the spoon.

“Embassy, then.” Dan nodded, shoved another mouthful between his teeth, ignoring the consequent jolts of pain. When it came to sweets, he’d rather suffer. Especially when it was strawberry flavoured. “I’ll give her another tinkle tomorrow.”

“They should have done my background checks already.” Vadim scraped some of the solid ice cream up and then gathered some of the molten stuff clinging to the side of the tub.

“From what I understand, they did your background checks to and fro, up and down and thrice sideways.” Dan grinned, then took his time with the next spoonful. Musing around a mouthful of creamy vanilla, “I have a few things to pick up from the embassy.” Catching a drop of melting ice with his tongue, causing Vadim to stare at him, mesmerized, and imagining cold kisses on heated skin. That was exactly what he’d do.

“You see, there were some things I told her to throw away but she didn’t. She kept them for me, and, damn, I’m bloody thankful for it. Couldn’t tell her that, of course.”

“All your books?” asked Vadim, by way of teasing.

“Arsehole.” Dan said with a grin, “no, the lapis lazuli beads.” He’d never kept anything, had never clung to material possessions. Except for those prayer beads.

Vadim glanced up, an almost stricken expression ghosted across his features. Thrown away. Glad for it. He shouldn’t dig for it, shouldn’t ask, didn’t quite know how to react. Be glad Dan wanted them back or wince at the fact they obviously meant so much that Dan hadn’t wanted them anymore. “The tasbih,” he echoed.

Dan stopped eating, suddenly aware of Vadim's reaction. "I'm sorry." Shit, that expression, of course! Why had he told him? Hadn't been necessary, but damn, he usually opened his mouth and started to engage his brain after the words were out. What wouldn't he give for the lady's diplomatic skills. "It was just, you know..." no, Vadim didn't know, "I was just so goddamned hurt. But I'm glad, very glad, she kept them for me. She must have known...better than I did at the time."

Vadim smiled. "Well, I wouldn't have gone to Kabul and got you a new one. No way in hell."

"I would." Dan glanced at his melting ice cream, "I'd give a lot to see the mountains again."

"You can take the man out of the mountains, but never the mountains out of the man," Vadim murmured and smiled. "Wherever you drag me...Dubai, Kabul, it's alright." Apart from one place he'd never visit again. Moscow. But Afghanistan was still there, the black flies, the dust, the hidden water in the moonscape. The chaikhana. The building, reduced to rubble, where they'd 'met'. Other couples had a bar, or a flat. They were cursed with Afghanistan. When he thought of the mountains, he remembered the cuts in his back, how he'd screamed in that vast place, with no hope of escape or rescue, death imminent, and the heat of a body in a cold cave, a smell and movements in the dark, and the too strong, too bitter black tea.

"Perhaps one day." Dan trailed off, then tipped the tub to his lips, drinking the remains of the ice cream. Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he set the empty tub down onto the table between them. Determined, as if ending a conversation that had never taken place in the first instance.

"Before then, though, we've got another three days, the sun is shining, the water is lapping, the ice is melting, the Thais are friendly, the beds are beckoning, and if you ever sneakily get me to have my arse waxed again, then the Russian is dying." Dan flashed a grin. "Unless, of course, you can convince me otherwise."

Vadim laughed. "Too much pain for your taste, eh, Dan? SAS roughie toughie squaddie not up to the pain?" He put his feet down and leaned forward. "Well, I prefer less hair between my teeth, and you've already agreed to shaving. That an incentive?" He gave a fierce grin, amusement and arousal mixing at the thought, the exact mix that lead to wrestling and a 'who wins fucks'.

“Oh, really?” Dan’s brows shot up to his hairline, baring his teeth in a feral grin. “You’re only saying that, Mr Big Soft Extra Groomed Poof, because I have a hand in plaster. You wouldn’t dare otherwise.” Smirking, he pushed the shades up, until they sat on top of his tousled hair. “I’ve fucked up bigger guys than you, I have you know.”

Vadim laughed. “That’s not the issue. Doing damage is one thing, dealing with pain is something else.” He stood, moved over to Dan and felt the gaze on him. The speedos were highlighting his body, as he pretty well knew, and he wanted nothing more than feel Dan’s hair against his abs. “Not sure ‘soft’ is the right word,” Vadim murmured, “but poof, aye.”

Dan looked up, all the way along the body. He’d be close enough to hook a finger into that skimpy piece of material, slide it down and...he grinned. “Does that mean you would want me to suck your cock?”

“How can you...tell.” Vadim reached for the sunglasses and put them on the table, running his fingers through Dan’s hair. “You eating always gives me ideas.”

Dan moved his head forward, nuzzling Vadim’s cock through the thin fabric. Mouth curving into a grin at the growing reaction he could feel beneath his lips. “I’d say you’re pretty obvious about it.” Murmured against the increasing interest, “even for someone as un-subtle as me.”

Vadim’s chest and stomach muscles tensed, and he leaned forward, bringing his cock closer against the lips. “Can’t help it,” he murmured. “You’re just too good at doing this.” He smiled, wanted to be taken to bed again, here in this place where nothing seemed to matter. They weren’t a ‘pair of faggots’ here. Unlike the merc camp. Unlike any other place in the world, except for a cave in the mountains. But bringing up retirement wasn’t a good idea. Dan seemed to enjoy it too much.

“Guess I have to drag you inside in that case.” Dan lifted his head and eyes. “Even the Thais would be pretty pissed off at a public display.” He winked before grabbing Vadim’s arse with his good hand, pulling himself up from the chair and sliding along the other’s body, until they stood with no space between them. “You think we’ll manage to spend the last three days in bed, fucking our brains out?”

Vadim nodded, pressing against him. “Yes. Seems like a...good idea. Best one you’ve ever had.” And if you fuck me hard enough, I might forget the torturer. For a while. A little while. You inside me will remind me why being a bitch and a

faggot feels good, and why I lost my pride for this feeling. He swallowed hard, forced Dan into a kiss, hating his own thoughts, the shame that had a hold on him these days, the echoing voice of the torturer there, like the man was watching him, recording everything he did and felt. The need to feel Dan, and being called a masochistic faggot for it.

“I have my moments.” Dan murmured, grinning, pulled into the kiss. He could feel tension in Vadim’s body, but ignored it. A figment of his imagination. Vadim was willing enough for sex at any time, instigated often enough. The niggling worry was all in his mind, they just needed to reacquaint with each other, body and mind.

He pulled Vadim with him, inside.

1991 Chapter XXX—Rank and File

September 1991, Dubai

Dan's mood had been at its best since they boarded the plane. Not that his mood had been anything but glorious for the last two weeks, but he was positively glowing when he sat in his seat, popping peanuts, munching remarkably good first-class food, and guzzling a few miniature beers, interspersed with the odd G&T in the same minuscule size, but all of them served in real glasses, by attentive stewardesses, giving the whole experience a feel of understated luxury, despite being thousands of feet in the air. Humming quietly to himself as he sat comfortably in his aisle seat, with Vadim at the window.

Vadim stretched his legs out as far as he could, slouching in his seat and enjoying the leg space, while watching Dan. His. Partner. Comrade. Lover. His again. Still felt the touches on his body and couldn't help but wonder whether everybody on the plane, from the Captain to the stewardesses to the business men and women in their grey suits and leather briefcases, knew what they were and what they'd done pretty much until the taxi had picked them up for the airport. He could reach for the earphones, or the magazine, or watch a film, but truth was, he wouldn't be able to concentrate with Dan that close. The space between them felt very empty. "I can see you can't wait getting back into the desert."

"Not quite." Dan turned his head, grinning. He left the earphones on, the music quiet enough to understand every word. "It's just that I missed Maggie. Despite her goddamned interfering and the fact I wanted to rip her throat out at some stage." Flashing a toothy grin, he reached across the empty seat, taking Vadim's hand in his right. Just like that.

Vadim closed his hand around Dan's fingers and felt impossibly awkward when the stewardess walked past. She must have seen the hand. Feeling strange, too conscious. "You were...you are friends. We owe her a lot." He'd feel small under that woman's gaze, she never failed at intimidating him. He didn't know why, or how; maybe because she seemed to be a different kind of killer.

"It's strange, but it's true. She's the only friend—real friend—I ever had. Jean's a mate. Maggie, though...did I tell you she sent me on her own expenses to New Zealand?" Unaware of a businessman's glance at their combined hands, and

the embarrassed way he quickly turned his head, and oblivious to Vadim's discomfort. Dan caressed the other's hand with his thumb, while holding on tight. It felt good, that hand. Damn good in his own.

"No, you didn't." So, likely, she felt the same. Friends with that woman—it explained her continued protectiveness and even why she had given him a chance. Of course it did.

Honoured to meet the man Dan loves.

"Aye, after I'd trashed my room in the embassy," unaware Vadim didn't know that story, "she sent me off for three weeks."

"Three weeks off? You're going stir crazy after three days, Dan." And did Vadim want to know why he'd trashed the room? No. Dan losing control was always fearsome—and not something he wanted to talk about on a plane. "Ha ha ha, very funny, bastard." Dan grinned and gestured to the stewardess, ordering another drink while holding onto Vadim's hand with the exact same untroubled attitude as before. Vadim gave her a dismissive wave, not looking at her. "Careful, or I might not take you to see the farm."

Vadim smiled; he could see Dan working on a farm. Outside, and at peace. Farmer stock. It was something he could do when not shooting people and getting blown up. "I'd...like to see it," he murmured. "We said next R&R?"

"It's a deal." Dan smiled, squeezing the hand in his own. "It's not a farm anymore, but the land belongs to it and, depending on how many more years of active service we can get out of our decaying bodies, I might even be able to afford the renovation of the house." Dan winked, "thank fuck I earn even more now than I did in Maggie's direct employ."

"I will have to...apologise to her."

"Why? I sure as fuck can't think of anything you'd have to apologise for."

"For slapping her hand away when she worked so hard to get me out?"

Vadim glanced at Dan with a certain amount of irony. "Walking out of her party?"

"Well, as we've established by now, you weren't exactly yourself."

Leaning across, Dan lifted both their clasped hands and placed a kiss onto the back of Vadim's, exactly the moment the stewardess reappeared. She served the drink without the slightest blink of her eye, making Vadim tense and curse himself for his response at the same time. It still freaked him. Felt like he had to justify, explain, or better yet, be invisible.

“Besides, do you really think Maggie would have done what she did if she hadn’t understood a lot more about why you reacted the way you did, than I managed to grasp? She wanted to search for you when you vanished, but I...I couldn’t. Didn’t want her to.” Dan glanced away for a moment, before once again smiling at Vadim. Blinking into the brilliant sunlight that streamed through the aircraft’s window.

“Maybe. I don’t like people knowing me better than I do myself,” said Vadim. That was indeed the biggest problem. Felt found out, caught, and outguessed. Like playing chess with his father. Always a humiliation.

“Welcome to my world, Russkie.” Dan winked at Vadim, entirely oblivious to any darkness underlying the words. He raised his plastic glass, and took another mouthful.

Vadim huffed. “You are easy to read, though. Well. It used to be easy. But maybe I just lost my touch.” Yes, my famous touch with treating people right. Leadership. Fuck all that.

“Aye, that’s me. Roughie toughie squaddie with the intellectual depth of a shallow baby bath and the educational background of a hedgerow. I’m complicated, me.” Dan laughed.

Vadim laughed, too. “Sorry, but that just about nails it.” He grew a little more serious and whispered. “But you also have the heart of a tiger and the vastness of a mountain.”

“Well...” Dan grinned while looking at Vadim, long and hard, forgetting to lower his own voice, “I take it as a fairly interestingly worded ‘I love you, Dan, because you are simply goddamned motherfucking perfect’.”

Bastard. Vadim’s eyes quickly flicked towards the aisle and the other seats, but he hoped the business guy was too busy catching up with sleep. “No, true, you’re not half bad, Mad Dog.”

Dan grinned and shrugged. “I get along.”

“Well, Maggie’s your friend. This time, I’m not trying to extract from her your whereabouts, after all.”

“You do have a history of that, granted.” Emptying the plastic cup, Dan filled it with the remains from the can. “You’ll like her, trust me. Maggie is a grand lady and the most straight-laced and trustworthy person I have ever met. Oh, and she likes you.”

“She does?”

“Fuck, yes! Or do you really think she would have gone to all the trouble? She was in Dubai, as far as I know, when you called the embassy. So, that means she must have flown all the way to Scandinavia to meet you there. You really think she would have done that and everything else for just about anyone?”

“I don’t know. I can’t say we struck it off well from the beginning. She was generous, but very businesslike.”

“She is always businesslike. That’s just the way she is.” Dan shrugged, emptied the last of his beer. It shouldn’t take much longer before the captain announced the impending landing in Dubai. “You’ll be just fine, trust me. I know for a fact she must respect you or she would have never trusted you to get through Selection. And respect, Vadim, that’s the biggest thing you can get from anyone.”

Vadim closed his eyes for a long moment. Respect was really the only thing that was still worth fighting for, that, and Dan. If he had respect, everything else was bearable. “I’ll be on my best behaviour.” He pressed Dan’s hand briefly. Still felt he should explain and a long, serious, honest talk might clarify a few matters. Likely best when Dan was out of the way.

“Don’t be,” Dan leered at Vadim, “you being on your best behaviour might not be appreciated by Her Excellency. I’d settle for second best, if I were you. At least with the ladies.” His chuckle was drowned out by the comm, requesting to fasten their seatbelts.

Vadim shook his head. “On my best socially acceptable behaviour. Don’t forget Major Krasnorada was a bit of a poster boy at times. Decorative. I’ll be decorative. And polite.”

“You sure as hell were a poster boy, I’ll never forget the second time I saw you, gleaming like a decorated Christmas tree. Remember? It was in that bloody hot hotel room in Kabul. Shame I hated you back then, we could have had some damn good mind-blowing sex with you on your best poser behaviour.” Dan grinned while Vadim helped him to secure his seat belt, impossible with one hand.

“With a hippie reporter? Not very professional.” Glancing out of the window, Vadim could see desert, and he already missed the lushness of Thailand. This was Dan territory, Muslim territory, and definitely not his home ground. He’d have to improvise here. The plane circled lower, then, soon, the wheels made contact with the tarmac, and the plane braked.

Not much later, Vadim plucked his bag from the conveyor belt and waited for Dan to get into the waiting queue, standing right behind him. Covering his back. It was perfectly natural. More natural than both their passports being dark red, emblazoned with the Arms of the United Kingdom and both declaring they were British citizens.

Outside customs, there was a driver with a sign that read “McFadyen & company”. Not Krasnorada, which seemed an odd but very considerate touch. Dan lifted his left hand to wave, plaster and all, attracting the driver’s attention, who immediately sprang into action and escorted them to the car, before taking over the trolley with the luggage.

The car itself as plush and air conditioned as all the vehicles Dan had been used to while in the direct employ of the lady, and he settled into the cool, sand-coloured leather. After a moment of small talk with the driver, who assured them the ambassador was very well indeed, they drove off towards the embassy. Dan didn’t take Vadim’s hand this time, just rested his own very close to the other’s thigh, respecting the country’s habits no matter how much he wanted to touch and taste his Russkie in public.

Vadim noticed the lack of touch, but was relieved, because Dan too close meant it would be harder to get into the role he’d have to play, try and find his strength back, bolster himself so he wasn’t as brittle as he felt most of the time, and especially when it involved people that were not Dan. Keep up the mask, a new mask, the old one was long shattered when they had taken it away and stripped him to the core. Remembered the doctor’s warning again, about being careful and not taking any response for granted, while being aware of his own responses. He couldn’t be a raving lunatic here, in the embassy. He’d show their investment had paid off. He wouldn’t act like a nutcase. If only he could remember how he’d dealt with civilians before, how to make small talk, how to pretend everything was fine. Well. If he was careful. He’d have to trust his wits.

They drove no more than half an hour before they reached high walls and lush vegetation behind them. “Ah, home sweet former home.” Dan smiled and nodded at Vadim when the gate opened to let them through.

“Impressive,” murmured Vadim, impressed at the luxury, the garden right in the middle of the desert, and Dan just didn’t fit into the scenery. Unless he wore one of his killer suits. He smiled, suddenly. “Let’s face the dragoness, then.”

“And here she already is.” Dan flashed a grin at Vadim before turning his head to look up to the building and there she stood on the porch, hands clasped, in the inevitable lightweight pastel coloured twin set and smiling. The car door was opened by a servant, and Dan couldn’t help but smile brightly when he stepped outside and looked at her, waiting for Vadim to catch up, before taking the few steps to greet her. “Ma’am, it’s great to see you.” For a moment it looked as if he were going to hug her, towering over the petite lady, but the very last moment he took her hand and bowed down in an old fashioned and entirely uncharacteristic kiss onto her hand. Which made her laugh, predictably.

“And it’s good to see you, Dan. All relaxed and tanned, almost in one piece, and happy.”

He grinned and finally let go of her hand which he’d held for a while. “You don’t look a day older, Ma’am. As elegant as ever.”

Chuckling, she shook her head with the bomb-proofed coiffure, where not a hair was stirred with the movement. “The likes of us are preserved, my friend, until we fade away one day, but I do believe, if you dug up my father, he would still look the same as on the day of his funeral.”

Dan laughed out loud while she turned her attention to Vadim, who took a halting step forward. Ashamed for his weakness, but reassured at the ease with which Dan acted. Dan, his shield and protection. Dan, his reason for being here, in too many senses of the word.

She was holding her hand out to Vadim, smiling warmly. “I am very pleased to meet you again, Mr Krasnorada. Very much so.”

He took the hand, briefly closed his own around it, gentle like to a child. “Ma’am. And I am pleased you...will see us. The invitation came as a pleasant surprise.” He hoped he’d done this right, chosen the right words. Glanced towards Dan, and back at the lady. “Never mind you saved Dan from an agonizingly slow death of boredom in that Thai paradise.”

Dan laughed, shaking his head and she smiled. “Dan does not look very bored to me. On the contrary, I don’t think I have ever seen him quite so upbeat since he started working for me.” Dan was making discouraging noises, waving his hand about, as if to stop her from talking about him as if he were invisible. She ignored him, with the most polite and charming smile.

“Well, I do hope, Mr Krasnorada, I can offer a small glimpse of your paradise lost for the last week of your well earned rest.”

Vadim paused, feeling tension creep up in his chest. Wrongly chosen words? He hadn't meant to criticise her. Or was it just light-hearted taunting? He couldn't tell. Couldn't decide, both seemed likely. But the situation was still friendly. “Dubai is certainly an interesting place—if less intriguing than our hostess.” Politicians and chess players. All he could try was call it a friendly game and know when he was outgunned in terms of power and likely in terms of intellect, too.

Stepping aside, she made an elegant gesture towards the open doors. “Please, gentlemen,” her choice of words made Dan chuckle again, he hadn't been a gentleman since the day he was born. “My staff will take you to your room, I have taken the liberty to have the master guest room prepared. Do revive yourselves and I will see you for refreshments on the patio, whenever you are ready.”

“Thank you kindly,” said Vadim, inclining his head, and allowed the person from her staff to take them upstairs, walking shoulder to shoulder with Dan. “One thing, Dan. If I say something wrong, let me know, yes?”

“Of course, but what do you mean?” Dan took the shades out of his hair where they had sat entangled in the dark mane. “Unless you call Her Excellency an overbearing nincompoop,” or a fucking liar, as he had done, on the day of Vadim's ‘death’, “you can't say anything wrong. Don't worry so much, Vadim. This is not a test, this is a holiday. Selection is over and you've made it.” He smiled as they were let into a vast room with queen sized double bed. Easily big enough for two tall men who would not enjoy twin beds.

“It's just...difficult. I don't want to make any mistake, and I might not realise if I said something wrong. I want...this to work.” Vadim set the bag down and gave the room a long, searching look, checking for the usual. Escape routes, windows, cover. Only then taking in generous space, muted colours, all very classy. ‘Posh’ the Brits called that. Expensive, and not understated.

Dan grunted exasperatedly at Vadim's searching look. “If my successor is any good at his job there's nothing to fear here. You're in an embassy, Vadim, an em.bas.sy!” He smiled, “not a goddamned hotel room in bloody Kabul.” Tilting his head, Dan watched Vadim for a moment, who looked back at him.

“Yes.” Secure, embassy, no Mujas, no spetsnaz, no interrogator, no regular or irregular army. Somehow, though, this was not Thailand, this was closer and more tense. “Stupid habit.”

“I need a shower, are you going to wash me?” The member of serving staff was just leaving, when Dan smiled, “besides, I rather like your hands on my body.”

Vadim glanced at the door that closed. Well. Two men, one bed. That had clued the staff in already. No reason to hide, not here. Or, maybe a reason, but no need. “Yes, of course. Can’t have the plaster get wet.” Vadim pulled his shirt free and slipped out of it. “And it saves time.”

“True, so get a grip on, Russkie, and get me naked.” Grinning from ear to ear Dan stood with his arms outstretched, waiting for his ‘personal service’ to get him out of shirt, trousers and canvas shoes, and to get soaped up in the marble-tiled bathroom.

Vadim smiled, slipped out of his shoes on the way to Dan and began to undress him. Shirt off, unable to resist, placed a kiss between Dan’s pecs, while his hands went for the belt and buttons. Just meant it as tenderness, not as a prelude, just to breathe in his smell and warmth in this clear, crisp, air conditioned room. Slipped the trousers and underwear off, and helped Dan step out of it.

The water had the perfect temperature, and the huge marble bath seemed more private than the connected room. The shower could have housed a platoon of soldiers, and none would stay dry, the water came in like thick, hot, soothing rain. Glass and marble and mirror misted over while Vadim cleaned them both up, soaping Dan’s body, then his, and found himself embraced, one-armed, with Dan somehow managing to keep his plaster dry, as he kissed his way down, getting to his knees. There was something about water running down Dan’s tanned shoulder and back Vadim would be forever unable to forget, realising too late what Dan was planning. “But you can’t...do that here, and...the lady is waiting...”

“Watch me do it,” Dan said dryly, and Vadim felt he’d protested enough, no, already too much, without sense nor reason as Dan took him deep and made him come, after a long while, right there in the heat and steam but with an odd feeling of familiarity. Whatever the place or situation, that was something that had grown back. Old comrade lust, and their bodies knowing each other perfectly well.

When Dan came back up his plaster had turned rather damp, but his grin was that of the cat that had got the milk, and the cream on top. “Feeling anymore mellow? Hm?”

“...aye.” Some kind of tension busting.

Dan was kissing Vadim’s jaw line, then along the shoulder, before stepping out of the spray and into the steamy room. “If you ask me, that was just what the doctor ordered and I am sure Maggie won’t mind waiting a few minutes. Especially since she is always busy anyway.”

Vadim huffed. “Well, certainly not *my* doctor...but yes.” He reached for the towel, astonished to find it huge and warmed up and soft when he unfolded it. “Come here. How do we get the plaster dry again?” As Dan turned to face him, Vadim couldn’t take his eyes off that half interested cock, or rather, it took him a moment longer. He wrapped Dan in that big towel, drying him quickly, then opened the door. “Sit down on the bed.” He only grabbed another white warm towel and slung it across his hips, allowing his body and skin to just dry. Would only take a minute, and he loved the chill from the A/C.

With Dan seated, Vadim took hold of his knees, opened them, lifted the towel and went onto his knees to suck him off, too, enjoying how quickly Dan responded. It was true, they probably had time, and Maggie wouldn’t sit there waiting for them. Thankfully, Dan didn’t grab his head, didn’t force him to take him deeper like he’d sometimes done—and Vadim had liked that, back then—but this one was gentle and slow and considerate, on safe territory, trust and understanding and the lust everything but aggressive.

Dan flopped into a boneless heap on the bed when he had cum, lying on his back, legs still open, arms stretched out wide, and simply breathing with closed eyes while shivering luxuriously in the cool air. “Want to sleep now.” Mumbled, he was listening to his heartbeat while it returned to normal.

Vadim rolled his neck, caressing Dan’s legs. “Five minutes rest, soldier.” He smiled, then stood to return to the bath to drink water, several handfuls of it, and towel off the remaining dampness from his skin. “Your traditional tea time is when? Four? Five o’ clock?”

“Urgh.” That was all Dan was willing or able to give. Lying crucified on the bed, he was still flatlining when there was a knock on the door, a voice asking to be let in to bring water for the gentlemen and to see if they needed anything.

Dan just about managed to flick the towel back over his groin before he called out to come inside. Water bottles were delivered and the member of staff vanished before Dan did even so much as stir.

Vadim stayed in the bathroom, unpacked the bag with his various personal effects, one of them the salve he used for the scars on his back. Always a bit unwieldy, but he didn't want to rouse Dan, and he wasn't sure he'd be successful, either. Took care of those patches of fucked-up skin, then got dressed. He stepped outside, unpacked Dan's bag, and chose some of his clothes for him. "Come. We should get dressed and presentable."

"Damn." Dan muttered, managed to open one eye. "Do I have to?" But of course he did and he sat up, stretching slowly while scratching the scars across his abs. "What is it going to be today, eh?" He grinned and started dressing from the pile, his back to Vadim as he kept bending over sans towel and with absolute intent. "Am I supposed to be wearing the linen suit and if yes, which colour?"

"The lighter one." Vadim shook his head, tried not to stare at Dan bent over like that, the bastard, he'd show him later, tonight, and that thought made him smile.

Dan pretended to grouse, while preferring to be told what to wear, at least that'd make sure Vadim didn't raise his brows at him, and it took the painful task of having to think about something as deadly boring as clothes. If it were up to him he'd live in camo trousers and army boots.

"Right, I'm done. All yours and Maggie's. Do I meet with your approval?" How on earth he managed to make the freshly laundered and ironed clothes—by room service in Thailand—look simultaneously rumpled, scruffy and sexy as hell, was a mystery.

Vadim stared for a few moments, then shook his head. "How she could have worked with you around..." he murmured and checked himself one final time in the mirror. The Thai tailor had done excellent work—Vadim loved that suit.

"Oy, Russkie, you're being an irreverent wanker." Dan slapped Vadim's face playfully, which made Vadim tense harder than absolutely rational, but he was too mellow now to think much of it. An unwelcome reflex, nothing else. "I was good at my job and she did have suits made for me. I think she kept them here. Got no way to store them in camp." Dan fished for his fags and lighter.

“So, you’re rather a merc than her bodyguard?” Vadim frowned, thinking that through, while ushering Dan towards the door.

“In many ways, yes. It’s more my kind of life. This, here, was far too cushy. Not enough adrenaline. Except for that bloody bomb, and that was too much adrenaline for my taste.”

“We shouldn’t keep her waiting. Lead the way. I have no idea where she’d have tea.”

“On the patio, you’ll like it there. Lots of shade.” Making his way downstairs, Dan nodded to a couple of people he remembered and exchanged a few words. Crossing the large hallway, he pointed to a door off to the side. “That’s my old room. Bet my successor’s in that now. Was rather nice, all mod cons.”

“Mod cons?”

Dan grinned, “own bathroom, hi-fi, stereo, satellite TV, all that techno gadgetry. I love that stuff. If I ever get to spend my old age on the farm, I’ll have it equipped with techno gadgets everywhere.” He shut up when he spotted her ladyship sitting under an umbrella, close to the ornamental pond and water feature, bent over some papers.

“Ma’am?” He called out quietly and she turned her head, smiling at them when they stepped into the gleaming sun.

“Please sit down.” She gestured to the two empty chairs at the table. “Just a moment, I am having the afternoon tea brought and my papers taken away. It is a good excuse for a little break.”

Vadim waited for Dan to sit, then sat down on the other chair, and remembered to smile. Didn’t know what kinds of things her papers and her signature influenced and set into motion, but assumed they were important.

“Do you mind?” Dan held the packet of cigarettes up and she shook her head, giving permission. The table was being cleared and a trolley with tea, coffee, water, fresh lemonade, and a selection of finely cut, triangled sandwiches, as well as small cakes was brought.

“Thanks, Ma’am.” Dan lit his fag, inhaling deeply. “Tell me, how have you been? You look very well, I assume my successor is a good man?”

She chuckled lightly, tut-tutting in his direction. “You are being rather pre-emptive. It is my prerogative to ask these questions first.” Gently mocking, “but first things, first. Mr Krasnorada, would you like tea or coffee?” She didn’t have to

ask Dan, was already pouring his favourite cup of black coffee over three lumps of sugar.

“Coffee, please.” Vadim noticed he was holding the armrests, and forced himself to relax in his chair. No sniper. No landmine. Nothing. He felt more relaxed than before the shower, but some tension always lingered. Knew it was her job to ask questions, her right, too, and found some strange security in the lightness that Dan handled the situation with. “Thank you, Ma’am.” He received his coffee, but didn’t drink just yet.

“Please, help yourself to sandwiches or cake.” She nodded to Vadim, holding the cup of coffee out to him. “Milk, cream and sugar are on the tray.” She smiled, “I don’t think I have to guess too much what Dan is going to choose.”

Dan grinned, “any strawberry tarts?”

“In fact,” she pointed to a lidded, double-walled bowl, “I had some strawberry tarts and whipped cream made just for you.”

Dan’s delight was evident, and he began to pile the sweet treats onto a plate.

Vadim smiled, watching him. Dan and his simple pleasures.

“Well, Mr Krasnorada, now that Dan is out of action for at least five minutes, until he has cleared out all of the cakes, would you be so inclined and indulge my curiosity? How have you been faring since the rescue of the American helicopter crew and our own ‘cheeky Brit’?”

Dan was shaking his head at her description, mouth full with tart and extra double helpings of whipped cream.

“Most certainly.” Vadim paused, but nothing in her speech nor manner caused tension, not an interrogation, nothing but interest. Not a battle, not a test. “I fared...well, all told. Getting the c...” no, not comrades, “the boys back was a little adventure, but at least it wasn’t patrolling duty. After the debrief we were sent out for R&R and it was lucky Dan had time at the same time, so I booked the place in Thailand.”

“I am glad to hear.” She smiled, sipping some tea. “When I heard from Dan he was in Thailand, I remembered that lovely place. I have been there a few times, but never for a holiday, perhaps I should remedy that.” Daintily picking up a millionaire shortbread, she bit a piece off the sweet caramel and chocolate while Dan listened, working his way through the cakes. “I wanted to go somewhere with beaches and the ocean up close. I...like water.” What a stupid thing to say, Vadim

thought, and suddenly understood she put him at ease while asking the easy questions and making him relax. “Of course, I owe you a great deal, and one of those things is an apology for my behaviour.”

“Do you?” Her brows rose in genuine surprise. “I cannot recall an event that required such a necessity?”

Vadim again couldn’t tell whether she was being generous by forgetting or whether she actually didn’t remember. He glanced over to Dan as if the solution was somewhere there, then back, felt strange again, like the only one who didn’t speak any proper language. “Your help in getting me out was not...met with the proper mindset,” he murmured, keeping his voice level. “I was unable to adjust. That is not...an excuse. I am aware I acted like...in a way that didn’t look very grateful.”

She was taking another sip of her unsweetened tea and held the cup for a moment at face level, regarding the tall man opposite to her. She smiled, said nothing for a while, before placing the china back onto the saucer and leaning slightly forward. “Mr Krasnorada,” her voice sounded gentle to Dan, who sat straighter, more alert, not knowing what to expect when she continued, “I would like you to understand I am fully aware of the reasons for your behaviour in Finland. In fact, I have been berating myself ever since I had not noticed, and I had not taken more measures to ensure you felt safe on your return. Making you join a dinner party, and to all intents and purposes, forcing you to interact straight after your release was an inexcusable mistake on my part.”

Dan forgot to chew, with half of a strawberry tart still in his mouth. Vadim looked stricken, eyes wide and almost unfocused, staring straight through her, then slowly blinking, frowning, and looking at her again, gathering his thoughts, but they moved away and blurred whenever he reached for one to form words with.

She continued, folding her hands in her lap. “I should have known, Mr Krasnorada, because I should have gathered more information on the subject. I should have asked for expert advice, and as a result should have followed my own advice, the one I gave Dan on the night, to give space and time and not to exert any pressure at all, least of all the one of expectations. Unlike Dan, who understandably was most keen to be in your vicinity, I should have ensured you had space and freedom for acclimatisation. But I did not, and instead made you meet the people who had worked on ensuring your freedom. This, Mr Krasnorada, was an

unforgivable mistake on my part. I have been subjected to reproach, rightly so, from a dear old friend of mine, a friend you will have met..." she paused a moment, having lost Dan completely, but from the reaction in Vadim's face it was obvious the other knew what and whom she alluded to, "I have to apologise to you, and not you to me."

The doctor, her friend. Vadim could just imagine Dr Williams shake his head and chide gently, in that cultured voice, with regret, not anger, and that sharp intellect that seemed to have seen and thought and experienced all there was about human frailty.

She smiled, holding her hand out to him, "I am glad I have the opportunity now to ask you to accept my apology for a very foolish and selfish motion. I am sorry, Mr Krasnorada, I should have known better."

Every word went through his skin. How could she know what he'd felt—or not felt—like. Could it have been that simple? Simply allow space, and he'd been able to feel again? Somehow, Vadim doubted that. Her hand. Vadim took it, and it seemed inappropriate to sit, so he stood. "I...there's nothing to apologize for. I...am glad you...gave me a chance. And I owe you my freedom. My new start. That's more than I deserved." He swallowed, feeling his voice go rough.

She, too, stood, as she shook his hand. "Thank you, Mr Krasnorada, and I believe I have to apologise for another weakness of mine. I was very, very angry on Dan's behalf, and I should have felt less protective and more professional, and thus should have welcomed you back and offered you the deal in friendlier tones than I did."

That made Vadim smile while he could feel his hand sweat, and he broke the touch. "If I'd have had any b...guts left..." I'd have managed to keep some face. He suddenly understood she did regret, genuinely regret the things that had made her such an imposing figure—somebody whose orders he had followed like a whipped dog. Much more goodwill towards him than she had shown. "...still, I owe you this new life, and while I...have not exactly been a model prospective citizen, this country will never have to blame me for anything." Adopted country. Hers, and his. Not enemies, and maybe friends, if it would go like that. He saw the possibility, suddenly.

Dan finally remembered to swallow, murmuring half to them and half to himself, “What *did* you do while I was gone.” But he did not expect an answer and neither did he receive one.

“I am glad, Mr Krasnorada, I really am, and I am certain you are and will be an asset to our country. And I am thankful you accept my apology, and for seeing both of you together, after all this time.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” From the bottom of my heart.

She nodded at Dan and Vadim before sitting back down, smoothing her skirt as she did so. “I would not dare believe I can even remotely grasp what both of you went through, but perhaps everything will turn out the best way it possibly could in the end, however much and however long it takes.”

“I’ve got Vadim,” Dan smiled, took the other’s hand and pressed it hard, “that’s all I need and wanted, and on top of that we are getting shot at from the same side now. Seems like luxury to me.”

Vadim laughed, pressing that hand and sitting down, too. “And you stopped collaborating with the bastard towelhea...irregulars.” Vadim pressed his lips together for a moment. Not merc lingo, even though it was a reflex. “We’re an unlikely pair, but so be it,” he murmured and looked at Dan. “Stranger things have happened.”

Dan looked at Vadim, wide-eyed, when the words registered with his mind. He swallowed hard. The price he had paid had been worth it. “Lions may die, but friendship doesn’t.” Murmured, not audible to the Baroness, who sat smiling and sipping her tea.

Vadim leaned in to murmur into Dan’s ear. “Not friendship. Love.” But my father wouldn’t have appreciated that—I still understood.

“I know, and it was what I meant.” Dan murmured back.

Vadim glanced at the Baroness. “Forgive me. It’s a bit like being drunk, with Dan my poison of choice, obviously. I guess I’m just overdosing at the moment.”

“Quite rightly so.” She took another bite of her caramel shortbread, “and please do not think I wish to put any claims onto your time. I understand you will be very busy with duties when you return to camp.”

Vadim smiled, felt like he was finding his feet and strangely liking this prim and proper lady, now that there was nothing more to fear. Only now did he

realise the weight of fear on his shoulder had been lifted. Apologies and explanations were magical. They changed everything. “Please, claim our time whenever you can fit us into your busy schedule. I can see how much Dan enjoys talking to you—and the strawberry tarts that come with it. And, of course, I’d be intrigued to hear whatever you’d be willing to share about Dan. There is much I don’t know.”

“No way!” Dan exclaimed but she just laughed, and he wondered how young this laughter sounded and how rarely he’d heard it outside of their private conversations. He wanted another cake and had to let go of Vadim’s hand to do so, the awkward movement watched by the Baroness.

“How is your wrist, Dan?”

“Fine.” Quickly swallowing a bite, he nodded.

“I am glad to hear, but I have arranged nevertheless for you to see my personal doctor. Judging from the state of the plaster this might be quite a good idea.”

Vadim smiled, now reaching for some of the sandwiches, getting hungry from looking at them.

“Whatever you say, Ma’am.” Dan’s exaggerated sigh went well with the mock resignation on his face.

“You keep this up, my friend, and I shall make you wear a suit. There are plenty of yours still in the wardrobe and you do not look as if you had lost or gained any weight.”

“You wouldn’t make me....”

“Try me, Dan.” Her Excellency winked at Vadim in an almost conspiratorially manner while Dan huffed something unintelligible, before hovering up the last of his cake.

“That would be cruel and heartless, Ma’am.” He finished his coffee, looking at her over the brim of his cup, all beaten dog with an added dash of dark-eyed puppy, wagging its virtual tail.

“Well, Mr Krasnorada,” she turned her attention to Vadim, “wouldn’t you agree Dan might be able to cut a good figure in a suit—if he practised a little more?”

Vadim smiled. “I remember an evening when he was quite dashing in his James Bond look.” He looked at Dan, giving him a mocking smile, remembering,

however, how he'd been stretched out and 'taken prisoner'. Ah, nice thoughts, and he should better think something else. "Of course, Dan's fashion sense reminds me of a long string of traffic accidents. Riff raff came as he played the reporter, unshaven, lice infested in local 'garb' in the mountains as the mentor to 'freedom fighters', and, of course, all manner of guises, including that of a big influential NGO."

"I have you know, Ma'am," Dan interrupted, "I was cutting a rather convincing figure as a member of the Red Cross." He wagged a finger in front of Vadim's face before looking back at her, pleadingly, while she laughed. "And, don't forget I was actually washed when I was in my Red Cross get-up. Hair and all, shaved as well. Honest."

"I talked about fashion, not your grooming. The story of your grooming would be the equivalent of a small sized genocide, not a traffic accident."

Dabbing the corners of her eyes with a napkin, the Baroness was still chuckling. "I have to admit, Mr Krasnorada, in contrast to Dan, you actually manage to make a suit look good and *remain* good looking, even after wearing it for more than five minutes."

Vadim reached out to touch Dan's shoulder. "He's not making a great effort, but I'd like to see him in a nice suit again. For several reasons."

"I can just imagine those reasons." Dan muttered, but damn, he remembered that night, too, and how he'd had to explain the stains on his smoking in a very creative fashion. He quickly had to cover his groin with a strategically placed elbow.

She smiled, looking from one to the other. "And what would those reasons be, if I may be so curious?"

Vadim paused to sip his coffee, winning time. Damn. Reasons. 'Because he looks great and imposing and I'd love to suck his cock while he wears a four figure suit' wouldn't be a good answer. "One is...it makes him uncomfortable, which I find endearing. Second—Dan is turning a little too old for the jeans look. Third—I'd be a barbarian if I didn't prefer him in a well cut suit, and fourth—because it's very easy on the eyes. Very easy indeed. There might be a fifth reason, but I'm not sure I quite remember. Dan?"

Cruelty sprung into Dan's eyes, under the highly amused look of her ladyship. "Could the fifth reason have anything to do with James Bond and a

certain evening in Kabul, or is that not correct anymore, since you have learned to use the article in English?” His grin was toothy and evil. If he was to suffer, Vadim should as well. Besides, he couldn’t remember when the Baroness had ever laughed that much.

“I think James Bond has something to do with it.” Vadim shook his head, but pursed his lips. “And the articles just happened when I went through Selection. Granted, it took some rethinking of how I speak English, but I think I usually remember.”

Dan grinned and shrugged, looking at the Baroness while pointing at Vadim. “Can you tell me why I wanted that man back? I am being mistreated and taken the mickey out of.” Remembering not to use swear words, at least for a while.

Tears of laughter were still gleaming in her acutely intelligent eyes, there was something else as well. Relief, warmth, and the profound pleasure of witnessing two people at light-hearted banter, where there had been nothing but darkness before.

“Well,” she smiled at both, “because you love him.”

Vadim nodded. “Listen to her. She knows her stuff.” Giving a wink, and siding with the clear and easy winner in the conversation. Apart from that, teasing Dan could lead to the most interesting payback, and that was always a plus. “I guess...” Dan heaved a sigh, “maybe she’s got a point.”

“In that case,” Baroness de Wilde stood up from the table, readjusting the pearls that got caught in the buttons of her twin set, “I shall leave you two gentlemen to your afternoon tea. Please do feel at home and ask for whatever you might wish. Dan knows this place and its ins and outs. Oh, and if you would like to take a swim, please feel free.” She smiled, nodding to both. “I am afraid I have an appointment, but I am sure you can entertain yourselves.”

Before she left, she did the most shocking thing Dan had ever seen her do. She winked at them, with a facial expression that bordered on mischievous.

* * *

They spent that day in the city proper, with Vadim making purchases against Dan’s protests they didn’t need any of the things, or that he was bored of shopping, but Vadim decided to blow what was left of his pay cheque, and he

enjoyed torturing Dan. He had no idea what to do with the clothes and gadgets—he didn't actually have a place to live or store things beyond that tin hut, and part of him told him he should stay Spartan and not keep anything there he couldn't afford to lose.

Maybe there was a way to put those things into storage. He had no idea what to do otherwise, but enjoyed too much to try things on and have them if he liked them, not heeding Dan's groans and general anguish. Dan had dragged him to Dubai, he better coped with it.

That evening, it was dinner with Her Ladyship, the smallest of circles, as if she still felt guilty about that other dinner, and Vadim found himself appreciating that concern more than he liked. Wasn't ready to be too close with anybody but Dan—or other people he considered safe, especially after a long, tiring day and in surroundings that invited too much thought. Too much memory. He drank wine and sherry and could just hear the thoughts hanging between Dan and Maggie, so he placed a hand on Dan's shoulder to tell him he'd retire, and thanked the Ambassador for the lovely evening.

He was actually tired when he walked upstairs for a quick shower and then to lie down in the huge bed, feeling a faint breeze from the A/C stir the air. He couldn't read, but he could listen to his own thoughts, which eventually stilled amidst memories of expensive jewellery, amazing suits, and the wealthy and relaxed, if somewhat pompous attitude all around him. He was clearly a guest, but he felt welcome.

He was half asleep when Dan joined him in that bed, and felt Dan's lips on his neck and throat, only half waking when Dan's hand went all over his body, and tonelessly groaning as Dan fucked him again, gentle but intense, and made him cum while he was still inside. Dan slept spooning him from behind, the good arm wrapped around him, with his hand on his abs, and Vadim felt himself lean back and be completely at peace.

* * *

Dan was deeply asleep in the middle of the night, exhausted from a day of travelling, running errands, a good meal, damn fine sex, and a heart-to-heart talk with the Baroness. He slept dreamlessly, while wrapped around Vadim, clinging to

the reassuring body heat and the deeply subconscious knowledge that he was holding his lover.

Sleep had him dragged under, until something stirred his unconscious mind. Not awake, but movement entered his thoughts. His body jerked by an outside force, and a sound that began to penetrate his sleeping mind. Yet Dan merely moved closer once more, pressed his body against Vadim's back, his arm tightening the embrace. Immediately falling back into the deep sleep, when the body in his arms stopped the movement and went rigid.

Restriction. Trapped. Sudden fear, overpowering sleep. Couldn't move a muscle. Darkness. Isolation. Not one conscious thought, but all pervading dread. He knew there was something, something outside, but knew nothing else, only that he couldn't move. Vadim fought the paralysis that held him in shackles, in chains, stretched out. He tensed, violently, every muscle in his body vibrating with the effort to shed sleep and its hold, and he heard the sound coming from somewhere, somewhere close, didn't realise his mouth was open, and his own throat was choking on the sound. A low, deep sound, more groan than scream, sleep deafened, sleep dulled, as his elbow suddenly moved, torn free, felt the constraints move and shift, almost free, and suddenly remembered something—madness, insanity, pain, but above all, fear so astute it made his heart race and his blood freeze. He awoke with a scream, pushing away whatever was there.

Dan woke with a start, disorientated, darkness surrounding him and wild thrashing. Arms, legs, a body pushing against him, away, forceful, flailing and the sound his sleeping mind had discarded was turning from terrified groan into something entirely inhuman. He did not know where he was at first, nor why, nor what, and instincts kicked in, throwing himself off the bed to get out of the way of the flailing limbs, before he registered what was happening.

Hitting the floor hard, he woke fully as the most horrifying scream tore through his senses. Blindly scrabbling for his weapons before his mind caught on where the fuck he was. "Vadim!" Dan shouted, fumbling for the light, his hand shaking.

Vadim tossed the covers away, couldn't stand anything close, couldn't be touched, and was conscious enough to fall silent. Wiped his face, hand came away wet. Tears. Sweat. He had no idea. Could have been blood. Where. Not the hole. Not the tin hut. Had no idea where he was, felt lost, disorientated, like somebody

had transported him in his sleep and left him. He couldn't make any sense out of it. He stood, needed to stand, needed to be off the bed.

Light flooded the room when Dan managed to find the switch and scrambled to his feet. Staring wide eyed at Vadim, breathing hard. "What the fuck happened?"

Vadim stood, breathing heavily, holding his sides like he could feel punches and kicks, heart racing so hard it felt like he'd throw up. Wrestling the fear. Almost tore the blinds off as he fumbled for them to open, frantic, needed air, needed, above all, space, mind still blank.

Dan took the few steps around the foot of the bed and stopped close to the other. His good hand on Vadim's arm, trying to calm him, with Vadim close to punching him. Could Dan not see he *needed* fucking air. Grew only more frantic, more nauseous as he had to struggle against Dan first. "Let me..." speaking Russian, didn't notice, didn't make sense, only tried to get the windows open.

"What the hell happened! Talk to me." Wrapping his other arm around the broad, shaking shoulders, Dan did not understand what Vadim was trying to do, nor how, nor why. Nothing made sense. Vadim's skin was pale, cold and clammy when touched, and Dan could feel the heart racing beneath his hands.

Every muscle inside Vadim clenched at the touch, could absolutely not stand being restricted, being touched, feeling anything on his wet skin. "Don't... please. Don't." Knew, however, with the certainty of a condemned man that his wishes didn't matter. That he was, ultimately, powerless.

"Don't *what!*" Dan's thoughts raced, lost in confusion, but he did take one step back, let go of Vadim. Felt tension, sweat, desperation in the other, the scent of...fear. "What the fuck is going on with you!" The helplessness gave an aggressive edge to Dan's voice.

"Don't...touch me." Vadim blinked as he realised what he'd almost said. Don't hit me. He expected punches and kicks, couldn't face Dan, Dan, who'd never hit him, not now, and still somehow, was afraid and didn't know of what. Holding his hands up in the age-old gesture of peaceful intentions, Dan took another step back. "I won't touch you. It's OK. Won't even come close. I'm sorry, Vadim. Won't touch you. OK?" He had no idea what he was doing, just that he had to calm Vadim, no matter if what he said was the exact opposite to what he wanted to do. Hold, touch, and stop this madness.

“O...kay.” Vadim stared at the window, but suddenly at a loss. Realised, as his mind caught up amidst the racing heart and the nausea clenching his guts. “Just...nightmare.” Admitting defeat. It was back. He groaned, wiping his face. Nothing new. He was dripping sweat. Again.

“OK.” Dan kept his hands where they were. Nothing was OK, though, nothing at all. “Nightmare.” His thoughts were racing, he didn’t want them to make sense, but they were starting to come together. “How often? It’s...” puzzle pieces suddenly fell into place, “they told me, back in camp, you were screaming at night. Is it the same nightmares?”

Vadim swallowed, kept half an eye on Dan and half on the window. The acute panic had blunted, instead, shame began replacing the dread. Regret. “I don’t know. I can’t remember. Just...can’t remember.” Wiped his chest, came away with what felt like a handful of sweat.

Dan had no idea how to handle this, had to act on instinct. He nodded, gesturing to the blinds but did not move any closer. “If you want to open them, there are a couple of buttons. Push the black one for the blinds and the other one releases the lock for the window.” He took a further step away, until he could sit down on the edge of the bed. Far away enough, he figured.

Vadim looked at the window, reached for it, but his hands shook badly, and he was rattled. Wasn’t sure he’d understood the explanation. Buttons. He stepped back, shook his head. “It’s...alright.” Windows. Dangerous. But not here. No sniper. No camera. Windows were not dangerous unless he was on duty. But it was deeply ingrained, part of him, like the pigments of his skin.

“Want to tell me what you remember, if anything?”

“I don’t remember. It’s just...emotions. Nothing hunting me. It’s not falling. It’s...just bad.” Switching back to English in mid-sentence, brow dark with concentration. So, he screamed in Russian. Well, that at least made sense. “Do you want to take a shower, maybe? You look cold. But anything, really. Up to you. Anything.”

“Just...calm. Quiet.” Vadim stood there, breathing, waiting for his heart to return to normal, but it took forever, like he’d just run a marathon. “Just...understand I’m awake.”

“OK.” Dan nodded, things were even less OK than before, but he needed time to make sense of any of everything, and most of all this helplessness, which

he didn't know how to deal with. So he sat, quietly, until the minutes passed by and he could not bear it anymore. Needed to do something, so he finally got up and to the tray with the kettle, preparing everything to make a brew. Busying himself as he would have done in the Afghan mountains.

Vadim watched Dan's motions, managed to sit down and place his hands on his thighs, suddenly exhausted. Tea. Brilliant idea. Like the doctor. Nothing a good tea couldn't make better. Nightmare fading, and the fear remained an astute memory, but would be gone tomorrow. "That's the...trauma," he murmured. "Stress reaction. It's..." my broken mind. "...a recurring condition. I'm sorry. It's not...I can't control it. It just happens. Sorry I woke you."

"No, that's alright." Dan was just glad Vadim was talking to him. The kettle boiled and he poured a couple of cups, carrying them over to the bed. Handing one to Vadim, who took the tea, mainly to hold it. Comforting. "Can I sit next to you? I won't touch. Promise." Dan felt like a right idiot, so utterly out of his depth.

Vadim gave a tired smile. "It's okay. I'm calming down." Reaching out to touch Dan's shoulder, briefly, still didn't want an embrace or anything quite that close, but could touch Dan, at least. Fuck. Touching his lover. Another thing Konstantinov had broken. That hurt and went deep, and Vadim was surprised how much that did actually hurt. Dan meekly staying away, and him wanting Dan there, at arm's length, at least for a little while.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Just...be there when it happens?" Vadim swallowed hard. "Fuck, I hate this, but...seems I am a nutcase. Sorry, Dan. I hate this when it happens. But being alone is...far worse." Lying awake at night, feeling tears run down my face and knowing you won't touch me because you hate me. That's far worse. "I'll always be there. Always. I have no intention to spend my nights apart from you. Ever again. As long as it's in my power to do anything about it, I will sleep beside you. You understand?"

"I do. And that's...good. It is. It wears off. It might...stop one day. This can't go on forever, can it?" Can it?

Dan managed to smile a little. "No, it can't." As if he had the foggiest idea, but by all that was fair and right this shouldn't go on forever. "Remember the bullet? You won't get rid of me, you'd have to kill me to do so."

Vadim smiled back. “And if I leave, just shoot me. It’s a deal.” And it makes a lot of sense, because without you, my life will be just a nightmare, and nothing else.

“I will.” Dan smiled, nothing but utterly serious. Sipping his tea, he looked straight ahead, at the drawn blinds that were bathed in golden-warm light from the table lamp. Sensing the body beside him but not touching, not daring to. Remembered the Baroness’ words, ‘give him time, Dan, time and space’. He would, even if he didn’t believe in ‘and they lived happily ever after’. It was a lie, just as much as ‘love conquers all’ or the ever present ‘love heals all wounds’. It didn’t. He knew that now, and accepted it. It just didn’t, and in the end, they were two naked men, sitting close, and unable to touch.

How he fucking hated the past that night.

* * *

Late the next morning Dan took off to the Baroness’ doc, reluctantly, even though sometime that night Vadim had calmed down and went back to bed. After a short while rolling over and grabbing Dan to sleep once more wrapped around.

He was going to be out until after lunch, meaning to get into the city centre on a minor shopping spree on his own, which had nothing to do with Vadim’s earlier one. It was all ‘manly man’s’ shopping instead of painful agony. It was late morning, a couple of hours after Dan had left, when Vadim heard the sound of the Ambassador’s steps along the poolside.

He raised a hand and lifted the towel, wet to cool his face. Found it hard to cope with the heat that seemed oddly more intense than Thailand, even though he was lying in the shade and had just minutes ago climbed out of the pool. Wearing his swimming trunks and a towel over his groin, he looked to the side, and, recognizing the feet, took the towel off, dropped it to the ground and sat up. “Ma’am.”

She smiled at him, inclining her head. “Mr Krasnorada, I was wondering if you were so inclined as to take some refreshments with me? I realise I am a poor substitute for Dan’s charming presence, but I can offer cold lemonade and fruit to combat this heat.”

Vadim gave a smile. “Most certainly. Before I fall asleep and bake to death.” He stood, shaking his heat-dazed head, then tied the towel around his hips, for modesty’s sake, and hoped she wouldn’t see his back. Or at least not speak Russian. Not exactly a view for polite society.

“Excellent.” She smiled and clasped her hands before retreating along the pool, expecting Vadim to follow. The same table was laid out that had been used the day before. Comfortably in the shade and with fans blowing a gently cooling breeze. Freshly pressed lemonade stood in a jug that was frosted with condensation, as well as bottles of mineral water and a pot of tea, together with fruit, cut into bites, and the most classic of all nibbles: cucumber sandwiches.

“Please, do take a seat.” She indicated the chair opposite to her as she sat down. “Juice, water or tea?”

Vadim settled, his gaze resting for a moment on the sandwiches. It was the first time he didn’t read about them, but actually saw them with his own eyes. “Water will do, thanks.” Wasn’t sure whether he should serve the drinks, felt out of his depth and decided to let things happen.

She nodded, filled a glass and handed it over, while smiling. “There certainly is nothing better than pure water, but I do admit to a weakness for fresh fruit juice.” Leaning forward a little, as if conspiring, “especially with a dash of brandy in it.”

“Used to be tea with a shot of vodka for myself, but it’s too hot for that.” Vadim grinned. “Ah, that’s much better,” he murmured as he took a deep swallow from the glass, feeling the cold water run down towards his stomach. “I’m hoping I don’t keep you from any important work?”

“Not at all.” Sipping on her own juice, “I was hoping you had some time for a light snack. I was looking for an opportunity to tell you how delighted I am you are here—with Dan. I just hope it is not too boring for you here in the embassy.” Gesturing to the nibbles, she took a sandwich herself.

Vadim shook his head. “I’ve served in an Eagle’s Nest. I don’t know boredom.” Don’t think isolation cell. Don’t think hole. Think Afghanistan. Afghanistan is safe. “And besides, I was curious. Well, in a way, I still am. You’re the only one of...” He paused, but saw in her face it would most likely be alright. “...Dan’s friends I’ve met. The others are...well, mercenaries. One cannot expect too much of that ilk, I suppose.”

She chuckled lightly, while elegantly making her way through the sandwich. “You struck me as a man, unlike Dan, who has a love of literature and, perhaps, the other fine arts. Am I right or am I wrong?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “Don’t tell Dan, but I even like ballet.” His father would smile now, if there was pride left in that old man. Pride when his only son had turned out to be a faggot. Defective. A Soviet, and a henchman for a regime he despised. Failed him twice. “I had a lot of time to read...our classical writers, of course, but I very much appreciate English for its simple elegance. Much easier to learn than Russian.”

“I must say, if I may,” she smiled, “your English has improved in leaps and bounds. You have certainly mastered the language since I last spoke to you.” Diplomatically leaving out the circumstances and anything else.

Vadim nodded. “I guess that’s because I think in English these days. It makes the language flow differently and feel more natural.” Every now and then, Russian thoughts did crop up, mostly when he was alone, or suddenly confronted with Russian, but other than that, he stuck to English. It gave him more control.

“Have you ever read the works of our great bard, William Shakespeare? If you are interested, I have the complete volumes here.”

“It wouldn’t hurt brushing up on Shakespeare. He was translated to Russian, I read a few of the plays...my father had an extensive library. I used to prefer the darker plays, the tragedies. Titus Andronicus, Macbeth, and some of the others that were bloodthirsty. The Merchant of Venice?”

“Ah, yes, what genius and what brilliance. Demanding the pound of flesh, with words and sentences concentrating on the impossible and making it believable to the audience. All human, each and every of the motivations, all so very human. Power, pain, greed, anger, revenge, and finally mercy.” Her gaze slipped away for a moment, towards the beautiful vegetation. She leaned back in the chair. “Sadly, I have not been able to read the great Russian authors in their mother tongue, only in translations.”

“Great thoughts translate into any language...much of the beauty gets lost, though.” Reading Bulgakov in English was probably a real pain. Somehow, that was a difficult thought. As if he was losing something when he kept to English. Something that had to do with beauty.

“In that case, please do help yourself to my library. Sadly, Dan never did, and that with his aptitude for languages. But if he were a bookworm, then he would probably not be who he is.” Her warm chuckle made light work of whatever lay beneath her words. “And I believe that would be a shame.”

Vadim nodded. “Thank you kindly, Ma’am. I don’t read much these days, but maybe I find the...” strength, “calm to have a look.” Inclining his head. “Dan never struck me as a man of theory or great thoughts, even though that is... uhm, not very flattering. Maybe he’ll find access to it one day, but I wouldn’t bet a pay check on it.”

She laughed quietly, shaking her head. “I can see, Mr Krasnorada, you do not hold out much hope for him.” She folded her hands in her lap, eyes sparkling with mirth. “Or can you truly imagine Dan sitting and reading ‘Love’s Labour Lost’, ‘Paradise Lost’ or ‘Sons and Lovers’? And I am only alluding to native English works.” Leaving forward, she took her glass, taking a delicate sip, smiling.

Hope. What an odd thing to say. “Dan prefers the mountains to paper. And the desert.” And skin, he thought, suddenly. Dan was a man of real things, of things outside his head, outside himself. “Like a mystic, looking for god, in an age without gods,” he murmured.

Placing the glass back down, she leaned forward once more, this time to look at Vadim, with that same smile on her face. Warm, a smile not many ever saw. “You really do love him, don’t you?” the Baroness said quietly. Vadim blinked, then looked to the side, without seeing colours and patterns, but it helped him find words. Speaking about love without cliché, without borrowing somebody else’s well-worn words that were maybe too comfortable, that was the true challenge. “Dan changed me in ways that stripped the man away I wanted to be, and the man I was made to be, and the man I was expected to be. He skinned me alive, and left only...somebody who,” he breathed, but barely, “...can live and die now, like a human being, not an automaton, not somebody else’s creation. Dan took my fear of death. I can’t die now. I know I’m immortal.”

“Immortal?” She said quietly, sitting still. “Your soul? Your being?”

“I don’t believe there’s anything like a soul. But I believe most people are asleep. They aren’t even aware what they are, or that they are alive. And we are all scared to die, so when it happens we scream for our mothers and clutch our guts because we’re scared. I’m not. I’m not afraid of death. The only thing I’m afraid of

is losing Dan.” But if that happens, he thought, Dan might just keep the promise and kill him on the way out.

She nodded without saying a word, her eyes on the man before her. Eyes that were clear and deeply intelligent, probing in a tender way.

“I’m not sure it makes sense. But death isn’t bad. It’s the fear, and just the fear. So when you lose that...it’s like death doesn’t exist anymore. It stops having an impact.”

“But if he left you, what then? Could you exist without him?” Her words came quietly, their meaning veiled.

Vadim inhaled. “Somehow I did, didn’t I? I promised him to live. And there are...people that might miss me if I killed myself. Family. What’s...left.” His brow darkened. “I think they would...be there if there was nothing else left.”

“Ah,” she exhaled quietly, “this is why.” She shook her head in a near aborted movement before fixing her gaze once more onto him. “In prison, did the promise sustain you?” Straightforward, and to the point, but with the most careful tone and voice.

“I’m not sure.” Vadim felt sudden tension rise. “A...wide black river with... just one floating log. Yes, and no. It was too easy to...lose sight of.” And lose all strength to think, and make decisions, and do anything but simply endure, drawing breath after breath like an animal.

“I am sorry.” She said after a pause, with the same gentle voice. “I did not mean to upset you. I guess...” hesitating, so very much unlike her, “I guess I simply care about you, Mr Krasnorada, even though I do not know you very well. No, not at all.”

Vadim paused and met her gaze, wondering why on earth she cared, and even said that to him. Crossing lines. Strangely, he didn’t mind. She was Dan’s friend, and that brought her close. He suddenly smiled, one of those strange bright smiles he’d almost forgotten how to smile. “I think you do know me. Better than my superiors ever did. You’ve seen me...begging, and hurt, and helpless, and insecure. That’s...a lot more than most people have ever seen me be.”

“You do have a very valid point.” Inclining her head, she smiled. “I have never, though, seen you anything but strong.” Adding, because anything but the truth would not do, “except once. And even then, Mr Krasnorada, I believe even

then you showed strength. Walking away was—what I then thought—the coward’s way, but in retrospect I was very much wrong.”

Vadim frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Well,” she shifted in her seat, “if you had stayed I dare not think what might have happened, because of our inability to understand. As I said to you before, I apologise for having dragged you to that dinner reception, probably the worst I could have done.”

“Please. It’s forgiven and forgotten.”

Nodding to herself as she gathered her thoughts. “And yet you healed enough to have the strength to face your demons—or whatever you might wish to call this—and you sought contact with me. More so, you succeeded in what was clearly not ‘just’ a physical challenge, but most of all a mental one. Selection, Mr Krasnorada, as you must know best of all, is essentially more about the mind than anything else.” Pausing, she leaned back in her seat, and her smile was somewhat melancholy. “And of course, owing to my meddling presence the first encounter with Dan was anything but pleasant. Yet, somehow, you got through it all. You and Dan, and here you are.”

It was all true, challenges, and how lucky he had been in the end. “No. It... took a while before we even spoke to each other without shouting.” Or snarling.

Another pause, tinged with a mild chuckle and a shake of her head, “love conquers all? I wouldn’t have thought so, to be honest. I am a realist.”

“Love can be like a commanding officer...it’s unfair, random, cruel, but it gets you through the war, somehow, gets you where you have to be.” Vadim smiled again. “I read some goddesses are both goddesses of love and war. I think that’s about right.” He gave a short laugh and shook his head.

“But what does that make the gods, then?” She leaned closer.

“I don’t know...I’m pretty much an atheist. Probably the only thing I share with my father.” He frowned, felt it was strange to bring the old man up in conversation.

Her eyes flickered across the way, towards the entrance to the patio, as she sat up with a smile that made her almost look youthful. “You don’t even believe in this one?” One hand lifted, elegantly, to casually point towards the man who was stepping through the door. Shades, knee-length shorts, shirt, and brilliant white plaster. Plus a carrier bag in his hand.

Vadim suddenly smiled, turning to look back. "Some god of war and love you are, Dan." He chided, laughing. "Let me take that." Moving to take the bag off his lover. Partner. Reason to live.

"Huh?" Dan's brows crept over the top of his shades as he reached the table. "What are you talking about?"

"Everything and nothing, really," murmured Vadim and briefly touched Dan's shoulder, while Dan allowed him to take the bag. It was quite heavy, full of techno gadgets and goodies.

Dan found his manners again as he greeted the Baroness, who smiled at him. The sun caught a glint of something he was wearing around his neck, as Dan sat down in the empty chair between the two. "Left anything for me? Especially now that I seem to have become a god?" He grinned at each of them.

"Accept our humble offerings," Vadim said, gesturing at the food. "Good hunting?"

"I'd say so." Dan held up his gleaming white plaster, "I got a fresh makeover in the bargain." He leaned closer to the Baroness, grinning as he pushed up his shades so he could look at her with his own eyes and no barrier in between.

"That doctor of yours, Ma'am, he is a very thorough fellow, aye? And there I was, thinking he'd only check my wrist and not all of the rest of me. Inside and out."

To her credit, the lady did not even try to argue. She merely chuckled lightly as she shook her head. "You have to forgive me, Dan, but I cannot stop taking care of those close to my heart."

Dan smiled, reaching for her hand with his good one and placing a light kiss on top of hers while his shades fell back over his eyes, spoiling the scene somewhat.

She seemed mildly surprised but merely smiled before gently extricating her hand and standing up, smoothing her skirt. "I think it is time for me, my dear friends, to leave you to your well deserved holiday, while I take care of some business. I shall see you tonight for a light supper, if you don't have any other plans."

"No, we'd be delighted." Vadim indicated a bow and smiled, glancing sideways at Dan. "It's a rare delight to see Dan behave so well, too. Please."

Dan managed to murmur “fuck you” with nothing but the corner of his lips, as she laughed lightly.

“In that case, gentlemen, I shall see you at 6:30 PM tonight.” She nodded to both of them, “until then.” With that she left, her heels clacking along the stone-tiled ground.

“You bastard.” Dan grinned the moment she was out of earshot.

Vadim raised his hands, professing innocence. “Why? She obviously enjoys your company, and I obviously enjoy seeing you struggle with the assortment of cutlery. Everybody wins.”

“Aye, except for me.” Dan managed to put on his best pout cum distraught face as he settled back into the chair, while hoovering food off the plates.

“Besides,” chewing while talking, “I have you know I bloody well know what cutlery to use when. I realise you think I’m an oaf, but I’m at least a well trained one.” Shutting himself up with another mouthful.

Vadim paused and looked at him, blankly, trying to understand whether he’d gone too far, didn’t know whether this was an accusation of arrogance, or...whatever else. “Oaf?”

“Aye, oaf, as in simpleton, dunce, blockhead, uneducated bozo, stupido, and totally unsophisticated idiot.” Dan started to laugh.

“A peasant.” Vadim smiled, finding Dan’s laugh, again, infectious. “Country bumpkin.”

“Exactly.” Dan thumped Vadim’s shoulder in a mock punch. “That’s me. Peasant. Straight from a small village in the Scottish Highlands. As sophisticated as a bullet, I am.”

Vadim smiled. “There’s much to be said for simplicity.” Leaning closer, then moved the chair so he could be close enough to feel Dan’s heat, hand on Dan’s chest, and he leaned his head against Dan’s. “It’s effective, healthy, and natural. And very often, I don’t want rhetoric.”

“Guess I’m lucky then, aye?” Dan murmured, paused, glancing towards the carrier bag. “Mmmm...lucky enough for the special purchase I bought today?”

“Special purchase?” Vadim straightened again and stood to bring the bag over, handing it to Dan. “What’s that?”

The bag on his lap, Dan rummaged with his good hand until he found what he had been looking for. “Well...that would be this, then.” Pulling out a large tub of Vaseline, he grinned, somewhat crookedly.

Vadim glanced around, but nobody was there to take offence at the possibility these tall military gentlemen might possibly indulge in physical acts that required Vaseline. “Here?” He cleared his throat. “In our...quarters?”

“Aye, here. Where else would you find that much privacy and safety?”

Pushing the shades off his eyes to let them sit atop his wild hair, Dan cocked his head. “In fact, do you actually know what I bought this for?”

I can guess. Vadim glanced around again. “Somehow, I think it’s not what I think it is? Correct?”

“That entirely depends on what you are thinking.” Dan smirked.

“I guess something we haven’t done here...so far.” As if he stood any chance to say no. As if he wanted to say no.

“I’d say it’s not just something we haven’t done so far *here*, but something we haven’t done. Full stop. Not ever, since...” Not ever that I remember it. Not truly.

Vadim glanced over his shoulder. “What is it?”

“A large tub of Vaseline.” Dan stated the obvious, deadpan.

Vadim groaned. “Yes. I mean what is it we haven’t done?”

Now, finally, it was up to Dan to falter in the midst of his usual cockiness. Swallowing first, he grinned, almost as bright and toothy as ever. “I thought ...” glancing behind him to check no one was in earshot. “It’s been so long. That...well,” grinned again, before he dropped the Vaseline into Vadim’s lap.

“Remember the cave? One of many, but you brought me back from the dead.”

The dead. A pile of dead. A fucking mass grave of dead Mujas. Vadim knew exactly the moment Dan mentioned it. Breath catching.

“I...I want you to do the same. I want to know. And, damn, want to feel you.” Adding with an almost defiant jerk of his chin, “aye?”

“Aye.” Not thinking. Not actually remembering where he’d learnt that and how Dan had reacted, but caught up in Dan wanting that, wanted to...be...what?

Helpless? Vadim took the Vaseline and dropped it into the bag. “Let’s go upstairs...”

“Uh...” looking up, Dan shook his head, with an almost comical expression of deepest regret. “Fear we can’t. Remember, light dinner? At 1830 hours?” Adding with deeply felt conviction, “fuck!”

“Shit. True.” Cancellation was not an issue. So, again, it would be a shower, rest, getting dressed, and then some time with Dan. Likely the whole night. No problem, there were no duties, they had time, and he could savour it. Let Dan savour it, mostly. “Well. We just...keep that thought.”

“I’m not going to survive that.” Dan’s hand twisted into the carrier bag on Vadim’s lap. “Shit. Can’t we go upstairs for a quickie?”

Vadim smiled. Anticipation was a dish best served...well. In several courses. “We shouldn’t ruin it with a quickie,” he murmured into Dan’s ear. “I’d love to, but I’d rather take my time.”

“Aye.” Dan swallowed, staring straight ahead. “What the fuck have I actually asked you to do?” Murmured, as if talking to himself. About to bolt, he suddenly stood up from the chair, nearly knocking the china dishes off the petite table.

Vadim quickly reached out to steady the table and then stood, grabbing the bag. “Never mind, Dan. Think of something else. I’ll take care of the rest.” It was about taking care. Taking care of a need, a desire, a wish, his lover, his life. The sudden wave of tenderness hurt like a bitch and made his voice fail. Seeing Dan flustered. He placed a hand on Dan’s shoulder. “Trust me with that.”

Dan stopped in mid motion, looking at Vadim with a seriousness unlike himself. Looking for a long time, until he slowly pushed the shades up, baring his dark eyes. “OK.” Just that, and a corner of his lips twitched up in a smile, entirely self conscious. “In that case, what are we going to do until dinner? I’m horny as hell. Have been all day long. Can’t stop thinking. Wondering. Imagining. And haven’t got a fucking clue, why.”

“Swimming, or a shower?”

“With that goddamned raging hard-on?” Dan snatched with his good hand for Vadim’s, briefly pressing it onto his crotch, earning an affectionate squeeze. Wearing briefs for once, which hid the obvious beneath those baggy Bermuda shorts.

“Well...It’s reasonably cold water.” Vadim smiled. “Just love your skin when it’s wet, did I ever tell you that?”

Dan widened his eyes in mock surprise. “Do you?” Moving closer. Too close, in fact. “You’d think after eleven years I should be able to remember if you did. Seems I’m an old man, booze and sex have eaten my brain.”

Vadim stood his ground and nodded, meeting Dan’s gaze. “I don’t mind repeating it, though. Ever since the hamam, I love how your skin looks when wet. I like the smell of it when it’s wet, and the taste.”

Dan smiled. “Aye, I remember the hamam.” Lifting his hand to Vadim’s face, fingertips touching the well-known planes and angles. A touch as gentle as a first-time lover’s, and he leaned in, a touch of lips on lips. Chaste in its simplicity. If it was witnessed by others, Dan did not care. “Best wrap up my plaster cast then,” he murmured, “right, old man?”

Vadim smiled, wanted to hold Dan, but just squeezed his shoulder. “Yes. She did notice you ruined the other plaster.” He gestured towards the exit. “Let’s head upstairs.”

Dan nodded, and followed Vadim.

It was hard not to jump the other’s bones, once they were in the room, but as much as Dan tried to make Vadim forget his resolution, as much did Vadim remember. They never made it into the pool, the large tub in their private bath a more convenient alternative for Dan’s plastered wrist, and a more comfortable one as well. Dinner time arrived, and by then, Dan wanted nothing but wolf some food down and take Vadim upstairs, or run away and never mention this idiotic notion of his again. One of those two, but really not the third option, which was sitting nicely at a beautifully laid out table, making conversation with a cultured lady, while indulging in exquisite food and sipping wine. Sipping...not so much in Dan’s case, who was indulging more in the plonk than in anything else.

Vadim caught himself smiling. If he hadn’t known better, he’d had thought Dan was nervous. Or maybe he was. Dan certainly didn’t drink quite that fiercely, normally. He laid a solid foundation himself, though, eating with a good appetite, and only drinking enough wine to be slightly on the mellow side. Chatting about this and that, as if part of his mind wasn’t occupied by the thought of Dan. Dan on the bed, spread out. This was probably what a real honeymoon felt like—the whole world just focussed on one thing, two people, them, and nobody else, and Vadim tried his best to not be rude and mask the extent of his focus on Dan. Spreading out the anticipation, but also genuinely enjoying the company. An odd mix of emotions,

sharp and crystal clear, this was really happening, and he savoured being able to feel that and to be so aware of himself—and Dan.

Dan was going through the wine at a rate of knots, getting rather merry and shutting up except for the odd comment. Still shovelling the food down as if there was no tomorrow, but his alcohol consumption caused even the Baroness to raise a brow with an amused smile. No comment, though, she remained as discreetly quiet about the odd behaviour, as she remained pleasantly engaged in conversation.

Dan began shifting in his seat, fingers toying relentlessly with the stem of the glass, and his face betraying a slight flush, while his dark eyes seemed unfocused on anything outside, drawn into his own thoughts. Thoughts he didn't know what to do with, and couldn't explain to himself why they had become so important, and why he had to act on them. Curiosity killed the cat, most likely, or simply an affirmation, fully, completely, and utterly unmistakably, that Vadim truly was back. That he would stay, was his, and nothing and no one could come in between.

Eventually, desert was over, and the Baroness excused herself, maybe to leave them to their own devices, or maybe she was actually tired—Vadim found it impossible to tell. It felt early to him, and he stood and smiled and thanked her for the company and the meal, while Dan did his best to be polite as well. Once she'd left the room, Vadim nodded to Dan, smiling. "You think you can walk, or do I have to carry you?"

"Uhm..." Weaving a little, Dan looked at Vadim with a drunken smile. Drunk...but not piss-drunk. "Can we take the bottle with us?" Pointing to the three quarter full bottle of wine beside him.

"I don't think they count them here."

"If..." a tiny hiccup forced Dan to pause, "if I stagger too much, you going to carry me over the threshold of our room?" Baring his teeth in a broad, clumsy grin.

Vadim laughed and extended a hand. "Come on. I'm sure you'll manage." Dan clamped the bottle under his arm, took Vadim's hand, and let himself get dragged onto his feet, where he swayed for a moment, before he had himself back under control. "Am not a lightweight," murmured, "just...damn. Booze seemed like a bloody good idea."

Vadim shook his head, chuckling, and manoeuvred Dan up the stairs, with plenty of patience, and interrupted with the occasional re-fit of his arm under Dan's shoulder. "No, not a lightweight," he conceded.

Once in the room, Dan flopped onto the bed, just about managing not to spill the red wine. The bottle ended on the floor, in dangerous proximity to his feet. Legs open, arms in his back to support himself with his good hand, looking up. "I'm so fucking tired of these nice clothes." He shook the mop of dark hair and grin upwards at Vadim.

"Are you?" Vadim leaned down to move the bottle away from the feet and out of reach, supporting himself on one knee. "Tired of the shoes, too?" Unlacing them, and pulling them off the heels, one by one, setting them to the side. He pulled the socks off and slid his hands up the backs of Dan's feet towards his calves. "Hmmm. I think I'll let you off then. You've been all cooperative today."

"What do you mean?" Dan smiled drunkenly. Lifting his legs, just a bit, to allow further access, demanding more of the touch. At the same time sliding backwards, until he almost lay on the bed. Peering at Vadim, "cooperative in what?"

Vadim smiled and slid his hands further up, towards Dan's belt and button, opening his trousers and then pulling them down when Dan lifted his hips, slowly, with ease and consideration. "Wearing nice clothes...behaving well...not trying for a 'quickie' if we've decided to do something else...and generally being good company. A bit silent, and a bit drunk, but those are minor glitches."

"Eh!" Dan complained, "you make me sound like a naughty boy who behaved kind of OK for once, which makes you sound like...my daddy?" The toothy grin crept back into his face, lighting it up, lines, eyes, scar and all. Sitting half naked, his bare arse on the cool bed linen, an awfully nice sensation. "What kind of daddy are you, though? Or...a granddaddy?"

Vadim laughed. "I guess I'm an evil daddy. Because I plan to take full advantage of you." Just joking, nothing of that actually went deeper than the joke, no reflexes, no thought of the title of older soldiers, no thought of his kids. This was only between him and Dan. He stood and pulled the jacket from the other's body, propping him up, handling him like a wounded or unconscious man, then slid in behind Dan to unbutton the shirt.

“If that’s your evil side, I could get used to it.” Dan grinned, eyes closing. Pure luxury of complete trust. Enough trust to...but he’d rather not think about it, and yet he still wanted to do it. This strange yearning to find out what it had really been like, and to know once and for all, if he could truly lose himself like that. Fully. Utterly. Without any reservations. His cock made itself known at that thought, nestled in the neatly trimmed dark curls, it started to show an unmistakable interest. “Vadim?” Dan craned his head to catch a glimpse. Pleasantly floating, the wine was doing its work and smiling came easy. “If I on’t like it, it’s no prob, aye?”

Vadim embraced him from behind, chest against Dan’s back, just dropping the shirt to the side. “Problem?” The actual meaning filtered through, soaking part of his mind like water. “No. Of course not. Just tell me to stop. No problem. None at all.” Suddenly wondered whether Dan would say anything, or just be reckless like he had been, years ago, when Vadim had fucked him, as a challenge. *I want to know whether you can fuck me without raping me.* “I’m not...” like that anymore, he thought, but it wasn’t quite true. There had been the attack on Jean. He frowned, thought but Dan was different. If it was about feelings, everything was different. “We’re trying it, if it feels wrong, we stop.”

“Aye.” Dan smiled, leaning back into the embrace. “That’s alright, then.” And it was, because Vadim wouldn’t think him a wuss and maybe, maybe he didn’t really know what he wanted anyway, but hell, he was going to do it. Even if he didn’t know why. Pulling one leg up on the bed, knee bent, he let himself fall back, closing his eyes. “I could do with some seduction, Russkie.” Murmured, his grin flashing through the strands of wild, stray hair. “You know, that seduction thing?”

Vadim smiled, again felt that intense tenderness that could be a pain, or better, an ache. He shed his own jacket, shirt, shoes, then rolled onto his side, stretched out very close to Dan, hand idly tracing down the other’s chest. “Not sure I’m any good at that,” he murmured, softly, fingers tracing the lines of Dan’s pecs, down to the sternum, then circling the nipples, shifting closer again. Strange, really, because he had no idea how it worked. It had been fierce, often a struggle, or had just happened, a touch that wasn’t pushed away, a mutual deal to get off. Knowledge more than guessing, daring, stalking.

“Mmmm...you’re doing just fine.” Dan murmured, eyes still closed as he stretched himself out, arms, legs, as if the bed, the man and all of the sex in the world just belonged to him, and him alone. “I don’t even crave a fag all that badly right now.” Flashing a lopsided grin, he searched blindly for Vadim’s neck, pulling him down into a kiss.

Vadim smiled, returning the kiss, rolling on top and still keeping his weight on his knees.

“I feel like a fucking virgin.” Dan broke the kiss at last, face flushed, eyes not quite focussed. The alcohol was mellowing everything, sight, sound, and most of all barriers. “Just a damn lot more willing.”

“I can tell.” Vadim pulled the bag closer that had been sitting innocently near the pillows, and fished out the Vaseline. He set up the tub close by, pried the lid off, and slid down Dan’s body, rubbing his face against Dan’s cock, breathing against his groin. “I’d suck you, but that would take the fun out of it ...”

“Aye...” Dan shuddered at touch and words, “but I want to know.” Why? Not sure, but he remembered keenly the tongue in his body, and dimly, the other sensation, the one that had once pulled him back from insanity. He wanted to know, and wanted to let himself go. Completely. His legs opened further, knees falling wide open on each side, and he felt a stab of lust at the way he bared himself. No one, no one else would ever get him to do this. Not even Jean and his light-hearted ways. No one, except the first one.

Vadim remembered the way Marc had lain there, and he reached for one of the pillows and tucked it under Dan’s ass, supporting it and changing the angle of the hips. “Right.” Taking a dollop of the Vaseline, he smeared it across Dan’s hole, smiling as his fingers circled the area, smoothing the jelly, warming it, and sliding it inside the heat, just a digit of two fingers, probing and testing.

“That’s...not bad...for starters.” Dan breathed out, closing his eyes. The world was spinning, but the wine wasn’t to blame. “Don’t know when I started to *like* having things up my arse.” Murmured.

Vadim grinned at him. “Things? I mean, we had cock, tongue, hand...” Figuring that talking would make it easier to see when he crossed the line to pain. He gathered more Vaseline with his free hand, and pushed the two fingers deeper, moving them in and out and apart to loosen Dan up. “What other things, Dan?”

“Ah...” breathing out, Dan’s head moved back in his neck, as hidden tension relaxed away. “Not...really, but been thinking of dildos. Want to...to try them with you. More than just the candle.” Hips moving in tiniest motions, working with, not against, those fingers.

“With me or on me?” Vadim watched Dan, studying how his body tensed, but in good ways. Dan was opening up, ready for more. He pulled a third finger close, fingertips in a triangle, and worked his way in again, adding enough Vaseline to make this fairly easy, but had to move in increments because Dan was tight, but not tense. The body just needed to yield, needed to accept. “On you.” The response was immediate, but when another finger was added, Dan’s brain seemed to have a different idea. “Both. Want to...to feel. You... me...” The wine was of no importance anymore, only those fingers counted, moving, pushing gently, probing further. Opening him up, making him accept their intrusion. Wanting it. Asking for more, as his hips lifted on their own, trying to push deeper.

Maybe he’d get to fuck Dan more often? Maybe? It was still mostly the other way round, even though Dan didn’t resist quite that much these days, didn’t seem quite that reluctant. “Yeah. We...have time.” Leaning in to kiss Dan’s knee, Vadim pushed deeper, small finger nestled with the others, thumb close, too, and as he felt the resistance grow, he twisted in a circular motion, and managed to slide deeper.

Dan groaned, turning his head. Eyes closed, he was entirely one with the sensations. Didn’t need to remember the way he had felt centred, pulled away from the insanity; could feel it right here, in his very middle. Lifting his knees further, his body wanted to do this while his mind remained quiet, submitting to the body. Trying to find leverage, he was holing his knees up with the good hand, trembling with the effort.

Vadim reached up with his free hand and placed Dan’s legs on his shoulders, carrying the weight as Dan relaxed with a sigh. “Calm. It’s all good,” he murmured, kissing the left leg as he moved his head to the side. Twisting the arm slightly to get deeper—this was the line of knuckles, the fingers and the thumb, and he hardly got anywhere with this, so he pulled back again and began to work, feeling himself sweat with the concentration.

Unaware of the time, the way minutes were turning into an hour, while his body began to open up fully, Dan’s lips were parted, letting out low, guttural

moans. Nothing had ever been like this, deep inside, touched, as if he had nothing to hide, as if every secret was now Vadim's. His cock hard and strong, weeping, he didn't try to stroke himself, didn't want. This was time—time outside of everything else. Time to ground himself and Vadim, time to be one. Giving away the most precious gift he could: his endless trust, and every secret of his body.

At some point, the resistance just softened, and Vadim was amazed how easy the rest of his hand slid into the warmth, the heat, the powerful tightness, his fingers curling up as if by their own volition, forming a relaxed fist, tight, taut muscle all around. Vadim tried to move his fist, a few times, just to see what effect it had on Dan.

Incoherent sounds that had no meaning, except for lust, and Dan truly had lost himself, and found. Didn't know where he was, nor with whom, nor even who he was himself. Didn't matter. Names, who cared. Just the way his body had separated from his mind; and the way his lust stretched endlessly across hours, well into the night. His body covered with a thick sheen of sweat, he hadn't opened his eyes for an eternity, hadn't spoken a single meaningful word, and yet the sounds that came from his throat, his chest, were constant. The deep colour of his cock and balls, full to bursting, turned almost purple, as the night wore on.

Vadim smiled, felt strange, looking at Dan's blanked, ecstatic face, the way he squirmed on the bed, the breathing, those incoherent, nonsensical, low sounds. He moved his hand, slowly working deeper, and back, trying out which elicited more or a different reaction. He reached for Dan's cock, but dipped his hand into more Vaseline before that, then took hold of it, just stroking the underside, careful not to do too much, not quite sure what Dan felt and how much might be painful.

Dan's whole body shuddered, uncontrollably, and his stomach muscles, beneath the scars, contracted so hard, his breath became desperately harsh. Good hand clenching into a fist, his head was rolling from side to side, while panting through parted lips. Chest heaving, sweat gathering between his abs, tears were running from the corners of his closed eyes, when suddenly, as if hit by a thunderbolt, his whole body tensed, lifted, arched as if frozen in electric shock. He came, hard and high, and he screamed, overwhelmed. Too much, all too much, and all too good, when he finally crashed, and crashing hard. Barely conscious.

Vadim remembered that much—to pull free while Dan came, easing out slowly, but without lingering, didn't want to turn any of this into pain. He gently

lowered Dan's legs onto the bed, reached for a towel to wipe his hand and the Vaseline off Dan, and got off the bed, his back creaking from the slightly awkward position and the added weight. He walked around the bed, then lay down right next to Dan, pulling the light covers up, wrapping Dan into them and holding him, kissing his neck, the side of his throat.

Dan never woke up, not then, neither through the night. Sleep, dreamless, and never letting go of Vadim. One, at last.

1991 Chapter XXXI—Back to Base

September/October 1991, the Persian Gulf

Dan had been slouched in his seat, deep asleep, ever since they'd boarded the plane for the short flight across the desert from Dubai back to the camp near Kuwait. With his wrist needing another couple of weeks in plaster, duty wasn't upon him yet.

The plane was small, with two-seater rows, and his head had dropped onto Vadim's shoulder. Good hand resting on one muscular thigh, Dan snored softly into Vadim's ear, never waking up beyond a snuffle, even when the stewardess came to check if they needed anything. Life had been too good and cosy the last three weeks, and Mad Dog was as relaxed as a pampered pet.

Vadim leaned his head against Dan's, glancing up only when the stewardess passed. He didn't want to guess what she thought, but like everybody else, she most likely found Dan endearing in this state. He tried to concentrate on *The Economist*, but rolled it up eventually and stuffed it in the pocket in the seat before him. Still didn't manage to concentrate on printed words. He looked outside the window, seeing nothing, just barren desert. The flight was short, at least that, and Vadim touched Dan's hand when the plane was about to land.

"Whassup?" Dan's sleep-slurred speech turned the vowels and consonants into a parody of his usual accent. "Mmmmm..." Turning his head, he rubbed his face into Vadim's t-shirt, lips curving into a slow grin while his eyes remained closed. "Time for sex, yet?" Murmured.

Vadim ran his fingers over Dan's stubbly cheek. "I wish," he murmured back. "And unless we're talking the airports toilet, sex is out for at least another hour or so."

"Damn." Dan began to stretch, from the lower spine towards his neck, yawning in the process. "That means we're about to land, aye?"

"Aye."

Dan cracked one eye open, looking up at Vadim from his twisted position. "That also means the question is now 'your hut or mine'?" As in, living together? Vadim paused, then suddenly smiled. "I don't know. I'm not very attached to mine. And I get less visitors than you do."

Dan grinned, rolling his neck, then sitting up straight to fasten the seatbelt, or rather, to try fasten it one-handed, until Vadim reached over and closed it, by accident brushing Dan's groin.

"Those damn huts are too small for both our stuff. What about that, we use one for sleeping and...." Dan wagged his eyebrows and he produced a toothy grin, "and the other to store our kit? They aren't that far apart and we could throw both mattresses onto the floor to make it comfortable. Bloody beds are too narrow." Clearly, he had thought a lot about this.

Vadim smiled. "I guess the possibility of couples forming was not...thought when they designed them. Sounds good. We keep the emergency stuff where we are and use mine for storage."

Dan laughed, "Aye, couples. That'll be a shock for some of our favourite 'mates'." He glanced out of the window when the plane went into descend, poking Vadim's ribs with his elbow. "Midge is going to have a field day, but that stupid son of a bitch won't just have me or you to contend with, on our own. It'll be the two of us, and I can't see the wanker having the guts to confront us. Not even with his bunch of cronies for support."

Vadim paused, and the thought of those bastards seemed an odd weight. But Dan was right, of course. They'd do fine defending themselves. If they were attacked. It might just be rumour, gossip, and cutting remarks. "Well. They already established that I was your bitch."

"And that's a fucking load of bullshit." Dan's face had turned in an instant from relaxed grin to angry snarl, but it could just as easily smooth back into something else. "You're not, and that's that. Just don't give a shit what the arseholes say. Or punch them every time they *do* say something. Don't know, what's the better approach?"

Vadim smiled, seemingly still relaxed. "Just expect them to say it, that's all. We need to be prepared. It will all be behind our backs, and some likely to our faces. Teaching some a lesson would be good—just...pre-emptive measures. Gain the initiative."

"What you want me to do, walk into the Mess and break Midge's nose once we get back?" Dan flashed a feral smirk. "Or wait before he actually says it?" "Well, there's the CO. But I'm sure your friends would swear that Midge tried to ambush us and we only handed him his ass in self-defence."

Dan was leaning slightly forward, the ground coming closer as the plane was about to land on the desert airfield. “Sounds like fun, if you ask me.”

Vadim grinned. “Your idea of fun seems to have expanded somewhat...?”

“Well...” Dan’s words were drowned out by the sound of the plane touching ground, “if you had told me just a few days ago I’d ask you to fuck my arse with your fist and actually *enjoyed* it, I would have told you you’re fucking sick. So, aye, seems my idea of fun has expanded quite a lot recently.” Grinning, Dan settled back while the plane slowly rolled towards their parking station.

Vadim tensed and felt himself harden—Dan being so...unabashed and outspoken and them being out in the open. Oh fuck. “Yeah,” he murmured, forcing himself to think something else. Just. Dan’s reaction to what he’d done, and Dan demanding to try that again, and what it did to him, and to Vadim himself. “True...I used to be the more flexible one, once upon a time.”

Dan’s eyes remained focussed on Vadim for a long while, before a slow grin spread across his face. “Seems I’m the more flexible one, and bloody literally so. Who’d have thought this...” picking up Vadim’s wrist, lifting hand and arm for a brief moment, “fits in something so tight.” He wiggled briefly on his seat, as if to emphasise his words.

Vadim swallowed. Dan’s teasing wasn’t helping, and he leaned over to kiss him, one way to shut him up and also because he needed to. “You bastard,” murmuring against the other’s lips, while Dan was stunned at the public display of affection—and that in a non-western country to boot. “Any chance we...can have some more time before going back to camp?” Vadim asked.

“And where would that be?” Dan stayed as close as possible, “got the safe house, you want to carry the luggage there?”

“Yes. Why not. Safe houses have a tradition, don’t they?” Same place where he’d abducted Donahue? Probably. Vadim didn’t care, as long as it had a bed and was somewhat more protected than the tin hut.

Dan cocked a brow while Vadim opened his seatbelt, ready to leave the plane. “In that case, follow me, but...I guess you know the place.”

They grabbed their luggage from the plane, with the taped-up box of gadgets being taken straight to the camp, and they hailed a taxi just a little later. To Vadim, it was a blur and a haze, mainly staying somewhat behind Dan to not give

away what he felt and needed, not in this country, and definitely not in his profession.

The drive was short, once again back through twisted streets and small alleys until they reached the building that looked just like it had a month ago, before Dan had sent one jarhead and one Delta to the same place at the same time—not having a clue what had happened in the meanwhile. He was careful with the door, stepping inside after a few security measures, but the place seemed tidy and deserted in the shuttered gloom. Nothing gave any hints to who had occupied it last, except for...Dan grinned when his gaze fell onto a different blanket than the one he'd had left across the bunk and a stack of water bottles, US make. He turned to Vadim who had followed, then dropped the luggage and locked the door behind him. "So," Dan put his hands behind his back, standing with legs braced and an impetuous grin, "what do you want?"

Vadim dropped his bag, saw Dan assume that PT instructor stance, while hiding the cast from view. It was easy to imagine Dan was fine again and back to 100%. You know what I want, he thought, but realized suddenly it was a game. Dan asked in jest, or part jest. His eyes flicked over to the chair where he'd had that chat with Donahue, then, quicker, back. Remembered being tied up and beaten, remembered wrestling Dan to the ground and having him on top. The memories made things worse, better. "You. I've always wanted you."

Dan's grin widened, bouncing once on the balls of his feet, thrusting out his chest. "The question is, Vadim, *how* you want me. Right now."

Right now. Just...yeah *just* two years and a few months ago they would have stumbled to the bed, biting and kissing and groping and rubbing.

Would you like to suck me off, if you had the chance? Does that arouse you?

Vadim closed his eyes and lowered himself, slowly, onto his knees, his hands moved back, crossed in the small of his back, right fist closed, left hand firmly holding the wrist. Knees connected with the ground, eyes still closed, but fluttering, like something inside needed to see. Needed to see Dan. Vadim looked up. "I...want to suck you off."

"Oh shit." Dan breathed out, his voice hitched, instantly husky. The grin had vanished, replaced by something larger, darker, the instant lust like a punch to his guts. "Why do you want to suck my cock?" He took a step closer, slipped without thinking into a part of himself he'd almost forgotten. "What does it make

you feel?” His good hand on the button of his sand coloured jeans, working on the zipper.

You're a masochistic faggot. Degenerate.

Vadim shook his head. “I need...to remember I want this. How much I want this.” His face twitched. His own, free will. He could decide to do this. No force. He was offering. To his lover. “It gives me...power. Over you, over... myself, and...” Over the interrogator. Couldn’t speak it.

Dan swallowed, heard something in the voice that didn’t make immediate sense, would remember it later. “Damn right.” Pushing the trousers down, he stood naked, his cock clearly interested. “You take my strength away when you do that. Legs tremble, knees buckle and my thoughts are mush.” Raising his hand to touch the blond, short hair, Dan’s voice dropped to a murmur, “and that’s exactly why I’m a cocksucker. Not many understand the power, and it’s fucking arousing to bring another man off.”

Vadim looked up, Dan’s voice crawled up and down his spine, mostly down, made him tense, that voice—that tone—got him ready to be fucked, just got him in the mind for it. “Used...to do it for the power. Just...the power. It’s different now.” It’s the demons, as the doctor called it. “They haven’t taken that away.”

“I know.” Dan’s hand moved from the top of the head along the temple, “I remember.” Caressing the cheek, jaw line, then back to the hair once more. His touch became more intense, more demanding. “Hope you remember me, too. From the first ill-fated attempt, when you choked me, to the last deep-throated greed that almost made me cum.”

“I do. Fuck, I do.” Wanked so often to the one at knife point, imagined so often how you do it. Vadim opened his lips, gathered saliva in a too dry mouth, and moved forward. Just his head, hands still crossed on his back, to take the cock, suck on it to get it fully hard, and once it responded, Vadim pushed his head down hard, nearly forced it down his throat, concentrating only on the technique, denying the torturer any room in this as the heat filled him, the impossibly strength and the thickness that just took his breath.

Dan gasped and let his head fall back into his neck for a long moment. Hips moving forward towards that mouth, while his hand stayed in contact with the head. Not forcing, not holding, just feeling every movement. Connected. Images before

his closed eyes, memories, of caves, rooms, and the open. Nothing more potent, though, than the sight of Vadim, when he opened his eyes.

Vadim took him deep, several times, to get loosened up and get used to it again, then pulled back to concentrate on the head, sucking and rubbing it with his tongue, enjoying the taste, the touch communicating something to him, something that Dan's breathing pattern didn't. For once, the interrogator was not in this room, didn't stand between them, and Vadim felt a deep and desperate lust well up that he could allow now. His motions becoming stronger, positively fierce, taking Dan deep and powerful, fucking his own throat, and what discomfort there was, what restriction, only made him hungrier for it.

Dan lost control over his body, staring down at the sight, steadying himself with his hand that had slipped from Vadim's head to his shoulder. Moving in sync, not knowing who was setting the rhythm and who was following it, he felt his lust sharpen, deepen, settling in his guts and in his balls, making his knees unsteady and turning his movements desperate. His breath became as uncoordinated as his whole body, and he groaned, murmuring nonsensical sounds of encouragement and, strangely enough, gratitude. Yet all was forgotten when he felt his balls tighten, drawing up to his body and then suddenly, with a few harsh movements of his hips, he came with a barely suppressed sound, gasping Vadim's name, moaning while he shuddered.

Dan's knees almost locked, and he could hardly stand, wanting to just let go and slide onto the goddamned floor.

Vadim reached up to steady Dan by his hips, cleaning him up while swallowing the cum, then slowly releasing Dan to straighten again, placing an arm around him to pull him closer, and hold him. Felt utterly and completely at peace now that no amount of shouts of 'faggot' and derision could touch him. "We...need to report back tonight? Or tomorrow?"

Dan buried his face in the crook of Vadim's neck, inhaling the familiar scent of soap, fresh sweat, and that which was purely, deeply Vadim. "Tonight. Damn."

"Bad planning."

Dan chuckled lightly, felt exhausted in the most pleasant way. His whole body strumming with contentment. Murmuring against skin, "what do you want me to do for you in return?" Tongue 'accidentally' snaking out to trace a vein and

lap at salty, heated skin. Remembering the particular spots along Vadim's neck and behind the ear, that used to produce the most remarkable reactions.

Vadim tensed, hands nearly closing, fingers digging into Dan's back, and, yes, he was hard, and his cock twitched. He groaned and pressed Dan closer.

"Anything...just...anything. Could...lend that good hand..."

"Or I could lend you my throat." Dan's murmur returned to huskiness, while his good hand was working on the other's trousers. "Up to you. You just say. I'll be your whore." Didn't have a clue how the last word had slipped out, decided after a brief moment this was far too interesting a new game to bother about the ramifications. At least not just yet.

Vadim looked up, a sudden flash of something in his eyes, the blue intense as lightning just then, and the frown disappeared faster than it had come. He knew absolutely nothing about prostitutes, had never been there, no females to keep his cover, no males. Every conscript had been available, so why pay? But Dan, rendering a service. Dan...submitting to what he wanted.

Unconditionally. "Suck me," he murmured, hands sliding back to rest on Dan's shoulders, pushing him down. His face, flushed, and heavy eyelids hiding most of the emotion in his eyes.

"Aye." Dan didn't quite manage to open the zip and pull down the briefs one-handed. "Whatever you want." Looking up, the darkness of his eyes intensified as he worked on the zip while nuzzling cock and balls through the fabric, and Vadim wanted to help him, wanted to make it easy and get to the good part—when he suddenly realized this was already the good part. A great part. Excellent part.

"How do you want me to suck you." Mouthing the hard contours while pushing the trousers down, "Sir." Added, out of nowhere.

Vadim's stomach muscles tightened, every muscle in his body electrified at that word. Sir. The epitome of power. Part of him wanted to tie Dan up and throw him on the bed only to fuck him, hard and fierce, but he couldn't resist the lips. The eyes, that dark glance that invited and lured and seemed mostly waiting for something. "Deep," he said, voice rough. "And...fast." No patience, not with these stakes.

"Sir, yes, Sir." Uttered sharply, as if he were still in the Forces, Dan nodded, managed to pull the briefs down and free the cock, pressing his face against it,

revelling in the hard smoothness. The game mixed-up. Hustler, soldier, who the fuck cared. As long as he was right there, on his knees, about to lick and taste that cock and feel once again the heady power of the powerless. He'd meant to take his time, but he had his order and there was no preliminary niceness, no licking of the head and shaft, lapping at precum, toying with the sensitive opening. Just his lips, closing around the swollen tip, and his head, moving down, his throat, opening. Impossible to deep throat in the pace he was setting himself, but his good hand closed tightly around Vadim's cock, stroked with the same rhythm as his head and the suction was hard and unforgiving. Fucking himself fiercely.

Vadim couldn't help it, worse, didn't *want* to help it, instead placed both hands on Dan's head, against the back of it, knew how much he could ask and at the same time knew Dan would deal with it, and that he wouldn't last long, anyway, not at that speed, not with Dan doing this. He thrust forward, forcing Dan deeper, taking control, just like that, feeling everything inside tighten as the pressure came down harder, fucking Dan in hard, not very controlled thrusts, just. A few. More, and went rigid, came hard, while Dan was gagging around the intrusion. Vadim shuddering and sweating, legs weakened as he heard himself pant and groan like a horrible weight had been taken off his shoulders.

Dan didn't tense, though, not after the first reflex. Did the opposite instead, just let go. Strange, to simply let go. Relaxing with that cock down his throat, and the urge to cough and worse, and yet his body went slack and his eyes closed. Just waiting. Taking. Waiting until he could swallow again. Could breathe.

Vadim pulled back, not completely out, loved Dan's heat and wetness, instead ran his hand down one cheek while Dan drew in deep breaths through his nose. Thumb tracing the line of the upper lip that was still semi-pursed against his cock, fingers cupping the chin, stubble and sweat against his hand, and it hurt to love so much.

Dan's eyes opened, and he blinked once, twice. Didn't move anything else, just stayed right there and then, arms slack at his sides, the cock softening in his mouth. Right where it belonged. Trusting, if Vadim was going to shove anything else down his throat, he'd take that, too. Even a muzzle. Or a blade. Vadim gave him a smile, calm now, relaxed, at peace, happy, all tension gone, all fear gone, all darkness gone. "I liked that thought. Both. The...hooker. The... 'sir'."

Dan cleared his throat as he wiped his lips with the back of his hand. A missed drop, but he still licked his hand, making Vadim's eyes widen a touch. "I had a feeling you did." A slow grin began to spread across Dan's face. "No idea where they came from, but I think they will be back."

Back? A game. Dan liked his games, and, thought Vadim, so do I.

"Interesting." Lane answer, but the blood still hadn't returned to his brain. Vadim pulled back, stowed his cock away, could still feel Dan. Was about to step away to find something to drink, but extended a hand. "Come."

Dan's fingers closed around Vadim's hand and he let himself be pulled up and back onto his feet. "Are you telling me now how good it was for you, asking me if it was good for me and declaring I'm the one, the only one and you want to make an honourable man of me?" His grin turned into a full-blown smirk.

Vadim grinned. "You think the CO has the legal powers to marry us? Like a ship's captain?"

Dan laughed, deep-bellied. "We've already been through that, and you've decided I look shit in a dress, so let's forget about that one."

Vadim glanced around, then saw bottles of water stand near the bed. Didn't know the brand, which was strange, come to think of it. He knew all the possible brands of water that were drunk in the merc camp, so...these were not drunk in the merc camp. Good work, Sherlock. He stepped over, picked one up, checked the cap for tampering, then unscrewed it. "That jarhead water?"

Dan took a glance and nodded. "Seems so." Holding his hand out, impatiently waiting for Vadim to finish drinking. "Right now I'm thankful for it having been left here." He looked at Vadim, who lowered the bottle, straight on, not a flicker of his eye and not a twitch in his expression. Jarhead. Matt. Donahue. Delta.

Vadim met the gaze. Donahue. His water. The place where he and Dan met. He handed the bottle over and wiped his lips, watching Dan. That expression was too schooled, too controlled. Dan was hiding something, protecting. From him, and against him. The closest thing they could get to hostile. Or was it? He couldn't trust his judgement. Dan might be joking...only he didn't joke like that. "Well." Didn't know what else to say and looked away first. He didn't win staring competitions any more. That particular bone in his body appeared to have been broken, no, pulverized.

Dan took the water and lifted it straight to his lips. Drinking in long, thirsty draughts that rolled over his tongue, down his throat, filling his stomach. The water was lukewarm, but the shady room had kept the worst off it. Finishing, he set the bottle down on the chair beside him, only now realising his trousers were still pooling around his ankles, which made him grin and the atmosphere changed, all tension dissipated. “You want to stay here for a while before heading into camp, or tackle the bull straight by its horns?”

“Wouldn’t mind stretching my legs,” murmured Vadim, and moved towards the bed. Dan never managed to lie with a smile. These were 100% gold. “Just rest up a few minutes.” Unlacing the boots, then pulling them off, he pondered what the Donahue thing meant. What it actually *meant*, not what it was. He looked up and gave a smile. “Your American and French buddies can wait five more minutes for their presents, aye?”

“Shit,” Dan sat down with his bare arse on the bed. “You’re saying something here. I didn’t bring any prezzies, now did I?” Looking inconsolable for a moment, until he had Vadim’s full attention and only then did he break into a grin. “Well, not much anyway.”

Vadim shook his head, grinning. “I thought you did.” Just like Dan to bring... whatever presents to soldiers that needed a change to the same old. Just like in Afghanistan, leaving full bergans behind. This time, it would be Jean and Donahue that received the gifts.

Bending down to undo his bootlaces, Dan glanced sideways, “besides, I’d take a Russkie any day over anyone else. You did get that, didn’t you? Roof top, Thailand, embassy and all, eh?”

“Yes. You just can’t kick the habit of Slavs...” Vadim moved, patting the mattress next to him. Didn’t care what else Dan had done in this room. It was safe, and quiet, and he ignored the fact that Jean, strictly speaking, was a Russkie too. Didn’t matter. Not for the next five minutes. Or ten.

Shuffling over, Dan lifted his legs, fiddling with the laces of his boots in that awkward position. “Morose, hm?”

“Always.” Vadim stretched to reach the laces, but pulling the boots off Dan’s feet proved impossible from that position, so he got up and pulled from the other side, setting the boots down and studying Dan there, on the bed, his, and soon

again a mercenary and not a bored tourist. Civilian shoes were less difficult to take off, he reflected.

He got on the bed again, close to Dan, and held him with one arm, tight, feeling him breathe and the heart beat, and thought the whole soldiering business was such a waste of time.

* * *

Two hours later and a quick nap in between, they were in a rickety taxi on their way to camp. Dan had his old bergen strapped to his back, one bag in his good hand, Vadim carrying the rest of their luggage. They got out of the car after a quick exchange with the driver, not even bothering to haggle the price, then striding towards the gates.

“Home sweet home, right?” Dan flashed a grin at Vadim.

Vadim squinted his eyes against the low sun and knew the beast would swallow him up again. ‘Home’ was no place. Not here, not anywhere. Dan would have to do, like before the prison, but even then, there had been a family. This place wasn’t home, this was merely where he slept after work. “At least the pay’s good.”

“Aye, and that means I can take you to New Zealand, show you the farm I bought, and then have it all done up for our retirement.” Dan’s lips curved into a cocky grin, seemingly not being able to imagine such a thing as retiring from active duty. Forty-two, a knackered body, but he kept beating it into submission.

Vadim smiled and shook his head. The farm. A far distant place on the other end of the world, and both of them retired old pensioners sitting on a porch, watching sheep? Actually, that did sound nice. “You’ll have to take me there,” he murmured.

“Next R&R, if it works out. My treat.” The guards opened the gate after Dan’s and Vadim’s ID passes were shoved under their noses, and Dan kept walking, straight towards the guard house, to sign in with the duty officer. Craning his head back at Vadim, “I’m just thinking about the poor bastards who do this as their regular army job. They earn how many times less than we do?”

“Substantially.” Vadim had to remind himself not to touch Dan, had to remind himself to stay away and was still standing close as he signed in as well,

would have to remember no kissing, no touching. He glanced towards the camp. Midge would certainly raise the issue—but then, part of him was looking forward to fighting him again. “Do we move the kit right away?”

“What time is it?” Dan turned half-way to face Vadim, the shades back over his eyes after a brief stint of identification. He stood close, one booted foot between Vadim’s legs, and a hand brushing along one thigh as he turned back to the guard who’d said something. “What?”

“I said tea time, mate.” The soldier pointed to the wall clock behind him, a cheap plastic affair. “Scran’s up in a second.”

Turning once more to Vadim, Dan grinned. “Sounds good to me. Let’s dump our stuff in my hut and catch some food. Starving again. We can pick up the big parcels from the mail station afterwards.”

Vadim nodded, and kept himself from placing a flat hand between Dan’s pecs to push him away. Close. Whatever would happen in this desert, Dan was close. “Mail. Right.” Mail was hardly worthwhile—sometimes legal letters and tax stuff from Her Majesty’s Bureaucracy. No more letters from a dutiful wife. “Started any pen pal friendships while you were bored?”

“Bored? When?” Dan smirked, “and no, no pen pals, but I had parcels delivered here. Already forgotten? My new CD player and the other goodies.” “Oh, your shopping. You entirely manly male shopping, that is.” Finding some of the lightness of Dubai, and holding onto it. Ignoring everything else, most of all the feeling he didn’t belong here.

“Exactly, that one.” Dan laughed. The *manly* shopping. Techno gadgets.” He winked behind the shades, only the quirk of one brow and the twisting of the scar in his face visible.

They headed deeper into camp, where two teams had just arrived, covered in red dust, and heading towards the armoury to hand in the weapons. Vadim thought for a moment they looked like mythical creatures, more animals than men. Like those soldiers in myth, grown from dragon’s teeth. Dragon spawn. He didn’t look closer, merely trotted towards Dan’s hut.

Walking slower for a moment, checking out the men, Dan tried to find a familiar face amongst them. He had to catch up with Vadim a second later. “Wondering yet what the scran assassin has cooked this time? I already miss the buffet in Thailand.”

“Something with enough fat, sodium, and cholesterol to get even my heart into a nervous stutter, no doubt.” The salt made sense, though, with the amounts they sweated out. “Good I start patrol duty tomorrow. That way I can get rid of the calories.”

“Bugger, and I’m still off for at least another couple of weeks.” Dan gave his hips a quick twist until they collided with Vadim’s. “Guess that means I’ll turn into a fat bastard in the meantime.” He grinned, “oh, and better get the wrist checked out with the medic, don’t I?”

“The way you treat that bandage, no doubt.”

One dusty sweaty face lit up in the group of men while Dan was talking, and Jean briefly raised his rifle to acknowledge him, gesturing they’d talk later. Noticing no doubt how Dan and Vadim were far closer now. A roguish grin, and Jean gave a wink.

“Hey!” Dan called over, “missed me, Princess?” Laughing his head off at the reaction, when Jean flipped the bird and called back: “Damn, we got off the wrong road. This must be the magic kingdom, I just saw a fairy.”

“Ha ha ha!” Dan shouted across, wiggling his hips in an exaggerated fashion and bumping into Vadim a few times, who seemed just plain bewildered. “You’re just dried up and missing me, wanker.”

Jean’s crew, tired and dusty, were laughing and joking amongst themselves and Jean gave Dan a nod, another grin and an insulting gesture. Dan was still laughing as he waved the Frenchman off.

They had almost reached the hut and Dan checked out Vadim, who glanced back over his shoulder, brow dark, as if he was unable to read Jean’s comment, his joke, or the whole interaction.

“Hope you won’t regret having me on the same mattress every night.” Dan suddenly flashed a grin. “No. Will you?” Vadim couldn’t help but ask, and felt stupid as his voice seemed heavier than he’d wanted.

“Why?” Throwing his right shoulder against the door, which had got stuck from the constant change from heat to cold, Dan stumbled inside with a bright grin. “I’m the one who manages to sleep curled around you, at 48 plus degrees, while you are turning into a big puddle of sweat. I sure as fuck won’t regret anything.”

“It gets colder at night. Then you are clearly welcome. And...even in the heat.” He’d regret that, Vadim knew, but the little discomfort was worth it. Maybe

Dan's sleeping brain just needed the connection. Like his own sleeping brain always fucked him up.

Dan waited until Vadim had stepped into the gloom, then kicked the door shut, grabbed the other's shirt into his fist and yanked him close. All in one fluid motion Vadim didn't resist at all. "I told you, my Russkie, I won't ever be without you again." Murmured, lips so close they almost touched until Dan crossed even that minimal distance and pulled him into a kiss.

Vadim's hands connected with Dan's back, pulling him closer, digging into his flesh as his lips opened and the hunger was back like there had been no quick release just a couple hours ago. It would be difficult to turn up for duty, Vadim thought with humour, pulling away just to murmur, "No regrets. Not ever."

"Good." Dan's shades hung at a precarious angle. "Just a bit of a problem now." His hands still on Vadim's hips, the good one digging into muscles as he rubbed his groin once against the other's to emphasise his unspoken point. "Still, I'm starving, guess I got to think of icebergs and bomb proof hairdos." Vadim managed to pull away, his mind somewhere completely different, and yes thinking something else would be good now, otherwise he'd feed Dan a couple of snack bars and not let him out of the hut. He pushed the bag to the side with his foot. "Let's get you some food, then. And maybe...call it an early night tonight?"

"Definitely." Dan lifted his shades and stared down at his all too prominent cock. "Damn." Muttered, "down, boy, down!" To no avail, even when he added a frustrated "woof!" He sighed, "can't be helped, I'm starving, and it's not that the guys haven't seen a hard-on before." Grinning from one ear to another, "and if I'm really lucky they think it's a greeting for them."

* * *

Around lunchtime the next day, Dan was walking across the compound, carrying a bag in his good hand, while whistling. Back in the customary shades, t-shirt, shorts and flip-flops, he ignored any stare that had potentially grown nastier since they've returned—and returned together, clearly a couple. Nodding with a grin to those who couldn't give a shit either way.

"Hey!" Hollering before he even got close to Jean's hut, "Princess!" Smirking at the odd turn of head and incongruous gape from some of the passers-

by. A little later, the door opened and Jean was leaning against the door frame, white dusty wifebeater clinging to his upper body, camo trousers riding low on his abs, displaying an expanse of shining skin with the faint glory trail towards his belly button which was just barely covered by the shirt. “Ah. Mr Honeymoon is paying a visit.”

Dan’s eyes were going ostentatiously from head to toe and back again, grin blooming into a fully-blown smirk. “Aye, and I thought I’d better deliver the favours to the wedding guests, aye?” Raising his bag he waved it about. He didn’t even try to hide the reaction in his shorts to the sight of that French motherfucker.

Jean moved to the side only enough to allow Dan to squeeze in, allowing him to pass by getting very close, glancing downwards. Mildly surprised, but still on top of the game. “Wedding guests? I want cake, then. And maids of honour to...dishonour.”

“Fat chance, Frenchie. Unless you like to fuck the nice arse of a gentleman of honour.” Grinning ferally, Dan slipped past and into the hut, adding when the door closed behind him, “wait, as far as I remember you *do* like fucking a nice arse.”

“Yeah, but only if it’s extra special nice.” Jean gave a laugh and clapped Dan on the shoulder. “You look well rested.”

“Easy to do after two weeks in Thai heaven and one in Dubai luxury.” Dan held the bag out to the other. “Here. And happy birthday to you, too.”

“Awww, you shouldn’t have.” Jean took the bag, glancing at Dan to gauge what might be in it—like a rattlesnake or other practical joke, then opened it. Inside, packets and CDs, a wrapped up Sony Discman, a round black box with cables, the CDs were The Doors, Jimi Hendrix, Steppenwolf, and some of the other classics. Jean glanced up, grinning. “You got my birthday date wrong, but that’s fine. Let’s make it Christmas today.”

“Aye,” Dan grinned, “figured you needed an edumacation in good music taste.”

“Careful...the Legion has a long and rich musical tradition.” Jean pulled out a final box with a beautiful oriental pattern, which contained a silk scarf with deep, rich colours, and Jean raised an eyebrow. “Aw, you do love me after all. It wasn’t just a thing for one night.”

“Har, har, har.” Dan almost blew a raspberry. “Very funny, Frenchie. That’s for your lady, thought she might appreciate something from Dubai.” Sitting down on the bed, Dan pushed the shades into his hair before leaning back. “Don’t get your hopes up, Princess, I might bring you prezzies, and might kiss you awake, but I sure as fuck won’t sweep you up into my arms and take you away on my mighty steed.” He laughed, adding, “unless it’s for a shag of course.”

Jean glanced towards the door. “I guess the other knight in black armour might disagree about any sweeping up stuff going on here, eh?” He put the scarf back into the box and set it on the table to the side.

Dan shrugged, “That’s not up for discussion. I love him, that’s that, but you think I am going back to the monogamy of Afghanistan? I never bloody shagged anyone except Vadim, until I got here. No fucking way I go back to that. Wouldn’t be fair on my harem, right?” Flashing a smirk, “Love’s one thing, and everything else is another.” Stretching put his long legs, he dropped the plastered hand across his lap. “Or don’t you agree?”

Jean’s eyes dropped, continuing to dip lower as he grinned. “Okay, fair enough...” He moved closer and placed a hand on Dan’s chest. “Can’t say I disagree. Can’t say I’m not fucking needy after three weeks with just Mrs Thumb and her four daughters...”

“What, you didn’t find yourself another fuck-toy?” The mock-shock brought an evil gleam to Dan’s dark eyes. “And here I was, thinking the whole camp was lying down in front of your feet, squealing ‘take me! Take me!’” He managed simultaneously to grin, snort, pull the t-shirt up to his throat and the waistband of his shorts down as much as they would go, revealing the line of dark hair.

Jean moved nearer, his chest hovering close to Dan’s, supporting himself on one arm as the other went up to pull the shirt off, briefly lowering his head. “As a point of fact, nope, no such offers. But I hardly hang ‘round the Americans, might have been luckier scoring there, eh?” Dipping his head low to kiss the exposed flesh, while Dan chuckled in the back of his throat.

Jean flicked his tongue across and into Dan’s belly button. “I guess there were a few holes left unstuffed while you were gone...”

“You’re pretty one-track in your thinking, mate.” Dan’s good hand rested on the bent neck, making its way against the growth into the short hair, stroking upwards. “It’s not all about fucking...”

“Sometimes it’s about being fucked?” Jean looked up, grinning, bared his teeth and traced the ridge of one of the scars, then the pattern of sixpack that became visible.

“Ha, ha, tosser,” Dan rolled his eyes, laughing breathlessly at the touch of lips and teeth. “Here I was, thinking a Frenchman like you knew all about *l’amour*. Sucking, stroking, rubbing, all that shit.” His hand slipped beneath Jean’s white vest, tracing down heat-damp skin as far as he could reach. “I happen to like a male body, and whatever can be done with it.”

Jean came up to meet Dan in a kiss, playful, but with heat and determination, almost straddling him now. “Here...” he murmured, breathless, “is a male body, so...what do you...want to do with it, huh?” Kissing again with lips and teeth open, tongue following as he pressed in, enjoying the building passion and heat and not stopping once to think.

“Well...” Dan breathed out, “you could always return the favour.” Tugging on fabric to get the top off Jean’s body. Dan managed to grin from ear to ear while never completely stopping the kiss.

Jean shed the vest, tossing it to the side without looking. “Which favour?” Sucking on Dan’s lower lip now, pressing up against him, skin smelling of soap and sweat and dust.

Dan’s eyes closed for a moment, as he fought, then lost, and let go of the groan that had been building up in his chest. “Your arse....” A man had to try, no matter how well he knew the answer. He’d still try and try again, while grinning like a fool. Hand roaming across Jean’s back to rest on the powerful neck, relishing sweat, strength and skin beneath his fingers.

Jean laughed. “I’m curious, but not *that* curious...”

“OK.” Dan smiled and shrugged one-sided while Jean swallowed, debating, maybe, for a moment. Horny too, but at the same time, that would make him gay, right? “You been thinking about my ass?”

Dan’s laughter hitched, while his fingers tightened into Jean’s neck muscles. “I think about *everyone*’s arse, if they are worth thinking about. I’m a bloke, for fuck’s sake. I think about sex 24/7.” Lifting his hips off the bed to grind against

Jean, then pulling him down, close to his lips once more. “And you, Frenchie ...” murmured, while kissing, “have a particularly nice arse.”

Jean was on top, grinding into Dan, kissing deeply, lust still growing. “I’m flattered, but trust me, if I ever want to know what it’s like getting fucked, I’ll ask you to do it, but...just...doesn’t really do it for me, okay?”

Dan grinned, shook his head when Jean did seem sorry, and seemed to want to make up for it by opening Dan’s trousers, sliding them down, helping him to shed them fully.

“Don’t be stupid.” Dan’s interest was obvious, but then he had started to be interested back when Jean had opened the door. “I don’t care. I get enough arse in my life anyway. Can’t complain.” Kicking the shorts into a corner, he grinned. “Just give me your speciality.”

Jean paused, wondering, maybe, about Dan and Vadim, then grinned at him. “Yeah.” He stripped the shirt off Dan, kissing his chest and sides, slowly moving up over Dan’s throat and jaw, chin to his lips, hands roaming as he did, taking hold of Dan’s cock like it was his own, kissing him deeply and hungrily while beginning to pump him.

Moaning into Jean’s mouth, Dan lost himself within heartbeats. Just like every single time he kissed that wannabe French motherfucker with his Russian face and Russian eyes and...nothing otherwise Russian about him. Nothing like Vadim. Nothing...and then Dan ceased to think. Hips pushing towards the hand, his own digging hard into Jean’s neck muscles, pushing and pulling. Close, closer and more, as always drowning in that goddamned skill of lips and teeth.

“You sexy bastard,” murmured Jean between kisses, pressing against Dan’s leg, knowing he’d come into his pants. Free hand holding Dan close, who was losing control, rapidly, as suddenly somebody banged against the door. “Jean, you in there?”

“Merde!” hissed Jean, jumping off Dan as if stung by a scorpion. “What the fuck do you want?” Called out.

“What?” Dan croaked. Lips swollen, body in the dumbfuck state of arousal.

“I wanted to talk about the route tomorrow.” The voice behind the door shouted.

Jean closed his eyes. “Putain,” he murmured, already getting up, fishing for the shirt.

“You can’t be fucking serious!” Dan groaned, desperate, yet already looking around for his shorts. What the fuck was he going to do with that hard-on of his?

Jean shrugged, cast an apologetic glance to Dan, who was cursing under his breath while getting to his feet and towards his shorts. Bringing out a stream of the most colourful expletives he could find, in every language that came to his mind, including Pushtu and Russian.

“We should talk through the route and the map. I’m going to brief the boys, so ...” The disembodied voice called out once more.

“Yeah, it’s important, it’s about the job. Get ya.” Jean slid the shirt down, got his trousers back in order, then walked towards the door while Dan just about managed to get into his shorts and close them haphazardly. The t-shirt was irretrievably lost. Couldn’t be helped.

Jean glanced at him, and Dan nodded before scooting back onto the bed, snatching his shades and pushing them onto his nose. Flip-flops somewhere, t-shirt hopefully out of sight, in nothing but those goddamned shorts.

“Sorry. Come on in.” Jean called out, opening the door. That very moment Dan spotted a deck of cards, hastily went for it, and leaned over the table, hiding his raging arousal by dishing out cards.

He’d kill that motherfucker. Tomorrow.

The other merc came through the door and Jean kept in his back, or half covered by the door, hiding the evidence nonchalantly, as if he’d never done anything else.

“Thanks, Jean. You lucky bastard are off tomorrow, but after what happened last week, I want to be one hundred percent sure.”

“Sure, no problem. Only...didn’t want to turn my back on Mad Dog. The bastard’s cheating at cards.”

“Aye, Frenchie!” Dan called out, even managed to laugh, while randomly dishing out cards.

Jean brought out a map and unfolded it on the table, explaining the route and the possible problems, again. Apparently, the route had changed after an attack, and people were generally more on edge than normal. Jean kept close to the other, hiding behind the man’s body, who seemed at ease with that closeness, while Jeans spelled out the road. His finger tracing the line on the map and speaking,

monotonous, precise, every now and then clasping the other's shoulder and cracking a stupid joke. Mates.

"Thanks man, that's helpful."

"Take the map, and bring back Pascal in one piece...I'd miss my sweetheart too much." More jokes, promises of bringing back the whole team alive, and Jean saw him out the door, closing it firmly and locking it as soon as the guy was out. "Oh fuck."

"Well." Dan pulled his lips from his teeth, baring both rows, while stretching his arms to the side, letting muscles slide along skin. "That was fun."

"No. Shit. Yes. Fuck." Jean shook his head. "Fuck. Killed the mood."

"Wouldn't say so." Dan started to grin, while slowly pushing the shades off his eyes, perching them on the top of his wild hair. "You missed a whole show, here. All that touchy-feely shit going on between you two? Didn't need much imagination to get the porn rolling in my head." Dan patted the front of his shorts. "Only thanks to my steely determination I managed to keep the boy down. The show would have been even better with booze."

Jean laughed. "What? Me and him? That was...completely innocent. Hey, I'm not gay. Seriously."

"No, of course, not, mate. You're as straight as fuck, your lady is proof to that." Pointing leisurely at one of the pics on Jean's wall, Dan smirked, but there was nothing malicious about that grin.

"Yes. She is." Jean shook his head. "Perv. But...booze I have. I'm off tomorrow, he's taking over my patrol." He nodded towards one of his chests. "There. Some red, and some whisky."

"Whisky." Dan didn't even think before deciding. "Where the fuck did you get the stuff from? Not quite legal here, aye?"

"Nope. I have friends in high places, and they don't always check everything. Plus, what I do in my off time is my own business, and none of theirs. Fuck them." Jean went digging around the chest, found the whisky, glancing with regret at the wine. "Wrong temperature. Completely wrong temperature. Shit." "And what does that mean? You not even bothering to drink it? Booze is booze, mate."

"It's wine." Jean rolled his eyes. "Okay. Yeah, I'll drink it."

Grinning, Dan threw the cards onto the table, then shuffling them into a loose pack. Glancing up from a haphazard fringe of dark hair and entangled shades.

“Think it’s safe yet to get our kit off again? Booze is so much better naked.”

“Strip poker, huh?” Jean nodded towards the cards.

“You want to play?” Dan laughed, “I’m game, but I warn you, I’m damn good, with my skills honed by a very special lady. You’d get naked anyway, so there’s no challenge.”

Jean laughed. “No need to draw it out, then...?” He pulled his shirt free again and dropped it on the floor, then opened his fly, pushing his trousers down, half-interested, mostly because of the situation. “I won’t dance, you know.”

“Dance?” Dan laughed at the mental image. “Why the fuck should you dance?”

“Stripping. You know. Pole dancing. Don’t gays have bars where guys strip and do dirty things on a pole or on a lap?”

“What the fuck do I know?” Dan shrugged. “Never been to anything like that.”

“No?” Jean sounded incredulous.

“No.” Extracting the shades from the mess of his hair, Dan shrugged before chucking them to the side, then once again getting out of his shorts. “Got any mugs, or is it drinking straight out of the bottle?” Dan reached for the whisky as Jean found two mugs.

“Drinking wine like this is a crime. Take it from a Frenchman, this is...a crime.”

“I don’t mind. I’ll sure as fuck get into the mood again.”

Jean laughed. “I bet you will.” He poured drinks, starting with whisky himself, clearly trying to get drunk quickly as he gulped it down in a few deep swallows.

“Hey, you got an agenda, or what? If I keep up with you, I’ll be piss drunk in fifteen minutes.” Grinning, Dan downed his first liberal shot. “Or are you waiting for me to take advantage of you so you can claim later it wasn’t because you wanted to do it but because you were pissed?”

Jean quirked an eyebrow over the rim of the mug. “You think I’m capable of such a nefarious lie?” He moved closer, grinning, before Dan could utter any

piss-taking remarks. “You think I’d claim I kissed...” his lips touching Dan’s, moving closer, “caressed...” hands running over Dan’s heated skin, “and stroked...” hand rubbing the insides of Dan’s leg, fingers splayed, “by accident?”

“Aye.” Dan’s grin was on full beam. “I think you are capable of a hell of a lot.” Emptying the mug in one go, the whisky was running down his throat like liquid fire. He just about managed not to cough while clinking the empty mug against Jean’s. “But I’m not complaining.”

Jean downed the rest of the whisky, flushing slightly, and poured more. Feeling the alcohol already, after the enforced sobriety. Half sitting on Dan, his lips again on Dan’s chest, only pausing to take another swallow of the alcohol. “Hey, never did anything that was bad for you, or did I?” Pushing Dan’s legs apart, which opened readily, his lips had arrived at the place where leg met torso, close to Dan’s cock, but not touching. Just biting the inner thigh playfully.

“That...” Dan gasped out, “depends on what you define as ‘good’.” His cock was definitely convinced this was very, very good, especially the way those lips kept moving South. Not that Jean could get any further South, perhaps a little more North would be perfect, and a bit more...he drew in a deep breath while the fingers of his plastered hand carded through the short blond hair. So much like...and yet not...and all was different. No rules and not giving a damn about what the fuck was going to happen next. “I need more booze.” He managed to get out after a series of particularly promising nips and bites of the far too sensitive flesh of his inner thighs.

Jean grinned and reached over to pour more whisky, adding some to his own mug, and taking another deep swallow, fingers sliding down Dan’s dam and towards his ass. “God, I fucking loved fucking your ass,” he suddenly said, grinning, changing sides to nip the other thigh, nose brushing past Dan’s cock by accident.

Dan’s cock jumped towards Jean’s face at those words, barely missing. Downing all of the whisky in one go, he coughed, which rapidly morphed into several noisy breaths as the lips and teeth kept doing their work while his legs kept opening further to allow better access. “I can...imagine. I...” but he shut up, dropped the empty mug on the bed and his good hand joined the other, stroking Jean’s neck and temple, jaw line and cheek.

Jean grinned, baring teeth as he pulled at Dan's flesh. "You what?" Visibly enjoying the touch, biting firmer until it stung, then lapping the same reddened skin with his tongue, as if soothing it. Hand moving to Dan's cock, circling it, as he moved a little closer to the centre. Cock in full view, and he glanced up to Dan, almost nervous. "Shit," he murmured.

"S'okay." Dan slurred the words together in a husky mumble. The fingers of his good hand spread across Jean's neck, up the back of his skull. Even though he didn't mean to, light pressure was guiding, pointing the way. "Don't have to." Murmured, but fuck, he'd be ready to pray to any god, Allah, Jehovah, Baby Jesus, who the fuck ever, if only Jean would. He was so hard and horny, he'd offer his soul to the devil, if the old codger didn't already own it. "S'okay..."

Jean swallowed audibly, the pressure in his neck reassuring, tender and gentle, and clearer than a thousand words, as clear as Solange's helpless whimpers or her squirming on the bed. Only that Dan was by no means Solange. Wrong equipment. Right equipment. Oh fuck. The taste was salty, almost smoky, a strong taste, but clean, healthy, and he opened his lips and slipped the head in. Hand holding the cock, twitching flesh, veins thundering under his fingers, or his own pulse. He forced his tongue to extend, probe the thick piece of flesh that was entering his mouth, lick it, strange, silky, hot, his eyes fixed on Dan's taut stomach, the terrible groves of scars, survival written all over that body.

Dan's groans were everything but controlled. Jean. Straight Jean. Mate Jean. Friend Jean. Comrade Jean. Straight-as-yeah-hell-fuck Jean. His hips twitched, but he stilled himself, while he never increased the pressure on the neck, but never diminished it either. Just there. Shuddering with lust and staring down at the sight of the utterly focussed way his cock was being tasted, licked, and touched.

Jean took another inch, felt that was as far as he could go, put pressure on his lips, then remembered his hand, slowly pumping Dan.

"Shit, I..." Dan let out incoherent sounds, while his thighs tensed until he could feel the strain down to his toes. "I...let you...tell...won't cum...know..."

Jean glanced up at the words, seemingly putting the meaning together very slowly, then thought he just couldn't look at Dan, not while...doing this, and stared straight at Dan's stomach, mind blanking as he tried to remember what to do now. Breathed in through his nose and sucked on the flesh, feeling Dan respond, moved up with resistance, and licked across the head, more taste. So that was precum, he

thought, mind blurred by what he did, while the alcohol was truly nothing but an excuse. He almost pulled off, then pressed his lips firmer together and went down again, hand pumping faster than his mouth as he remembered, and back up again, the motion less stiff now, coming from his neck and shoulders.

Dan's thighs tensed even more. Rock solid muscle under deeply tanned skin, except for the flesh itself that Jean was sucking and stroking. The sight was killing him, and he didn't have a clue why this man, of all men who'd sucked him off, was blowing his mind, not just his cock. Perhaps the unexpected, or the forbidden, or...and then Jean moved down again, with slightly more speed and pressure this time, as if he really meant it and Dan could do nothing but groan and shudder. Heart racing, breath coming in shorter and shorter gasps, struggling for control, not to push down on the head. "Oh shit...not long..."

Jean pulled back again, understanding suddenly what he did, understood why he did it, and moved with some force, almost jerking back. Sucking on the head, more taste, feeling Dan tense and wrestle the emotion, or rather taking it, riding it, and he thought fuck, he really likes this, really, really enjoys this, and there was an odd tenderness that made him forget this fucking awkward thing, this wanting and not wanting, this offering for something else. Then took him deeper again, careful to not go too deep, instead working with his tongue and neck, finding a strange kind of way to do it, one that seemed alright, less weird, while his hand kept pumping him, and the other hand dug into Dan's thigh, steadying himself.

Dan's leg muscles so tense, he was almost on the balls of his foot, while his abs kept contracting. Wanting to hold Jean's head, dig into the neck, push him down, but did nothing like that. Good hand forming into a tight fist instead, eyes closed at last. Too much onslaught onto his senses, despite the unskilled attempt, but it wasn't about skills nor experience. It was the goddamned fact it was *Jean*, and that he did this. His eyes opened before it got all too much and he felt his balls draw up, abs contracting helplessly, while the orgasm built up like a geyser, pressure bursting to the surface. His plastered hand pushed clumsily at Jean's face, pushing away despite wanting to force that throat down deeper to take him in all the way. "Now." Forced out, his good fist slamming into his own thigh.

Jean pulled back, face flushed, hand still pumping as Dan came, splattering cum across that belly and thighs and he felt it hot against his shoulder, and the side

of his throat and run over his hand. He grinned, meeting Dan's gaze, who was staring at him with inscrutable dark eyes, while Jean's own betrayed emotions, fondness, and tenderness and more. He released Dan, who fell back on the bed like a boneless weight. Jean stood, reaching for his shirt to clean up, saying nothing.

Dan started to smile, didn't say anything either, until the smile began to morph into a grin. "Thank you." Clearing his throat and wetting suddenly dry lips. "Hey, just returning a favour." Jean wiped his shirt over his neck and across his chest. "And I did not learn that in the Legion. Or in the Soviet Army. Seriously."

Dan was grinning like a fool. "You sure about that? Compared to my first blow job this was paradise. Mine was utter crap, couldn't even get him off." "Absolutely sure." Jean grinned and came closer again, one hand on Dan's shoulder as he leaned in to kiss. "Well, you get me off fine, so I thought I'd make an effort. Solange is really good, and you are good, and, well, seems pretty complicated to me...doing several things at once, you know?" "Shut up." Dan murmured, simultaneously teasing and awfully gentle.

Surprised when Jean really did shut up. "You were doing just fine, Frenchie, and you never need to pay me back for anything, aye?"

"I know, but..."

Dan shut Jean up with a kiss this time, using his hand on the neck and a fair amount of pressure.

Jean pressed in, wanting the kiss, needing it worse than any other touch, desire and lust coming in hard and bad and worse, and goddamned motherfucking right. He took hold of Dan's good hand and led it down over his body, to his cock, all the time kissing him like his life depended on it. "Want you...fucking...need...want...must have," he said, almost comical as there was no fierceness, only odd tenderness that was more begging, more inviting than any aggression. Playful, still, and sensuous with no holds barred. Dan was shaken to the core by those words. Couldn't quite grasp their meaning but sensed it, and some strange tenderness welled up. An odd soft spot, where he didn't think he should have one. Not for anyone other than Vadim, and perhaps the Baroness, and otherwise...and yet the words and that near desperate kiss turned the post orgasmic haze into something far mellower. Breaking the kiss, but keeping his hand in the back of Jean's neck.

“What do you want?” Dan smiled, murmuring against the other’s lips.
“Want my arse?” And he didn’t even ask himself what he’d just offered.

Jean’s lips opened, nodding, feeling protected and a whole lot more.
“Hand... a hand’s alright...but if you...If I can have that, fuck yes...” Lust growing only worse, weeks and weeks of need and the memory of Dan’s body. “Shit. Oh shit.” Knew what it all meant and couldn’t think it, couldn’t think desire and lust and more and wanting, friend and comrade, and mercenary, and fellow man, man.

Dan did nothing but grin and nod. Strange, how this seemed the most normal thing in the world. No holding on to his male ‘power’, and least of all no Kabul. Was all good, just as he’d said. “How do you want me?” And that, for fuck’s sake, was something he had never asked before, never offered.

“Like this...on your...back.” Jean was kissing again. Didn’t say, couldn’t even think this was how he did Solange, most of the time, assumed it was the position that felt best, or something, but in truth wanted to understand, wanted to see it was Dan, and that thought aroused him more. Dan. Mad Dog. Not just a body, not even just a man.

“Like this...” Dan repeated, his fingers in Jean’s neck stilled. His smile faltered for a moment as he just looked, searched, pondered. On his back. Face to face. He’d never done that, not once. Then he suddenly smiled again, and he nodded. Was all good in the end, was all okay. No past, no dark secrets and no extremes of anything. No rollercoaster of emotions with magnitudes of life and death. No Kabul, and no derelict house in a stinking alley that had long been reduced to rubble. “Okay.” His hand slid down Jean’s shoulder, resting on the biceps, while his lips quirked lop-sided.

Jean paused as well, as if he sensed the reluctance, and kissed Dan again, eager, tender, passionate, heartfelt. “That alright?”

“Aye. Just be gentle with me.” Dan winked, but there was seriousness in the humour. “I just came.”

“Shit.” Jean gave a laugh. “That means that...you’re tender, right? It’s fine, I’m okay with a hand. Or just let me cool down a bit and keep kissing and stuff, until you’re...recovered.”

“No worries, I’ll be OK.” Taken aback for a moment at this oddly tender way of being taken care of. With Vadim it was different, each expected the other to put a stop to things if they needed to. This was...like being a girl, perhaps, and Dan

suddenly laughed low. “Just don’t pound away like a meat cleaver.” Flashing a grin while slowly moving onto the side so he could scoot properly onto the narrow bed.

Jean shook his head. “Hey, I can be gentle, now, can I?”

“Aye,” Dan grinned, “you are.”

Almost as if apologizing. “I *am* good with just...other stuff.” Jean followed onto the bed, lying on top of Dan, arms keeping most of his weight off Dan’s chest, like he would with Solange, but his cock pressed against Dan’s thigh. Dan started to laugh again. “Don’t treat me like a china doll, I’m fucking Mad Dog!” As if emphasising his point, he lifted his legs, with the other’s body between them, and pulled his knees nearly up to his chest. “What are you waiting for? I see you’re gagging for my exquisite arse.” Hiding some of the strange feeling with a lopsided grin.

Jean stared down at him, his grin faded, face suddenly smooth and relaxed, like he rarely was. Jean’s usual expression was a grin, or the beginning of a grin, or a moment of wicked humour.

Dan cocked his head to the side, and simply watched the face and its expression he had never seen before. He could not decode it, but stored it away.

Jean suddenly frowned as if he had just become aware of himself, and rolled his eyes as the grin came back. “What a slut,” he muttered, in good humour, and he crawled over, reaching for lube, and reaching further for a condom.

“Yeah, I guess.” Dan took his knees, hooked his arms underneath to lift his legs up. Spread, open, and suddenly goddamned uncomfortable when Jean’s body left and he just lay there. “Hurry up, aye?”

Jean grinned. “Listen, I’m trying to take it slow and you already start pushing.” Shaking his head as he flicked open the cap and smeared a generous amount of gel on Dan’s ass, who cursed at the sudden coldness. “Relax. You can always put your legs on my shoulders...it’s easier on your fucked arm, too.” Reaching for a pillow and shoving it under Dan’s ass. “Lift it, sweetheart.” Dan did, and felt a notch more like an idiot.

Slippery fingers struggling to hold the condom which Jean opened with his teeth—skilful and practiced enough to alleviate all fears of punctures, and he rolled it down over his cock, then leaned against Dan’s knees and rubbed Dan’s hole. Warming and distributing the lube, sliding the thumb in, just the first digit, teasing

Dan and grinning as he did, not disgusted by any of this, merely a friendly, experienced tease. “But you’re right. You have a great ass.”

“I wouldn’t know. Can’t see it from here.”

“Just trust me with it.” Jean leaned in to rub his face against Dan’s leg, pushing his finger deeper, bending it and massaging the muscle, getting it to relax for him. Strangely erotic, still, to have Dan like this, and do this, and it gave him time to calm down, too. Just a bit.

The touch was good, no question, and if it continued it could even ignite another slow-burning fire, that soon after he’d cum, but Jesus fucking Christ, was that what a bint felt on an examination chair? “You going to find a foetus up there?” Dan hid the discomfort with a grin.

“Only if you stuck one up there,” Jean retorted, grinning. “What? You nervous, babe?”

“Did you just fucking call me ‘babe’?” Dan’s incredulity couldn’t be any more comical. Especially not with a finger up his arse and his knees wide open, thighs pressed to his chest.

“I think I just fucking did.” Jean laughed like this was some stupid standoff in the chow hall. “So what are you going to do about it, sweetheart?” Joining another finger and pushing it in, then sliding it out, slowly fucking Dan with two fingers and giving him the Mother of all Grins. “If I go too fast or rough or whatever, tell me, okay? Talk to me. Solange just hits me with a pillow when I do.” A wink, and the grin turning softer, gentler.

“I’m a bloke. I’m not your Solange.” Dan’s voice betrayed that those fingers had an effect. Yet so...vulnerable. So much for his reputation as Mad Dog, hard-as-nails motherfucker.

“I noticed. You got the full set.” Jean smiled, looking pointedly at Dan’s cock. “I’m not even sure I’d like you if you got an operation and turned into a girl.” “Shit.” Dan pressed out. “It’s just that...damn.” Taking in a deep, shuddering breath, “never done it like that before.” Adding, with suppressed aggression, “okay?”

“On your back?” Jean paused, pulling his fingers out only to adjust Dan’s hips. “Okay. No problem.” Then why the pause, the reluctance, and then agreeing to it? “Are you positive you want this?”

“Aye,” and he was. “I just feel...,” he grimaced, “like a total idiot like this, with my legs up in the air. Waiting for the gynaecologist.”

“Yeah, I can imagine.” I can’t really, Jean thought. Despite the vastly powerful body under him, open, ready, Jean couldn’t drag his mind off that thought. Dan’s reluctance to get fucked even though he’d done it, and there was Vadim, and Dan clearly liked it. Had liked it the last time. “As you said to me, you don’t have to...no...you know, no promises or anything. I won’t leave you if we don’t.” The question suddenly in the room just how Dan and Vadim fucked. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“Leave me?” This was it, it broke the spell and Dan started to grin. “Okay, darling, in that case, sweetheart, forget about how utterly dumbfucking stupid I look and feel, and kiss me, baby, before you get your cock up my arse, sugarpuff, where you’ve wanted it to be for quite some time. Right, sweetcheeks?” He’d found the trick to forget about the situation: take the piss Face to face. Okay. Was all okay, as long as he could laugh about himself.

Jean laughed, too. “That’s it. Take the mickey. It’s just sex, nothing to worry about, loverboy.” He leaned in, kissing Dan, deeply, still chuckling in the back of his throat while his hand caressed and kneaded Dan’s muscular ass. No bones to be felt. Muscle. Plenty of it.

“Just relax, the worst that can happen is a cramp in your hamstring. We had that a few times, it’s funny, but painful.”

“Just give me your shoulders, then.” Dan grinned, had found his footing. This was easy. Don’t concentrate on your arse spread wide and open, but on the banter. He could do that, and easily so. Wasn’t goddamned Mad Dog for nothing. “I’m a battered old warhorse with fucked up knees.”

Jean grinned at him and leaned closer, bending over to allow him to put his legs up. “You’re a stud alright...”

“That, and a fuckable arse to die for.” Dan grinned smugly, when fingers slipped into his crack, travelling between his cheeks.

Jean shifted, needed to make a move now, didn’t want to cool too much, and was confident Dan would either talk to—or shout at—him if he did something wrong, and that everything was fine. Just sex. Just...some odd kind of contact, accommodating, pleasing, pleasuring, making the other feel good. That was really all there was to it. Kissing with open lips, damn near biting Dan’s lips once more,

before straightening up and positioning himself, smooth, practiced a thousand times. His face betrayed intense lust as he began to enter, with little further warning, moving very slowly, but steadily, and allowing Dan's body to open. Eyes closing for a long moment, while entering, breath going faster, pressed, as he struggled for control, for Dan's sake.

And Dan did nothing more than breathe steadily, relaxing himself, while all the time staring at Jean. He'd never seen this, the expressions in the face of the man whose cock was entering his body. "You're...good." Stupid words, but so damned true. The speed perfect, poise, caring, waiting, all that shit made it easy. Hardly any pain, just this uncomfortable feeling of being stretched and filled, which increased until his body accepted and got used to the intrusion enough to change discomfort into something else. "Damn good," murmured, his good hand roaming along Jean's arm, the other lying at his side. "For a *straight* guy."

Jean grinned, tender, intense smile. "Hey, this is missionary ordinary fare for me, honey." He ran his hands down Dan's legs, strong grip up, and much gentler tracing down again, moving his hips very slightly, playful. Slowly moving, but deep. Focused on Dan, how his abs tightened and how he breathed, finding a deep pleasure in how Dan accepted him and how he seemed to fall into it.

"One of these days..." Dan's breathing had turned slightly erratic, "I'm going to kick your fucking ass..." his cock was showing interest, albeit halfheartedly, "for calling me those endearingly cute names."

"Cool. You on top, then me on top, and everybody else thinks it's about fighting, while I'll be thinking of this...what will you be thinking, Mad Dog Babe?"

"Fucktard." Taking in a sudden sharp breath at Jean's movement. "I'll be thinking of pounding your arse, but I guess I'll never get to do that." Grinning, though, while still staring and studying. Watching how facial expressions changed, eyes closed, then opened, darkened, contracted, and read every single sensation in Jean's face. "I just wish..." murmured, trailed off. He was there for the leisurely ride and he wasn't going to jump any hurdles. There was no finish to reach, least of all in record time.

"Wish?" Jean moved slow, deeper, deliberate, still no force involved, he was determined to keep it gentle and intense like this, 'sweet' as Solange called it. Fuck me sweet.

"Nothing."

“You...sure?”

Dan smiled, lifted his hips and suddenly felt everything deeper, different. Far closer to the fistfuck he could still recall as vividly as if Dubai had been yesterday, not a week ago.

Jean inhaled sharply. “That’s...that’s it. You got control there. So what’s it?” “Some wishes are better left unfulfilled.” Murmured, as Dan settled back and half-closed his eyes, until Jean was nothing but a face behind the dark fringes of his eyelashes. He suddenly smiled again, dropping his hand to his half-interested cock, idly stroking himself with slow, unhurried movements. He had nothing to prove, not the second time round, and the intrusion had turned into a pleasant sensation. “Without the past there’s no present.”

“I think that saying was different,” murmured Jean, rocking into and against Dan. Slow, deep, leisurely thrusts, or rather, pushes, nothing violent about it, more probing, testing, expanding than pounding in any way. Moving to change the angle of Dan’s legs, coming closer, still a fair distance between them, and his eyes watched Dan’s hand, smiling, coordinating his movements with Dan’s strokes.

“They were wrong.” Dan’s smile deepened. Inhaling one deep breath at Jean’s movement, he closed his eyes for a moment before his strokes stilled. “You manage to kiss me like this?” Murmured, as his hand dropped away from between their bodies. His cock wasn’t important right now, he wouldn’t be able to cum anyway, and fuck, it wasn’t about that, but he’d be scuppered if he knew what the hell this was about instead.

“Of course.” Jean took Dan’s legs, adjusted them, opened them further and moved closer, shifting the centre of weight to fall forward, supporting himself on his arm while he allowed Dan’s body to adjust to him. “Course I do.” Sounding husky, as if he’d answered a different question, or none at all, or thought aloud, distracted, mellow, stupidly emotional. He shifted, stretching his neck to kiss Dan, shifting some more, spreading Dan out, who allowed everything to just happen to him, knees far apart. A deep, open mouthed kiss over Dan’s lips, and a smile, and another kiss. “Gorgeous. You’re just... fucking gorgeous like that...”

“Oh shut the fuck up.” Dan breathed out, grinned, still kissing, all at the same time. Mellow with a pleasant and constant arousal, that was not going anywhere, stoked like a slow-burning fire. “You make me fucking blush like a virgin.” He grinned, and his hand came up to Jean’s neck, keeping him close. Jean

kissed, tongue included, with playful nips and bites and then again deep, heartfelt kisses, moving ever so slowly as if the kissing kept him completely occupied, or he just forced it to last as long as possible. “Still...true,” he breathed, face glowing with sweat and arousal, as he moved, now chest to chest, neck sweaty, short hair damp under Dan’s fingers that kept playing and applying pressure. “You...okay if I speed up?”

“Aye.” Dan half-opened his eyes, lips still parted and damp from the kissing, feeling strangely taken care of. A strange, unknown sensation, completely impossible to connect it with Vadim. Would be wrong, they just weren’t like that. They ran deeper, with every extreme imaginable; every fibre and deepest core. “Go ahead.” Barely more than a murmur. “Fuck me as you like. I can take it.”

Jean laughed, nothing more than his chest expanding and contracting a few times. “I don’t *want* you to just take it...I want you...to get into it. Alright?” Dan’s eyes widened at that, fully open now. “Huh?”

Jean smiled and kissed again. “Never mind...” Wondering, just for a moment, where that “I can take it” came from...Vadim, doubtlessly, and that had to have reasons. So, Vadim fucked like a sledgehammer, with his partners just ‘taking’ it. What a bastard.

Dan said nothing, words paling into insignificance at those awfully skilled kisses. That, and the way Jean managed to move at the same time, in smoothly controlled motions.

When Jean did speed up, it was almost with regret, and the tenderness gradually grew into passion, but never into madness. Fingers stroking, moaning as he kissed as if he couldn’t hold back, and slowly building up towards his climax, while Dan lay back. Almost passive except for his good hand stroking up the sweaty back, enjoying the friction of his trapped cock and the sensation of being filled and stretched and stimulated.

Jean’s face twisted as he didn’t hold anything back, sensuous and sexy in his growing need. Looking at Dan, smiling, with that odd sense of humour, hands running over heated skin and through long tousled hair. “Not...not long now ...”

“Good.” Dan breathed out, with a grin that was as warm and teasing as it was mellow and unhurriedly aroused. “My knee’s gonna kill me.” His teeth showed when his grin grew, before leaning his head back and baring his throat.

Jean laughed, breathlessly, burrowing his face into Dan's neck, kissing and licking as the thrusts became shallower and faster. Sounds muffled against Dan's skin as he came, held until tension left him and he rested, most of his weight on Dan's chest, breath cooling. His hand idly and uncoordinated touching Dan's face. "Wake me...tomorrow."

A faint chuckle shook both Dan and Jean. "If you don't move the condom will spill all over your bed and, what's worse, my hips *do* fucking ache!" Despite his words Dan was still holding onto Jean, loosely now. The ache in his balls was pleasant, an odd combination of recent orgasm and mild arousal, and his arse? His Frenchie clearly had one up on technique.

"Hmmm. Okay." Jean set his hands down on the bed and pushed himself up, sliding back, holding the condom as he pulled away, getting rid of it in the rubbish bin close to the bed, while Dan lowered his legs with a heartfelt groan, stretching from thighs to toes. Jean moved to collapse on the bed, on his side. "Stay...a bit. Yes?" A happy, sleepy smile followed, and Jean's eyes were closed.

"Sure." Dan rolled himself over onto his side, facing Jean, who moved closer without opening his eyes. "Vadim will be out until three hundred hours. It's the graveyard shift."

"Good. That's good to hear. Didn't check the plan, you know."

"You think I should tell Vadim?"

"Fuck no. He'd rip me a new one." Sleep-slurred speech making the sentiment less than impressive.

Dan grinned, ran his hand over Jean's sleepy face and down the short hair, in a strangely tender gesture, before he propped himself up on his elbow. "By the way, that condom thing, you do realise I'm tested and clean?"

"Just making doubly sure. I could have something. I'm not saying you have, I'm just careful." Jean turned to lie on his stomach, hand reaching up to move under Dan's shoulder, to touch him. Both men squeezed onto the narrow bunk.

"Aye, that's alright. Just making sure." Watching the quarter-profile, Dan couldn't help but smile. Hard to grasp how everything had panned out, and yet, even though he felt a mellow tenderness for this man, this talented kisser, he knew above all there was something that ran deeper than even blood: dust and mountains of Afghanistan, and a man who was part of Dan's soul as much as his own. He

chuckled quietly. “I’ve swallowed your cum a few times, if I thought you’re not clean, that’d been pretty damn stupid, aye?”

Jean looked at Dan, eyes still half closed. “Yeah, true...Figure I should get tested. Will do that on R&R. But I’m not screwing around much. To think I left the Legion in part so I could get more pussy...”

“Nor did I...” Dan grinned gently, lowering his head until his forehead touched Jean’s temple.

Half-suppressing a yawn, Jean moved his brow against Dan’s arm. “That was...exactly what I needed,” he murmured.

Dan waited a moment before sliding down until his head rested on his own arm. “Okay, sleepyhead, I’ll slip out at some stage.” Pulling Jean closer and moulding the body against his own, while Jean sighed deeply and relaxed again, fully content and skirting the edge of sleep. Nothing wrong with a little skin to skin amongst friends, and Jean greeted the closeness with an uncoordinated attempt to hug without moving too much, or waking up.

“Yeah. You okay?” No real curiosity, not even awake enough to compute anything, let alone a hypothetical need of Dan to come, too.

“Sleep.” Dan chuckled, managed to grab the blanket with the hand in plaster, throwing it over them. “That’s an order.”

“Not sure I could...commit insubordination,” murmured Jean. He allowed himself to drift off, soundly asleep just minutes later.

* * *

Two hours later Dan slipped out from under the blankets after a short snooze. Jean was still out like a light, while Dan gathered his clothes, luckily finding the elusive t-shirt. Getting dressed in silence, he stealthily left the hut, and headed straight to the showers, not bothering with a towel nor soap, figuring he’d somehow manage with the plastered hand. He reappeared a short while later, dripping wet, but with his shades on despite the darkness, the shorts thrown on, heading back to their hut.

Two more hours before Vadim returned, and he was sleeping like an innocent babe when his wet head hit the pillow.

The door opened after a while. Three o'clock. The darkness inside, and the peaceful silence meant Dan was asleep, not out. Vadim paused, stood in the door, felt the dust and grit in his hair, rubbing between skin and armour, between his teeth. Just the peace gave him pause. Never had it been like this. He hadn't expected Dan to be here, hadn't expected him to be asleep, but he was. He had no rituals, no routine to fall on. Just the strangeness of *coming home* after a long day, night, a long shift, and he was tired as his high-strung body dared to relax, adrenaline running through his body like liquid ash.

Vadim stepped in, leaning the door shut, began to undress in the dark, but felt Dan's presence was something incredibly precious, and he didn't want to disturb him and at the same time wanted for Dan to wake up. He set the armour down and to the side, felt the night cool his sweat underneath, began to shed the clothes while looking down at Dan who lay there, a dark silhouette in a dark room.

The faint sound of a snuffle and Dan shifted on the mattress on the floor.

Taking up all of the space, arms and legs spread out, entangled in the blanket as he rolled over onto his side. Still asleep, except for those long-honed senses that had picked up movement and sound, yet no danger. Eyes and face hidden by his wild hair, he drew in a soft breath, sighing.

Vadim undressed, the skin of his face so dry it felt electric, and he dropped his shirt into a corner of the crowded room, then crouched, leather of his boots creaking, to run a gloved hand through Dan's hair. "It's just me," he said softly. "I'll be in bed shortly."

"Aye," Dan sighed and murmured, words slurred with sleep. "If it hadn't been you, wouldn't have slept, too dangerous..." and fell asleep again the next moment. Breath evening out even as the gloved hand kept stroking his hair for a little while longer.

Vadim stood again, with a sigh, took his gloves off and grabbed a towel. He was on his way to the showers, just getting a quick wash and some soothing lotion on his dried-out skin, only the worst, face, neck, throat, back of the hands, lower arms. He already missed the spa, and duty had hardly begun. A few minutes later, he locked the door to the tin hut, shed the towel, and moved under Dan's blanket, who shuffled to make space, skin against skin. He ran his hand down Dan's back, naked, and kissed his shoulder.

Dan barely woke, merely moved into the caress in one fluid motion with a soft sound of contentment before settling once more. Asleep on a lighter level while somehow aware of the touches.

Vadim moved closer, resting against Dan, warm body, smelling clean and good and placed an arm around him, spooning up like Dan normally did. The long shift and the sudden intimacy left him with a desire that wasn't urgent, that didn't need to be acted upon, and grabbing Dan now and fucking him didn't feel right. Tomorrow morning, then.

With a faint, sleepy sigh, Dan wiggled backwards, his arse pushing against Vadim's groin, once more relaxing into the embrace.

Vadim shifted, but was wide awake. Dan this close. Dan nearly asleep. Dan naked under the same blanket, relaxed and asleep, but responding. Vadim's hand moved down Dan's flank, the warmth and smell in the darkness. Dan. Perhaps waiting for tomorrow wasn't going to happen after all. He reached over for the lotion he'd used, poured it into his hand and warmed it, then began to massage Dan's ass, who let out some small, sleepy sounds, figuring if he didn't want to he'd tell him, otherwise...he'd just have to make it good.

Dan's leg fell forward, knee bent, muscles too relaxed to keep tension, and his limbs moved with the motions of Vadim's hands. He was still drifting in a contented state, with complete lack of apprehension.

Slippery fingers moving to Dan's hole, Vadim didn't know why the ring of muscle was comfortably loose, as he rubbed in the lotion, then coating himself with it. He rolled over, Dan's bent leg getting pushed further away in the motion, and slid in with hardly any resistance. Grease, sleep, relaxation made this easier, and something he had no knowledge of, only Dan, who was waking fully the moment his arse was breached once more. Vadim's cock entering his body without any force, merely rocking inside, and despite the stretching ache, with barely any pain at all. He'd never been so loose, it had never been that easy, and despite being awake, Dan did not leave the comfort zone he was in, floating, and just allowing this—this gentle, tender and loving intimacy.

Vadim groaned softly, feeling how easy this was, how little tension, no revulsion, no fight. For once. Probably Dan was just too asleep, but even so, this was different, different and welcome and the perfect thing to do after the graveyard shift. He moved slowly, didn't want to fuck Dan hard just now, didn't want to

make him tense up and suffer through it like he usually did. Merely tried to keep that relaxation alive, moving slowly, but deeply, gently, hand reaching for Dan's cock. "Don't tell me to stop..." he murmured against Dan's ear. "Because you feel...so good."

"Aye..." breathed out, nothing more. Dan's eyes stayed closed, even though most of his face was pressed into the pillow or hidden by wild strands of hair, and his drowsy smile remained unseen in the darkness. He should perhaps fight Vadim off, like he'd always done when Vadim had tried to fuck him slowly, but it was all so long ago. Too many years, and too much in between—and a Russian Frenchman who had smoothed down some long outdated barricades, a few hours earlier.

Dan's cock showed a growing interest, half-hard, pressed into the mattress, trapped between his body and the sheets, with Vadim's hand adding pressure, while his own remained relaxed beside his head. No tension, no fist. And all Dan could do was simply smile and let it happen, because for once, for the first time, the tenderness was welcome and good.

Vadim rocked against Dan, that tight heat without the struggle, his, his lover, his comrade, his life. The tenderness bit deep, and the hurt was good. Reminded him what they were and how, and against all odds, and he forced himself to do it slowly, because that felt right, and Dan seemed to accept it, because of the small sounds he made and the breathing that remained relaxed. Vadim came after what was too long and too short, too much emotion. Pulled out and turned Dan around on his back, who moved like a puppet with that smile remaining on his lips, and, still breathless, took Dan's cock deep, causing the sounds to return, huskier, deeper. Then slowed this down as well when the flesh hardened fully in the heat and tightness of his throat. The same relentless, tender, intense touch, hand reaching for Dan's hand, fingers curling and intertwining, as he sucked on the head only to slowly fuck his own throat in the cold desert night.

Dan, like Vadim before, took longer than usual, and yet it was never long enough. The sensations intensified by emotions, some of them on the surface, open, vulnerable and caused by no one but this man. Others hidden, opened up, changed and allowed by another man, who, unwittingly, had made this, now, possible. This tenderness, this gentle loving lust that was killing Dan and making him immortal, all at the same time. When Dan came, his orgasm was drawn out. Starting deep inside, shaking his core and dragging itself through from cock and balls right into

heart and mind. When he came, Jean was there, with them, an integral yet invisible part, before fading away and only one remained: Vadim. And Dan. And this goddamned love.

Vadim swallowed, sucking only to clean Dan up, then placed his head on Dan's scarred abdomen, breathing in his smell and bathed in his warmth, the gentle glow of love and security. Hands entwined with Dan's good one, breathing, just breathing, one of those moments when he knew he'd die a happy man.

They lay like this for a long time, no words spoken, none needed, and resting in the comfortable knowledge that this silence united them. Until finally, before he succumbed to sleep again, Dan tugged on Vadim's arm, pulling him up and into another embrace.

Vadim stretched, embracing, shifting, as tiredness set in and he rested on Dan's shoulder, arm across his chest. He knew how he'd wake up in an hour or a bit more—Dan holding him, spooning up. He always did, but right now, he was too content to move or think, drifting off to sleep.

* * *

It was late morning when Dan woke for a second time, or third, depending on how he looked at it, becoming rapidly aware of the light in the hut, and the way he was wrapped around Vadim, with his face pressed against the back of Vadim's neck, legs entangled and arms holding tight. He'd been out in the early hours of the morning for a quick dump, piss and wash, and nothing was able after that to rouse him from his sleep. October in Kuwait saw temperatures drop and he was comfortable in the morning sun that came streaming through the small window. No more fifty-plus degrees, the thirty-odd at lunchtime were positively cool.

Shifting against Vadim, rubbing his groin into the smooth arse, Dan ignored the sounds from the camp, concentrating on the feelings inside and out instead. "Mmmmmmm...." Breathed out, "you awake, Russkie?"

"Is that your idea of foreplay? 'You awake?'" Vadim yawned, pressing back against Dan, who chuckled. "Guess I am. What's the time?" He had slept past five o'clock. A rare day. And not screamed. He was fairly sure he hadn't. "No fucking clue, seems to be late, though." Dan felt too lazy and mellow to do anything but rub and stretch slowly against Vadim's back, arse and legs. His cock

was starting to get interested, and he wondered when they'd made the rules that forty-plus men were not supposed to be as randy as spotty teenagers. "I could reach for my watch...or I could keep rubbing my cock against your arse." Dan chuckled again, "what do you think am I going to choose?"

Vadim nodded. "No...competition. Your...decision is...entirely justified." Dan's lips curved into a wide grin against the heated skin of Vadim's neck, while Vadim looked around, located his own heap of clothing, and angled for the camo trousers. His watch was in there, somewhere. "The lotion is on ten o' clock, from your position."

"Aye," Dan spotted the bottle and reached for it, "we should get out the KY and leave it near the mattress, that stuff's a thousand times better."

"Yeah, but...no idea where it is..." Vadim slipped his hand into the pocket, fishing out the watch, casting a quick glance at it. "Eleven hundred. Not bad. Means we have some time before lunch."

Dan's chuckle became muffled, the lotion between his teeth, as he squeezed some onto his good hand, which travelled back south, ending between Vadim's cheeks, rubbing the lotion into his arse. "If we continue with the frequency of our fucks, I'll last the whole hour before scran."

"Yeah." Vadim inhaled, opening his legs, morning desire fuelled just by the closeness and the fact there was plenty of time. "I...needed you last night...couldn't resist." He glanced over his shoulder, grinning.

Dan lifted his head while positioning himself, grinning fully fledged back at Vadim. "I didn't hear myself complain, did I?" He could feel himself right there, at the perfect point of entrance, and he let out a deep breath. Preparing himself for the utter bliss of the first moment of breaching the muscle, when a sudden, wall-shattering knock was on the door. "Mr McFadyen!" The voice was stentorian and posh, "are you in there?"

Dan froze, muttering "oh shit," staying as still as he could, cock still nudging against Vadim's hole.

Vadim groaned, and felt a shiver run through his body. Officer. Caught. Literally in the act. Animals. Shame. Degenerate. He shook his head, fought the panic, fought the shame, lust wiped out that instant.

"Mr McFadyen! This is rather important. Are you in there?"

"What the fuck do you want?" Dan shouted back, growling with frustration.

Vadim moved away, so fast Dan fell back in the panicked motion, no way he could go through with this, not now; he got up, got dressed as quickly as if they were under attack, forcing himself into the dust-caked sweaty kit while the voice called out with growing impatience.

“Mr McFadyen, I have the Aide to General Major Richards beside me, and I would appreciate it, if you did not let Major McMonahan nor me wait for much longer.”

On his arse, Dan scrambled to sit up, looking round for his shorts. “Okay, okay, sorry, Sir.” Cursing under his breath, but at least his hard-on had gone down rapidly. He found the shorts and thrust his legs into them, managing to close them one-handed. A t-shirt was no where to be seen, and he spent the next second kicking lotion and rumpled blankets out of the way, instead of bothering with a top. He was at the door after a glance at Vadim, who was just about managing to pull the shirt over his head, dressed in his dirty camo trousers from the night before, when Dan unlocked the door, coming face to face with a very official looking US Officer, in his Sunday best uniform with medals decorating his chest and peaked cap making his already square jaw look even more like Captain America. The British Officer beside him did not have a single muscle moving in his stony face, while the US guy’s eye twitched at the sight of Dan’s mostly unclad body with its prominent scars and its sleep-tousled hair and the state of the room around him. Two mattresses on the floor and a man standing behind them, with flushed face and short blond hair, not meeting his gaze.

“Mr Daniel McFadyen?” The Major managed to get out, sounding almost normal, even though his eye kept twitching.

“Aye.” Dan nodded, “but it’s Dan, not Daniel.” He suppressed the urge to scratch his groin or some other inappropriate gesture, while blinking into the sun. He really should have remembered his shades. “Is there a problem? I thought all my debriefings were done and dusted before I went on R&R.” But then why the hell did this guy look like a Christmas tree? And, worst of all, the second in command of the British camp right beside him?

Vadim didn’t know what to do, felt the overwhelming urge to turn away, and merely pulled the t-shirt fully down. He picked up his watch and closed it around his wrist with a click, angling for his boots. Getting dressed as if he’d slept

here by accident. It gave his hands something to do. Felt the lotion between his cheeks.

“Apologies, Mr McFadyen, our papers stated your name was Daniel. Daniel Ewan McFadyen.” Dan grimaced at the name while the Major avoided any stray glances inside the hut, eyes fixed on Dan, and his face as stoic as the British Officer’s.

“It’s Dan, papers or not.” Dan insisted.

“The reason why I am here is because General Major Richards has sent me to present you with the US Military’s decision to award you the Bronze Star with Valour Device.” The man lifted the briefcase a fraction. “The medal is to be awarded for your bravery in rescuing the surviving crew of the helicopter crash in the Iraqi desert, between August 17 and August 18 1991.”

Dan stood, gobsmacked, staring at the man with an incredulous expression, while Vadim slipped into his left boot, and then the right one, pulling the laces tight.

“What was so damned special about that?” Dan balked, once he had found his speech.

Without an expression, the Major recited the official reason for awarding the medal, but Dan shook his head. “And what about the others who helped rescue us? I would never have been able to do this on my own.”

The Officer did not even blink. Square jaw, square head, probably square brain. “Mr Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada and Mr Jean-Pierre Leclerc are to be commended for their bravery.”

“Oh that’s *nice*,” murmured Vadim in Russian. “Very *thoughtful*.” He straightened and crossed his arms in front of his chest, moving a step closer. “No medal, though?”

“Neither man was as involved in the single handed rescue as you were. General Major Richards has decided to make a distinction between both acts of bravery after perusing the transcripts of the briefings of the surviving crew. The pilot, Jackson, the loadmaster, Martinez, and winchman Johnson, once he was fit enough to be questioned.”

Bullshit, thought Vadim, and tightened his jaw. Legionnaire and ex-Soviet. That was the reason. The fucking Americans handed out their tinsel in buckets as if they had to meet quotas for general morale, but suddenly, it was about distinctions.

If the fucking Americans could distinguish anything, why not start with enemies and allies?

Dan frowned. “Sir?” Addressing the British Officer, as if he could shed light on the whole rigmarole.

“Mr McFadyen, I would advise you to accept this award. I am sure it would make your former regiment proud. And, since you are an ex-serving member of the British Forces, you will receive full honours.”

Dan nodded, glancing behind him at Vadim, whose face was dark and closed, shoulders tense, muscles on his lower arms showing his hands opened and closed as if imagining he was wringing a neck. Dan looked back at the two men. “I guess I should say...’thanks’?” He knew he sounded less than enthusiastic, but if he was to choose between a morning fuck with Vadim and the shenanigans of a US medal with all the brouhaha that would cause, he was going to go for the shag any time.

“On behalf of General Major Richards, we are honoured you accept the award, Mr McFadyen.”

The British Officer butted in, “One thing, though, Mr McFadyen, you require permission from HM the Queen before you can accept the award. However, the British command post has decided to pursue this issue for you and I cannot see how the permission could possibly not be granted under the circumstances.”

“Oh, of course.” Dan replied, appearing dumbfounded. “And is that all I need to do for now?”

“Of course,” the US Major nodded, “but there is a chance the Office of the Secretary of the US Army will become involved, since you are an ex-member of the Special Air Forces, who committed a heroic act to help save American servicemen.”

Dan rolled his eyes with a frown. “Publicity? No thanks. Don’t think that’s a good idea, not with my former job. I bet there’s still a reward on my head somewhere out there, from way back in Afghanistan, and the Russians tend to have a long memory. So, do me a favour and explain to your Secretary of whatever Office, I don’t want my name and my face publicised, unless they fancy picking up my carcass with a pretty hammer and sickle painted across.” The Yank seemed to get the message and the British Officer gave a small nod. “Is that clear?”

“Perfectly clear.” The Major uttered sharply, before saluting crisply, as if Dan were still officially in the military and had climbed a lot more ranks than he ever did.

“Good day, Mr McFadyen, and apologies for having...,” the slightest of hesitations, “disturbed you.”

Vadim moved forward, a baleful stare threatened to burn the trimmed hair off both senior officer’s necks, and he slammed the door shut behind them, snarling in sudden anger.

Dan rose his brows. “What the fuck’s up?”

Vadim shook his head, inhaling deeply, fighting the anger, and the shame that somehow was sandwiched in all that sudden, unexpected anger. He was disgraced, forever, not even worth the cheap tinsel of the Americans. “Fucking politicians.”

“Eh, what? You mean the medal or, rather, non-medal?”

“Both.”

Dan shrugged, “it means nothing to me, they can stuff it up their arses. I just said yes because of The Regiment.” Stepping closer to Vadim, “or is something else the matter? The fact we got ‘caught in the act’? I think it’s hilarious—in hindsight.”

Vadim’s brow remained dark. “It...makes me,” he inhaled and broke eye contact. “Feel ashamed. Like a dog. It’s bad enough, but that...this is bad. Somehow, hurts. I...don’t know. Shit. I sound like a whining bitch.”

Dan was too shocked to say anything. Staring at Vadim with wide eyes, open-mouthed, until he staggered back and slumped onto the only chair that still fit in a corner beside the mattresses. “Ashamed.” He finally found his voice. “Of having sex. With me.”

Vadim closed his eyes and rubbed his face. “Ashamed to...need.” His voice shook and he hated himself more savagely in this moment than he’d ever hated anything in his life. “I hate those bastards. I feel...I feel like a fucking prostitute as a merc. Don’t you understand? I don’t mind the fucking job, I like it, but I hate the guys giving the orders, and I hate their guts, fucking Americans who ‘defeated’ what Reagan called the ‘Evil Empire’. Hammer and sickle? Yes. That’s us. Them. I’m not even that anymore. I take their money, and I fight their wars, but they should better *the fuck* leave me alone, especially when I...” He looked down at the

bedding. “am not a merc. They have no fucking right to disturb us or even *think* the fucking wrong thing. Or even the *fucking* RIGHT thing.”

Dan’s breathing came hard as he felt the taste of acid in his mouth, trying to make sense of the barrage of loathing. He sat, staring, and didn’t know what to say or think except for a vicious stab of pain and crystal-clear panic. Panic that all they’d re-found and gained since Thailand was slipping away, back into the coldness of a Finnish winter night. “What do you want to do?” Almost choked on the words. “What do you want *me* to do?”

Vadim shook his head, saw Dan go silent and pale, knew it was a mistake. He’d have to keep that inside. He couldn’t cut it out, he couldn’t stop feeling it, and it did no good, only bad.

“No, I mean, it’s not about me.” Dan carried on. “About who or whatever the fuck I am. You know who I am. Haven’t changed all that much. What you see is what you get and all that shit.” Shaking his head, Dan stared at his hand in his lap.

“Fuck, I’m sorry. You’re...good as you are. Too good, I don’t...deserve you. Or do I?” Vadim crossed the small room and offered both his hands. “I hope I do.”

“It’s not about deserving. It’s about what the fuck is going on inside of you and I don’t get it. Can’t understand it, and don’t know what the fuck to do with it.” Looking up at Vadim, only then taking the offered hand into his good one. “Is that part of how they fucked you up?”

“I...don’t know. Maybe. I...believed in my country, Dan. I did. Not the bad things, but the people. The...ideals. I did believe.” I went out there and represented my country, and then I fought its wars. I believed, once.

Dan nodded, glancing towards his shoulder bag, the one he always carried on duty, and his voice dropped. “If you want out of here, tell me. I’m not cut out for a normal job, but I could do security...somewhere. Somewhere in New Zealand, close to the farm, while working on it. Doesn’t have to be big money. Nightshift. Shit like that. I don’t care. And I don’t want that damned medal either. I’ll just refuse it.”

“No.” Vadim paused, forced himself to let it go, the darkness, could see Dan couldn’t deal with it, and he wasn’t sure what he felt anymore. Pull together soldier, he chided himself. You are spetsnaz. He pressed Dan’s good hand. “I don’t mind the job. The job is fine. We’re good at it. Realistically, we have five more

years. Maybe more if we get into something higher up, with less marching and shooting. The money's good, and I have not a penny to my name. No. You take their piece of tinsel, for the...fucking crew, and not for their fucking congress, for the kids you got out. Don't mind me. I'm just allergic to officers, I guess."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Dan looked up, dark eyes searching Vadim's face. "Not all Yanks are arseholes, by the way. Don't forget that, as little as not all Russkies are bogeymen."

Vadim's hands tightened again. "Touché."

Despite the words Dan's face remained serious. "The crew were great guys, they deserved to be brought out. The kid, Johnson, and Martinez who kept going, and the pilot, Jackson, struggling on with a fucked leg." Dan's face was turning softer. "And Matt's a good guy, and so is Hooch." Forgetting he'd never mentioned the Delta before. "I'll accept the stupid medal for them. They fought for their survival with courage."

"Soldiers. They are all the same. Too fucking young..." Vadim tried a smile, but wasn't sure how it came out. "It's alright. They are...your friends. Like Jean. It's all good. Don't mind me. Don't worry about me, okay?"

"Okay."

"And...who's Hooch."

Dan only blinked once and to his credit, he hardly hesitated. "Hooch's a Delta who stopped me before R&R and we exchanged a mutual handjob and blowjob." He shrugged and flashed a grin, "don't know anything about him otherwise, we didn't talk." The grin grew in confidence, "And if all went well the Delta has been busy with a young jarhead, anyway."

"You've been busy yourself, no question." Affectionate teasing. "Delta is overrated, though. What I read about them, they always end up in complete fuck-ups.... thanks to the oh-so-generous and oh-so-altruistic US military and their culture of in-fighting." Vadim smiled brightly. "The military analyses I read were very funny."

"And of course, Spetsnaz and SAS are a thousand times better, eh?" Dan winked, relieved the former tension was starting to ease.

“SAS is very uncomplicated, but Spetsnaz is physically superior. But we are closer in outlook than I would have thought. Only, we have a longer history. Russia had special forces a long, long time before you had any. We invented them in their modern form.”

“Physically superior?” Dan pulled himself off the chair, drawing up to full height and thrusting his chest out. “I don’t question your sources, and that you might have had a longer history, since The Regiment was only founded in the second world war, but superior?” Dan slipped his hand out of Vadim’s, stemming both onto his hips, plaster or not.

Vadim grinned. “You’re a rare exception. The men I’ve seen were scrawny, wiry, had bad teeth and bad reading habits.”

Dan puffed himself up even more and bared his teeth. Both almost completely straight and remarkable healthy rows of them. “I grant you the reading habits, though.” He mock-punched his right fist into Vadim’s abs. No force behind it, merely touching rock solid muscle. “and there’s nothing wrong with being wiry. It’s like the Duracell rabbit, they go on and on and on.” He smirked, the elation of having lost all tension was as heady as a drug.

“I’ll call you ‘bunny’ then?” Vadim stepped forward into a kiss. “Or is ‘American hero’ better?”

“Fuck you, commie bastard.” Dan grinned, adding before his lips touched Vadim’s, “and it’s almost lunchtime. I’m wasting away.”

“Yeah, lunch, and then it’s nearly time for me to go back out there, guarding convoys.” Vadim kissed again. “Let’s go.”

“Wait.” Dan pulled away, walking over to his bag and rummaging one-handed in the front pocket. He bent down, slipping something over his head. When he turned round to face Vadim, he had a chain hanging around his neck, with a bullet hanging from it. “Don’t think I ever showed it to you. Had it emptied in Dubai.”

Vadim reached for the bullet, skin crawling for a moment. *That* bullet. “That means you can’t use it now?” His fingers never tired of touching the throat, the collar bones, the shoulder.

“That’s right.” Dan stood perfectly still, only his chest moving with every breath. “Because if I ever needed to, I would not use a bullet. Too impersonal. If

your death had to be mine, it would be my hands, or a blade.” He paused, studying the pale eyes in front of him, “but as I said before, *live* for me. Not die.”

Vadim studied him, his lips opened to speak, then he fell silent, and breathed. “You know, I would cum if you cut my throat. You, with a knife, is the... sexiest thing I know.”

“You’re a goddamned kinky bloody motherfucking bastard.” Dan’s voice rumbled, several stages into huskiness. “And when you least expect it, I will be there, with a knife. I won’t cut your throat, but I can’t promise there won’t be blood...and cum.”

Vadim nodded, suddenly breathless, mind spinning, and not making sense anymore. “Food. I think. Shit. You think we have time for sex before my shift starts? Just a quick one?”

“Nope.” Dan shook his head, pointing to the door with a glint in his eyes that was nothing short of evil. “No time, I have a few things to deal with, and you need to be fresh for your shift.” He grinned, stepping to the side. “Your shift’s with Jean tonight, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I didn’t know his name was Leclerc, though...” Vadim walked towards the door, towards food and the rest of the world.

Dan shrugged, “I didn’t know either.” But I had his cock up my arse, and that thought sobered him sufficiently to grab a shirt before heading out, to cover his scars, the bullet on its chain displayed on his chest.

* * *

Ten days later, and Dan had been cleared for work. While his wrist was still strapped up in a tight, elastic tube, he was fit enough to resume his duties as team leader. He was back out in the dust on the eleventh day, while Vadim was out on the same shift, in Jean’s team.

Working security, high strung, all day, and yet another day, nothing serious had happened. Some small arms fire, but no serious ambush, no grenades or assault rifles beyond some AK shots fired at them from a window, or a ditch, and nothing they couldn’t evade. No grenades, that was the main thing. Still, on the way back, cracking jokes to relieve the tension. Vadim felt the buzz. Too much work, too much concentration, and it grew especially bad when nothing happened. Keeping

the mind focused, and still remaining on guard while being relaxed enough to not turn into a berserk, that was the challenge. The jeeps pulled into the camp and the guys loosened helmets and grabbed water bottles, washing the dust off their faces. Vadim saw Jean tell a stupid joke in French, making Pascal laugh, before Jean turned to him. "Dan's patrol is just coming in..."

"Yes? And?"

"Nothing and." Jean reached out and took Vadim's rifle. "Get cleaned up. I'll finish up the stuff." Vadim had the odd feeling Jean was grooming him to become his second-in-command, or something. Maybe teams would be split and Pascal got his own crew. He'd be the last to know. "You sure?"

"Absolutely. Get cleaned up, means you don't have to queue for the showers."

Jean grinned. "And I don't do that for the TLC you're getting, but so there's no bloodbath when I get around to shower."

Vadim nodded, strangely grateful for the consideration, and headed to the tin hut to get rid of his body armour.

Dan was heading in the same direction, loosening his helmet strap as he kicked up dust with his dirty boots. Thrumming with tension, not only had it been the first day after endless weeks off, it had also been a particularly shitty patrol. Unlike Vadim's, his own team had escaped an RPG at hair's breadth and one of his men had caught a few shrapnel splinters in his face. Nothing first aid couldn't deal with, but it left Dan flying high on adrenaline. He was still buzzing with too much energy that needed an outlet like a running session or a killer workout in the gym. Shower first, though, and some scran.

Vadim arrived at the door just a step behind Dan, grinning, suddenly, being met with a similar grin from beneath a grimy helmet. Good to see Dan after a long day, and he remembered last night with painful clarity, like every night, which washed away the thought of shower and food. With a quick glance around, he pushed Dan into the hut, who stumbled inside, and the door slamming shut behind them.

"What the fuck?" Dan spun around.

Vadim shouldered right into him, dropped his helmet. His body armour impacted Dan's, and drove him against the nearest wall, the force knocking Dan's helmet off, breath expelled with a groan. Vadim pressed into him, the tin hut

groaning from the force, and kissed him savagely, lips open, damn near eating his face off. Hands moving to Dan's trousers, seeking to slip past the armour.

Retaliating the moment he tasted sweat and heat, Dan pushed Vadim off with a growl. Shoving him hard into a chair, and setting right after him, hand twisting into the straps of Vadim's flak vest, as his thigh pushed hard between Vadim's legs.

Vadim groaned, hand had slipped from Dan's trousers, instead it was now his groin against Dan's thigh, and quickly rising lust, too frantic to find a way out of his armour or Dan's. Instead grabbing uniform and flak vest and turning to slam him into the wall again, but Dan twisted enough so both of them crashed against the metal wall, the impact lessened by the armour. A sharp exhale the only noise apart from the clatter.

Dan tasted of dust, the desert, sweat, the red shit sitting in every wrinkle, every line of Vadim's face. "Fuck, I need...you...bad."

Dan merely growled in response before attacking Vadim's lips, jaw line, delving into the narrow line of grubby skin that was exposed at his neck, making Vadim hiss and buck against him. Teeth digging into sweaty flesh, his hand still twisted in the straps, and his leg pushing more forcefully between Vadim's, pelvis thrusting hard against the other's groin, and Vadim opened just barely enough so the leg could arouse him, but tight enough to make sure Dan couldn't kick him in the groin. Dan's whole body shoving, suddenly, twisting both of them, until Vadim's back was crushed against the wall, while Dan bit viciously into any exposed flesh he could find.

Vadim moaned, pressed Dan closer, pulled him in, trying, frantically, to remove the armour, but the kit seemed horribly complicated, too many straps and pockets and buttons and more straps. Instead, he shed some of his gear, dropped ammo pouches which clunked to the floor.

Snarling like an animal when Vadim moved, Dan pulled off, hands working on the straps of his webbing. Managed to open it, but got caught in it when he tried to let it slip off his shoulder, while grinding against Vadim. Cocks hard, camo thrusting against camo, Dan bared his teeth, cursed in all languages other than English, tore at the webbing and finally threw it across the room, knocking over the chair with an almighty clatter. Didn't notice, focussed on Vadim, grabbed hold of his shoulders, nearly ripping the sleeves of the desert kit off when he pulled the

other away from the wall and thrust him to the side, following, shoulder first, for greater impact. “Mine!” Growled.

The door opened. There might have been a knock, but it likely had been washed away in the noise and clatter inside, and Jean peered in, saw—Vadim’s back, Vadim just reeling back from an impact against the wall—Dan, snarling like a feral beast, facing him, both men fighting, struggling. Looked like they were trying to kill each other, but suddenly it became clear, and Jean inhaled sharply, smelling the lust. Those groans weren’t pain, and both were just as dusty and dirty as they’d come in.

Vadim was breathing hard, like after long struggle, pressed against Dan, both hands on his gear, struggling to get the armour off, Jean supposed, his mouth dry.

Dan’s hips came crashing into Vadim’s once more, the only part of their bodies that was not hidden beneath armour. Tilting-twisting to maximise impact. Sweat running down his face, he could feel it trickle down his neck, soaking the camo beneath the heavy vest, when Vadim finally managed to open Dan’s armour. Delving forward, Dan pressed his chest against Vadim’s, mouth open, biting, devoured rather than kissed, own hands tearing at the goddamned straps of the other’s armour, when he was suddenly gripped, and an almighty thrust made him reel backwards, nearly stumbling over the crashed chair. Back slamming into the opposite wall, Dan grunted in a mixture of pain and lust as Vadim’s heavy body drew the breath from him. His hands were immediately on Vadim’s arse, pulling him closer, grinding, thrusting, needing to get as much friction as he could, while growling cuss words under his breath. Throwing his head backwards, baring his throat and snarling viciously when teeth dug into skin and flesh.

Jean stared, stared fascinated, and saw Dan’s wild abandon. Dan, who completely went with Vadim’s brutal onslaught, no less brutal himself, and it went right into his groin, seeing these, like this. Vadim, usually controlled and aloof, was just acting, just doing, no thought no malice. Vadim who bit, and ground...no, wrong thing to watch...watching instead Dan, whose eyes were half-closed, as Vadim pushed against him, rubbing his body against Dan’s with an urgency and power Jean hadn’t seen before. Vadim only pulled back to slide a hand between their bodies, very nearly ripping the camo cloth as he struggled to free Dan’s cock, and Jean could almost feel it on himself.

Speechless, staring, suddenly aroused.

Dan pulled the straps of Vadim's vest open the moment his own cock was freed, and he pushed the armour open before throwing himself to the side and taking Vadim with him, ending up thrusting and grinding into Vadim's hand, while ramming him against the wall. His body shoving again and again into the other's before Dan pulled back, both hands on buttons and fly, his head thrown back once more, growling with sounds that had nothing to do with being human. Freeing Vadim's cock, stroking, viciously grinding, biting hard into the newly-bared muscle of the other's neck, while his own was equally mauled. No quarter given, by neither man.

Vadim's grin was a vicious, impossibly aroused, and even sexy expression, one Jean could feel in the right places. The kind of grin made him want to bitchslap it out of Vadim and turn him around...but those were entirely the wrong thoughts...Vadim's shoulders, body tensed, while he groaned for release, and turned again upon Dan, grabbing him by the shoulders and smashing him against the wall. Open armour on metal, loud enough for the whole camp, but people had just arrived, and Jean wasn't sure anybody else was in the accom area.

Dan opened his eyes when the impact rattled his bones and saw, unfocussed, a shadow near the door. Blinked and groaned while his cock was stroked in the confines of their bodies. Suddenly realised they were being watched, and by whom, and his eyes widened. His next stroke of Vadim's cock was hard and merciless. Staring right at Jean, letting out a string of "shit, oh shit, shit!" while he frantically thrust into Vadim's groin, bruising their trapped hands and almost cruelly stroking—and being stroked, while his gaze was transfixed on Jean. Eyes locked, while his teeth mauled Vadim's neck.

Jean's eyes were wide, face flushed, staring right back at Dan with an expression the Legionnaire would have denied and seemed unaware of, but much like a starving dog at a pile of meat. For long seconds, he stood there, frozen, hungry, staring, then suddenly, as if he'd awoken, turned away, closed the door, and was gone.

The same moment, Vadim groaned and came, cum splattering across Dan's cock, hand, and camo, silencing the worst into the shoulder muscle between his teeth. Followed moments later by Dan, whose eyes closed when Jean ran out, thrusting and shuddering helplessly and utterly out of sync. Cum between their

bodies, soaking camo, staining armour, and his breath came in desperate gulps as he clung to the slightly larger body. “Oh fuck.”

“Oh...fuck...indeed.” Vadim smiled and kept an arm around Dan.

“Fucking...bad idea...bitch armour,” he cursed. “Unwieldy shit.”

Dan laughed breathlessly, dropping his head to rest in the crook of Vadim’s neck, and felt Vadim’s hand cup the back of his head. “At least it kept the worst bruises away. Don’t complain.”

“Okay. And made a lot of noise.” Vadim laughed. “But that was fun.”

“Aye...” Dan struggled to stand. “Can we stay like this? Can’t move.”

“Yeah. Just a little. Need...to catch my breath,...too.” Vadim moved to kiss Dan’s temple. Fingers moved to check the bruises, but he couldn’t see anything in this half light. “Shower later.”

“I just want to sleep now.” Dan felt as if his knees were about to buckle. “You’re wearing me out! Didn’t expect to get you back and have too much sex—and that there is such a thing as ‘too much’.” He yawned, wanted nothing more than to drop onto the mattress, but everything be damned, that one was in the other hut. Several doors away.

Vadim grinned. “Okay. What about this...” He helped Dan stay on his feet and closed his fly again, wiping the drop of cum on a rag he’d used to clean his gun with, then wiped himself down and stowed his cock away, too. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Scran? Or bed? Or shower? Spot the ones that would kill me.” Dan flashed a grin. He knew he was as dirty as a skunk, sweaty, dusty, and splattered in cum, but hell, the thought of dragging himself into the shower was just too daunting. Worse, if they did not show up for their meals they’d go hungry. “All your damn fault.”

Vadim grinned. “Just...the patrol made me...hard. Thinking of you, okay? That happens.” He grinned and led Dan out of the hut, towards the shared one. “Shower, quick, then food, then bed.”

“Sir! Yes, Sir!” Dan saluted as they stepped out of the hut, laughing while fishing for a fag, and not giving a shit at any of the stares they got. Remembering the look on Jean’s face, how he had stared at them, and Dan grinned to himself.

1991 Chapter XXXII—Comrades in Arms

October 1991, the Persian Gulf

The next day, after his shift, Dan waited for Vadim in the vehicle park. His patrol had come in a few minutes early, their charge safely back at the airport. His helmet dangled from one hand while a cigarette hung dangerously low in the corner of his mouth, as he was talking to one of the guys in his team.

Midge and a couple of his cronies were lingering not too far away, but the way Dan ignored them, they grew tired and sloped off. Apparently deciding it wasn't sufficient fun if they started verbal abuse, and any physical attack would be fruitless, what with Dan's mates all over the place and the crazy Russkie imminent.

When the second convoy of armoured vehicles approached, Dan looked up, grinning into the dust cloud from behind his shades, before returning his attention to the guy who'd been telling him about his problems with one of the rifles.

Vadim got off the jeep, spotted Dan amidst the men, and saw Jean had spotted him too, because Jean gave him one of those good natured ironic grins. Vadim was too tired to be angry about something that was just the usual pisstaking. Besides, Jean did step lightly around him. The other guys got to hear more stupid jokes, as if Jean was never quite comfortable about how far he could go. Jean gave him a nod that likely said something like "It's alright," and Vadim left the group.

He took the helmet off and headed straight for Dan, but remained a few steps away as Dan was talking to some other guy.

"Cheers, Spud." Dan nodded and chucked his cigarette butt onto the dusty ground. "I'll look into that before the next shift." Slapping the man's shoulder, who muttered something like thanks, mad dog, cheers, mate. "See you at scan." Dan called after him before turning his attention onto Vadim.

"Hey, sexy." He said quietly enough so that no one around them could hear, grinning at the other. "Fancy meeting you here."

Vadim grinned back and shook his head. "Yeah, and I thought they made them pale and red-haired on that island of yours." He winked when Dan laughed. "Fancy going to the tin hut and then showers?"

"I'm still knackered from last night's 'fancy tin hut' adventure." Dan grinned, waved at Jean, whose path described a curve, passing somewhat closely if he kept on course, and he just raised his hand and waved back.

"Besides, you remember what I asked you to do, when we were back? I want you to apologise to Matt." Fishing for another fag, one of Dan's team mates was passing with a water bottle, which he pushed into Dan's hand, taking a long swig. "Today's the day." Holding the water out to Vadim. "You up for it?"

Vadim waited until Jean was out of earshot. Apologize. To Matt. Had he promised that? Well, how bad could it be? And why did his stomach grow small and nauseous? "Whatever." He looked to the side. "Yes, sure. Get in touch with him. I just need to wash the shit off." And return the rifle.

"He's off this afternoon, he agreed to meet in the safe house." Dan took the water back that Vadim hadn't touched, downing the rest. Wondering for a moment if his Russkie had any idea what it meant that Matt had the courage to go back into the lion's den. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Wasn't up to him.

"Okay." Vadim inhaled deeply, face dark.

"Let's go to the showers, then." Rifle slung over his shoulder, Dan turned to walk towards the check point where they signed their weapons in. Vadim followed, acting in every way the comrade, and nothing more, not too close, not touching, to blend in as much as he possibly could, still knowing everybody knew.

"Hey!" Dan grinned at Vadim after the paperwork was done. Lighting a fag before he slung his arm around Vadim's waist. So much for blending in. "You look like this is the worst thing in the world. I reckon it was a bit harder to get us out of the desert, no?" Walking so close, his hip was touching Vadim's, even when the brief half-embrace stopped and Dan's arm fell back to his side.

Vadim glanced at him. "I wouldn't want an apology in his stead. I never got an apology, either."

"Apology? For what?"

"Not from him. Or you. From...others." Vadim managed to stop himself, despite the growing anger. Another wave of darkness was rolling up towards his throat and head. "He wants it, he gets it."

"I think you got something wrong here." Dan stopped in the middle of the open space in front of the huts, causing Vadim to look around and check if anybody watched them.

“Matt never said he wanted an apology, he doesn’t even know about this.” Reaching out, Dan almost touched Vadim’s chest before letting his hand fall back down. “I want you to apologise to the kid because he bloody well deserves it, but you know what?” Dan’s eyes were growing darker and the plume of smoke from his cigarette barely hid the rising irritation in his face. “If you don’t want to, then don’t apologise, because this is bullshit. A false apology is a slap in the face, so stuff it, Russkie. I go alone.”

For Dan’s sake. A real apology, and for Dan’s sake, or this thing would irritate Dan more, and fester. Maybe. It was hard to say. Go alone. What for? He met Dan’s eyes for a moment, then looked to the side again. “I will apologise.” He inhaled. “You got me on the wrong foot, okay?”

Tilting his head, Dan studied Vadim for a long moment before he finally nodded. “Okay. Just don’t ever accuse me in years to come that I ‘made’ you do it, because I don’t. Understood?”

“Yessir.” Vadim nodded. “Understood.” He headed into the room to drop the armour and kit off, and grabbed his shower gear, thinking about Matt and the safe house and Dan and how he’d phrase it. ‘Sorry I tortured you’ was not the greatest solution to that problem.

Dan followed him into the shower only a few moments later, and while Vadim kept brooding, Dan kept quiet. Ablutions done as quickly as always, it was time for scrab as soon as they had washed. Dan was the only man in the queue with wet hair—and the only one with any wild hair to speak of in the first place. Standing one behind the other, Dan spotted Jean close by. “Hey, Frenchie, fancy a game of pool later?”

Jean laughed. “Can’t get enough of seeing me bend over, eh?”

“Hahaha, you should be so lucky.” Dan lifted his shades, playing the game of banter they’d been playing since they started shagging. “Who says I even fancy your arse.”

“It’s all over the camp...and the showers.”

Vadim shot Jean a glance, and was, again, surprised, that nobody seemed to pick that up. Jean was flaunting it, and nobody cared or bothered. Instead, they liked him more for that sense of irony and irreverence.

“Just you, or...?” Jean asked.

“Or what?” Dan turned his head, glancing at Vadim with a smile, “I said to Vadim we’d teach him a bit of pool. Are you game?”

Vadim nodded, not quite sure what the game was, but it wasn’t ‘just pool’.
“When?”

“Always.” Jean nodded forward. “And don’t hold up the queue up there.”

Shuffling forward, Dan grinned. “1930 hrs? Vadim and I are out of camp for a while after tea, probably around an hour.” It was Dan’s turn to get his slop, the usual huge amounts of chips, meat, veggies and anything else the well-meaning cook piled onto his plate, plus a double helping of dessert and far too strong coffee, all washed down with half a litre of water.

“Yep. Doable.” That would give Jean time to call Solange, he reflected.
She’d be home by then.

“Till then,” Dan smirked at Jean, “keep the balls warm for us.”

“You guys do the warm thing,” Jean quipped back.

“Yeah, you fucking bet!” Dan smirked once more, teeth showing, winking to Vadim before he let his shades fall back over his eyes. He turned to chat with the cook, who’d become something of a mate and who always provided the extra rations for him, since food went through Dan like a sieve.

The rest of tea time went without a hitch, Midge and his cronies remained hushed in a corner, and despite Dan’s niggling worry that this was only the quiet before the storm, he revelled in sitting at a table, laughing, eating and chatting with team mates, and most of all, Vadim, even though the latter was hardly the heart of the party.

With scran done, Dan pushed himself off the bench, looking straight at Vadim. “Shall we?” Completely ignoring the wolf whistle to his left, except for a raised middle finger in the universal gesture of ‘fuck you’.

Vadim nodded and stood, face closed, eyes not looking at anybody, as the anger was boiling deep inside. He wouldn’t mind ripping somebody’s head off just for the calls and jokes, unable to take it like Dan did. Impossible to take it with the same nonchalant relaxed attitude, thus the best he could do was keep silent and wait for the moment till he could legally act, hoping they’d overreach and give him an excuse and a reason. He followed Dan outside, out of camp, away from these primitives and enemies.

Walking towards the gate, Dan lit a cigarette. Silent, in thoughts, until they passed through the barrier and were on their way into town. Dan had been staring holes into the dirt in front of his boots, glancing to the side now. “Vadim?” No way he could have missed the thunderous expression on the other’s face. “You got to loosen up a bit. Cat calls and shit like that happen with anyone.”

“I know. That’s military life, isn’t it?” Vadim looked at Dan, frowning. “It’s part of the whole deal. Being kicked around and mocked all the time, and bitches like Midge can piss all over us?” He lowered his gaze again. “Fuck, I miss being an officer.”

“They don’t ‘piss on us’, that’s bullshit. It’s just the way things have always been and always will be. Pecking order, too much testosterone, male crap and cock fights, and who gives in, is the weakest one. Show me one army in the world that does not suffer from bullying, all through the ranks and everywhere. Even being an Officer wouldn’t help you there.”

No, as an officer, I could kill and cripple them for it, without having to fear anything. No punishment, thought Vadim.

Dan shrugged, dragged a lungful of nicotine into his body, exhaling as he spoke. “I’m not condoning any of this shit, but I decided a damn long time ago I’m not a victim and never will be, so whatever crap is flung at me, it doesn’t touch me. It means nothing, it’s just others trying to find your weakness.”

And they didn’t have to do much searching in this case. Vadim shook his head, remembered the barracks in England, and that it had been easier there. Far easier. Despite his accent, despite the fact he didn’t quite belong, at least nobody had known what he felt and what he was. “Our ‘weakness’ was fairly open, though.”

Dan shrugged once more, looking around himself before his eyes rested on Vadim. “If those bullyboys didn’t pick on us for being gay they’d find someone else, and they’d pick on them. For ugly teeth, for being a ginger haired git, for being fat, for being thin, for having no hair, for being in their eyes something that’s different or just simply weaker, a victim, a target and a punching ball. Look at it this way, if they try it with us they always find themselves being punched in return—and losing.” Dan flashed a grin, “and the cat calling? That was just friendly banter. Don’t you think those guys are bloody *envious*?”

“What?”

“They see us, and they know we get some. Every day. And they? They got girlfriends and wives at home, or no one, and all they have here is the five-fingered lady. Trust me, Vadim, the wolf whistle earlier was nothing but that: banter amongst mates, and maybe, if you just shrugged and grinned, and realised that in fact they are just damn envious because of what we have and what we show them every day, right smack bang into their fucking faces, then they might even start to become human in your eyes, and generally rather decent guys that you might want to be mates with.”

Vadim was torn, pausing as he thought, then gave Dan a sudden, unexpected bright smile. “I love you,” he murmured. *What we have. What we show them every day.* “Fuck them.” Of course, Jean didn’t quite belong in either group. He didn’t join in, he just played. Jean somehow didn’t mean it.

Dan flashed a bright grin back, somewhat taken aback at the reaction, but so delighted, he could hardly find the words. Wanting to embrace, kiss, and devour Vadim right there and then, but of course that was impossible. “Well ...,” dragging quickly on the cigarette instead, “that’s good, then.” Throwing the butt behind him, he was still grinning when they turned the corner towards the safe house. After a few security checks they unlocked the door and slipped inside. Nothing had been touched, but the bed had gained a pillow and the table a box with condoms. Dan couldn’t help grinning.

Vadim leaned against the wall, checking the room like he had done before, noticing Dan’s strange delight. “What’s the matter? And when is the kid coming?”

“Well,” Dan plunked himself down onto the bed, “exhibit A, the condoms aren’t ours, aye?” Leaning back against the wall, arms and legs spread, he slouched in a relaxed position, “and exhibit B, no idea, he said he’ll be here as soon as he can. But he’s just a wee jarhead, if they don’t let him out he’s fucked.” Patting the space beside him.

Vadim nodded. “Alright. So he’s meeting somebody else here?” Dan was probably by now running a bed & breakfast service for all the gay uniform guys in the country. The thought made him grin.

“Aye, remember the Delta I told you about? That’d be him, then. Of course, Matt gave me an earful, earlier, because I scared the shit out of the poor kid by arranging a blind date with a Delta.” Dan was everything but remorseful. “Seems they got on, then. USMC and Delta. Okay. The kid is outgunned, but okay.” Vadim

got onto the bed and sat right next to Dan, who was laughing and murmuring “outgunned, alright,” to himself. Untying the laces of his boots and pulling them off.

“I hope he’s nice enough to knock.”

“No idea, Russkie, but if you straddled my lap I could kiss you, while fondling your body with my hands beneath your shirt and grinding my groin into yours. Sounds like a plan?”

Vadim glanced at the door. “Not sure.” The bed was in a bad position, too...straddling Dan, his back would be turned towards the door. On the other hand, Dan. Shit. They could have a quick one, and likely nobody would interrupt them. Chances were precious few, unless it was at night in their hut. Vadim sighed, it was no choice, really, and he got onto Dan’s lap, legs open left and right, feeling the heat between his legs, and grinding against it. “Okay.”

“That did take you a while to consider, hm?”

“No. I just figured the kid has seen this kind of thing before.”

Grinning up, Dan leaned his head back against the wall, shades still balancing on the bridge of his nose, even as his hands pulled on fabric and slipped beneath Vadim’s t-shirt, just as promised.

Vadim leaned in to kiss and plucked the shades off Dan’s face. They were in the way, and they did make him look distanced and alien. He relished the touch on his skin, moving against Dan, grinding against the heat, feeling his own desire awaken and grow, no longer caring about consequences. Or interruptions.

“You know,” Dan’s voice got instantly huskier, “if anyone had told me I’d be a randier bugger at the ripe old age of forty-two than I was at twenty-two, I would have told them to fuck off and cool their head down the next loo, while I kept flushing.”

“Yeah, but you were trying with the wrong gender.” Vadim kissed deeply, opening his lips wide to invite Dan, hands in Dan’s hair and on his shoulder. “Fuck, I’m no better.”

“Yeah...” breathed out, Dan pulled Vadim closer, hands roaming over skin. He couldn’t say anything else, because he had a tongue in his mouth and damn, it felt just fine there. He was just about getting into the swing of it, tugging on Vadim’s shirt to get it off him completely, when someone knocked on the door. Damn. On time.

Vadim groaned, broke the kiss and moved away, while Dan tried to stop him, breathless, aroused, and in no mood to apologize for anything. Not now. Not fucking now. Vadim reached for a water bottle and headed towards the door, figuring he could just as well open.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Vadim!” Dan groaned, exasperated, “you didn’t have to move away, the kid’s got a key to this place and as you said before, nothing he hasn’t seen. Damn.”

Vadim glanced over his shoulder, stood there, trying to catch his breath and trying to get his body to behave. Or at least be not so fucking obvious. Not sure what Dan wanted. Just continue? With the other guy coming in? Looking surprised and clueless. “What?”

It knocked again, but Dan ignored it for a moment, perfectly aware their voices could be heard from the outside. “You don’t have to jump up like a panicked chicken every time someone might see us together. There’s nothing wrong with it, not when it’s a mate who doesn’t care and who does the same thing himself. Okay?”

“Just...” Vadim swallowed. Just when I feel fucking vulnerable. But Dan didn’t get that part, the shame, the need to hide. To have control. “Okay.”

Dan nodded, looking at Vadim for a long moment, then called out for Matt to enter.

Vadim stood there, drinking, as the door was unlocked and the jarhead entered, regarding him past the bottle. Pretty bastard. Buff, certainly, very fit, young, a face that almost begged to be slapped or kissed or both. Vadim grinned as he set the bottle down.

“Hey, Mad Dog.” Matt grinned at Dan when he entered, who waved at him, locking the door behind him and pocketing the key. The Yank nodded to Vadim, even though his eyes narrowed slightly, a frown settling between them. Still, he seemed to do his best to be civil. “Long time no see. What was the name again?”

“Vadim.” Not gracing the other with his patronymic, or last name, both were pretty much only a habit and meant very little. “Long time no see indeed.”

Dan winced at the sudden tension, wondering if this had been such a great idea, but at least he had to try, and hell, the kid was here. Right in the lion’s den.

Vadim set the bottle down and looked at Dan, briefly, then crossed his arms in front of his chest. Glad that he wasn't sitting on Dan's lap. "Listen, yes? I don't think we *have* to talk, but I ask you to listen to me for a little."

Matt's brows shot up, had only come because Dan had asked, didn't have a clue what was going to happen. He glanced at Dan, who only shrugged and smiled slightly.

Vadim's stance was broad, rock-solid, like facing off, but not going anywhere near the American, merely standing his ground. "It won't take long. You know the story anyway." Vadim paused as if checking the American understood, and Matt obviously did, because his own stance suddenly mirrored Vadim's, arms across his chest and just as solid as the other. Closed-off, defensive without defending.

"Damn right, man." Matt stared straight ahead, seemingly stoic, but Dan could see his jaw muscles working.

Vadim was speaking slowly and clearly, as if gathering his thoughts. "Our first meeting did not go well, I understand, and it is my fault. Dan made clear to me you are a close friend, and I have...overstepped myself and treated you wrong. Not like the friend of..." He paused, wrestling through the concept and the words again, in front of this half-baked kid. "the most important person in my life. What I did was...dishonourable. Unbecoming. A disgrace. I," he inhaled, jaw muscles tightening. "ask you to accept my apologies."

That was obviously not what the kid had expected, and Matt's jaw dropped open, while Dan audibly exhaled a sigh of relief. "Uh..." was the most intelligent answer the Yank managed to get out, before gathering himself. "Shit, man, I didn't think...like, didn't expect..., he puffed his chest out, once again staring straight ahead at Vadim, but the tension was already less. "I thought you were just a fucking asshole. Was I wrong?"

"No, you weren't, but doesn't matter." Vadim inhaled again. "But I'm more honourable than that. You did nothing wrong, and yet I punished you for... something. That was uncalled for. There's no excuse. No reason. I did it, it was wrong. Dan's friends are my friends." He shook his head. "Well, I blew that one, but that's the theory, anyway."

"Well, I...I guess you were fucking desperate."

“I was.” Close to killing myself. There’s no deeper despair than that. Matt’s stance began to relax and his arms unfolded, falling to his sides. Too young to resent forever, and too damned uncomplicated to hate. He held his hand out, waiting for Vadim to take it, all the time watched by Dan.

Vadim reached out to take the hand and shook it, marvelling at the fresh faced beauty now he allowed himself to see it. Dan had a good taste, only the best meat on the market.

“That’s a fucking good excuse, man.” Matt glanced over at Dan, “and I guess it worked in the end.” He even offered a vague smile to Vadim. “Apology accepted.”

“Thanks.” Pressing the hand lightly, then releasing it, and Vadim stepped back, not sure what to do beyond this point. He glanced at Dan, then back at the kid. “That means a lot.”

Matt seemed just as unsure about what to do, when Dan leaned back on the bed, as sprawled as he had been before. Grinning with intense relief, from one to the other. “Now that you’ve ‘kissed and made up’, as they say, I guess asking for a threesome is a bit much, eh?” Dan smirked toothily into the room, while Matt almost choked on his own spit.

“Huh?”

Vadim studied the kid and gave a short, toneless laugh. “So that was what you had in mind,” he said. “And I was wondering.” He moved towards the bed and sat down. “As if Matt here didn’t get anything better than two grandfathers ...” A glance to the kid. “And one an ex-Soviet that was everything but friendly first time round.”

“I was joking.” Dan shrugged, waving Matt towards the only chair, opposite to the bed. “I figured it would make a grand ice breaker and it seemed to have worked.” Matt sat down, eyeing Dan and Vadim with barely hidden suspicion.

“Joking?” He piped up, stretching his long legs out as he slouched on the chair. Too young, too good looking and far too sexy. Except for that stupid-assed haircut that made any head look like a badly polished billiard ball.

“Fucking great sense of humour you have, Mad Dog.”

“Do I?” Dan grinned, fishing for a fag before reaching for Vadim, attempting to pull him closer, and Vadim got onto the bed again, giving the

cigarette a disapproving glance. “What do *you* think?” Dan glanced at his Russkie. “Am I a joker?”

“Sometimes.” Vadim looked into Dan’s eyes, tried to see what went on in that head, and thought, probably, it was Dan just being familiar with him and Matt. His *other* lover. “But I’m not sure you’re right now.” He kissed Dan, suddenly, before he could say anything, with the passion that had just been interrupted. Hand on Dan’s chest, fingers digging into muscle and skin. “I don’t think you are...” he murmured against Dan’s ear, breathing out, then kissing Dan’s neck, and biting, changing between the two.

“I...” Dan was flustered all of a sudden, totally taken by surprise, and the cigarette ended up crumpled and torn between his fingers. “I was...” he meant to say ‘joking’ but then he wasn’t so sure anymore what he’d meant in the first place. Glancing over at Matt, who was watching them, with an odd expression.

“Don’t mind me.” Matt suddenly said, reaching for another water bottle, making himself comfortable in his chair. “I’ll just sit here, quietly, like, and watch the show.” If he was embarrassed at all, he did a damn fine job of hiding it with bravado.

Vadim grinned at Dan, almost daring him to chicken out, call the bluff, because, truth was, Matt was easy to ignore as he was sitting right in his back. If he could ignore a door, he could ignore a jarhead. And he’d enjoyed Vanya watching him fuck some guy, he remembered, as he pulled Dan’s shirt free and over his head, despite feeble protests, then dropping it at the side. Now fully on the bed, legs left and right again of Dan’s legs, pulling his own shirt off as well, figuring giving Matt a view of skin and muscles wouldn’t hurt. The faint gasp he got as reaction to those scars and a body kept in pristine condition told him the Yank was paying attention very well.

Vadim went down to kiss Dan again and murmured into his ear. “Not...part of an apology, this one.” He grinned, baring his teeth, then nipped at Dan’s throat again, while Dan muttered, “fuck, then what is this? I didn’t plan...”

Shutting up when hands opened his belt, and Vadim got off him, to the side, giving Matt a view, as his teeth traced the line of Dan’s cock through the cotton cloth. He was rewarded with a sharp intake of breath, and his eyes closed as he knew perfectly well where everything was. Opened the buttons, working at this speed because he was sure Dan would bolt and freak if he gave him just a second

to consider what was going on. In fact, this was damn fucking hot, Dan spread out and watched by this young guy.

Vadim pulled Dan's trousers down, and immediately took his cock deep, not allowing himself any coherent thought. Taking him deep instead, causing Dan to groan and buck, fully in with the first movement, and then concentrating on that. Moving his head up and down, feeling the length slide inside and restrict his breathing, then sped up, skirting the reflex, but never quite triggering it.

"Oh shit!" That was all Dan managed to bring out, staring down at Vadim's head, then back at Matt, who was moistening his lips and whose open water bottle hung forgotten in his hand. Dan didn't know what to think, figured thinking was highly overrated, and let his head fall back against the wall instead, legs opening further, arms at his side for balance. His lips parted, he felt the jarhead's eyes on him, and that knowledge triggered something that made his mind buzz and his cock surge.

Vadim now went deeper and faster, then slowed down, allowing Dan's cock to almost bob free, only to catch breath, then went down again, relentless, and he'd grin if that had been anatomically possible. He gave the jarhead a sideways glance, not self-conscious, not shy, not embarrassed about what he was doing. He'd done it too often by now, and the kid was no danger.

Matt was silent, staring, suddenly murmuring as if he had forgotten he was thinking aloud, "leave me something."

Vadim paused, pulling almost free again, taking hold of Dan's cock with his hand to lick the crown, then looked at Matt again, and nodded, waving him over with his hand.

Matt jerked as if slapped and his face coloured, but he got up nevertheless. "Fuck, man, you want me to share?"

"Yes." He did. He was willing to share. Vadim wanted to see Dan go insane.

Dan groaned and Vadim felt him twitch in his grasp as he invited the younger man, while looking at Dan with a knowing expression.

"I'll...probably die." Dan groaned, breathless, hands twisted in the blanket, but his comment broke the spell and Matt slid to his knees. He didn't touch Dan's cock, though, instead tongued the head and teased the slit, lapping at precum before taking his time and licking between and around Vadim's fingers. Only when

Dan started to jabber incoherent words and made pleading sounds, did he suck the head in, until his lips touched Vadim's hand, which gave Vadim an unexpected jolt of pleasure.

Matt's own hands were in his back, wrists held, pushing his head down, indicating to Vadim to do the same with his hand, and Vadim stroked Dan's cock, finding a rhythm together, reducing Dan to senseless begging for more, or less, or anything at all, as long as this never stopped.

Vadim felt his guts knot, every now and then brushing the jarhead's lips, but he soon found the rhythm, and leaned in to lick Dan's scars, but distracted by the kid that blew his lover. Just inches away from him—a sight that aroused him far more than if he'd done this alone, by himself, and one hand covered Dan's, that was a fist around some of the blanket. “I can take over,” he murmured. “And finish him off, or you do. Your call. Depends how much...you like the taste...”

Matt came up, eyes somewhat glazed, lips glistening. His voice had turned too husky and deep for a young guy like him. “I like it.” He didn't look at Dan, who was pleading nonsensically for the ‘torture’ to continue.

Vadim nodded. That meant Matt would finish him off. It would be fitting—and the longer he drew it out, the more Dan got out of it. Not that he was grateful right now. Of course not. Like most things in their fucked up lives, they moved into perspective and were cherished only years after the fact. “Okay.”

“Your turn. My hand?” Matt still didn't acknowledge Dan, as if he didn't exist, as if all he was, was a straining cock that begged to be sucked—reducing the man to sex, deliberately so.

“Aye. You can finish him off, then.” Vadim grinned, grinned so hard he found it almost difficult to engulf Dan's cock again, casting an amused sideways glance at Dan that was downright cruel in this situation, especially with Dan being completely out of his mind, his facial expression one of pain rather than pleasure.

Vadim continued where Matt had stopped, tasting the kid on Dan as well, while Matt helped him keep Dan interested, stroking the cock, kneading his balls. Judging from Dan's sounds, it worked a charm. Plus, this turn-taking was easy on the jaw muscles, which was another plus, and it was more arousing than the usual configuration. Interesting. He could sense Dan was close, and pulled back, before Dan managed to cum. “He's all yours.” Vadim sat back, relaxing his jaw with a few motions and grinning at Dan, lips open, half-showing teeth.

The incoherent sounds were hardly human anymore, and very much unlike Dan. The only time Vadim had ever heard those needy whimpers and pleading moans, coupled the way Dan's body thrashed and jerked with complete abandon, was during the fistfuck.

Sounds that turned truly inhuman when Matt's lips closed firmly around Dan's cock, shoving Vadim's hand out of the way and taking him in fully, sucking down until Dan could do nothing but buck up with an unguarded cry, convulsing as his body and mind were lost in the throes of orgasm.

Matt quickly pulled back enough to swallow, they'd long established it was safe, and he stayed where he was for a while, seemingly reluctant to let go of Dan's cock, or just simply allowing the man to calm down enough to remember breathing.

Vadim watched, watched that young face and his lover, the sounds going right through him. He leaned in to Dan and kissed him, didn't matter Dan had no space to breathe right now, he wanted to be close, and he was so hard it hurt.

Dan wasn't able to kiss back properly, nor do anything that required brain power. He was still struggling for air, his heart hammering, when he slowly began to become aware of his surroundings. "Uhhhh...." Breathed out, the most intelligible sound he was able to produce.

Vadim grinned, kissing the open lips, not bothering whether Dan kissed back, enjoyed or hated it, fingers digging into the long hair, staring into Dan's eyes from very close. Yes, he was alright. Killer orgasm, but alright.

Matt finally let go of Dan's cock and scooted back onto the chair, where he slouched exactly like before, but this time sporting a formidable hard-on through his uniform trousers. "Anyone in there, dude?" Matt grinned, far more at ease than five minutes ago.

"Uh-huh." Blinking, Dan gazed straight at Vadim's pale eyes, no more than a couple of inches away. "I..." he moistened his lips. "Fuck, I didn't plan this."

Vadim nodded. "I know." And he did. Dan had, after all, asked Jean for pool. He wouldn't organise anything like this if he had planned this. Funny, really. It was beyond Dan, but not beyond his own scheming. "Now look at the nice American, Dan," he said softly. "Don't you want to say 'thanks'?"

Dan's eyes blinked sluggishly. Trailing from Vadim, too close, over to Matt, too far away. "I guess...I guess I can't...expect you two..." Only then did he cotton on to what Vadim had actually said, and he blinked again. Faster this time, before

focussing fully onto Vadim. Eyes narrowed to try and keep the blur away. Studying him for a moment, his hand came up, landing on Vadim's groin, closing around his hard cock and he gave a small acknowledgment, making Vadim groan and move against the hand, before a brief smile ghosted across Dan's features. "Aye."

Turning his head, then his body, away from Vadim and towards Matt. Sitting up, Dan rolled his shoulders before stretching, then sliding onto his knees and crossing the short distance. Kneeling in front of a shocked looking baby Yank.

"Matt..." Dan murmured huskily, "I want to properly thank you."

Vadim sat back, almost as shocked, but he knew Dan was playing it by ear and perfectly...and impossibly sexy. Dan just acting, just doing this...this...submission thing, this power thing...he nodded to Matt and smiled, encouraging. All perfectly safe. Not sane, but safe.

"Yeah, fuck, sure." Yet Matt seemed everything but sure, despite the encouragement. Dan seemed deceptively meek, trousers around his knees, cock spent. Those dark eyes lifted, framed by the silver streaked dark hair, laughter lines around the eyes and...Matt shook himself out of his reverie.

Fingers working to get his belt open, trousers undone, briefs down. Dan was everything but meek, everything but docile, and nothing but tamed danger. Sinews and muscles, twenty-plus years of deadly experience. A lethal killer, on his knees. Begging, almost, to suck a cock. It was the tamed danger that won above all else, that got Matt to free his cock and simply wait, not touching Dan.

Vadim got off the bed, standing there, changing the angle so he could watch better. His guts a churning mess of desire, surprise, and the strange feeling of power, and the pure arousal of seeing Dan with somebody else. He didn't hate Matt now. If anything, he was jealous because he hadn't watched them those other times. Took half a step closer.

Dan glanced at the cut cock, moistened his lips, and then did the most unexpected thing of all. He turned his head, voice, soft and husky, unlike the wildness of his eyes. "May I?" To Vadim. Asking permission out of a strange instinct, knowing what effect this game would have on his lover. The lover who hated nothing more than being a lover, being with him, being gay—and being different. In public. Paying him back, now, for every touch, and every kiss, and every smile in front of others.

Vadim nodded, speechless, unable to say a word or make a sound, just moved closer and ran his fingers down Dan's face, through his hair. His own desire killing him right now. "Yes. Suck him like...you would me." Voice husky, and he didn't even realize he'd spoken Russian.

But Dan had noticed, and he smiled, before turning back to face Matt, lifting his head and pulling his hands back, just like Matt had done earlier. But Dan did it with more vigour, more viciousness. Muscles standing out, visible even through the thin shirt, a sight Vadim couldn't tire of, and he took Dan's wrists with his hands, keeping them crossed and up and back, feeling Dan's muscles shift as he did, while Matt was only able to stare open mouthed at him, cock twitching.

Lowering his head, Dan focussed a moment before doing what he did best, sucking down hard and deep, using all his control, his zest, and his fucked-up lust for cocks and cum, to deep throat his Yank as hard and furious as he could. No quarter given, and no other choice for Matt than to let go and enjoy the ride.

Vadim groaned, just seeing this almost made him cum in his trousers. Imagining it was himself, and at the same time fully appreciating Matt's cock and near perfect physique. The taut, flat stomach that was half-revealed as the t-shirt rode up, just a bit, but this glimpse of skin was almost better than the whole thing. The way Dan's face changed, and the expression in his eyes.

Matt's eyes were half closed, transfixed on Dan and the way his cock vanished between those lips, and he could not last. Not the way the Russian was holding Mad Dog, forcing his arms and wrists higher, making him bend further down, and Dan just let him, just did it, and Matt stared, breathless, helpless, lost to lips, teeth, suction, strength, heat...he came before he even realised he was there yet, thrusting upwards into the willing throat. Groaning and panting, but he did not touch Dan, as if Mad Dog belonged to another. To that madman, that Russkie.

Gasping, when Dan licked up the shaft, Matt looked up, watched how Dan moved his shoulders, struggling against the way he was held to lift up onto his knees, before Matt finally realised what he wanted, when Dan kissed him the next moment. Deeply, letting him taste his own cum, tongues intertwined.

Vadim's hands still on Dan's arms, but he released him, instead moved to the side, looking down at Dan, opening his fly, and freeing his cock while Dan and Matt were kissing, lost for a while in that small word of perfect intimacy after an orgasm. Dan finally pulled back, grinning at Matt, who was nearly as breathless as

he had been before the kiss, when Dan turned his head and glanced slowly up at Vadim.

Vadim, who needed this, right now, with very little patience, and slid his cock between Dan's lips, which opened willingly. Pushing deep, knowing Dan would accept and could deal with it. He thrust in a few times, fucking that throat almost roughly, certainly fast. All the time Dan's hands remained in his back, fists surreptitiously clenching, concentrated with narrowed eyes on fighting the gagging reflex.

Just a little later Vadim took Dan's head and pressed him in while coming, against the desperate sounds. Then, despite what it cost him, Vadim pulled back, shaky on his legs, dazed, unable to say or do anything, not while he was panting so hard.

Matt was staring at the sight before him. Disbelief and shock written all over his face. Gaping wide-eyed and with an explosive mixture of lust and something akin to repulsion, disappointment, embarrassment, a whole lot of confusion, while Dan was unable to take any notice of him, nor really of Vadim. Too intent on getting his breath back.

When thought returned, Vadim reached out to touch Dan's face. "I love you," he murmured, again. Seemed he couldn't repeat this often enough. Words that were now allowed, accepted, that were alright. Seeing Dan struggle for breath, he took him by his shoulders, pulled him up, one arm around Dan's heaving chest. "Are you alright? Lapushka?"

Dan grinned, stood close, leaning into Vadim. Two cocks in one go was more than he'd bargained for. "Aye." His voice remained husky from the abuse his throat had taken. An abuse he had more than readily accepted, even welcomed. "Fucking hell, that was...different."

"Yes, it was." Very different. Their games only ever had seen Vadim on his knees like this, with Dan in control, with the power. A few times, in an almost as good a safe place in Kabul. "I needed to be...rough." And what buzz if it was Dan at the receiving end. Always. No struggle, acceptance, and just knowing Dan accepted it.

"That's OK, it was a bloody interesting thrill and you didn't hear me complain, did you?" Dan's dark eyes were alive when he grinned. Tilting his head, he rested it in the crook of Vadim's neck for a moment, eyes closed, grinning from

ear to ear, while his lips touched Vadim's throat. He didn't pay Matt any attention right now, couldn't help focussing on Vadim, with Vadim's hand resting between his shoulder blades. Despite the American's less than subtle clearing of his throat as he rustled with fabric, tucking himself in at last.

Vadim turned his head, looking at Matt and smiling at him. "Are you alright?"

"Uh, yeah, sure." Matt stammered, looking at his hands, uniform, chair, table, bed, even Vadim, but studiously avoiding to look at Dan. "Just didn't expect this, like, stuff." He shrugged, "don't complain either. Was hot." He shrugged again, still not looking at Dan.

Vadim paused at the obvious consternation. "Yeah, I guess...guess that feels pretty weird." Not quite sure what to say to the kid. Holding Dan like this meant Matt was more or less a guest, and Vadim felt strangely generous and pleasant, but first tucked himself in with his free hand, which finally stirred a rather spaced-out Dan into action who hadn't noticed anything amiss with Matt's reaction. Too lost, but finally remembering his trousers were at his ankles. He sighed, shrugged, and did abso-fucking-lutely nothing about it.

"Or is it about...this?" Vadim motioned around, not sure himself what this 'this' actually was. Remembering something Darren had said. It felt like ten years ago, but he had replayed their conversation often in his head. "Funny, how power works, huh?"

"What?" That got Matt's attention, and even Dan perked up, blinking twice. It was the Yank though, who shook his head and stretched his legs out, slouching in the chair once more. "Is just fucking odd, alright? Didn't expect Mad Dog to do stuff like that. Didn't think he was your bottom. Am just surprised, like, that Mad Dog's a sub. Though that dom shit, yeah man, that doesn't surprise me." Matt quirked one corner of his lip up, obviously remembered how Vadim and he had 'met'.

"*What?*" Dan exclaimed in utter disbelief, finally getting his act together, but not his trousers up. "Sub? Dom? What the fuck's that?"

Vadim gave a laugh, didn't mean to go on laughing, but couldn't stop right away once he'd started. Letting Dan go so he could sort himself and pull his trousers up. "Top and bottom, Dan. Matt here..." strange how the kid had become 'Matt' and was no longer 'Donahue', "thinks you submit to me. That you're the

passive one. You know. Like to be humiliated, even, like to give up control.”

Vadim cleared his throat. Dom...and him, that...didn't seem quite right, either.

Switch, or slave. But he'd be fucked if he told the kid that.

“I *what?*” Dan had just about managed to pull his trousers to thigh level, when he let them drop again. Staring incredulously at the jarhead, whose face was starting to discolour into a remarkable shade of dark red. Pushing his hands into his hips, Dan drew himself up to full height, including the puffing up of his already impressive chest. Unaware of the fact any such gesture with one's BDUs around one's ankles was not the most effective one.

“I have you know, Matt, I am no such thing as a 'sub', I am not bloody well ever passive—unless I choose to be and there is something to say for an occasional fistfuck.” The latter caused the American to gulp and stare open mouthed, discolouring even further. “I sure as fuck do not like to be humiliated and I'd probably rip anyone's throat out, who tried to take control.” He glared, but Vadim had started to laugh even harder and it was damn difficult to keep up the righteous anger, when faced with the kid's flustered appearance.

“Then...what...why...” Matt managed to stammer.

Vadim rubbed his eyes and had turned away to fight for his composure while Dan stalked over to the bed and sat down with his bare arse. Priceless. Vadim thought he'd laugh about this probably even on patrol. Would be difficult to explain. Better keep his mind in the present. “Because sometimes, Dan likes it. Colour me surprised if it happens, but I'm certainly not the top...or dom, or whatever...” Vadim paused, then shrugged when Matt seemed surprised, but at the same time strangely relieved. “Seems that happened when Dan took me prisoner the first time. I just got a liking for it, I guess.” Remembering how badly fucked up he'd been, and Dan in control, the struggle all those days, while sharing warmth in the night.

“Oh bugger.” Dan murmured, glancing at Vadim when he finally, absolutely finally and at last, pulled up his trousers again. Lifting up to close them, then patting the space beside him. “It's just games, kid,” but the Yank didn't listen. Instead, Matt looked from one to the other and drew in a deep breath. “Alright, man, this is getting way to fucking crazy. Time for a little story telling, right? Prisoner?” He glanced at Vadim, then at Dan. “You never told me about that, Mad Dog. I know you've gone a long way back, like, stone age, but prisoner?” Vadim

glanced at Dan and stepped towards the bed again, standing there, hands now in his pockets—a sure sign he was relaxing. “Afghanistan, 1980. I was Soviet special forces, and Dan...was undercover. Dan took me prisoner to interrogate me, up in the mountains.” He smiled, ruefully, while the Yank’s eyes grew wider. “I spilled the beans, of course I did. I know what torture is like. And Dan’s method was crude, but effective.” Giving Matt a knowing, understanding nod. “Dan very near killed me, but somewhere inside that complete bastard, he decided he didn’t want to kill a prisoner. Geneva convention more than my beauty.”

Dan was looking down, rubbing his nose with the back of his hand for a long time, before he looked up and met Matt’s scrutinising gaze. “I’m not a nice guy, kid.” He shrugged, but didn’t apologise. Facts, past, and over. They’d done what they had done. “Or, at least, I’m not *just* a nice guy. I did what I did, in fact, we both did. Vadim and I.” Looking up at the other, who gave him a nod, remembering, with too much clarity, and still it was removed and had paled over time. Dan smiled and hooked his hand into Vadim’s webbed belt, pulling him down to sit beside him. “Let’s just say, the way we met wasn’t as fun as the way you and I did, or Hooch and you, for that matter.” The last bit got Matt to roll his eyes and shake a feeble fist at Dan, as if he complained about something that had seemingly turned out well.

Dan slung his arm around Vadim’s shoulder, fishing for a fag in one of the many pockets of his trousers. “You could say it was tit for tat. Eye for an eye and all that shit. We both bear the scars,” Dan’s voice softened, “inside and out.” He found the cigarette and zippo, lighting the fag one-handed. Exhaling slowly, he watched the plume of smoke before adding with a smile, “and that’s why we can play what we play, even the unexpected, without being a ‘sub’ or a ‘dom’ or whatever you called it, and without belonging to any bloody category, and without it affecting who we are. We’re just us: old, scarred, weathered battle horses who’ve gone through more shit—together and apart—than anyone should survive. But we did, so what’s a little kink between friends.” He tilted his head against Vadim’s shoulder.

Vadim reached up and cupped Dan’s head, not minding the smoke and studying the kid, only hoping for his sake, he’d never get into anything similar, even though it had turned out well. That kind of fresh face should be home, not killing stuff. “That about sums it up,” he murmured. “Some things lose proportion,

or get twisted, and all you have is yourself to measure things by. I guess it looks a bit lopsided from...outside, or a different perspective.”

“Okay.” Matt looked from one to the other. “I think you’re right, looks strange from here.” He sat up straighter, offering a smile. All seemed to be well in his world once more, even the colour of his face was returning to normal. “It’s freaky shit what spec force does. Guess I’ll never *get* it. Not sure if I want to.” He shrugged, reaching for one of the water bottles before pointing at the ‘idyll’ in front of him. “But this, shit man, yeah this is what I want. Hope you have a fucking clue how damned lucky you are.” He tipped the open bottle to his lips and emptied almost half of it, while Dan poked gently into Vadim’s ribs, chuckling,

“I think I know. And what about you, Russkie?”

Vadim rolled his eyes. “Yeah, decent enough cocksucker, brings in his own pay, doesn’t look half bad, and is great for sharing warmth. But the smoking...that’s an issue.” Gently touching his head to Dan’s, who was laughing out loud. Vadim grinned, then glanced at Matt. “Piece of advice: stick to your own countrymen, though. Doing what we did at the height of the Cold War was a shit idea, all told.”

Dan was shaking with laughter now, hard to imagine, in hindsight, how they’d made it. How the hell they had survived eleven years, Afghanistan, near death, Moscow, near destruction, and now the desert. “Listen to him, Matt, he’s right.”

Matt grinned and stood up. “Yeah, but not with a freakin’ Delta who doesn’t talk.”

“I wouldn’t say that’s a disadvantage.” Dan chuckled.

“Don’t know.” Matt shrugged one shoulder, one hand in his pocket. “Listen, guys, I got to be off. Just wanted to say thanks, for...” he looked at Vadim for a long moment, “for everything.” Vadim met the gaze, not unfriendly, felt a strange kind of connection with the kid now, like one of his own comrades, one of the good ones.

“Same here.” Vadim couldn’t say more than that, the eye contact had made it awkward, but close. There was understanding.

Walking past Dan, Matt leaned down and snatched the half-smoked cigarette from his fingers, despite Dan’s protest. “And your ‘Russkie’ is right, Mad Dog, smoking is shit. You should stop.” Grinning, he stubbed the fag out beneath

his boot and ducked far too quickly for Dan's lazy fist to connect anywhere vital, when Vadim added: "See?"

"I'll be around." Matt grinned, unbolting the door and was soon out, leaving Dan and Vadim sitting on the bed.

"Well. That was that." Dan said dryly after a moment, fingering the pack for another coffin nail. "Why do I feel like a very old guy who is part of a very old couple?"

Vadim leaned back, stretching his back out on the bed. "Because we are. I don't think I was ever that young, though. Or was I?" He glanced up at Dan, smiling warmly.

"Nope, definitely not when I 'met' you. Besides, you were already older. What was it again? Thirty-two? Or were we thirty-one?"

"Thirty-one."

"That kid's just about twenty or thereabouts." Dan shook his head.

"Damn." Vadim looked at the door, thought of the kid, and shook his head. Doing the numbers. Nikolai was twelve. His daughter two years older. He hoped they were alright. "He's just starting it, though. They trained him and sent him off to war. When he comes back out of it, he might be dead, or like us, or different. But I guess he'll be alright. He's a smart one. Young, but smart. And," Vadim added with a lopsided grin, "a prize to behold."

"Aye, if only he weren't quite so smart, if you ask me." Dan was looking at his fag packet and stashed it away with a heavy sigh and rueful grin.

"You mean 'smartassed'?" Vadim grinned. "I like that. Good choice, 'Mad Dog'."

Dan grinned, poking Vadim's abs. "Is it time for this old couple to go back to camp for a round of pool, or what about a 'kiss and a cuddle' before we go, old man?"

"I think I could fit a kiss and a cuddle in." Vadim raised his hand and waved Dan down to hold him. "Wake me if I fall asleep, okay?"

"Sure. That is if this old man here doesn't fall asleep first." Dan settled comfortable in the embrace and closed his eyes. Limbs entangled, bodies pressed close, and sated from recent sex. Paradise could be so simple.

* * *

When Vadim entered the mess, Dan just half a stride behind him, lighting another cigarette, Jean had already started playing pool. A brief glance at the clock showed they were almost thirty minutes late. Jean was half sitting on the pool table, just taking aim at the white ball, an unlit cigarette haphazardly dangling from his lip. Vadim could just imagine what Dan's and Jean's shared 'fag breaks' were like.

Jean glanced up at them, then shot the ball at a red one, making it bounce around twice, nowhere near one of the pockets. He got off the table with that lazy confidence that was clearly put on, but the Legionnaire flashed them a smile. "Ah, must be nice to get some. Dan? You guys still up for a game involving less interesting balls?"

Dan was laughing around his cigarette, shrugged, while pointing at Jean's unlit one. "It's getting soggy. I was told they work better if you actually light and smoke them."

"I'm just hoping to kick the habit that way." Jean took the cigarette from his lips and put it behind his ear. "To dry," he commented, to none in particular. "Sure." Dan rolled his eyes, strolling over to the cues. He took one and inspected it, making sure the ferret and tip were firmly secured, before handing the cue to Vadim, who took it and held it more like a club. "This one's not too bad, I take one of the warped ones." His hand rested on Vadim's arm some time longer than necessary as he grinned.

Vadim nodded, looking at the table and watching Jean set up the balls in the triangle, then back to Dan. Sated, calm, relaxed. Sex with Dan just put him into a mind frame where the Legionnaire was only half as grating. Or anybody else's company. He thought of the American kid, and was surprised there was no bitterness, no anger, no nothing. Just the feeling they were all, on some level, soldiers, and comrades.

Chuckling, Dan shook his head and took Vadim's hand in both of his, attempting to rearrange the cue, but Vadim's hands seemed to resist, awkwardly holding on while clearly not getting what to do with the thing. "You don't use it to kill people, and if you did, you'd stab them, not clobber them to death." Glancing at Vadim for a moment, Dan smiled when a thought occurred to him. "Fencing. I bet fencing is a lot like pool, just that pool is played horizontally and with balls."

Vadim paused, lips breaking into one of his rare, bright smiles, and he assumed the en garde position, which was very awkward with the unbalanced piece of wood. "I don't think so."

Jean laughed. "You fence?"

"Used to."

"Wow. Power to you. That's one sport I wouldn't really place you in, I mean."

Dan turned his attention to the Frenchie, eyebrows shooting up towards the wild hairline. "What, you didn't know Vadim was an Olympionite?"

Jean lowered the cue. "He was? What sport?"

"Pentathlon." He couldn't help it, Dan was beaming with possessive pride. "*Modern* Pentathlon," Vadim corrected, out of reflex, and found it strange to be looked at this way, even when Dan just grinned in reply. It had been ages ago. He lowered the cue as well and stood normally again, flat hand rubbing along the wood without noticing. "But I didn't win anything."

"You would have." Dan shook his head while walking over to the rack, picking a cue for himself. "I know you would have."

"You competed in the fucking Olympics," said Jean, "that's very impressive. Wow. Our Vadya is a celebrity." A good humoured grin, as he walked around the table, standing in front of Vadim. "I do wonder what other secrets you have, comrade."

Vadim shook his head. "Maybe that I'm not a complete bastard?"

Jean frowned, then shook his head. "Now you're stretching it, comrade."

"That's bullshit, Jean." Dan said very quietly from the corner, cradling his chosen cue.

Jean looked at Vadim for a long time, the gaze was met stoically, but without challenge. Vadim's stance said 'Look at me all you like', until Jean plucked the cigarette from his ear and lit it, half-turning away from Vadim. "A friend's friend," he stated and raised his cue again. "Okay. Just do what I do. Pool is dead simple and dead sexy, especially when you bend over the table."

Dan was still standing a few feet away, glancing across the room. They were alone, and that was a damn good thing, especially after Jean's comment. Even though Jean couldn't possibly mean *that*. Now could he? But Dan sure as hell

couldn't help the sudden heat that pooled below his belt. Not after the unexpected...afternoon. "What you mean, Frenchie?"

Jean grinned. "I'd teach a grandmother how to suck eggs if I explained to you bending over the table looks a lot like an invitation."

"Aye, but the 'bending over the table' thing is usually not done in a Mess. At least not with the same, ah, let's say 'thoughts'."

"Or 'not thoughts'," corrected Jean, tapping the table lightly.

Dan grinned, walking back to the table and plonking himself down with his elbows on the sides, looking at Vadim. "Guess it's time our resident wiseass shows you how to play pool, eh?" The cigarette had burnt down and he stubbed out the butt in a nearby ashtray.

"I guess." Vadim still looked somewhat dubious, seeing Jean chalk the tip of the cue, prance around and then take the triangle off. Placing the white ball in the D at the opposite end of the table, facing the front of the triangle, lining up a shot.

"This is called the break shot." The balls scattered, and Jean looked pleased when he potted a red ball. "There. You try to pot all red ones, but none of the yellow ones, and not hit then them either, and the black one last, after all your red ones. If you put one in, you get another shot. And so on. It's all about angles and hitting the ball right."

"Okay. Sounds simple enough."

"Then come, try it." Jean waved Vadim over. "See that one? If you line it up like this..." Leaning down, placing the cue into his hand, taking measure. "If you hit it slightly left of the centre, it should just drop in, no sweat, no work. See?"

Vadim leaned in to follow the indicated trajectory. "Yeah."

"Okay. Try it. Chalk first, cue like this, and the rest is practice."

Dan was watching the two Russkies, both of them without fatherland and only one with a home. He smiled to himself with an odd sense of tenderness. "Go on, you'll probably be annoyingly good at this."

Vadim gave Dan a smile and lined up his shot, hitting the white ball so it made a small jump and went somewhere else entirely.

"Too much strength. Balls like to be handled with care," said Jean, grinning, his hand lightly touching Vadim's arm. "But we let you have another go for practice." Vadim looked at Jean, very briefly, but the touch was not threatening,

not teasing, and the annoying thing about Jean was that the bastard could be innocent and tantalizing at the same time.

“Hang on, I show you.” Dan grinned, leaving his cue where it was and walking to stand behind Vadim. “Just try again, here.” Draping himself over Vadim’s back, touching him all the way. No pressure, just guidance. His hands on Vadim’s, guiding the cue, with Vadim noticeably breathing faster, and briefly closing his eyes as the touch went through and around him.

“Just...like that. Pull back and...” Dan breathed out the next words in a husky purr, “as gentle as the beginning of a fistfuck.”

Vadim tensed, again ruining the shot, and glanced over his shoulder, but Dan was smiling innocently at him. Eyes dark and unfathomable.

Jean’s eyes slightly widened at Dan’s words, and seeing these men this close made his heart race, remembering when he’d seen them, and now, different, tender almost, and he could imagine what it would look like, Vadim bent over. He cleared his throat. “Well, almost there. Have another go.” He picked up the ball and put it back into its original place. “Now, slow and smooth.”

Dan moved one step away, enough not to crowd and not to touch, while still being near, watching.

Vadim did the motion a few times without touching the ball, then added some range to it and got it right. The angle wasn’t quite there yet, but the white sent off one of the reds and it went into the right direction.

“There you go!” Dan applauded, “you got it. Now you just have to make sure you get all of the red balls in, because you started with red, but not the black, because that goes last, and definitely not the yellow. If you pot the white one, or hit the yellow ball first, your opponent gets two shots.”

“Yes. Not rocket science,” murmured Vadim.

Jean nodded at him. “Try a few, we start again after you potted a couple.” He motioned to indicate the table was all Vadim’s, and Vadim walked around it, looking for angles. Suddenly concentrated like studying a tactical map, and trying the occasional shot, getting the hang of it.

Dan grinned, then walked over to the drinks dispenser, gesturing to both men if they wanted an ice cold, alcohol-free beer as well. Vadim shook his head, but Jean headed for the drinks dispenser himself, leaning against the machine with a lop-sided smirk.

“What?” Dan got the first bottle out, handed it over. Drops of condensation rolling down his fingers. “You trying to tell me something with that smirk?”

“Are you trying to tell *me* something with that...” Jean nodded towards the table. “Or why did the temperature just go up by ten degrees?”

“Look,” Dan grinned, cracking the top off his bottle, “*I’m* the one who had sex today.”

“Bastard.”

Dan smirked, took a deep draught of the ice cold liquid, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He kept his voice low, “and I do remember Vadim and you are not particularly friends, aye?”

Jean nodded and glanced at Vadim. “Sure. I didn’t mean to invite myself there.” He grinned. “Don’t get me wrong.” Jean opened his own cold beer. “Don’t think I *am* getting you wrong.” Dan winked, turning half-way towards Vadim. “How are you getting on?”

Vadim nodded, waving the cue. “Yes. Set up the proper game?”

Jean pushed away from the dispenser, put the cue down and started collecting the balls, then set up the triangle, arranged the balls correctly with the black one in the middle, and put the white ball into position. “What teams, and who breaks?”

“We’re three and I’m bloody good. I reckon that means it’s you and Vadim in one team, against me. Sounds fair?” Dan grinned with all the arrogance of a veteran pool player. “That also means I am kind and generous and let Vadim break.” Finishing his beer before sauntering to the table, Dan leaned casually against it with his hip. Striking a relaxed pose that was nothing short of a hustler—if only he were about twenty years younger.

Jean laughed. “Kind and generous, eh?” He nodded to Vadim and plucked the triangle off. “Your turn, Vadya. And remember, whatever he does in front of your eyes is only geared towards winning. They say it’s 11% skill and 89% mental.”

Dan snorted watching Vadim line up the first shot. “I wouldn’t have guessed,” Vadim murmured, but more light-hearted than he usually was. The first shot scattered the balls all over the table, but none went in.

“Not bad.” Dan pushed his hips forward while swivelling the cue in his hand. He moved ever so slightly further into Vadim’s line of vision, his body

language shouting ‘fuck me’, and Vadim’s eyes were drawn and stuck to the crotch that had just taken centre stage in his vision.

“Let’s see how you deal after the next shot.” Dan grinned, “my turn. After all, men of our age only have so many shots left per day.” He leaned over the table, and instead of choosing the easiest shot to pocket the first colour, he decided on the furthest one, which forced him to spread his legs for balance and to lean half across the table. Arching his upper body until his arse stuck out, it caused the worn desert camo to tighten across his buttocks. He placed the shot with remarkable accuracy, the white hitting a red and sending it sliding into one of the pockets. Dan grinned triumphantly. “Red it is, then.”

Vadim swallowed and could only agree to Jean’s earlier assessment. This was...about sex. Or Dan made it that way.

“Ah, go on, then, you tease,” said Jean, laughing. “Just keep it up like this....”

“And then what?” Dan didn’t get up, instead twisted on the table until he leaned on it sideways, his whole body stretched and taut, and his face showing a kick-ass grin. “I’m going to win? Damn right, Frenchie.”

“Not without a fight.” Jean was watching, unashamed, far too interested and head-on to even pretend he wasn’t paying attention, but Vadim didn’t notice much, too caught up in staring.

Dan sauntered past Vadim, who turned with him, brushing him all the way with his body, before getting to the other side of the table and repeating the earlier show, this time to get the second red ball and letting Jean enjoy the full view of his arse as he leant over once more.

“Right. I think we should start distracting him in turn,” said Jean, pulling the front of his wifebeater loose and letting it hang out of his camos. “Vadim?”

Vadim shook his head and was somewhat surprised as Jean did pull the wifebeater over his head and dropped it on the nearby benches. “Take this.”

“Strip Pool?” Dan grinned, then wolf-whistled.

“Yeah?”

“You think you can distract me like that without retaliation?”

“I was hoping, not.”

Wiggling his hips into Jean’s direction, Dan concentrated on the game. Glancing up at Vadim with a wink before hitting the white and sending another red

to the pockets, except...it stopped right before and touched a yellow ball, which then slid in slow motion towards the pocket and vanished.

“Damn!” Dan was still grinning, though, and came back up to stand.

“Seems it is your turn.” Leaning the cue against the table, Dan had both hands on the hem of his t-shirt, fanning himself with the fabric, pretending he was warm.

“Jean’s got the right idea, don’t you think so, Vadim? Far too hot in here.”

Vadim shook his head again, watching the other two, then looking towards the door. The Mess wasn’t exactly private. Still, he couldn’t stop looking at Jean, and Dan was even worse.

Pulling the shirt over his head, Dan flung it across the room towards the benches, before idly rubbing the scars across his abs. He took a step towards Jean, cue in one hand, the other running up his own chest, grinning with nothing short of promises. “Your turn.”

“Is it just?”

“That depends, doesn’t it?” Dan grinned while stepping away.

“Guess it does.” Jean motioned for Vadim. “Come. He’s got two points already.”

Vadim stepped up to the table, glad he could see something that wasn’t bare skin, but it was terribly distracting. Still, one of the yellow balls was close to the pocket, and he only needed to hit it straight on. Unfortunately, the white followed right behind.

“Bugger, eh?” Dan smirked, moving close to Vadim and letting his hand rest between his shoulder blades. “Too bad.” Leaning so close, he spoke directly into his ear. His voice had taken on the dark rumbling sound before sex, despite being in a very public area. “I think if you lost your shirt you’d play much better.”

Vadim straightened, leaning into Dan’s touch, eyes almost closing. “Dan ..” Torn between shame and wanting, body showing definitely one of them, and suddenly Jean stepped in, taking hold of Vadim’s shirt. “Come on, secret weapon.” Somehow, that brought the tension up a notch. Jean’s hands against Vadim’s stomach, and brushing him as Jean pulled the shirt free. “Should try every trick in the book.”

“You’re insane,” Vadim murmured, suddenly feeling a hand on his hip, and he wasn’t sure whose it was. Did it matter?

“Aye, but that’s why you love me, right?” Dan murmured, two hands in Vadim’s back, palms connecting with scarred skin. “Besides, if you distract me enough, I might fuck up the next shot.” A crotch was rubbing against Vadim’s backside, but whose was it? Vadim’s eyes were closed, he was enveloped in bodies, heat, and tension jumped up yet another notch. He reached behind him, finding that crotch and rubbing it, reasonably sure the body covered it, but he was perfectly ready to head to the tin hut. Don’t think. Just don’t think, as fingers slid under his shirt and brushed his nipples.

“Oh fuck,” breathed Vadim. All strategy was out of the window.

“Aye...that was exactly what I was thinking of.” Hands roaming under Vadim’s shirt, not two, but three, four, with fingers touching, palms pressing and hands connecting. Playing with nipples, teasing skin, manipulating scars and flesh. Dan was stepping in closer, groins pushing into Vadim’s backside, forcing him to lean over the table. Harder, closer, while Dan’s voice rumbled, “how do you like this game so far, Vadim?”

Vadim’s hands took hold of the table, the rim pressing against his cock, probably too hard to hump it, but so far, it felt too good to stop. He couldn’t think. Couldn’t think about Jean who was there, too, the encounter with the Yank had been too fucking sexy, and his caution was going out of the window.

“I do,” he murmured. “Like it.”

Jean grinned with irony and kindness, and pressed against Dan, clearly showing his interest, too. Moving close enough to almost kiss Dan. “There’s somebody heading this way,” he murmured into Dan’s ear.

“Hmmm?” Dan didn’t listen, Vadim’s reaction, his body, scent, skin, and Jean, and that after sex with Vadim and the kid. And holy fuck, he couldn’t think, just wanted to kiss. Turning his head to capture Jean’s lips, too close to his face. He almost managed, when the noise outside got loud enough to penetrate even his sex-muddled brain.” “Oh fuck.” With feeling.

Jean grinned and broke away first, heading for the other side of the table and picking up Vadim’s cue, as Dan slipped his hands out from under Vadim’s shirt, murmuring into his ear, “keep that thought.” Vadim barely managed to open his eyes and reach for the offered piece of wood, even though he was far too gone to do anything with it. The way Vadim looked, he’d be lucky if he remembered anything about pool.

Just now some soldiers broke into the mess, loud and boisterous, and there were catcalls at Jean's and Dan's state of undress.

"Hey!" Dan called out to them, having just about managed to shuffle far enough away from Vadim that he wasn't too obvious. "You're just jealous of my manly body," laughing, "and it's too fucking warm in here, they left the heaters on full again." He grinned at them and waved with the cue, while carefully keeping his groin hidden behind the table. Wouldn't do to flaunt that obvious hard-on.

One of them, Doug, picked up on the banter, walking over to slap Dan's bare shoulder. "Jealous, mate?" Voice stentorian with a heavy Glaswegian accent. "I tell you what, your scars can curdle milk. I think I rather not swap bodies." He was laughing as good humouredly as Dan. A jock like him, he'd always been one of the good eggs, who didn't give a shit about what Dan was, only who—and that was a Scotsman, like him.

Waving negligently at Jean and at Vadim, Doug jumped out of reach of Dan's retaliatory punch. "Don't know what you see in Mad Dog, ladies, but seems we have to add our Frenchman to the ever growing horde of fangirls."

"Doug, you told me yourself after I caught you with that donkey..." Jean lined up a shot and sunk a ball. It was a red one, but that didn't matter, the guys didn't know it was Dan's colour. "A hole is a hole, right?"

Doug laughed so hard, the first mouthful of the alc-free beer was spewing like a fountain all over the place.

"Aye, that'd be true, then." Doug winked at Dan, before sauntering back to his mates. "You play nice, Mad Dog, or we all get too jealous of your harem, wanting a piece of your assembled arses as well." Glancing at Vadim with an astonishingly friendly grin, "and I doubt your harem would take kindly to that."

"I think you're damn right." Dan grinned, "now fuck off and leave us to play."

Doug shrugged, still grinning like an idiot, before joining his other mates.

Vadim wasn't quite sure how stoic he appeared, but relaxed visibly. This was one of Dan's friends, then. One who didn't mind. Good. He really was in no mood to fight, still feeling those touches on his body. And at loss for a comeback, while Jean potted another ball, yellow, seemingly only concerned with potting the next one. Red. Completely random.

Dan looked first at Vadim, then Jean, watching the nonsensical potting of balls. “Not much point in finishing *this* game, eh?”

Jean glanced up, smirking. “Nope. It’s somewhat screwed.”

Glancing over at Vadim, Dan lowered his voice. “You still keeping the thought in mind? Because in that case we could go and finish *that* game.”

Vadim nodded and put the cue down. “Yeah, let’s...go to bed.”

Dan winked across the table at Jean, apologetically, “it’s late, you know. And we’re old geezers. We need our beauty sleep.”

Jean grinned. “No problem. I know which of the two games I’d prefer...” leaving that hanging in the room, before waving Dan off. “Have fun, guys.”

“Okay.” Dan dropped the cue, suddenly in a hurry, as obvious as the hard-on he was still sporting, and he snatched his shirt from the empty bench without further ado. Waiting for Vadim to catch up, calling, “don’t wank yourselves blind,” into the room as a good-night.

Jean laughed. “Fuck you, too!” Flipping him the bird, with no place to put his hard-on, and regarding Dan’s ass as he left the mess.

Dan didn’t bother putting the shirt back on even though it was cool outside, as they rushed towards their shared hut. “Still keeping that thought?” Glancing at Vadim.

Vadim nodded. “Aye.” Looking around quickly, then almost breaking into a trot, moving fast and in a straight line to the tin hut. He opened the door, almost shoved Dan inside, and began to shed clothes. Shirt was the first to go, while Dan threw his own into a corner, kicking the door shut and working on his belt buckle and fly. Vadim sat down on the bed to remove the boots, kicking them off, and lying back on the bed. “Fuck...you and Jean...you guys...are really close,” he murmured, didn’t even know why he was speaking, and opening his belt and buttons.

“Are we?” Dan didn’t pay half as much attention as he would have if the sight of Vadim, his own enduring hard-on, and memories of hands and bodies, hadn’t stopped him from doing anything but wanting to fuck that arse. He pushed his trousers down, then bending over and pulling frantically on his boot laces. “You didn’t seem bothered, more like...earlier. With Matt.”

“No, not bothered.” He was positive Jean had touched him. Just to tease? And tease whom? Dan? Him. “It’s him that hates my guts.” Or maybe used to.

Vadim slipped out of the camo trousers and tossed them to the side, stretching out, inviting, hard.

“I don’t think he does. Whatever the fuck happened when you arrived in camp, didn’t look like hatred tonight.” Toeing the boots off, Dan pulled trousers and socks down and off in one go, almost falling over when he stumbled to the bed. Gazing down at the naked body, his throat was suddenly as dry as his cock was hard.

“Maybe...I’m wrong then.” Maybe Jean had run out of hatred, in the meantime. But somehow it wasn’t back to being buddies again, either. “And now, Vadim, now I want to fuck you till you scream.”

Vadim grinned, shuddering. “Yes, please.” He reached over for the oil, handing it to Dan who got onto the mattress, pouring oil into his palm as Vadim moved onto hands and knees. Briefly touching himself, then opening his legs. “At least not...in public.”

“But it’d be fucking hot.” Dan murmured, staring down at Vadim’s arse and wondering if anything could ever be as sexy as that view and the knowledge that this was his. “Mine.” Didn’t realise he’d spoken out loud. “Fucking *mine*.”

“Yes. Told you,” Vadim whispered.

Dan spread warmed oil with both hands onto the firmly muscled buttocks, enjoying the feel beneath his hands, before letting it run along the cleft, then rubbed around the hole, along the dam and further down, all the way to the front. Coating Vadim’s cock as thickly as his arse, until it was slippery, then stroked leisurely. Dan’s other hand began to fuck Vadim, first with one finger, then quickly another and soon demanding more, making him groan and push back, reacting out of instinct. No fears tonight, and no shame.

“Your arse is mine,” Dan still didn’t realise he was uttering all of his thoughts aloud, “your body’s mine, your thoughts, every fucking thing. Mine. Everything.”

Vadim moaned, broadening his stance, head hanging down, watching Dan between his legs. “All yours,” he confirmed again, feeling the fingers move inside and do it just right, and he was soon panting with need, just from fingers, but Dan knew him too well, knew exactly how to handle him. “Fuck...fuck me? Need...more.”

“More...aye.” Dan pulled back until his hand left Vadim’s oil-glistening cock and his fingers remained poised, barely breaching the ring of muscle. “More.” He needed more, too. More than ever before, and more of what was his. Vadim. He knew every inch of the body in front of him, had had that arse so many times but...more. “Fuck,” Dan murmured, suddenly understanding how he’d *get* more, and how he’d *give* more. “Stay where you are. Don’t move.”

“No. Won’t.” Vadim inhaled, catching his breath, damned fucking needing, expecting Dan to move in and pound his ass, shifting his weight.

Neither of them noticed the door had remained open, and was silently pushed further ajar.

Vadim’s head was low, his arse high up in the air, and fuck, yes, that was it, exactly that. Moving off the mattress as fast as he could, Dan looked around the room, could find nothing except for his webbed belt. Didn’t care that his hands were slick with oil, tore the belt out of the trouser loops and knelt beside Vadim’s head, his cock brushing the other’s face as he reached for his hands. “You’ll get more. Damn right.” Motioning to Vadim, “I want your hands in your back.”

Vadim rubbed his cheek against Dan’s cock, willing and ready to give head, but broadened his stance further, straightening into a kneeling position as he crossed his wrists on his back, understanding with sudden clarity what Dan wanted. Dan wanted a prisoner. And that thought made his cock jump. The belt was looped around Vadim’s wrists and pulled tight. Too tight perhaps, but the way the dark green webbing cut into sinews and bones made Dan’s heart race even faster, and the lust surged in his guts. “Do you feel that?” He’d wanted to ask ‘does it hurt?’ but realised deep inside he wanted it to hurt, to feel.

“Yes,” Vadim breathed, rough cloth rubbing against his skin as he moved the wrists, testing the firmness. Part of him should be terrified, but instead, all parts of him agreed. “I feel.” I feel my own lust, and I feel this. I feel your lust, too.

Every movement, every word watched from the door.

Moving once more behind Vadim, with the legs opened further and the stance broadened, the arse had become more vulnerable. Dan stared at the hole, circling the puckering, tight muscle with one finger, which made it tense and contract, while pouring more oil one-handed onto Vadim’s cheeks. “Tell me how much you want this.” Murmured, his voice no more than a rumble. “Tell me what it feels like when I fuck your arse raw.”

Vadim smiled at him. “The...best thing I know. Apart from fucking *your* ass raw.” Dan chuckled low as Vadim pushed back, curving his spine to open up more for Dan. “Like...like you own me. Truly own me. And nobody...else...between us. Like everything’s just games, and we are life and death.”

“But we *are* life and death.” The oil ran down the cleft, dripping onto the mattress and Dan didn’t care. “In the end, it is only us.” Rubbing his hands all over glistening skin, slicking his cock as he moved into position. “You’re all that truly matters.” Dan reached for the loose end of the belt once his cock breached through the muscle, poised right there for a second. Breathing deeply, before tightening his grip on the belt that connected himself with Vadim’s bound wrists. “You’re fucking mine,” breathed out, “and nothing matters.”

“Nothing...”

Dan slammed forward the next moment, groaning when he pushed all the way in, and Vadim had to tense and lean back to not lose his balance. He moaned loudly as Dan just took him, took him like that, raw and powerful, and his head fell back as his body fought to accommodate Dan’s size. Twitching, tensing, the burn of stretching adding depth to the feeling. “Dan...” The name was a moan. “Need...”

“Aye,” one hand on Vadim’s hip, the other around the belt, “need you.” From nought to fully fledged thrusting, Dan didn’t allow a moment of acclimatisation. He was there, deep and primal, fucking with all the abandon of the full strength of his body.

Vadim lost all control. Not that he had any to start with. Sounds between moans and groans and pleading, he just took what Dan gave him, body fighting to keep on his knees, not knowing the man on the outside of the door watched them, closely, watched Dan thrusting inside and listened to Vadim’s groans, picturing himself doing the fucking and teasing. Fucking either of them in his mind, imagining to smell and taste and lick them, hand on his groin, rubbing through the cloth in time with Dan’s punishing thrusts, and approaching climax faster than Vadim.

“Can’t...can’t scream,” whispered Vadim, “can’t...but I...want to...”

Dan felt nothing but the tight heat and the yielding body that kept its strength pitched against his own. He lasted longer than he’d ever thought he could, fucking Vadim with every ounce of his strength, and Vadim was helpless at his

mercy. Suppressing the sounds as much as he could, just couldn't let go, not in camp, not here, but the sounds that did come from his throat were enough to put the man at the door over the edge, working himself furiously and clenching his teeth hard as he came, splattering the front of his camo trousers.

Finally, release came crashing for Dan and his body was shaken in the grip of his orgasm, while Vadim begged to be taken over the edge, "please, Dan, help...help me..." Almost collapsing, but Dan fought for control, bent down, still inside, still gasping for breath, and stroking Vadim's oil slicked cock, as furiously as he had thrust into him. Taking him over the edge as close as possible to his own, and Vadim crashed within seconds, falling as he did, forward, onto his chest and face, finally losing balance, defeated, much like a broken prisoner, panting so hard he heard and saw nothing.

Dan fell with him, on top of Vadim, spread out like a living blanket. Skin on skin, breathing across sweat misted muscles, his hands caressing along Vadim's body. Soothing, loving, where words could and would not come. The silence brought perfect unison.

The man outside leaned his head against the door frame, tried to calm, steady his pulse, watching the powerful Russian collapse and Dan over him, caring in all that fierceness, tender and protective, and was suddenly almost envious of Vadim's abandon. Knowing Dan would catch him if he'd choose to fall. "What...the fuck's going on," Jean barely breathed.

Neither man inside was aware of the witness, and it took a long time before Dan rolled off Vadim, working on opening the loop around the wrists, while resting on his side, face to face with Vadim. "Hey, Russkie." He whispered softly, smiling.

Vadim looked up, blue eyes very blue right now. "Hey... hey stranger, fancy... meeting you here." He just lay there, breathing, gazing at Dan as if that man alone filled out his world. Nothing beyond that, not the place, not the time, completely open and free that very instant. "You...you kill me...every time."

"You've had a lot of deaths in that case."

"Not...nearly enough."

Dan freed Vadim's wrists, throwing the oil stained belt to the side before pulling the hands towards him, checking them over. Veins standing out, skin

somewhat raw. Vadim's sensitive skin. Always too sensitive. "Thank you."

Murmured, his fingers circling Vadim's wrists.

Vadim smiled, tiredly. "You're welcome. And thank you...I needed that." "So did I." Leaning in to kiss Vadim, "today was one of those days..." Dan had barely the strength to do anything other than pull up their blankets. "I'm getting too old for all of this." He chuckled quietly, eyelids heavy. "You want to get cleaned up before sleeping?"

"It's alright." Vadim turned to move up to Dan, chest to chest, one arm around Dan, forehead to forehead. "Sleep. I'll...get clean tomorrow."

Dan smiled, already dropping off, as he wrapped his arm around Vadim, murmuring sleepily, "love you." In Russian.

Vadim smiled, eyes already closed. "And I you."

Jean pulled away, closing the door silently, feeling oddly...protective of what he'd seen inside. Something that shouldn't be disturbed or witnessed by somebody who wouldn't get it. Checking that nobody had seen him, he moved away into the night, quietly, and alone.

* * *

One week later, Vadim was on late shift and Dan had spent the evening first in the gym and then in the Mess. When he stepped outside into the night air, he sensed the chill. It was late autumn, after all. Fishing for his fags, he inhaled deeply with a sound of contentment, when the nicotine hit his lungs.

He slowly made his way to the vehicle park where the shift would arrive, too mellow and sated to do more but grin good humouredly at the odd guy who was out and about. Dan leaned against the wall of the closest building, smoking his second cigarette in a row, when he heard the engines of the vehicles approaching, their beams of light cutting through the darkness.

Vadim was almost asleep walking. He'd slept like shit last night, felt restless and nervous for some reason, and had already been tired when he'd left for this shift. Now, he wasn't only tired, he was barely walking, caked in the dust that had a very specific taste. With grim humour—that didn't actually feel funny, he thought he could probably place any handful of dust one fed him to one of the battlefields. Afghanistan, if anything, tasted different. He got off once the jeep

stopped, and began unstrapping his body armour, enough so he could move, but not enough to bang against his body when walking. He meant to head straight towards the armoury, then shower, and, he hoped, collapse in a bed that was already warm.

“Hey, sexy.” Dan’s voice came from the darkness, before the red glow of the cigarette illuminated his face for a moment.

Vadim turned, helmet dangling from his fingers. Right. So tired he’d walked almost straight past Dan. “You mean me, stranger?” He gave a tired smile. “You sure?”

Pushing himself out of the shadows and two steps into the light of one of the vehicles, Dan leaned back against the wall, hip jutting out, grinning from behind his shades, sporting his hustler pose. “Sure, I mean you, handsome.” Pulling on the fag once more, Dan let the smoke curl out slowly. “10 dollar me love longtime.” Grinning.

Vadim studied him with a lifted eyebrow, but he was too damn tired to find a witty repartee. “Let’s...renegotiate that price,” he said, speech slightly slurred with tiredness. “Tomorrow. Don’t care what happens to me tonight, though. Whatever.”

“That sounds like an invitation I can hardly resist.” Chuckling low, Dan stubbed out the remains of his fag. “But I guess I have to restrain myself from molesting you.” Stepping closer with a wink.

“Molest me tomorrow.” Vadim began to move his feet towards the armoury. “Keep me company?”

“Aye, soldier.” Placing his hand on Vadim’s shoulder, Dan walked with him, side by side. “I’d wash you down but I guess the others would just be jealous of the preferential treatment you get.”

Vadim glanced at him, seemingly mustering some amusement at that thought. “Take that to the armoury, and I’d be happy.” He would be happy once his showered body hit the horizontal. “Maybe find...something to drink, too?” He managed to walk mostly in a straight line, wouldn’t do to look sleep drunk. Just pulling himself together again. “Getting too fucking old,” he murmured, in Russian, and didn’t notice.

Dan looked up, didn't comment, though. "Bullshit. You got a few more years in you." Sticking to English. "Just let me get your stuff and you head straight on to the showers. I'll have some scran and water ready. Alright?"

"Aye."

They reached the armoury and Dan handled Vadim's flak vest as if the other was a puppet, with Vadim just moving arms and shoulders to help Dan free him. Felt ridiculously nice, being taken care of. The other guys weren't any better, only that they had to rely on a comrade or fumble around when Vadim got the full treatment. Mercenary faggot couple. Midge's insults didn't sting, not right now. Being a couple was so damn nice, Vadim didn't even know where to begin in counting his blessings. He grinned as Dan took the weapon out of his hand, before steering him to the window of the building, to show Vadim's face to the guard inside, who nodded and cleared him from signing personally.

"Off you go." Delivering a mild slap onto Vadim's backside, Dan turned towards the building. "See you showered and clean in 'Hotel McFadyen'."

"Five star if there ever was any..." Vadim trotted off, managing to not fall asleep under the hot water. When he returned, he had a pile of dusty camo under one arm, wrapped in a towel, and headed straight for Dan's tin hut. Their shared place.

Not quite five star, what with the mattresses on the floor, a single lamp and otherwise pretty much nothing, but Dan was naked, sitting cross legged amidst the blankets, a plate with thickly cut beef and cheese sandwiches on the floor and a two litre bottle of water, straight from the cooler. He looked up when Vadim entered, smiling. "I'm afraid the accommodation isn't quite up to standard, but the room service is doing its best."

Vadim dropped his kit into a corner, locked the door, then got onto the mattress, sitting down in front of Dan, yawning like his jaw tried to pop out. "It has a door we can lock, Dan. See? It's great. Really good." He reached for the water first and downed a good three quarters of a litre before setting the bottle down, then took one of the sandwiches, chewing fast and ravenous. Slowing down once his mouth was full, chewing some more and just enough to get the food down, while reaching for the next. "What I needed..."

"See, maybe you *are* getting old after all. You need sarnies more than naked me." Dan laughed, "that wouldn't have happened back in Afghanistan, eh?"

Leaning forward, he mock-glared at Vadim, who had stopped chewing and looked puzzled, but since Dan wasn't wearing his shades, the amused gleam in his dark eyes gave everything away. "Or are you already tired of me being here every night?"

Vadim swallowed and grinned. "Try me. Tomorrow. Don't want to fall asleep in the middle of it."

"That's alright, then. I'll let you off this time." Stretching out, Dan made himself comfortable on the side, watching Vadim finish off the second sandwich and then drink some more. "I'm yours as a 'cuddle toy' whenever you're ready." He smirked toothily.

Vadim put the bottle down and smiled, sleepily and unguarded, which seemed tender and content and very tired. "Of course you're mine," he murmured and stretched out to lie right next to Dan, arm across Dan's waist, head on his shoulder, while pulling up the blanket around them. He inhaled, then exhaled deeply, and found himself slightly more awake now than just five minutes ago.

"Had a good day?"

"Aye, easy shift and then off in the afternoon." Turning his head to reach Vadim's forehead, Dan kissed it and tightened his arm around him. "Saw Jean for a chat. He's off in three weeks on R&R before the wedding in April. We're invited. It's in France."

"France. Never been there." Vadim rubbed his face against Dan's shoulder, just enjoying Dan close, his smell, his warmth. "That's good. We'll need to think of a present." He yawned again. "Shit, I'm so fucked."

"I'm sure I can come up with a present." Dan murmured, placing another kiss on Vadim's head before falling silent, and very soon Vadim's breath deepened and slowed, the arm around Dan relaxed, becoming heavy. He was out like a light.

It wouldn't take Dan long to fall asleep as well. Not with Vadim wrapped around him, and he knew eventually he'd find himself spooning behind his Russian. The best way to sleep.

1991 Chapter XXXIII—Principles of War
October/November 1991, the Persian Gulf

Dan's and Vadim's shifts continued to be out of sync for the next couple of weeks, while the weather was finally heading towards winter. The nights had become cold, but the days were still warm. Nothing compared to late autumn in Russia, or even just Old Blighty.

Eventually, Dan was on the graveyard shift, and Vadim's covered afternoon and evening, leaving little time to be together except for the mornings. Jean, meanwhile, had been seconded away from Vadim's patrol to work with some newcomers.

One day the shit hit the fan. There'd been an ambush, and Vadim's patrol—or rather that of Pascal, who had taken over as the team leader while Jean worked with the new guys—had to go charging in, guns blazing, shrapnel whizzing past. Who or what attacked them they never knew, but the opposition had decided to do a quick hit-and-run, and Pascal, like any good leader, decided to get back to base 'pronto' as he said, and they grabbed the wounded and returned to the camp. No need to come down with the heavy boot. By the time they had enough men in place, the insurgents, rebels, or whatever they were, would be gone and were likely getting ready for the evening prayer.

Being easily one of the strongest, Vadim carried one of the men, and the guy was bleeding profusely from wounds in his face and temple; all Vadim could do was cover the wound and get him to the medics. He knew he'd get debriefed about the incident, and, still somewhat shaken, returned to Dan's tin hut to get a fresh set of camo before he'd be grilled by the CO. He did not like that officer, and the feeling was mutual, even though the man never raised his voice with him and never alluded to Vadim's association with Dan nor his origins as a defected former enemy.

When Vadim opened the door, Dan and Jean were standing there. Both were geared up to leave, both had the same shift, different teams, and they were standing close together, within touching distance. Half an arm away. Closer than touching distance. Jean turned to face him, and there was a strange smile, somewhere between embarrassment and something else.

“I’ll see you at the checkpoint,” said Jean, abruptly, like changing topic in mid-conversation, and suddenly Vadim knew what they’d been doing. Jean’s eyes were somewhat glazed, there was an ease and calm relaxation about him that always riled Vadim as if he was ‘taking the mickey’, as the Brits said. With no further word, Jean walked past, acknowledging him with a grin. Door falling shut behind him.

“Hey,” Dan smiled as he turned towards Vadim, “what got you back that early? I’m just about to hit the dust.” He was fishing for his shades as he spoke.

“Ambush. Route was cut short getting some guys out.” Vadim glanced at the door. He pulled the gloves off, then began to take off the vest that was sticky at the right sleeve. “I’m off to get debriefed.”

“What?” Dan suddenly alarmed, the shades never reached his eyes. Dark glance, turning into even darker hardness. “What the fuck happened?” I could have lost you. Could have...no. Unthinkable. He stepped closer, hand resting on Vadim’s arm.

“Dave’s team got ambushed, people were firing AKs from the roofs, and there might have been an RPG involved. Pascal’s team was the closest to get them out.” Something wasn’t quite right, like Vadim was asleep and dreaming. Dan sleeping curled around him. Dan fucking him. Dan kissing him and sucking him off. Dan. He frowned, staring at the shirt in his hand, idly touched his chest, right underneath the burn scar, nothing felt real, nothing seemed right.

You don’t deserve human emotion, Krasnorada.

Vadim shuddered, and looked up, almost alarmed. Times of stress. Strain. His mind suddenly unsteady, reaching for concepts, abstract ideas. Like the idea of Dan and Jean. And why did that affect him like this? After the pool game? “Have a safe shift.”

“Aye, but shit, Vadim, talk to me. That’s not funny. Where the fuck were you and what happened?” Dan moved even closer. Skin on skin. Almost. Barely an inch between. “If anything, we need to know for the patrol.”

Vadim reached for the map in his pocket, and folded it out on one of the crates. Functional. He was still functional. Thank fuck for those drilled-in responses. Professionalism. Dan and Jean. While he’d been working. They’d always done that. Yes. So why did it feel like this? “Here.” Finger indicating the area on the map. “It’s a troublesome spot anyway, that was bound to happen.”

“OK.” Dan nodded, making a mental note before he took Vadim’s arms with both hands, holding tightly. “Shit.” Couldn’t help it, he was shaking his head while looking at Vadim. “Could have lost you today. Wouldn’t know what the fuck to do.” But he had to go, no time, no time. They were waiting.

Vadim nodded, inhaling deeply. “Won’t happen. Better goat fuckers than those have tried. And failed.” He lifted his hand to touch Dan’s chest briefly, clenched his teeth together. “You’re late.”

“You here when I get back?” Dan couldn’t bear letting go, still holding onto flesh and blood.

“Aye. And showered and maybe sleeping.” He hoped. He was still numb from—whatever. Was that one of these irrational responses? One of those moments of dread he couldn’t place. So what had caused it? The ambush? Something else? But he wouldn’t talk about it. Dan was going out, risking his neck on patrol, and confronting right now could get Dan killed. He needed his wits about them out there. “You be safe out there.”

“Aye.” Dan smiled leaning in for a kiss. Couldn’t go without that reassurance.

“And if not, I’ll haunt your arse to kingdom come.”

Vadim felt an odd reluctance, but closed his arms around Dan and pulled him close, ignored, and still couldn’t ignore the fact Jean must have kissed him like that just minutes ago. Wondered if he could taste the other on Dan’s lips, and found himself suddenly fierce, invading Dan’s mouth, kissing him deeply, madly, like indeed this was the last time, and he pressed harder against the armoured body, suddenly helpless and tender and sad.

“Godspeed, soldier,” he murmured, pulling away, then turning away, only to make sure his face didn’t betray any of that, his body helplessly wanting something that could just leave his life forever on the pull of a trigger.

Dan stepped back, surprised, silenced for a moment, and it took him a second or two before he managed to put the shades back on and nodded, more to himself than Vadim’s broad back. “Aye. I’ll be back.” With that he vanished, for another shift, and another time of putting his life on the line.

* * *

Seven hours later, at the end of the shift and in the middle of the goddamned night, Dan returned to camp, dog tired. Meeting Jean at HQ, while checking in the weapons, he managed a few of his trademark glib remarks, an odd slap on a comrade's shoulder, and a bone weary chuckle. No more. On his way to the shared hut, he could think of nothing better but falling asleep, curled into a tight embrace and relishing Vadim's body heat in the cool of the autumn night. Nevertheless, he had to shower beforehand, half asleep already or not.

Vadim woke when the door opened, awake almost immediately, but a leaden tiredness told him he hadn't actually rested much, might even have been dreaming bad, something dark lingered on the edge of his mind, like a stale taste. He sat up, looking at the dark figure moving about. "How was work?" Strange, sounding like a housewife expecting the husband back. How was work.

"Same shit as ever. None of your earlier problems." There was a tired smile in Dan's voice. Audible, but not visible in the darkness. He wasn't wearing his shades, bare-eyed and bare-souled with tiredness, as he turned towards Vadim, armour undone and discarded, shirt and vest flung into a corner.

Reaching out with his hand, fingers eager to touch. "Didn't mean to wake you. I'm sorry."

Vadim took the hand and kissed it, without even thinking about it, then pulled himself up, helping Dan undress. Dan came home to him. These were his quarters. Fuck the legionnaire. "Don't worry. Was sleeping light anyway." He pulled Dan into a tight embrace, suddenly feeling all that fucked-up tenderness again. "Let me help you with the boots." He knelt down, busying himself with the laces.

"Hey," Dan chuckled softly, "I don't expect you to wait hand and foot on me, aye?" Carding his smudged fingers through the short shaved hair, while enjoying the attention.

"I know." Vadim pulled the boots off Dan's feet, left first, then right. Helping him by tugging down the trousers, and Dan stepped out of them. "Can't have you fall in the dark, though."

"Good point. Would be hard to explain, eh?" Dan grinned and yawned at the same time. "I'll be back in a sec." Once he was naked, he wrapped the towel around his hips and got the shower utensils. "Better get under the water or I'll stink to heaven come tomorrow."

Vadim fought the impulse to join or accompany Dan, instead waited and switched on a torch, pointing it away from the bed. Waiting for Dan, sitting on the bed, still with that strange disorientation around.

It took no more than five minutes before Dan returned to the hut. Still damp, hair wet, yawning as he shut the door behind them. “Kept the bed warm for me, Russkie?” Softly teasing as he threw the towel over a makeshift rack near the window.

Russkie. One of two Russkies. “Aye,” murmured Vadim and made room for Dan, who stretched with a satisfied groan, from head to fingertips and down to toes. Turning onto his side, he could hardly make out Vadim’s silhouette in the darkness, when the torch was switched off. “Did the day rattle you?” Reaching out to trace Vadim’s face. Dan’s fingertips knew every single inch.

Vadim closed his eyes. He should let it rest. He should rub against Dan, claim him any way he knew, continue to claim him, love him, fuck him and be fucked in return. But it was impossible to ignore the paw prints in the snow. Strange thought. Aye, his father. His father had used that metaphor once. He had said some events in the past were like a wolves’ path through the snow. In the featureless white, these drew the eyes, and, worst, the mind, even if the trace was old and half snowed over again. Vadim had never really understood what his father had *actually* said. “I’m good. Good you’re back.” And what he wanted to say was: Good you’re mine in this moment. And that meant he was jealous.

“You sure?” That was as far as Dan could think. Knew something was off, but too tired to sense every shift and change.

“Aye.”

“In that case, let’s go to sleep? I’m fucking knackered.” Dan smiled as he shuffled closer, expecting Vadim to turn so he could spoon him. His groin and chest against Vadim’s arse and back, that was the way it was right, and the way Dan loved it.

Vadim rolled over on one side, reached back to take Dan’s arm and pulled himself closer, seeking a closeness that was more than the usual. He shouldn’t bring it up, he should keep shut about it, didn’t want to start a fight, he should just swallow that. Should somehow accept his lover slept with a man who was younger, less fucked up, a man that didn’t scream at night. A deserter, and, in certain ways,

something that Vadim had never been, something closer and more like Dan. And that it bothered him. Unlike Matt.

“You...you’re not serious with Jean, are you?”

Dan tensed, a rigid presence in Vadim’s back. “What do you mean?” His exhausted mind frantically tried to get the picture. Something was wrong, no, a lot seemed to be wrong, but what the fuck was going on?

“What I said. You’re not serious with Jean.” Vadim glanced over his shoulder. “You’re just fooling around, right?”

Inhaling deeply, Dan let out his breath after a pause. It made sense now. So that was what was going on, picking up vibes he hadn’t understood. “I have sex with Jean, aye. I thought you knew that? You sure as hell behaved as if you knew.”

“Yes. I knew. Him and Donahue. But the kid...is different. Jean. It’s about him. I’m just...I guess surprised you still see him like that.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Dan’s genuine surprise made him shift backwards, away from the tight embrace, trying to get a good look of Vadim while doing his best to understand a concept that made no sense to him. “It’s just sex. He’s a mate, and so’s Matt and so’s Hooch, and so would anyone be who takes my fancy and is willing to shag around for a bit. I don’t understand, Vadim. Why wouldn’t I?”

Shag around for a bit. Vadim felt his jaw tighten. Why not. Why not indeed. They weren’t married. Comradeship wasn’t exclusive. Friendship wasn’t exclusive. He had never claimed anyone for himself. He had shared a wife he’d loved but not desired, had taken men that had girlfriends, or wives, had had ‘lovers’ that were not his, not his, not his property. Vanya hadn’t been, Platon hadn’t been, Sasha neither. All his life, he’d taken what he could and never managed to claim all of it, always ever shared. It probably had started with the fucking masseur. No such thing as exclusiveness. No husband and wife games. Nothing like that. And he had made his own marriage a farce himself. “I don’t know. Really, I don’t.”

“I don’t, either.” Dan fell silent, too damn exhausted to get his thoughts straight, he struggled to keep up with the whole thing which seemed a great and big and fucking huge problem, just not in his own mind. “It doesn’t mean anything special when I fuck around. Why would it?” Taking his time as he tried to make sense of Vadim’s thinking, so alien to his own. “Do you want me to get back to being monogamous, like I was in Afghanistan? I just didn’t have the opportunity, but hell, you think I wouldn’t have, if there had been? I’m not a girl, I don’t expect

you not to fuck others if it so happens, and I don't expect this to be expected of me." He stifled a yawn, it wasn't easy to get himself through this morass. "I'm sorry if you're hurt." He added, quieter than before.

"I don't mean to upset you, it just never occurred to me you'd be bothered by it." Moving closer once more, tightened his arms around Vadim. "I love you, Russkie, you know that. You mean the beginning and the end to me, and all that is in between. You are life and death and every single breath, but..." Dan paused, tried to gather his thoughts while fighting against the tiredness, "but that's why I don't get why it's a problem that I share bodily fluids with others." Before Vadim could reply to his last words, he added, "if it hurts you, and if you don't want me to, I won't do it. OK? You're more important than anyone or anything else. If you can't stand it, I won't fuck with others. I'll be exclusively yours if you absolutely want me to. Alright?" Falling silent.

Vadim didn't doubt him. Dan and his word and being absolutely loyal and reliable. And what he wanted to say was 'If you touch him I'll kill him', and he thought of the ease with Matt, and the kid's fucking wholesomeness, and the banter with Jean, funny, and light, and it tore him inside but that was something he would never be able to give again. He wasn't made for it, was too fucked up to be this good for Dan, and even if he did fuck around with them, and even if there was more than that between Jean and him, and he was almost positive that it wasn't just sex, maybe not even just friendship, that didn't take Dan away. And if it did, there was nothing he could do to stop it. There was always Dr William's phone number. "It...doesn't matter. It's just sex. I don't have to see it, and I don't want to," taste them on you, "know. We're not married. And even that...doesn't mean...exclusiveness."

"You sure? Because if you're not, I'll tell everybody I'm not available." No matter how little Dan could understand it, he wouldn't...just wouldn't. Too dedicated to just one man.

Everybody. Vadim closed his eyes and held Dan's arm to his stomach.

"We share so much history," Dan added, "I don't want the present to get fucked up."

Worse than we already are? "I'm sure. Shouldn't have brought it up. Now sleep, Dan." And forget I asked. Let's just pretend this didn't happen. Dan closed his eyes, scooting closer, as close as humanely possible, while his arm around

Vadim tightened to almost painful level. “As long as you’re sure, aye?” Softly, he was far too knackered to try and drive the point home any further, and far too willing to accept Vadim’s agreement at face value.

Was all straightforward and easy to his mind, that love and lust didn’t have to be the same. Love was exclusive and lust to be shared. He was asleep within a few minutes, pressed against Vadim’s back, safe in the embrace and the knowledge that he simply loved that man.

* * *

The next day finally saw a change in their shifts. At last they had some days off together, time for both Dan and Vadim to relax and work-out, if only...if only the camp wasn’t expecting half a dozen trucks with spares, kit and explosive. Fresh supplies that had meant to arrive at least two weeks previous, but had been delayed. As usual in the British Forces, nothing went to plan, yet worked out in the end—somehow—anyway.

All hands were needed, soldiers and mercs alike, and all the guys off duty had to put their free time into unloading the trucks. While most men complained, whining and grumbling like bitches, Dan didn’t give a shit. 11 AM, not a time he’d still be asleep, neither one he’d be likely to have sex, and well after breakfast. A spot of carrying shitloads of crates wouldn’t hurt. He was walking across to the vehicle compound, wearing his shades and nothing but a pair of desert boots and hard-wearing camo trousers, while joking to Vadim, “makes a change to pumping iron, aye?” Grinning broadly.

Vadim peered up to the sky with narrowed eyes and knew he’d burn in the sun. The place had tanned him as much as he could get tanned, and he wore a sun lotion with a ridiculously high number on the pack, and he’d probably still get burned. In fact, he’d taken to wearing the dust scarf around his head, which made him look like a cheap pirate imitation in sand-coloured camo, but at least it meant his scalp wouldn’t fall off in big patches of skin. He grunted something noncommittally, walking at Dan’s side, wearing the undershirt still, but soon saw he was overdressed. Most guys had stripped down to their camo trousers like Dan, and Vadim debated whether he should expose more of his skin or leave it at that, keeping a thin layer of protection between himself and cancer.

Dan shrugged and grinned after a side glance, finishing off his fag. Throwing the butt behind himself before they reached the trucks, he greeted his mates. Joked with some of his own team, then Jean's and Pascal's, and simply ignored the rest. Those men, who couldn't stand the faggot in the first place, and plain loathed the sight of a couple in camp. A gay couple. A bloody, seriously, goddamned *happy* gay couple of mercs.

Vadim just gave people he knew a nod, acknowledging them, as they acknowledged him. Still no runner-up for any popularity contest, but things around him had settled in a somewhat uneasy routine since he'd been part of the rescue op.

Dan had just about finished talking to one of the guys in Jean's team, when he caught a murderous glance from one particular man, and instead of allowing himself to be touched by the hatred, he laughed broadly into Midge's distorted face. "Fancy seeing you here. Didn't realise they let GVARs out in this sun. What with the ginger burn and all that."

Midge exploded into a cacophony of abuse, swearing in Dan's back, when he turned. Standing next to his big Scottish Sergeant mate, he was grinning while Vadim smirked. He couldn't remember what it stood for, but he'd heard the term used in SAS selection—against another 'ginger' as they called the pale redheads. Taking the piss out of gingers was Dan's answer to the constant drone of how they were gay, faggots, and should get their cocks cut off, which Vadim found far more grating than any joke about any hair colour could be. He stood between Dan and Pascal, luckily enough, and the men were forming a line as the trucks approached in a cloud of dust and dirt.

Midge, though, couldn't let go. Right behind Pascal, he kept sneering jibes at Dan, ignoring Vadim between them. Pascal didn't seem happy about this, but didn't do anything either, ignoring the man and the situation.

Dan did his best to ignore the nasty bastard, until Midge started to boast about how Dan had crawled in the dirt, not so long ago, and how he would have finished him off, had the Sergeant not appeared. Dan's eyes narrowed behind the shades, casting a furtive glance at Vadim, who actually didn't seem to pay much attention, instead downing half a litre of water, but appearances with Vadim could be deceptive. If Vadim understood what Midge was implying, the wanker wasn't going to live much longer. Dan half-turned, shouting against the chatter of voices

and the roar of the approaching trucks, “yeah, ginger, and we all know why you’re called Midge, aye?”

Vadim bent down to put the water bottle down and half-turned to face Midge, whose face was turning so red he looked close to exploding beneath his carroty head. Making it impossible for Dan to watch his face.

“Obviously, not because your name’s Mitchell, but as everyone knows who’s showered with you, it’s because of ‘midget’.” Dan was smirking from ear to ear, while laughter exploded all around him, drowning out Midge’s abuse. The guy was about to launch himself on Dan, when the trucks stopped and soldiers jumped out of them, with several of the higher ranks calling the line of men to order.

There were still sniggers and un-hidden laughter along the lines, and even Pascal kept grinning at Dan, who pretended nothing at all had happened. And Vadim likely had not caught what the ‘midget’ had implied. Instead, the Russian was ready and eager to work, mostly to get it over with.

The unloading started. The first crates were handed down, with ample warnings they contained explosives, mostly hand grenades. The bitches were heavy, found Vadim, taking the crate that came up, and handing it on, making sure Pascal had it firmly in his grip before he released it. The crates came through fast, as they all wanted nothing more than be done quickly, get out of the heat, and Vadim saw with appreciation how the men began to sweat and how muscles rolled under the skin. He’d keep his shirt on, mostly for the protection, but also because he didn’t know who else could read the word on his back, and the scars stood out especially when his skin reddened.

Dan felt sweat run in steady beads from beneath his too-long hair down his neck and trickling along his back, into the waistband of his camo trousers. Sweat glistened on his chest, stung his eyes beneath his shades, and itched on the pale scars across his stomach, making the grip of his hands slippery. Like Vadim, though, he rather took his time to ensure the next man had his grip firmly on the crate, before he let go.

Everyone worked quickly, efficiently, except for Midge, who kept his jibes up, taunting every time he turned with his crate towards Vadim, who was in front of Dan. Dan ignored the shit, but kept wondering why the hell Midge tended to ignore the other ‘faggot’, Vadim. Fear, he reckoned, and grinned to himself. Because the bastard just didn’t have a clue what he was dealing with. Or because

he, Dan, had gone to the ground, and proven not to be invincible. Vadim worked stoically on, much like a machine, a look of concentration on his face, lips slightly pursed as he seemed to be in his own world, withdrawn, yet alert.

Dan concentrated on his job when a thought came to his mind, and he grinned. Pursing his lips to whistle Disney's theme tune for the seven dwarves, singing "hey ho, hey ho..." when he got too annoyed with the ginger bastard, and when heat and exertion were getting too much. Strangely, it was Pascal who caught and identified the theme song, and began to sing it, with several others falling into the tune. The logic of a chain gang, where anything was welcome to lighten the mood.

Midge became more erratic, the further this went on, and the more the sun was belting down mercilessly, and the more Dan ignored him, while taunting him in return. Erratic enough, to be steaming with anger, almost throwing the crate into Vadim's hands, who managed to catch every time, without moving a muscle in his face.

Every time, until the furious Midge, who'd been warned a couple of times already, turned in such a violent huff, the crate slipped out of his sweaty hands, before he had reached Vadim half-way. Crashing onto the ground, the joints of the wooden crate splintered from the impact, and grenades hit the ground, rolling.

Vadim's eyes were immediately on the scattering weapons, and several men seemed to pause. Dan froze, eyes immediately on the ground, while others were still handing down crates. Vadim spotted a single pin half buried in the sand, right in the middle of soldiers, not nearly far enough from the tents, nor the trucks that were full of fuel, never mind the explosives, never mind Dan standing right on top of it. Vadim's eyes darted around, frantically. The grenade without a pin lay close, and Vadim shouted a warning, not realizing it was Russian "Fire in the hole!"

Dan's head whipped around, the Russian warning drilled deeply into his own bones, and he yelled in English, "Take cover!" Throwing himself onto Pascal, who didn't react at first, while Vadim dove for the grenade. Held it just for a moment, then threw it as far as he could, fearing it might slip from his hand, bounce off something and it might not be enough. Drilled-in responses too powerful to deny in that moment Midge was only a comrade as well, just a soldier,

and Vadim tackled him, bringing him down and covering him as the grenade went off with a deafening explosion.

Every man was on the ground, taking cover, the warning had spread like wildfire, when Dan tackled and took down Pascal. Covering their heads, lying flat on the ground, as dust and sand rained down on them, engulfed in heat. Midge was cursing underneath him, but now that Vadim didn't hear any screams, couldn't smell blood, his mind shifted from battle-readiness to a flaring hatred. Midge was trying to shake him off, mostly by turning around, but Vadim grabbed a handful of the hair, just long enough to provide leverage, and got a leg in between Midge's legs, shifting on top of him to bring his groin right against Midge's ass, which tensed, but Vadim pushed against it, two, three times, hard enough to be impossible to misunderstand, but subtle enough that nobody but Midge got what he meant. Vadim moved to hiss into the ginger's ear: "Like that, bitch? I know you want to have my cock up your ass, cunt. And I won't be gentle."

Midge didn't reply, frozen beneath the heavy body. Mouth full of dust, body crushed. For once he'd lost his appetite for destruction.

Dan, completely unaware, was scrabbling off Pascal, who was trying to turn around and move beneath the heavy weight on top of him. "Sorry, mate." Dan's shades were hanging at an angle off one ear, as he managed to get to his knees. Adjusting the shades before looking around. No screams, no terror. They seemed to have got away with it. "Really sorry, I know how much you fear this gay thing is contagious."

"Don't worry. I read it's genetic," said Pascal, visibly shaken and caked in red dust.

Dan grinned with relief, to his surprise his grin was answered by Pascal's own. Showing enormous relief, until he caught a glimpse of Midge's ginger hair beneath Vadim.

"You fucking stupid cunt!" Pascal shouted, jumped back onto his feet before anyone realised what was happening. "You drunk or fucking what?" His French accent more noticeable in his righteous anger. "Merde! You could have killed us all, putain!"

"Here comes the paratrooper," muttered Vadim, slapping the back of Midge's head hard enough to sting, then rolled off him and stood. He spit a mouthful of dust into the sand, while Pascal kept shouting at the top of his voice, a

stream of half-French, half-English expletives, cursing everything from Midge's ancestors to his carelessness and irresponsibility, only using far less pleasant or complicated words. Meanwhile, the others had got to their feet again, most visibly rattled and relieved. Vadim stood next to Dan, had checked him over quickly, then folded his arms in front of his chest, enjoying the normally placid Frenchie blowing his top.

"What a cunt," Vadim said, tonelessly.

Dan was still brushing sand and dust off his chest, but only rubbed the crap even further into the layer of sweat. "You have no idea." Murmured towards Vadim. Watching how the British Army took over the dressing-down and standing-to, and didn't even feel the tiniest bit sorry for Midge. As it was, he enjoyed every second. There was a moment's lull in the cacophony of voices, and Dan took his chance to shout, "what's it like to owe your life to a faggot, cunt?"

Absolute silence. Enough time for Vadim to feel the heat rise in his head. 'Faggot'. It just didn't stop being embarrassing.

Midge turned to stare at them, light eyes widened, struggling for composure or even just his usual act of meanness as the full realization struck him. "I own your ass now," said Vadim, sneering. No use saying he'd have let him die if it hadn't been for Dan, or even stupid Pascal who was a decent enough guy.

It wasn't Dan who burst into laughter. Not even Pascal. Of all the guys in the line, it was Dave, Midge's Irish mate, who guffawed, laughing so hard, he almost pissed himself. He was the catalyst that got all the other men to burst into laughter as well. Infectious, all the way down to Dan and Vadim, and the final death knell for Midge, whose days in the camp were numbered anyway, when the MPs came to take him away for thorough investigation.

Dan was still chuckling when Midge was gone and they were sent away after clearing the last crates and securing the trucks. Still sniggering, as they made their way to the showers, while Vadim mostly smiled wryly, more keen to get out of the sun, and cleaned up.

"Russkie?" Glancing sideways, Dan ran a dirty hand through dust coloured, sweaty hair.

Vadim pulled the cloth off his head and wiped his face with it, turning his head to look at Dan. "Aye?"

"You do realise I love you, aye? No matter what shit any arsehole says."

Vadim smiled. "I do. Now let's get cleaned up." He placed a hand between Dan's shoulder blades and pushed him slightly to move towards the showers. Thought he should let him go, but then kept an arm around Dan's shoulders, walking in stride with him. Whatever they thought about it.

* * *

They'd just about managed to get into the shower and under the spray for about ten seconds, when a couple of squaddies walked along the centre aisle, straight up to Vadim. In towels themselves, one of them called out, "Hey, Russkie, whatever your name is."

Vadim cast a glance at them, his customary glare that gave warning he was willing to fight and able to win, then turned. He wasn't sure these guys belonged to Midge, but that meant nothing in camp. Entirely possible they'd try and make him pay. Had been a while. "Yes?"

"Just meant to say 'thanks'. Fucking great reaction time. Didn't fancy getting turned into minced meat just yet." The guy grinned and his mate was giving a thumbs up.

Vadim paused, just staring, not even blinking. Trying to figure out whether it was a joke, or just a different strategy in the usual game. Thing was, there was nothing hostile about these men. They'd just wandered in and addressed him. Him, naked, under the shower, with Dan beside him, watching, but keeping out of it.

"Neither had I," Vadim finally managed. "Grenade had plenty of time left, too."

Someone suddenly shouted from one of the opposite stalls, "What's your name anyway?"

"Vadim. Krasnorada." Vadim had always assumed they knew it, with that strange feeling everybody knew him, but apparently they hadn't. Didn't remember the polite question 'and you', he was too surprised.

"Ah, shit, that's not a good name for a guy in camp." The man from the shower stall was calling across. Poking his head out, he was second in command in the fourth team, run by a Welsh ex-infantryman.

"Why?"

“Too long. Not matey enough.” The merc bared his teeth in a wide grin. Soap suds cling to his shaved head.

The two squaddies were laughing at that, nodding, “Damn true.” One of them shouted across the showers that were filling with up with men, “Hey, anyone know the perfect nickname for our camp commie?”

Vadim was simply bewildered. The SAS had failed at giving him a nickname. He didn’t expose himself enough, he had no official name, and he doubted he’d ever been in their files; no name meant no paperwork. But glancing across he saw Dan grin...that calmed him and suppressed the natural—hostile—reaction. But then, since the time in prison, how many of his reactions had been fully natural?

“Can’t call him ‘Drago’, that’d be fucking unfair.” Another merc grinned, soap bag under his arm, towel around his hips.

Laughter erupted all across, drowning out the sound of running water. “Damn right. Remember?” The first squaddie asked, expecting Vadim to know what they were talking about. “Rocky four. Rocky Balboa and the Soviet fighting machine.”

Soviet fighting machine. Somebody called Drago. It just didn’t make any sense. Judging from what Vadim knew about the recreational habits of this ilk, it was certainly not a book. Probably a comic.

Laughter once more, and Dan joined in, poking his head out to grin at Vadim, telling him non-verbally, all was good. Good banter. Good jokes. Mates.

Not enemies. Vadim nodded, brow dark, not understanding.

Dan switched off the water, angling for his towel. He was drying his hair when he casually commented. “Rocky, aye?”

This was picked up by the couple of squaddies, who grinned triumphantly. “That’s *it*! That’s it, mate. Perfect. Don’t you think?” Calling into the room. “He’s Rocky! Bloody lot better than Vadim or Krasnorada. That’s what Civilians are called. Not us, and you’re one of us. Right, mate?”

Rocky. Two syllables. It wasn’t really about shortening the name at all. Vadim looked dubious, but he could see people were not being hostile. They meant this. “Err, right.”

The second squaddie extended his hand. “I’m Jed and my mate’s Gibbo. So, what about a drink in the mess? Two-can rule of piss-poor lager, but better than nothing. OK, Rocky?”

Vadim glanced at the guy in front of him, and shook the hand, firmly, briefly, half-expecting some form of practical joke. “Sure. That’s...” What was it? “A nice thought.” There. Talking.

“Sorted!” The man called Gibbo slapped Vadim’s wet shoulder and—miraculously—didn’t get punched by reflex. “1900 hours in the mess. See you then.” Walking to one of the free stalls, he looked over his shoulder, “and bring Mad Dog. Not that he wouldn’t come anyway.” He and his mate were laughing as Dan flicked a lazy finger at them.

“Yes, later.” Vadim was still dumbfounded and stared after the men. Dan turned, towel around his hips, water still clinging to his skin. “Looks like you’re going to be popular, *Rocky*.” He was grinning at Vadim, who had guys nod at him and grin, and several thumbs up. “Are you done yet, or are you sunning yourself in your new-found celebrity status for a while longer?”

“No, we can go.” Vadim reached for the towel and wrapped it around his hips. “What is Rocky? One of those stupid comic superheroes? Like Captain America?” asked Vadim in a low voice.

“Nope, much better.” Dan grinned as he snatched shades and soap bag. “I have to get the videos for you, but Rocky Balboa is an 80s legend. Played by Sylvester Stallone, he’s an underdog boxing guy, who makes it up to the very top with sheer determination.” He shrugged, blinking into the sun when they got outside. “The old dream, aye? Little man making it big.”

“Very British.”

“In one of his films he fights a mean Soviet fighting machine, played by some Swedish bodybuilder who got no acting skills but a fucking great body.” Dan’s grin widened as Vadim raised an eyebrow.

“So, they can’t use the Drago name, because he’s the baddie, and they use Rocky instead, who’s the goodie, since you did the heroic thing today.”

“I didn’t do it for them. I should have thought of pushing Midge onto the grenade and holding him down on it.” And it was not quite a joke.

“Aye, but...” Dan stopped, turning to face Vadim. “Just remember, it’s a great sign of respect to give you that nickname, and it’s really the biggest proof of

camaraderie that they can come up with. You made it, Vadim, you're one of *us*, if you want to, or not." Leaning closer, still with the same grin, Dan murmured, "and I very much want you to be one of *us*, but not in their way..."

Vadim's eyes focussed on Dan and, feeling his breath, Dan so close, so intent. Out in the open, public displays of affection, and how much he wanted to touch him right now. "That's how you got to be called 'Mad Dog'? I see."

"Aye, that, and because I showed some brazen balls in a suicide mission." Dan stood still too close. "Just don't tell Maggie about it."

Vadim grinned. "What are you offering?"

"Well..." Dan seemed to ponder, then pulled back, while the grin kept growing, if possible at all. "I tell you inside the hut." With that he turned and walked purposefully towards the hut they shared for sleeping. Not the one that housed clothes and kit.

Vadim glanced over his shoulder, but nobody appeared to pay them any mind. Maybe they never had. Maybe it had been some kind of misunderstanding and they hadn't actually been watched all the time. He entered right behind Dan and closed the door.

"Locked it?"

"Yes."

Dan threw the soap bag into a corner and undid the towel around his hips. The shades still on, he stood with the towel in one hand, the other pointing at his groin. "First off, did you notice I kept that up?" Pointing at his abs, where the trail of dark hair used to be, in between the gauges of scars. Still smooth, as much as a razor could manage, making Vadim's mouth dry out and his body come alive. "And I need help with that..." Turning round, Dan bent over, braced his legs, "You promised." Presenting his arse. "Remember?"

"I do..." Vadim closed the distance, lost the towel, ran his hands across Dan's back, one hand moving to Dan's ass. "Good...job."

"Could be better. You said you'd help me shave between my arse cheeks."

Touching and caressing more, Vadim leaned in to kiss Dan between the shoulder blades, and pulled him a bit closer. "You're offering...that?" Following the touches like a cat, Dan straightened to stand close, back touching chest. He craned his neck, trying to get a glimpse of Vadim, who placed his arms around him, and moved closer, full body contact.

“I offer you anything you want.” Dan slowly turned within the embrace, until he stood face to face. “I offer you absolutely anything today. No matter what.”

“No matter...” Vadim rested his brow against Dan’s, knew in his bones Dan meant it, and it seemed like the open ocean. Tantalizing, limitless, and potentially dangerous. Only, what was the source of danger? What hidden pull? “If you call me ‘Sir’, that...kills me,” he murmured, head still touching Dan’s. “If we’d...pretend...”

“Pretend what?” Dan murmured, one-fingered flicking his shades up and on top of his hair, before his forehead touched once more Vadim’s.

“You know.” Vadim closed his eyes for a moment. “Pretend I was your officer. That...that kind of thing.” He felt queasy about it, mostly because that was very close to the bone, one of his favourite things, and at the same time so very close to the crimes he’d committed. Once upon a time. But different. This was his lover. His partner. Dan.

Dan lifted his head, tilting it only a fraction. His dark eyes appeared black in the gloom of the tin hut. He took his time, just looking at Vadim, with no expression on his face, until a ghost of a smile began to creep back onto his lips. “You want me to be a recruit?”

Vadim inhaled deeply. “Yes. Not a prisoner...” and where had that thought come from? Something inside recoiled from it, while Dan visibly twitched. Vadim knew the reality of that, and it was horrifying, nothing erotic about it, no, recruit was safe. It was just pretend. Make-believe. A game of sorts. And at the same time fucking embarrassing. “Oh shit. You...know what I mean.”

“Aye...” Dan’s smile began to widen until it turned into a grin. “I know damn well what that means.” Plucking the shades off his head, he stored them on top of the soap bag, then wound the towel back around his hips. Stepping towards the door, he stopped, turned back, and pulled Vadim into a brief kiss.

“You wait here. Back in a sec. And keep that thought....” With that he unlocked the door and walked out of the hut. In more haste than usual.

Vadim exhaled, paced, then found a pair of camo trousers, and slipped into them, mostly to do something and cover himself just in case Jean blundered into the hut. Waiting, not quite sure what he’d do and how, and whether he could pull

through with it—there was still that shame, of having abused that position, that trust, that power, but this wasn't real, this would be just a game.

He had to repeat that to himself over and over again.

Dan hurried over to the other hut, barely acknowledging anyone with more than a grin. Rummaging through his bergan, he picked out a few items of clothing and jumped into them. Searching for the last one, he finally found what he was looking for in the back pouch of his old army pack. He was gone for no more than a quarter of an hour. Stopping at the door when he returned, he didn't want to just walk into the hut, but looked around himself, saw no one, then lowered his head to pull his hair back and hid it best he could beneath the covering. He knocked.

Shit, Jean, thought Vadim, hating the Frenchman for always being around, always making his presence felt, or even just anticipated. "Yes? Door's open."

The door opened and a man stepped inside, briskly. "Sir?" In Russian, as he closed the door behind him and locked it. "You asked for me, comrade Major?" Still in Russian, while saluting the Soviet way.

Dan. Beret at the Soviet angle, Vadim recognized it like the pain from an old scar. An old T-shirt, too tight, nicely tight, olive trousers, pretty tatty and again too tight to be strictly comfortable when fighting, and boots, and an old army webbed belt with heavy metal buckle that seemed somehow familiar. Dan's old kit? He recognized one piece of equipment; a scarf round Dan's neck. He was fairly sure he knew that one. The same one that had covered his wounds—or an identical twin.

"Yes, I did." I did ask. Vadim looked at Dan, and knew he shouldn't meet Dan's eyes, just very briefly, but saw in them that it was alright. He stood, folded his hands in his back. The door was locked. Nobody listening. Nobody watching. And he was only half-dressed. He grinned, suddenly, knowing a good way to start this.

Dan stood to attention, like he had in his past, whenever he'd been called up by anyone superior in rank. Officers. Fucktards. Poncey arseholes, and yet he now stood and stared straight ahead, at a point to the left of Vadim's shoulder. Pretending to be perfect raw recruit material, while Vadim, in a state of undress that would be scandalous for a Soviet Army officer, paced around him. Studying Dan with that other set of eyes, from a perspective that was old, ancient, and entirely predatory.

“Comrade Major?” Dan finally uttered, still in Russian. Breaking the silence that had him tense and waiting.

“Shave me,” said Vadim, slipping into Russian, and it made him wince inside. Russian. Like touching a broken bone that had been set. He nodded towards his shaving kit. “The straight razor.”

Dan nodded sharply. Easy to fall back into an ancient skin, exaggerating behaviour to fit a projection that was larger-than-life. “Sir, yes, Sir.” He immediately fell into motion, while Vadim sat down on one of the boxes, legs braced like he was in the middle of an earthquake, or just imitating his own Colonel in his most pompous of moments.

Dan prepared the shaving kit, set everything into place. Found water in one of their bottles, but it was cold. No use. Looking at Vadim and yet not looking, once again at a point above one bare shoulder. “Comrade Major, allow me to heat water?” His Russian was rusty at first, but getting back into it with every word.

Vadim nodded briefly, grunting as if the recruit didn’t warrant any kind of proper answer. An inconvenience—and a damn fine ass in the tight trousers. Talking about tight trousers.

“Thank you, Sir.” Oh, Dan remembered. Knew what his place should be in the fictional pecking order, and made it ten times worse than his own early days.

Hurrying outside, Dan pulled the beret off, couldn’t run around in that without inviting comments, making his way to the mess tent. He could either heat water on the small gas cooker in the other hut, or could get a bowl from the mess, the quicker option. It took only a small amount of cajoling, before he got the metal bowl full of hot water and remembered to pick up a couple of fresh towels from their second hut. If he was going to do this, he would do it as perfectly as he could. How easy it was to slip into this. Games, play, pretend, it all felt like a second skin he could put on and off at will. Adjusting the beret, after checking no one was watching him, he knocked once more.

Vadim had slipped into his own shirt and boots. Still in disarray, but being semi-naked didn’t quite work in his mind. “Yes!”

Dan entered when he was called, locking the door. Set the bowl of water and the towels down before he saluted again, doing a passable impression of the Soviet salute that he’d seen enough times, then standing at attention, everything

laid out. “Sir, everything is ready, Sir.” Never truly looking at Vadim. Playing his role to the dot.

Vadim looked at him, frowning darkly as if something was annoying him. “If you cut me, there’s hell to pay. Do you understand?” Dangerously low voice, as he raised his chin. “Get on with it, then, I don’t have all day!”

“Sir, yes, Sir. I understand.” Dan saluted again, crisply, hurrying to get the shaving utensils over to Vadim. Creating lather, he carefully smoothed the creamy substance into Vadim’s face, making sure he did not miss a spot, while being watched by slitted, blue, baleful eyes. Placing the towel around Vadim’s neck and throat, Dan checked the razor. It was sharp, and he hadn’t done this often. Himself, yes, whenever he didn’t have a safety razor, but on another? He remembered every single occasion he’d shaved Vadim, but right now he needed all of his concentration. Starting on the left side, he carefully moved down, before cleaning the blade. Going back to the cheek and jaw line.

Vadim’s right hand dropped from his thigh and came to rest on Dan’s knee, from the inside. Keeping his eyes on the face of the ‘recruit’, his hand slid higher, to the inside of the thigh as he felt the blade again, sliding further up, as if without intention.

A tiny twitch of Dan’s hand, but he had himself under control. Still.

Concentrating with narrowed eyes, he tried not to move at all, while doing his duty. Cleaning the blade once more, he guided Vadim’s head back, to shave below jaw line and down the throat.

Vadim kept looking at Dan’s face, had felt the twitch, and felt the corners of his mouth move into a minute smirk, as his hand moved further up, feeling Dan’s balls in the tight trousers—thumb came forward and traced the line of Dan’s cock.

Another twitch, but Dan’s hand remained steady, even though his face broke into sweat. The concentration increased, no way could he allow himself to slip and cut the throat. Cleaning the blade once more, he started at the other side, working down cheekbone to jaw line. His shirt betrayed dark patches under his arms, no mean feat for a man who seemed to be made of kryptonite and never sweated in the desert’s temperatures.

Vadim’s grin grew, at the same time enjoying the tenderness of the steel blade, and pushed his hand up harder, almost yanking up against Dan’s balls and

dam. Twisting his hand to cup balls and cock, squeezing it harshly in the cloth, his lips turning into a sneer.

No matter how much he tried to steady himself, Dan's hand slipped when his body jerked, the blade nicking the skin on Vadim's right side. Blood turning the shaving foam pink. Dan froze, blade poised, "Forgive me, comrade Major."

"What. Did. I. Tell. *You*," shouted Vadim, jumping to his feet, grabbing the towel and wiping the rest of the foam away. The pink foam stark on the light towel, and Vadim hit Dan in the face with it, once, twice. "Down! Down I say!" Fuck, it was too easy. He felt actual rage.

Dan's face stung, the attack too swift for him to react. Not in this role. His first reaction to snatch the towel, pull, punch this motherfucker's lights out. Searing rage in his own eyes. Dark, burning, ready to kill for having been *hit* in his *face*, but then he looked for another second. Truly looked. Saw Vadim's face, eyes, anger, and the game had become goddamned real. Too real. Real enough to have caught him off guard and triggered a response outside of any role. Dan took in a sharp breath, had stalled too long already, muttered, "fuck!" then lowered his eyes, head, whole body and threw himself onto the ground. On all fours, Head hanging low. Damn, if this game was going to be worth playing, he would play it to the limit. Recruit. Fear. Helplessness. A nobody. Nothing. Copy, Sir!

The old Dan. The man who'd break his bones, the man who would answer blow with blow, the rage at wanting him, the rage and anger and pride. Vadim felt his heart expand, such a sweet pain inside, that feeling of seeing the man he'd fallen for, in love, in lust, amidst the dust and desolation, the man who could make him scared, who'd broken him, the man who needed a comrade without knowing it. He smiled, secretly, because Dan wasn't looking at him. "You cut me," he whispered, touched two fingers to the burning cut—where the soap had touched the wound—and it came away wet and bright red. He raised a foot to set it against Dan's shoulder, and pushed. "You scum. Peasant scum! You think I can report to the general with a cut face? What does the general think when my men can't even shave? How can they win this war? Eh? Just because the Afghans wear beards doesn't mean they are as buttfuck stupid as you are!"

Resisting the push of the boot as long as he could, but in the end, Dan lost balance. Falling onto the side, he scrabbled back to his knees as soon as he could. Keeping his head low, never looking at the other, because no recruit would. None

would dare lift their eyes towards the centre of wrath. “Forgive me, comrade Major. Forgive my stupidity!” Sticking to Russian. Crawling. Begging, like a seventeen year old would, faced with a force that could destroy him at the blink of an eye. A life meant nothing. *His* life meant nothing. Nothing at all. Not to the almighty Officer.

Vadim couldn’t help it. A part of him loved this game, relished it, made that dark tide rise. And rise. Making his breathing shallow, constricting him with anger and arousal, with that lust that came with the power. He needed a moment to think, used that time to wipe his face more thoroughly, his throat, too, grunting displeasure. “Kneel.”

And Dan did, remembered what it was like if all one wanted and needed and could possibly exist around was just the greed to live. Scrambled to his knees, eager to please, to live, like a recruit would have done. Looked up, quickly averted his eyes, staring straight ahead.

Vadim moved forward, pushing his groin very closely into Dan’s face, pausing, for a moment, then moved forward, rubbing his groin in Dan’s face, over his cheek, and his lips.

Dan wasn’t Dan anymore. Lost in the game, he jerked away, tried to avert his face with a sound that caught in his throat. Man. Cock. Terror. And somewhere, in the deepest recesses of his mind, he remembered. Remembered what the correct response would be like: fear.

Too perfect. Vadim almost hurt, felt like a coiled spring released, a pressure inside he hadn’t even been aware of, and he reached out to place his hand against the recruit’s head. Pushed him forward, like a commodity, like a towel or anything else that would never resist. Part of him regretted he didn’t have a pistol, but would be too far, too real, shit, Dan, on that first night. No, too much. “Are you good for anything? Are you even useful?”

“Don’t kill me,” the recruit whispered in panic. Russian words jumbled on top of the other, too fast. “Please don’t kill me, Sir.” Lips moving against the cock pressed against his face. “Please...” A body recoiling with revulsion, yet frozen with fear.

“Maybe,” grunted Vadim, as if to himself. Keeping his hand against the recruit’s neck, he opened his fly with the other hand and freed his cock. “Do like

your girl does, bitch.” Casual insult, his cock poking lips, his biceps taut against the resistance.

Resistance that was undoubtedly fighting against the obvious, body tense, tight with disgust. The recruit was letting out a strangled sound, trying to turn his head away.

Vadim hit him in the neck, a sharp, stinging pain, and the recruit’s head came forward, with a sound of pain. Vadim’s foot came down to kick against a tensed thigh, a short, vicious pain, again, and this time the recruit cried out, his whole body jerking. “You can’t even do that!” Vadim hissed, sharply. “You want to go into the pit, right? Is that it?”

Pit. Horror. Tales of death amongst Soviet soldiers, and the recruit found his voice, as he tried to scoot closer again, towards that cock. “No! Please comrade Major. No, please. Not that.” Head moving forward on its own, seeking out the cock this time, eagerness in desperation. Lips searching, finding, and taking in. With utmost clumsiness, and teeth scraping.

Vadim shuddered at the feeling of teeth, something inside coiling, just the fact it was *bad* made it good in a different way, and he pulled his lips back from his teeth, hissing “if I feel your teeth again, I’ll knock ‘em out.”

Nodding frantically, the recruit moved back again, forcing his head down, as far as a clumsy boy could, who knew nothing about such things, instead repulsed by what was happening. Turning more reckless when the back of his head was hit repeatedly, the recruit fucked himself amidst gagging noises and a brutality no real virgin would be able to handle. But this one could, and this one forced the cock down his throat as if his life depended on it.

Vadim suppressed a sound, what kind of sound he wouldn’t even know, maybe it was Dan’s name, or a ‘yes’, or just a groan, the tightness and resistance, the disgust, all of it was good. He pushed the recruit harder, forcing him into a rhythm that soon drew his balls up. And even though he’d loved to come into the face, there was something else. He pulled back, pushing against the recruit’s forehead at the same time, then took him by the throat, and forced him to the side, down, and Dan went with it, moving with the force. His body offered little resistance, not now, not that he knew what was going to happen and *wanted* it to happen. Had known right from the start.

Vadim kicked him into position across the crate, where he kept him down with a knee, grabbing those hands roughly. The body shuddered, but the resistance was feeble, just as frightened as a seventeen year old recruit would be. Just that the body was tall, strong, and all too muscular. Once Dan was bound, Vadim physically lifted him, and tore down the trousers. Naked. Baring a smooth arse, and causing a strangled sound to escape. Pulling them further down, he kicked the legs apart. Oil. There was the oil they often used, and he squirted some into his palm, briefly rubbing the stuff down, then got on top of the 'recruit', right into position.

"If you scream, I'll kill you," Vadim breathed, and the recruit whimpered, which turned into a badly suppressed scream when Vadim began to push in, efficiently, harshly, hips using strength, and the dark lust pooling in his guts. The body beneath him struggled. Enough to give resistance, not sufficient to throw him off. Bound hands pushing upwards, trying to push away, but groping at nothing. Cries of pain and...something else, filled the room, when the body was used.

Vadim cursed, the lust near unbearable now, just knowing one thing, they should be silent, had to be silent, his hand moving to the recruit's throat and roughly pulling the scarf loose, then twisting it around his wrist, like he had done many times, and his reward was a choked, desperate sound. At the same time thrusting with all his strength, no consideration, too urgent, too fierce in his need to have. Body. Recruit. Dan. Didn't matter. Using pressure, force, the motions underneath, but most of all that fierce impossible destructive force inside him pushing and pulling him into something savage, a kind of feeling he knew well and that had no place outside war.

The recruit's body was slammed against the crate like a puppet, with every vicious thrust. Hands in fists, tearing at the restraints, and the frenzied sounds that came out of the constricted throat were worse than ever before. Desperate. A body on the edge of breaking...and Dan's body on the very brink. Too much, an onslaught of pain and images, and most of all, no air, no breath. No power, helpless. And something happened in Dan's mind, when he tried to draw in air and failed. Vision darkening as his body contracted, convulsed, fucked and abused, once, twice again, and more, and thrusting deep inside, torn, air, none, body. Death. Vadim. Lust...and his body bucked and thrashed in a last desperate attempt to scream and fight, not even realising he was cumming until he collapsed with a toneless shout, body convulsing in orgasm before he blackened out and fell limp.

The tension and fight brought Vadim over the edge, too, the sounds, that visceral panic, the smell of agony, and he came, letting go of the scarf immediately, just knowing, by instinct, by experience, more would be bad. He pulled away, tried to stand but failed, instead knelt, wiping his sweat away, and the oil on his trousers, saw Dan was still...oh fuck. He got to his feet, immediately freed Dan's hands, pulled him up by his shoulders, checking the pulse, which was slow, but steady.

A choked sound came out of the abused throat, before there was movement. Disoriented, his whole body weight against the other, Dan remained slumped, but pressed out "oh fuck," before he was shaken in an almighty coughing attack.

Vadim let him go, only supporting him by the shoulders, wiped the beret off, ran fingers through Dan's hair, looking at him, trying to read his face. "Dan?" He reached for the closest water bottle and offered it.

When Dan raised his head, he rubbed both hands over his eyes. Looking up at last, there was the biggest shit-eating grin on his face. "You fucking kinky bastard." With a raspy voice. He took the water and downed at least half of it. Vadim grinned, too relieved Dan was alright, and only now remembering to stuff his cock back in, after a quick wiping down. "I...?" Not sure what to say, or think, but he didn't have to apologize, apparently not. "...I'd have killed to be your commanding officer," he said, and couldn't help laughing.

Putting the water down, Dan let himself slump onto the floor, like a boneless sack of flesh and blood, exhausted. "Holy fuck, that would have killed both of us, and not in a good way." Twisting until he leaned back into Vadim, sitting with his bare arse on the floor.

"Yeah." Vadim placed an arm around Dan's shoulders, and kissed his throat. "And shit, my arse is killing me."

"Sorry..."

"No, you're not. Liar." Dan cast a grin upwards. "You enjoyed it too much." He downed another couple of mouthfuls of water. "Must admit, I'm not sure I want to think about what that means for your past." He was still grinning though. Past, to him, was done and over with.

"I wasn't quite like that...but it's certainly inspired by...memory." Part his own superiors, part when he'd raped, and a bit of Gavriil, and that made a hellish concoction that was stronger than vodka.

Gently prodding at his throat, Dan frowned. That would be visible, no doubt. “And how the heck am I going to explain this?” Couldn’t help grinning, though. His mind still reeling from the realisation he’d cum. Just like that. By getting fucked. Like a highly prized whore.

“Hm. Wear a scarf. It’s just red, should fade soon. Especially with your skin tone.” Vadim placed his head on Dan’s shoulder, the firm, steady, powerful body so close, and saw the crate, and the traces on Dan’s chest. Cum. He smiled, and kissed Dan’s neck. “But seems you enjoyed it.” Sticking firmly to English again.

“Mmmm...” Mumbled, “I need to think about that one. Not sure what that says about *me*.”

Vadim nodded, thoughtfully. “Seems, we...we both like to play with fire. Like we did before we had feelings for each other. When it was just about sex. You know? Seeing the other suffer...feeling him struggle turns us on.” He inhaled while Dan reached for his hand, thumb stroking the palm. “It comes down to one thing, Dan. You are strong enough to suffer, and I...I am strong enough to suffer for you. If you want to do this to me, do it.”

“Oh, no doubt.” Dan’s grin faded, replaced by a thoughtful look. Quiet for a moment, while he kept caressing Vadim’s hand, as Vadim’s fingers curled inwards. “But not like this.” He finally murmured. “That’s not me.”

“The...officer?”

“Aye, guess I’m just not into humiliation. More into...” Trailing off, Dan shrugged when he couldn’t quite grasp what he was trying to figure out. Twisting his head back up to glance at the other, the grin returned. “We’ll see when it happens, but until then, I’d better get cleaned up.” Pointing with his chin towards the mattresses on the floor. “And I wouldn’t mind a kip. Or is that out for recruits?”

Vadim smiled. “Leave granted. At ease, soldier.” He brushed his face against the side of Dan’s face.

“Cheers, Russkie, but only if you clean me up.” Dan groaned when he scrambled back onto his knees. He was a sticky mess, and there was still some warm water somewhere.

Vadim reached for the scarf and wiped Dan down, then, using the remaining water and the towel, cleaned him up after getting him out of boots and

old BDUs. Then cleaned himself, while Dan pulled the t-shirt over his head, and Vadim grinned to himself in a strange, relaxed amusement. “Thanks. That was...good. I’m surprised how good.”

Craning his head backwards, Dan raised his brows. “Surprised? I’m not. You’re a kinky bastard and I’m no better.” Winking at Vadim. “One of your more redeeming features, loverboy.”

Vadim looked up. “I won’t apologize, then.” He got out of his own clothes, then dropped towel and scarf all onto the pile with the dusty uniforms and stretched out on the mattress, angling for a bottle of water. And, sure enough, Dan was right there, right next to him, side by side. Vadim knew as he dozed off he’d wake up with Dan in his back, holding him and ‘spooning’, which was such a contrast to what he’d felt and done just minutes ago, but on the other hand seemed like things were settling in. Their past no longer some kind of curse, but part of the present.

* * *

Dan was slowly drifting awake after about an hour-long nap. Glancing at his watch, it was still early, barely afternoon. Plenty of time before 1900 hours. He lay with his front pressed against Vadim’s back, his arm across and holding, hand covering Vadim’s pecs. Without fail, he’d always end up like this, no matter what. No matter the temperature, and no matter the time, nor what they had done before they’d fallen asleep. He moved his head, only to kiss the shaved neck, smiling to himself. Vadim didn’t move, didn’t wake. Dan didn’t figure as a potential danger.

That had been...different, Dan thought. Unexpected and, if he was honest with himself, rather shocking. Not Vadim’s game, no surprises there, he’d known his Russkie since the days of being a merciless bastard, but his own reaction. He’d cum. Holy shit, he’d cum by just getting fucked. Aggression. Brutality. Bound and ‘helpless’, and most importantly, getting strangled until he’d blackened out. Dan’s grin turned into a grimace in Vadim’s back. Was he really such a sick motherfucker that he needed to re-enact the rape? Pulling in a sharp breath, Dan tensed, winced at the movement as a sharp stab of discomfort ripped through his guts. Ah, yes. His arse. That’d be an interesting evening, sitting on the hard benches in the mess.

Closing his eyes and letting the breath back out, slowly this time, Dan shrugged to no one and nothing in particular. Alright, so he'd cum. So they'd re-enacted the terror of eleven years ago. Again. Oh yes, once again. Wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last, and hell, he'd enjoyed the added twist of being a 'recruit'. Kinky bastard? Fair enough, so they were, both of them. He distinctly remembered all the times he'd controlled Vadim, and there was no way he'd forget that buzz.

Kinky bastards. There were worse things to be.

The grin returned and Dan kissed Vadim's neck once more, as he stroked the pecs, which made Vadim stir a little, merely shifting his legs and an elbow.

Murmuring into Vadim's ear, "I'll be in the gym." He needed to lift some weights, feel his body work.

"What, now," murmured Vadim and half-turned as if to glance at him but didn't turn enough to make eye contact. "Okay."

Dan got up quietly, wincing again, and carefully dressed himself in the discarded shorts he found in a corner, and a t-shirt, crumpled into a ball. They would do, as long as he had his shades, which he adjusted. He put his feet into the boots, and could feel the ache in his body. Slipping out of the hut, he walked slowly, just as carefully as he had dressed, and went to the gym, to gingerly seat himself into one of the machines.

* * *

Dan had been working out for a while, beasting his arms and upper body, but not his legs, when his Sergeant mate entered the place. The moment he spotted Dan, the guy's grin threatened to split his face. "Hey, Mad Dog, heard about Midge? He got busted. Out on the next plane."

Dan grinned, pushing the weights with renewed vigour. Said nothing, just kept his teeth bared between a grin and a sneer. Feral and endlessly satisfied. "Not a great loss, aye?" Doug commented.

"Nope. None." Pressed out between his teeth, Dan shook his head like a dog when sweat stung in his eyes.

"That reminds me, what the fuck were you doing in your hut? I went past earlier and I wouldn't be a haggis tosser if I hadn't heard you scream." Dan

stopped, arms still in the butterfly machine, picking his towel off a metal bar to wipe the sweat off his face. Hiding something he recognised as heat creeping into his face. Oh fuck. He bared his teeth once more in a shit eating grin when he came back up. “Aye, mate, simple. You just tell me what you do on an afternoon off when you can’t get pissed.”

Doug smirked, “Wanking. What else.”

“You got it, mate.”

“Interesting kind of wanking.”

“You don’t want to know.”

Doug raised his brows, “you sure?”

“Fucking sure, mate. You really don’t, unless you’d like to spend an afternoon ‘wanking’ with the Russian.”

“Shit, no.” Doug laughed, delivering a friendly but mighty slap to Dan’s sweat drenched shoulder. “I get it, I don’t want to know, but whatever it was, scream a bit quieter next time, or the boys get nervous.” He was still laughing his head off when he went for the leg machine.

The gym started to get busy shortly after that, and Dan was winding his routine down. No way was he going to work on his legs, the movements would kill him. Half an hour later, he slid out of the biceps machine, forgetting to suppress a wince.

“Hey, Mad Dog!” Doug shouted across the noise of metal and grunts. Dan turned, towel around his neck, and shades back over his eyes. Presented with the big Glaswegian sergeant, as he half-hung and half-sat in the thigh machine. Grinning at him like a lunatic. “Seems you got your brown wings, aye? Just not the same way round that I got mine.” He was laughing as hard as before.

“Fuck you, Dougie.” Dan countered half-heartedly and with good humour. Too knackered to take the piss, and far too sated.

“Nope, doesn’t seem that way round, mate.” Doug stated again, with an even bigger grin, “or should I call you Adrien?”

“What?”

“Well, you know, ‘Adrien!’ and, ‘I am here, Rocky!’” Doug burst into laughter, most of the guys looking up, but none had caught onto the joke.

“Ha, ha, very funny.” Dan tried to sneer but couldn’t help the grin. Had a hard time suppressing the laughter. “Let me know when you’re done taking the piss on my account.”

“Never!”

“Thought so.” Dan flicked the towel across Doug’s legs, who only laughed harder. “Wanker.” Adding as he turned towards the door, “at least I get some. You’re just envious.” And with that he sashayed out of the room, with an exaggerated swing in his hips and a hand that fluffed his sweaty hair. Making his exit amidst cat calls, laughter and wolf whistles.

* * *

Dan went straight to the shower, didn’t bother to dry after a quick stint under the hot spray, and tied the sweaty towel around his hips. Water dripping from his hair onto his shoulders and neck, running slowly down the dark skin and pale scars of his body. Shorts and t-shirt under his arm, he made his way back to the hut, wondering if Vadim was still there. He didn’t knock, tried the handle and walked right in.

Presented with the sight of Vadim, who had only half-turned, partially on his back, one arm across his eyes, the single blanket really just covering one leg, and a plastic bottle of water resting near his chest, indicating that, apart from drinking, he had done exactly nothing.

“I see, you were damn busy.” Dan grinned as he threw the pile of stinking clothes onto the floor. “Preparing for a long night?” The towel ended on the same pile as the rest.

Vadim set the arm down and regarded him. “Preparing what?” He looked around and found the bottle close, reached lazily for it and sat up to drink. “For a long *night*.”

“Oh. That.” Vadim grinned, still drowsy, then gulped down water, wiping his lips and glanced up. “Your charming way to tell me I should get up?”

“Aye, get up and help me shave my arse.” Standing with his arms crossed over his chest, Dan grinned.

“You sure you want something manipulating your ass? Might give me ideas, you know?”

“Listen, Russkie, or Rocky, or whatever. If you have only so much as a twinkle in your eye that might be the germ of an idea, I’d punch your fucking lights in. Got that?” Still grinning. “Nice, gentle help with shaving. I feel as if a sledgehammer had ripped through my guts, so no...bloody...stupid... ideas!”

Vadim laughed and got up, laboriously. “I better get dressed, then.” He found a clean pair of camo trousers and slipped into them, and got some shaving foam and a safety razor. He only used the straight blade himself when he was very awake and calm and steady enough. “Okay. Uhm. Get into a good position.” He filled some water into the bowl and uncapped the shaving foam.

“Remember? No stupid ideas.” Walking over to the mattress, Dan let himself down with a wince. His upper body was aching from the workout. Pleasantly so. He’d never fail to enjoy feeling his body, at least he knew he was alive. Getting onto all fours, he opened his legs to allow access.

Vadim gathered up some water, wetting Dan’s skin, then sprayed some foam into his hand and rubbed it in, massaging lightly, but the look of Dan’s ass made him wince. Reddened and doubtlessly sore, and he was careful to keep the foam away. “Right. That was on...the hard side.”

“Aye, but you know I can take it.” Still an odd thought that he’d cum, and even more intriguing to imagine what it would take to make Vadim cum without touching his cock. Very interesting thought indeed.

“Aye. I know you can.” Vadim pulled the bowl closer and began to shave the stubble away. Wet foam, running down in droplets, baring dark skin over powerful muscle.

Patient, on all fours, Dan was suddenly struck by the hilarity of the situation. “Mad *Dog* alright, eh?” He murmured, hardly able to control a chuckle, and that really wasn’t a good idea with a razor so close. Safety or not.

Vadim shook his head. “Last I’m thinking about is dogs.”

“Well, whatever you are thinking about, you can always kiss it better.” Vadim grinned. “You want my tongue next?”

“Hell, no. Not in my arse anyway.” Dan craned his head as far back as he could, trying to catch a glimpse of Vadim. “But there are other areas that might need some tongue action.” He winked. “Russian recruits don’t come cheap, you know...”

Vadim carefully pulled Dan's ass cheeks apart to slide in and shave off the wayward hair there, while Dan remained very, very still. Again confronted with the evidence, Vadim shook his head to himself, wiped Dan's ass with a towel, and placed a kiss on one buttock. "They do, but let's assume they don't."

"Possibly, but *this* Russian recruit here doesn't come all that cheap." Flopping himself down, Dan lazily turned over. Head cushioned on his arm, he grinned at Vadim. "We have half an hour before drinks in the Mess. What about 10 dollars, you love me long time?" Putting on the fake Asian accent again.

Vadim sneered. "Just don't pay me in fucking *dollars*. Make that quid."

"You're fucking expensive, mate." Dan laughed.

Vadim put the bowl down, wiped his hands, and regarded Dan's body, smiling. "Fancy a blowjob, pretty man?"

"It's the first time anyone called me pretty, and if you really think I am, then you need to get your head sorted and your eyes checked, but hell, yeah." Vadim shrugged. "I'm just trying to get into the role..." He lowered himself onto the mattress, lying on his side, one hand on Dan's other side so he could support himself.

Spreading arms and legs into an aching but relaxed heap, Dan grinned and closed his eyes. Vadim bent down and took his cock, sucking on it to get its attention, licking, nuzzling, closing his eyes, too, just mellow and nice, not a professional blowjob by a long stretch. More lazy and tender, which turned only urgent much later, when he took the cock deeper and with skill, swallowing when Dan came, and then resting on Dan's thigh, hands gently tracing the lines of Dan's muscles and the scar on his knee.

Just lying there for a long time, silent and breathing, with closed eyes, Dan was half drifting off into another snooze, when there was a rap on the door. Someone shouting outside, and Dan muttered obscenities under his breath. He drew in a deep breath and hollered in his most stentorian ex-sergeant voice, "what the fuck do you want?"

Another impatient rap was the answer. "I said, get our Rocky out for a celebratory drink of two cans of bear's piss!" Laughter followed the words, until a well-known voice cut through the ruckus.

"Okay, guys, bring the battering ram!" It was Jean.

Vadim's eyes opened, and he looked up, unpleasantly surprised at the turn of conversation, and even more when there was a loud clanging noise and the hut shook in its foundations, accompanied by laughter. "One! Come on, boys, don't tire out already." Another impact. "Two!"

"I'll skin the fucker," hissed Vadim, scrambling for his clothes.

"Oh damn." Dan groaned and reached for his shades that had fallen off the edge of the mattress. Otherwise he did...absolutely nothing. Lying just as before. Naked. Sprawled. And not giving a shit.

"Three!" A worse impact that made Vadim jump, and cross the space to the door.

"Alright! Stop it!"

"Listen, there's the surrender," said Jean, smug, which was as grating as Jean could possibly be. "Relinquish 'Rocky', and come out unarmed!"

Vadim groaned, pulled up his trousers, and began to unlock the doors.

Outside, jeering people. Mercs, several of Midge's brood that had changed sides, Dan's team, Jean's team, Pascal, the whole lot.

Dan merely raised his head, shades over his eyes, and waved a hand in greeting. "Take him. Have fun. He's worn me out." His grin threatened to split his face, before he let his head drop back. Amused by the shenanigans, and most of all how some of those turncoats managed to celebrate his Russkie now, while a day ago they would have spilled his guts. At least Jean was a constant, and some of his older mates. Even Pascal. "Leave something for me for later!" Dan shouted.

The mercs descended on Vadim, he was jostled, suddenly lifted up, and all he could do was hold back the violent urge to kill them all, as they carried him off to the Mess. Jean, meanwhile, stepped inside, Pascal with him.

"What a disgrace, giving up your lover to the mob," Jean joked, and reached down to pull Dan up by an arm, who allowed himself to be moved, but only under protest. "Come on, pussy, get up. Who knows what they'll be doing with 'Rocky' there." He laughed. "I mean, Rocky? Does he even know the film?"

"No. Of course not." Dan huffed, looking from Jean to Pascal. "And by the way, you haven't noticed I am stark naked, with no clothes lying around?"

Pascal frowned, not actually looking at Dan, keeping his eyes somewhere else.

“That means you guys had sex,” said Jean. “See? I’m a real Sherlock Holmes.”

“I’m really impressed, Sherlock, but doesn’t that give you a clue I should get my arse out of this hut, over to the other, and find myself some clothes?”

Jean turned to Pascal. “You take his legs?”

Dan protested while Pascal frowned. “Shouldn’t he get...”

“Is gay naked different to straight naked?” asked Jean.

“Huh?”

“Grab him.”

Pascal moved forward, reluctant to touch Dan, but it was all a joke, really, wasn’t it, while Jean’s expression turned sly and he winked at Dan, who complained.

“Hey, Frenchies, what the fuck are you up to? No pawing of the goods, here.”

Pascal hesitated again, which was funny considering he was the paratrooper type who was happy just charging into battle. “I could get you some clothes,” he volunteered, very ill at ease.

Dan didn’t bother to hide the smirk. “That’s the best idea you’ve had all month.” Winking at Jean, who might or might not have seen the gesture beneath the shades. “My bergan is in my old hut. You’ll find polo shirt and shorts, anything, really. Just grab it. Cheers, mate.”

“Okay.” Pascal vanished, which caused Jean to call something in French which sounded more piss-taking than insulting. Once Pascal was out of the door, Jean leaned down to Dan. “You fucking tease.”

“Moi? It’s you who is the goddamned tease. Poor Pascal. With a friend like you, who needs an enemy.” Dan kicked the door shut and grabbed hold of Jean’s neck in the same motion, pulling him close. Naked body pressed against clothes, lips upon the other’s. “We have 30 seconds....” Murmured.

Jean groaned, pressing in as well, shook his head. “I can’t come that fast, no way. Shit.” He kissed Dan, urgently, passionately, open lips, tongue, pretty much devouring him, breathless and needy, and if they’d had a few minutes rather than mere seconds, things might have gone very differently.

Luckily, Dan had cum not long ago, and when he pulled away, the moment some noise announced Pascal’s arrival, nothing showed on his naked body.

Jean, though, was another matter. Dan adjusted his shades and grinned at the French para who stepped inside with a bundle of clothes over his arm. “Didn’t know what you wanted, just took a handful.”

“Cheers,” Dan took the first pair of trousers that fell out of the bundle, and stepped inside. It was one of the pairs Vadim had bought him in Thailand. Sand coloured, and far too good looking for a scruff like him in a place like this. “Better?” Slipping a polo shirt over his head, which just about fitted alright with the trousers. “No more scary naked faggot?”

Pascal shrugged, not sure what to say, and the whole issue always made him uncomfortable. “Why do you always say that,” he said, with an air of exasperation. “It’s not funny or anything.”

“I say it, because *you* make it funny by your reaction. Has it ever occurred to you, that I’m just not goddamned interested in you? There’s no need in being skittish around me, mate. I’m just a bloke like everyone else.”

That didn’t seem to convince Pascal who appeared increasingly flustered.

Dan closed the belt to keep the trousers on his lean hips, “but since you are such great piss-taking fodder, I keep repeating it. Faggot. Shitstabber. Poofier.” Dan was laughing hard, but slapped Pascal’s shoulder before the man lost his rag, and Pascal still didn’t seem to know how to react, merely met his gaze, looking worried and insecure.

“Sorry, mate, couldn’t resist. I promise to be better in the future.”

“He won’t bite. He barks a lot, but he never bites.” Jean grinned, placed a hand on Pascal’s shoulder and squeezed it. Giving Dan another wink.

“Uhm. Yeah,” said Pascal, who looked like he’d rather be somewhere else and probably already berated himself for bringing the issue up at all.

“Right. Shall we? And I won’t even call myself ‘faggot’.” Laughing again, Dan made his way out of the hut, managing to hide a wince that tried to escape as he stepped over the threshold.

Jean grinned, letting Pascal walk first, mostly to hide the effect Dan had had on his body, but as they walked to the Mess, Pascal fell in stride next to him. “What’s so funny?”

“Seeing a big guy like you blush like a girl, that’s funny. Just take it in stride. He’s a good bloke, Mad Dog. Won’t harm a fly.”

“I heard that!” Dan called backwards, “don’t believe him, Pascal, I am a mean fighting machine. Honest.” He lifted his shades to wink at the guy. “Not hurting a fly is a very bad reputation to have for a merc. So, forget about that immediately.”

They could hear the noise from the Mess tent, and Dan began to wonder in how much ‘agony’ he would find Vadim. Part worried, and biggest part highly amused.

Inside, Vadim was sitting on one of the benches, surrounded by the jeering mob. Cans of weak lager were everywhere, and people shouted at the top of their lungs—a general piss-taking that didn’t seem to take into account the half-naked Russkie sitting there, battling the instinct to free himself and break a few heads on the way out. People were slapping his naked shoulders, back, a dozen hands on him, which Vadim bore stoically.

Jean stuck his fingers in his mouth and gave a sharp, painful whistle. “And here’s ‘Adrian’!” he shouted, and the mob surged forward to engulf Dan as well.

“Oh shit, you fucking bastard!” Dan managed to yell at Jean over the noise, before he was taken into the centre of the mob. Finding himself eventually, thankfully, right beside Vadim. Pushed down onto the hard bench, he would have yelped when his arse hit the wood, if he hadn’t had a can of bear’s piss on his lips.

“Well.” He managed to get out, breathlessly. “What’s it like, being Mr Popular all of a sudden?” Grinning at Vadim, he gave his thigh a squeeze.

“Not sure,” murmured Vadim close to his ear. “I keep thinking they mean somebody else.”

“I can see that.” Dan grinned, his lips close to Vadim’s ear, “but you’re doing well, considering you’re the camp bogeyman.” He winked, then added, “you want me to get you a shirt? Or are you comfortable, flaunting your manly body to all and sundry?”

Vadim cast him a quick glance. “Boots, actually.” Glancing down to a stray bottle that just hit the ground hard enough to splinter into shards. “Boots would be good. And, yeah, covering the scars.”

“Actually, this is the Mess, you shouldn’t even be here without a collar.”

“That’s fine, as long as it doesn’t have a name tag attached.”

Dan twitched, eyes widening behind the shades, before he caught himself and laughed. “Alright, ‘Rocky’, I’ll be right back.” He was about to get up, but

didn't get far, when Jean leaned over, both hands on Vadim's shoulders, which didn't even make Vadim flinch, having been touched and prodded and slapped for what felt like a long time. Jean's touch wasn't uncomfortable, not threatening, even though he still didn't like him. "I think you guys should marry," Jean shouted over the din. "It's legal in Denmark."

The roar of laughter drowned out Dan's protest, who had to wait a moment before he could shout against the ruckus, "No fucking way! I'm a *man*, not a sappy, romantic Frenchman, who's heard too much of l'amour, and can't wait to get married himself!"

Jean grinned back. "You finding a fault in my manhood just because I have the most fucking gorgeous sexy model girlfriend anybody could possibly want to lay their paws on?" Kneading Vadim's neck, almost as an aside. "Hey, Vadya, what do you think about it? Am I less of a man, eh?"

Vadim glanced at Dan, finding the touches not too bad, even though he was at loss for a great answer. "No idea about your manhood, Jean. Haven't had a chance to test it." A meaningful glance to Dan, who suddenly broke out in a coughing fit, most unusual for him.

It took him a moment to get himself under control, before he downed the rest of his cold but tasteless lager, and slammed the empty can onto the table.

"Anyone here who thinks holy matrimony and happy wedlock is for incurable saps who should know better than to stop dipping their cock into many waters, raise their hand and shout!"

The answer was almost unanimous. A barrage of shouts and whistles, hands being waved and raucous laughter.

Dan turned to Jean, lifted his shades and winked. "See? Told you," before touching Vadim's biceps and heading off to weave his way through the crowd. "My girl at least wouldn't be able to rip my head off, Mad Dog." Jean shouted after Dan, then sat down next to Vadim. "Good to see you lighten up a bit. You're not all grim and nasty, eh?"

Vadim shot him a glance, then heaved a sigh and relaxed. He had no chance to escape, sex had made him mellow, and this was still better than ending up with a split lip and a swollen face. He listened to the banter, every now and then snapping a remark, but it seemed like he could say or do nothing wrong.

Jean's hands were on him most of the time, touchy-feely as the Frenchman was, so much Vadim got the feeling Jean missed Pascal.

It took Dan longer than expected to find socks and boots and a shirt that appeared mostly clean. Once again making his way through the guys, who did a veritable impression of being drunk without actually having enough alcohol, until he found the bench. Fag in the corner of his mouth, he dropped the clothes on Vadim's lap and prodded Jean. "Since when are you groping my man?"

Jean grinned. "Just keeping him 'warm' for you." He laughed, slapped Vadim's back, then moved a little away, amidst laughter. Jean's protective shield of assumed straightness still held up.

Dan squeezed in between Jean and Vadim, and winced again as he settled down. Muttering to himself that they could do with some goddamned cushions. Prodding Jean again. "Careful, or Pascal will be jealous." Baring his teeth in a smirk, then dragging at his fag and blowing the smoke into Jean's face.

Jean promptly reached for his own cigarettes and lit one, giving Dan a sly grin. "A dose of jealousy keeps the sex good..."

"With Pascal? Ha, ha, even I couldn't turn him less-than-straight." Grinning at Vadim, who was lacing the boots, "you should have seen him earlier. The guy's worried to touch me, in case he might catch the gay virus. Poor sod."

Pascal caught his name being mentioned and rolled his eyes, but didn't move to defend himself.

Vadim met his eyes briefly, then shrugged. "Well, you caught the virus."

The observation shut Dan up for a moment. "Damn." Rubbing his nose while inhaling smoke. "Hell and damnation, you are bloody right. So," nodding first to Vadim, then to Jean, "we have herewith established I was an innocent straight guy, who got infected by the evil Russian with the gay virus. Therefore, 'Rocky', it's all your fault."

Vadim simply shrugged while pulling the shirt over his head.

"Don't tell Pascal...we can't have deserters just because of fear..." murmured Jean, then laughed.

"What?" asked Pascal.

"Dan was straight when I met him," said Vadim, ever so helpful. "He knows everything about 'turning gay'."

“Aye, and trust me, back then Vadim wasn’t quite as cheerful and seductive as he is nowadays.” Dan’s grin went from ear to ear. “But I couldn’t help it, there is something...” snapping his fingers, “je ne sais quoi, about our

‘Rocky’. Don’t you think?”

“‘I don’t know’ is about right,” murmured Pascal, frowning, with tension around his lips, but still his rather friendly, balanced self. “Can’t we talk about the weather?”

Jean leaned in, arm resting on Dan’s shoulder.

“Sure, but with Jean so close, I figure the weather is rather warm.” Dan grinned.

Pascal looked at Jean, almost unpleasantly surprised, as if he was finally catching on Jean was awfully affectionate with Dan. And what it might or could mean. Then, almost visibly, thinking about how Jean touched him, too. “No idea what you mean.” He stepped back and looked like he was about to bolt.

Dan started to laugh, covering up his realisation that maybe they had been going a step too far. Laughing hard to dispel any doubts. “I’m just taking the piss, Pascal. Our Jean, here, is just an annoying touchy-feely git, but as hot blooded as a straight male can be. I can vouch for that, I’d get into his pants if I could, but goddammit, no chance. Not with that lady of his.” He winked, slapping Jean’s shoulder and sidling up to Vadim. He’d just lied worse than he’d done for years, and he didn’t even feel guilty about it. Flicking the cigarette butt into the nearest ashtray, he wrapped his arm around Vadim’s shoulders.

Jean snorted and shook his head, while Vadim couldn’t suppress a smirk, almost spiteful. Jean’s protective shield had been damaged, as Pascal visibly re-evaluated and seemed to go through incidents in the past, looking thoughtful, but then shrugged to join the rest of the crowd again. It all went back to boisterous fun, cat-calling, and enormous exaggerations of adventurous deeds, women’s tits, and the last dump. Vadim watched, bemused, but too mellow or tired to join.

Dan kept his arm around Vadim’s shoulders for a long time, joined in the occasional banter, shouted the odd insult, and laughed with the lot of them. Talking to Jean and moving to coke after his allotted two cans, but even that couldn’t keep him awake. He became quieter over the last half hour, his body succumbing to the fatigue of sex and workout, and a far too eventful day.

Having just lit another fag, it hung in the customary corner of his mouth as he sat with his head slowly leaning towards Vadim's shoulder, finally hitting it. Eyes closed. Cigarette burning, he had fallen asleep amidst the ruckus.

Vadim noticed the shift in weight, half turned and pulled the cigarette from Dan's lips before it accidentally dropped into his lap. "There, Lapushka. I think we call it a night, hm?" He ran his fingers across Dan's cheek, and gently touched his head to Dan's, who was barely roused, but smiled.

"Kitten paw?" asked Jean.

"I see your Russian's still functional," Vadim murmured.

Jean's eyes betrayed surprise, but tenderness. "You are the most...extraordinary guys I know, you know that, Vadim? Not sure I'll ever fully understand you."

Vadim snorted. "I'd be fucked if I understood it myself. But it doesn't matter."

Gently slapping Dan's cheek, he murmured: "I'll take you home, soldier," and slowly lifted Dan off the bench, half-carrying him. "Thanks guys, nice party." As they made their way back to the hut, with Dan more asleep than awake, they had voices calling after them. Not insults, not threats, but good wishes.

1991 Chapter XXXIV—Close Combat

November 1991, the Persian Gulf

Two days later, Dan got called over to the mail room when he arrived back from shift, which had been the same one as Vadim's, but of course in separate teams. Figuring it could only be from Maggie, he was surprised when the envelope bore an American eagle. Raising his brows, he raised his shades as well, studying the letter for a moment.

"There are a couple more." The mailroom guy shrugged.

Making some appropriately inquisitive noises, Dan pushed a grimy finger under the flap to rip it open. "For Vadim and Jean, huh?"

"How do you know?"

Dan grinned, "you must be the only bugger around here who has no clue how bloody goddamned heroic the three of us are." Baring his teeth in a grin. The squaddie rolled his eyes and muttered something under his breath, but shouted, the moment he spotted Jean's team, "hey, you got mail! Both of you." gesturing to Vadim and Jean.

Jean wiped his face, only slightly blurring the lines between clean and dirty, moving towards the mail room, with Vadim following closely.

"Neat. Not the postcards from holiday paradises," stated Jean, grinning. "You know, when they send you postcards with plenty of naked tits and next-to-nothing strings on a hot pair of Brazilian ladies?"

"As if I'd know." Dan snorted while unfolding the letter and staring at the load of gobbledegook.

Jean tore the pretty much identical envelope, brow darkening in concentration as he read. "Ok. Right. All these words to invite us to a medal awarding ceremony?"

"Holy fuck, seems so." Lowering his letter, Dan grinned at Jean and Vadim. "If they serve some good food I'm not going to complain." Poking at Vadim's letter. "What kind of Christmas tree baubles are you two going to get?"

"It says 'Army Commendation Medal'," said Vadim, followed by an affirmative grunt from Jean. "Same here. Holy fuck. I never got anything like that." Jean laughed. "Shit."

No, because you're a fucking deserter, thought Vadim, and bit back the comment he'd had enough medals to look impressive in his 'fake' real uniform indeed. Plenty of combat-related medals, too.

Dan just laughed, shaking his head, but his hand went to Vadim's shoulder, and his fingers were gently digging into the muscle. He knew, he understood, but hell, only one thing to do about it: laugh. They couldn't change the past.

"Fucking ironic, isn't it? You're going to have an Uncle Sam medal dangling from your chests." He smirked, teeth and all. "You got to laugh, aye?"

"Aye." Vadim folded the paper and stuffed it back into its envelope. Very ironic. Officially, he was now a Brit, and that meant an ally by default. He didn't really want the medal, unlike Jean, whose face had lit up under the caked dirt.

Dan turned to Jean, "so that means you never got a medal in La Legion?"

"Well, let's say I didn't really have a choice in getting the Croix du Combattant or the Medaille des Blesses. Engaging the enemy and getting wounded wasn't really a choice, there." Jean looked at the mail guy. "Let's hand the kit in. I'm dying for a shower."

"Aye." Dan nodded, "and a damn good thing I got that suit from the embassy," turning to Vadim, "and that you had one made in Thailand." He was walking to the door, when he suddenly stopped dead. "Damn. My medals, they're still in the embassy. Best get Maggie to send them over."

Vadim grinned, somewhat pained. "Guess I'll be the one who goes in naked."

Even Jean the deserter had two. Yet another thing where his own Motherland had told him 'fuck you'. No rank, no medals, no uniform, no badges. In military terms, none of his deeds nor qualifications existed. His career wiped out, with not even a piece of cheap metal strung up on ribbon to prove he'd been worth anything.

"No," Dan's hand came back to Vadim's shoulder. "You won't. *We* will know that you should have a chest glittering with lametta. I've seen you, in full uniform with all your medals." Vadim looked at him, that pained expression turning to almost stricken tenderness. How much it still meant. How much Dan cared for the man he'd been, even though that man, in his full powers and regalia, had been an utter bastard. I love you, Dan, he thought, and Vadim completely missed the expression on Jean's face: compassion.

Dan gently pushed Vadim through the door. “And while we’re getting this shit washed off, you better tell us what medals you did have, before the arseholes came down with the boot. Aye, Jean?”

“Oh yes. You must have had enough for a whole platoon, knowing you.” Jean grinned. “Well, at least a little. I played it safe in that place, but you were right in the middle of it.”

“I was.” And no, Vadim didn’t want to remember. It would be digging too deep. He’d felt proud because of some of them, and ashamed for others, depending on the deed, the achievement, they were connected with.

Dan seemed to understand even that, because he backtracked almost immediately. Grinning at Jean, “Guess it would take too long to list all of them. Just trust me, Vadim’s chest was just about big enough to hold the panel of ribbons and medals, and he’s not particularly narrow-chested, our Rocky. Is he?”

Jean grinned as they handed in their kit, shed the armour, grabbed the showering kit, and of course Jean was there, and joined them in the showers, using the stall right next to theirs.

Dan was the last one to step under the spray, grinning when he found himself standing between Jean and Vadim. With just the tiled walls between them. Now...that was an interesting position to be in, and he whistled while sluicing the dirt off, luxuriating under the hot water.

Jean glanced over with a knowing, teasing smile, studying both of them—but mostly Dan—with intent. Rewarded by Dan with a very slow and deliberate washing of his body, taking his time, especially around the more interesting areas, and Dan even turned his back to the room, slightly bending over, as he washed between his buttocks. Sticking his head out of the spray, he grinned, “strange, where that damned dust gets into, aye?”

Jean laughed, somewhat coarsely. “You wouldn’t believe where *my* portion of dust went. And I’d be surprised if Vadim wasn’t suffering from the same.” He was clearly half-hard, the show, the teasing, and the potential for embarrassment in this location.

“What, right into the Jap’s eye? Believe it or not, back in Afghanistan I was *peeing* dust.” Dan stepped further out from his partition, winking at Vadim, who stopped the water just a few seconds after Dan had stopped his, stepped into his flip flops and placed a towel around his hips.

“Damn, I’d come over for a drink, but I guess you’re going to be fucking like rabbits once the door falls shut behind you.”

“What makes you think so, Frenchie?” Dan was baring his teeth in an almighty smirk, and he still hadn’t bothered to put the towel round his hips. Jean laughed, leaning with both arms on the partition, water running from his hair over his face. “That grin? Or the way Vadim doesn’t stay under the water for longer than five minutes? He’s practically racing you.”

Vadim gathered up Dan’s washing bag and stood near his shoulder, close enough to almost touch.

“You think so?” Dan turned his head to look at Vadim. “We’re old men, we don’t *always* fuck, you know.” Finally, slowly, wrapping the towel round his hips, Dan picked up his shower gel. “Guess, to prove I’m telling the truth, we better invite you to a drink in the hut. Aye?” Nudging Vadim.

Vadim nodded. “Sure. Come on in. You don’t *have* to change.”

“That would destroy my reputation completely,” said Jean, casting a quizzical glance at Vadim’s back, while Dan let out a sound, suspiciously close to a snigger. “I’ll join you in a few minutes, let me just drop off this stuff.”

With that, he went towards his own hut, while Vadim and Dan made their way over to the one they shared at night, after snatching some clothes from the other one, and the booze.

“You think I should bother dressing?” Dan grinned at Vadim after flopping onto the combined mattresses on the floor.

Vadim dropped the towel. “I am getting dressed.” Finding a pair of camo trousers, he looked at Dan. “I did have sex in mind, you know.”

“What, with Jean?” Dan still didn’t make any effort at pulling his own trousers closer.

Vadim laughed. “With you, actually.”

“And why not with Jean?” Dan was grinning like a lazy cat.

“Jean hates my...” Vadim paused. Looking at Dan, like it had never occurred to him. “I don’t know. We’re not...exactly friends.”

“Friends...” Dan was at least bothering to make a half-arsed effort at reaching for his trousers, “and since when did that ever stop *us* from fucking? I distinctly remember hating your bloody guts, while fucking your brains out.”

Vadim reached for a tee. “He said ‘You make my skin crawl’...you at least wanted me.”

“Well...” Dan flicked the towel off to get a foot into one trouser leg, “when did he say that? I bet it wasn’t lately, or was it?”

“No.” Vadim frowned, pulling down the tee and then sitting to put on socks. “No, not recently.” Jean. He couldn’t deny Jean was attractive, if he’d shut up for once and stopped flirting with Dan.

“Can’t see the problem, then.” Dan was just about getting his second leg into the trousers, when Jean knocked on the door and came in. Tight shirt, camo trousers as well, but sneakers, no boots. “Hi guys.” He closed the door behind him, and sat down without being asked, looking at them, while Dan was just about to pull the camo trousers over his hips, fiddling with the zip and button.

“You expecting booze or what?” Dan grinned.

Jean reached into his thigh pocket and pulled out a flat bottle of whisky. “Brought my own. Not great stuff, but I assure you, you won’t go blind.”

“Let’s see what we’ve got.” Scrambling up, Dan was looking over the bottles. Some gin, some vodka, and the leftovers of whisky, with a six-pack of beer. American Budweiser, no better than the English shit. “Got no mixers, so I guess it’s beer and whisky, aye?” He was the only one who didn’t wear a top, and he didn’t seem to notice, either. Pouring generous measures to empty their own bottle of whisky, Dan handed tin mugs to each of the men, and they accepted the drinks, miraculously getting along just fine right now. “Slainte.”

The mug close to his lips, Dan peered over the rim, his dark eyes alit with a smile, “to friendship.”

“To danger,” said Jean, grinning.

Vadim merely nodded, still pondering what it meant that Jean had invited himself to their tin hut, brought booze, and what Dan had said, about possibilities. It still didn’t make much sense, but nothing did.

“Ah, that warms my poor heart,” said Jean, relaxing visibly, stretching his legs out.

Dan had almost finished the triple dram, and flopped back down onto the mattress. “And why is that heart of yours poor?” Glancing at Vadim, “you envious because your lady love’s not here?”

Jean laughed. “Yeah. It gets pretty cold at night...”

“So, you’ve come to ‘share warmth’?” asked Vadim, frowning still, standing. Jean grinned up to him. “If you don’t mind sharing?”

Dan murmured, glancing up at Vadim “well, do you?”

“I...” Looking at Jean, his easy confidence, and Dan, who meant it, he assumed. They’d both invited him to share in what they usually did. Some fucked-up generosity. He walked to the door and locked it, just to win time, to be safe, and Jean got up, shed his t-shirt, like that was decided now. Was it? Jean looked at him, grinning, half-teasing, half real irony, only too aware probably his actions didn’t make any sense. “Just don’t rip my arms off, Vadim, and we should be fine. Okay?”

“Okay.” Vadim still didn’t move.

But Dan, head tilted, slouched on the mattress, was slowly getting up once more. Eyes on Vadim, he reached out, hand touching cloth, warmed by skin, making Vadim’s chest widen, ribs and lungs expanding, and then Dan stood close. “It’s OK.” Murmured, he was smiling. The most tender smile outside of their solitude of two, and suddenly Jean did not matter. What mattered instead, was the sense of unease in Vadim he could not ignore. “It’s just joking between mates. We’ll only have a drink.” Adding, in Russian, “alright?”

“Alright.” Vadim looked into Dan’s eyes, touched his forehead to Dan’s, looked at Jean again. What did Jean want? What indeed? Drive his point home? “No problem.” He rubbed his face against Dan’s, touched his arm. “I’m good.”

“Good for a drink, hm? Between friends.” Guiding Vadim down to the mattress, he sat down beside him, that tender smile still on his face. What the heck did sex matter when more was at stake, and as much as he liked Jean—and that was a hell of a lot—nothing was worth causing Vadim unease. As simple as that. “So,” arm around Vadim’s shoulder, Dan looked up at Jean, “what about that whisky of yours?”

Jean offered it, freely. “There. It’s all I have—at the moment, at least.” He smiled, strangely touched by the way Dan cared for Vadim, who probably was still reeling from the thing with the medal. It was hard to comprehend, Jean thought, the fact Vadim was, in his own right, a fallen hero of a place that no longer existed. Small wonder he was still recovering. He put on the shirt again, almost in an afterthought. It was really too cold to be running around semi-naked, unless there was a good reason for it.

“Slainte, then.” Dan grinned, sitting close to Vadim, close enough to share the body heat. Downing the whisky, he enjoyed the way it burnt down his throat and warmed his belly. Feeling entirely at peace and completely content with himself and the world. “To friendship and medals, and the fact we’ll look like the fucking MI5 in our suits, unless our Frenchman can’t find one.” Grinning, Dan raised his mug for another dram.

Jean cursed. “Suit. Right. It said something about dress code. Fuck. I’ll need to have one brought in. I guess that’s FedEx or something.” He shook his head, and Dan laughed.

“Aye, and I have to get my medals shipped over. Will be a damn heavy parcel.” He winked.

“See, Vadya, you save some Yanks, and they make you jump through hoops for it. Slainte.”

“Slainte.” Vadim leaned against Dan, comfortable now to show this kind of affection, even though Jean was still in the room. The Legionnaire seemed to ignore it, or didn’t seem to think any of it. He was his usual self, unchanged, no longer provocative, and Dan leaned into Vadim, touching as he would when they were alone. Drinking and chatting about inane stuff made them laugh, relax, and feel at ease. Until it was time to sleep and prepare for another day, and another time to put their lives on the line.

* * *

Two weeks later, after phone calls, FedEx, extortionate express shipping rates, and Dan grudgingly using *shampoo* and getting a *haircut*, he was getting into the black suit he used to wear at the embassy. The one that made him look like 007, and that reminded him a tad too much of Kabul, but he kept the slight hint of unease at bay. Reading once more over Her Majesty the Queen’s letter of permission for both Vadim and him, allowing them—as subjects of Her Majesty—to accept the foreign military commendation. The CO had done his best, and Dan figured it was certainly not on his behalf, since the poncy bastard still hated his guts, but on behalf of the British Forces. Ex or not, he’d been SAS, and Vadim had gone through Selection. Honour by affiliation or some such shit.

Vadim put the last polished shoe down and pushed them over towards Dan. “We will still be dusty,” he murmured. “There’s no escape from the dust.” He was already wearing the suit trousers, the shirt, all properly buttoned up, and bent down to tie his shoe laces.

“Better than turning up in camo.” Dan grinned, doing the unheard of—*brushing* his hair, quite a bit shorter than before. “After all, with those Yanks, ‘informal’ means suit and tie and they don’t know jack shit about formal.” He huffed, “they should have come to one of our functions, they’d have been surprised how bloody formal us Brits can get.” Slipping into his shoes, he tied them, then stood in front of the small shaving mirror. Fiddling about with the panel of ribbons and miniature medals, he was cursing under his breath, could hardly see what he was doing. “And if they play that goddamned anthem of theirs I’ll vomit.” Grumbling, but still with good humour.

Vadim laughed. “Don’t. I trust the food at least will be alright.” He turned Dan around by the shoulder and checked the panel, correcting it slightly. “Ah. Here’s the ‘I kicked Spetsnaz ass’ ribbon. Didn’t think they made them.”

Dan grinned, keeping it light-hearted. “Aye, they made that one and another one, specially for me.” Pointing arbitrarily at one of the medals, “that one’s for ‘shagged Spetsnaz arse’.” He winked.

“And this is for ‘Can do deep throating’.” Tapping another medal, at random, Vadim kissed Dan on the lips. “You decided to accept that honour, so we go through with this.”

“It was a hell of a lot less *my* decision, than it was the CO’s and his cronies. As an ex-blade I’d rather keep things hush-hush, but I guess since I’ve become a merc I’ve already gone beyond the hush-hush stage.” Dan shrugged, fiddling with his tie, and had Vadim slap his hands away and correct it, for his troubles. “Not as big as yours, that panel, but I hope you’re at least a bit impressed, eh?” Dan smiled.

Vadim grinned. “I’ll have a closer look and check what it was you got them for. Even though I have a fairly good idea. Suits you. I like that suit. And the fact you’re shaved and trimmed in all the right places.” He plucked his jacket from the coat hanger and shrugged into it, correcting the piece. Comfortable. It was just right, and he loved that suit.

“I guess all the *right* places is the clue here, aye?” Dan grinned, adjusting his crotch. Refused to wear underwear, even in the suit, proclaiming it was bad

enough to get dolled up for the occasion. “Shaved back and front and all the way. I’m getting almost as bad as you, except you’re not going to get me to get rid of *all* my pubes.” Dan was bending down to retrieve something from his bergan, slipping it onto his wrist.

Vadim ran a hand over Dan’s ass. “It is more sensitive, though, isn’t it. And tastes better.” Grinning maliciously.

“Aye, as long as I get that promised blow job tonight, I’m not going to complain.” Dan added with a flash of a grin, “too much.” He was slowly turning round himself. “What do you think? Ready to receive some shiny dangly bits?” Vadim’s eyes caught on the string of lapis around Dan’s wrist, and, for a moment, was lost for words, then cleared his throat. “As many dangly bits as you want, Lapushka.” Again kissing Dan, then checking the time. “I guess the driver’s already waiting.” He closed the buttons on his jacket. “Do I look alright?”

“You look like a killer. A damn elegant one.” Dan smiled, rubbing his cheek for a moment against Vadim’s. “And it’s a shame I don’t have time to inspect you properly, but I will. Later.” Brushing his lapels down, despite them being as perfect as they could be, he grinned at Vadim, heading for the door. “We’ll look better than any of the Yanks ever will, they just don’t get that ‘formal’ concept. Bless the Colonials.”

“The tail wagging the dog,” Vadim agreed, and followed the sniggering Dan who stepped outside. Scanning the area for Jean, Dan found him standing there, smoking, and wearing a very serious looking suit that made him look quite expensive and refined, too. His hair was trimmed, he was shaved, and Vadim thought not being in camo diminished Jean somehow, made him appear younger, and more self-conscious, which, to his surprise, was an excellent look.

“Ah, there you are, just in time to ruin my cigarette.” Jean laughed. “Light up, and they’ll come out.”

“The same could be said for your very self.” Dan grinned, conscious of the dust and treading carefully. “You look like a cheap version of a runway model.”

“Cheap?” huffed Jean. “Okay, yeah, I’m a bit too plain to be a dressman, but cheap is a bit below the belt, my dear Dan.” Affecting a very camp accent. “Forget it, you just don’t get the toff tottie accent.” Dan laughed, slapping Jean’s shoulder, and all three made their short way to the waiting Landrover. To Dan’s eternal dismay there wasn’t only one vehicle waiting, but two more, and the first

one carried the CO, in full regalia. “Oh shit,” he murmured and grimaced, “that bastard is the last thing I need today. Those commissioned fuckwits always turn up when they think there’s a scrap of glory to be had.”

“Who’s going to sit on his lap?” asked Jean.

“We stick to our Lannie.” Dan murmured, nodding towards the assembled cronies, damn glad he didn’t have to salute that homophobic bastard. Those days were over. “Look on the bright side,” Dan muttered as he climbed into the back seat, “he must be bloody hating this. Faggots galore, all of them getting a medal.” Nudging Jean’s ribs with his elbow, “except for you, of course. You’re straight as fuck.”

“Damn right. I could sit on his lap. I know this guy loves me, secretly. It’s one of those great tragic love stories full of anguish and denial. Even more tragic and epic and heartbreaking than yours.” Jean winked.

Vadim rubbed over his lips. “Must be Pascal’s gay virus spreading.”

Dan was laughing under his breath. “If you keep that shit up, I am going to make a damn sad figure at the ceremony, having pissed myself with laughter.”

“My pleasure,” quipped Jean, and leaned back in his seat, while Vadim placed a hand on Dan’s thigh.

The vehicle was getting into gear, and the procession made its way out of the British camp and towards the American one. Dan glanced out of the window, musing after a moment, “would have thought they’d do that sort of thing in better locations than this shit place. You can say about Old Blighty what you want, but at least we know how to put on a spectacle. Tradition and all that.”

“Peasants,” murmured Vadim. “Uncultured, sorry peasants, all of them.”

“Bullshit.” Dan turned his head, but smiling, which kept the barb out of his rebuke. “That really is bullshit. As crap as the country might be, with friendly fire and all that shit, there are some fine specimens.” He shrugged, “Yanks are *all* as much uncultured and sorry peasants, as *all* Brits and Russkies are, or are not.” He leaned his head against Vadim’s for a moment. “And I don’t give a shit what nationality those guys were, whose lives we saved. They were just guys, like us. Aye?”

Vadim met his gaze, held it, then nodded. “Just soldiers. Like us.” He glanced out at the US camp. “I just wish they weren’t so bloody naïve and had a sense of history.”

“Aye, there is that.” Dan grinned as they pulled through the gates, the Lannies rolling towards the main cluster of buildings. “Well,” Dan took in a deep breath, “best brace ourselves for the invasion of the Colonies.” He adjusted his jacket once more before stepping out of the vehicle, where a few NCOs were waiting.

Jean extended an arm to let Vadim move first, then followed himself, securing Dan’s other flank while Vadim guarded his side. “Try and smile every now and then, Vadya.”

“I’ll try and remember.”

“It’s really their way of saying they respect you.”

Dan remained silent, faintly smiling to himself, as Vadim looked at Jean, obviously touched. Jean was right. It was about respect. How strange he could have forgotten. “You looking forward to it?”

Jean grinned. “Fuck knows. I just try and take it in stride.”

Shrugging one shoulder, Dan cast a grin from one to the other. “That’s exactly what I do as well. Dan McFadyen, faggot and Scottish peasant scum, about to receive a dangling ribbon.” He grinned as they walked closer, watching the soldiers salute, but not saluting in return. Those days were well and truly over, and a nod in their direction was sufficient.

“Hell, all this brouhaha makes you piss yourself with laughter.” Murmured, Dan was the first one to step through the door. Shaking hands with a few of the Officers, who were taking them further along the corridor, where an aide was waiting.

“Not sure I feel like laughing,” muttered Vadim in Russian, for code reasons. “I’d rather face the insurgents again.”

“I knew you’d say that,” said Jean, grinning. His Russian was rusty, but fully functional. “As long as you don’t sweep Mad Dog off his feet, bend him over and do the tango thing with him, they should be good. Chances are they don’t know you two guys are gay.”

“Guess the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ doesn’t work for them right now.” Chuckling under his breath, Dan fell silent, when they were guided towards the main door. Music played by a small band, something he didn’t quite recognise, but nevertheless seemed somehow familiar, and the lights revealed a glimpse of three

flags on the hall's wall. First, the flag of the United States, then France and then Great Britain, strictly in order of the alphabet, right after their own colours.

"Right. Flags," said Jean. "Makes you wonder whether they have a full set lying around."

The music got louder in the gym hall that had been repurposed to hold the award ceremony, and the heroic brass notes changed into the chords of the American anthem now. Dan rolled his eyes, whispering from the corner of his lips to Vadim, "hope they don't expect me to mime to *that* shit."

"Wouldn't know the words, anyway," murmured Vadim, and kept his jaw muscles clenched. It was the best he could do, in terms of neutrality. Less than a minute later, the music changed to 'God Save the Queen' and Dan's face lit up, nudging Vadim's elbow. "That's yours now, too," rewarded by a sideways glance, and a very short nod.

And that was their cue, the aide walking in front to lead the way, as they walked into the hall. Dan could hardly hold back a smirk at the sight of the shambles: all those Yanks in their fatigues, tunics over their trousers, and not an inch of the smartness of the British troops, unlike the British delegation, standing on the right of the front row. As much as he had sometimes loathed having to polish the belt buckle and wear the tunic inside the trousers, Dan felt an odd and ancient regimental, if not national pride, as he walked in front of Vadim and Jean, the anthem changing to the Marseillaise to honour the third of the award recipients.

Jean straightened up visibly as he heard the anthem, just barely this side of grinning with semi-suppressed, not-so-secret mirth. Singing and marching was a huge part of Legion culture, and he knew his songs and marches. The whole ceremonial rigmarole felt quite natural to him, while Vadim kept this very guarded, very neutral expression.

They came to stop in a line under the flags, and the protocol officer announced the names of the three men. "Daniel Ewan McFadyen," and Dan winced, "Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada," which merely tightened Vadim's jaw muscles even more. "Jean-Pierre Leclerc," which caused a miniature grin in Dan, who otherwise worked on his polite and neutral expression, which suddenly failed, as he spotted the first row of soldiers. There they were, the crew of the chopper: Gary Martinez, loadmaster and Ken Jackson, the pilot. Chris Johnson was missing,

but the kid might still be recuperating. Dan's face lit up like a torch, getting broad smiles of recognition in return.

General Major John Richards was announced as well, before all fell silent and the soldiers bowed their heads. A Chaplain gave thanks to God, claiming "they all came to this ceremony with hearts full of thanksgiving." Dan snorted silently, and sure as heck didn't bow his head, figuring no god had anything to do with this, just his experience and guts, and the courage of the two men who stood beside him.

Vadim briefly closed his eyes at the religious stuff, bad enough to be paraded out in front of these kids, now they brought their whole 'God's Own Country' bullshit into it. Jean, on the other hand, continued to enjoy himself. Vadim suspected Jean was probably Russian Orthodox, but not very practising. He certainly didn't seem to mind. Jean would probably cheerfully take part in some ancestor-worshipping cannibal feast.

The protocol officer read out the citation for Dan's award: bronze star with valour device. The citation detailed time, location, and circumstances of the events that had warranted the letter of commendation and consequently the award. Dan stood tall, when the General Major pinned the medal to his lapel, saying a few words of thanks, shaking Dan's hand before handing over the green leather bound folder, the letter pinned onto the front. The cameras snapped away for a while as the General Major stood beside Dan, holding up the letter of commendation, while being perfectly aware of the hilarity of the situation. Dan hoped he could escape in a few seconds, but the General Major asked him to say a few words. Dan tensed, taken by surprise, but he caught sight of the two guys from the chopper, and he suddenly smiled with a small nod. He cleared his throat as they all waited expectantly, thank fuck, he knew just what to say.

"Sir, I would like to thank you for the award, which came as a surprise to me. Surprise, because it was all simply about the lives of those men, the crew of the helicopter." Nodding over to Gary and Ken, "Good men, no matter which flag is stitched on their sleeves. I would have done the same for anyone else, no matter the country, no matter if 'friend' or 'foe'." A small smile crossed his scarred face, knowing at least Vadim would understand the following words. "It's really quite simple." With that he trailed off and nodded once more to the applause of the audience and the broad grins of the crew.

For Jean, it was the Army Commendation Medal; again the protocol officer found typically military-speak words for what Jean had done. Exemplary conduct was among them, dedication to his team, commendable leadership, time and place for the commendation and the medal. Jean looked, for once, dignified as the medal was pinned to his suit, words of thanks, handshake, folder. Camera flashes. Vadim inwardly cringed at the cameras, knowing his turn would come, too. Asked to say a few words, Jean grinned quizzically, and said “I have a few friends sitting right now in Paris getting ready for their Christmas shopping. When they ask me, ‘Jean, why do you do this shit... excuse me, Sir, I mean ‘stuff’, not, that other thing, so they ask me about it, and I say, I don’t have the slightest idea, really. I always end up in funny places, and strangely always make a solid decision. This was a really good decision. It was getting guys out of trouble, two men I respect,” he shot a quick glance to Vadim, “and whom I consider my friends,” a glance to Dan, “and yeah, if they ask me again, I’ll say I do it for my friends. Of course, it’s also a huge success with the ladies.” Flashing a typical Jean grin.

There was laughter amongst the ranks of soldiers, and even Dan couldn’t hold back his grin. Shaking his head ever so slightly, he caught sight of his hated CO, who looked as if he had swallowed a whole lemon, and that, in return, made Dan a very happy man. Glancing to Vadim, whose turn it was at last, and the General Major lifted the Army Commendation medal out of its casket, and pinned it to Vadim’s chest. A chest that should have been laden with medals and ribbons. Similar words of commendation for him, when the protocol officer read out the citation. A handshake followed, with the same request for a few words.

Vadim cleared his throat, knew his Russian name alone made every move, every breath, everything highly prominent, made him stand out against the two Europeans. Looking firmly at the crew Dan had saved, and he had saved, too, in the end. They, strangely, were the reason why he didn’t just say “thank you, Sir” and retreated back into the ranks. Working through his mind for something good to say, something the Yanks would understand, that wouldn’t sound arrogant, or foolish like Jean’s gaffe. “Thank you, Sir, for the award, and I am honoured to receive it. I am a mercenary now, but I haven’t always been a mercenary. It was fortunate I could help save these men, and unfortunate I hadn’t called them brothers and comrades before. Nevertheless, beyond politics and my own

convictions I used to hold when I was still an enlisted man, I am proud to see these men here, now, and for their sake, I will honour the occasion.”

Dan smiled at Vadim’s words, understanding what he was saying, and there was a moment’s silence amongst the ranks. Almost as if it took the soldiers a while to decipher what lay beyond those words, but once they got it, there was a subdued cheer, while the two men in the front, Gary and Martinez, nodded at Vadim, and Vadim gave them one of his rare smiles.

“The motherfucker really finds a way to say something very simple in a very complicated way,” murmured Jean near Dan’s ear. “How many words does it take him to say ‘I love you’?”

“None.” Dan murmured, smiling. “We’re long beyond that.” He wanted to touch Vadim, but restrained himself.

The protocol officer then asked the pilot of the helicopter to step forward, and Ken Jackson stood beside the three men, ready to receive his own award, the purple heart. The General Major went through the same sequence as before, while the protocol officer read out the occasion of when the man had been wounded. In addition talking about winchman Chris Johnson, who was home in the US, recuperating from the serious chest wound.

It was then time for the receiving line, and Ken moved to the front of the line to be the first one to congratulate and thank his rescuers. The second man who filed past was Gary. Shaking hands, first with Dan, clapping his shoulder, and stopping to have a photo taken, then following down the line. Words of thanks and broad smiles, and then all of the others followed, filing through. Soldier after soldier, some with the broadest Western accents, others with Eastern twang. Every race and every colour, and all of them American, until it was time for the British contingency, who shook hands with a sour expression and a forced smile, when it came to the CO, forcing Dan to work hard on suppressing his big-arsed grin. Vadim made an effort, smiled for the cameras, shook the chopper crew’s hands with both his, holding them for a moment longer to again emphasise his point, and became businesslike at the others, very clearly delineating which men were comrades and which were just handshakers.

They were finally all done, music still playing, when the ceremony was officially called to its end and the informal part began. An adjacent room had a buffet set up that left nothing to be desired, and junior staff stood ready with trays

of drinks. Dan fell behind deliberately, his hand on Vadim's shoulder. "You got through it, hm? Was it all that bad?" He flashed a tender grin as he added quietly, "and by the way, I love you, too."

Vadim smiled at him. "No, not as bad as I thought." He plucked two glasses of something sparkling from a passing tray and offered one to Dan. "Just would have liked a warning about the fact they wanted me to speak. But you did well. The guys looked happy."

"Didn't have a clue we were supposed to say something." Dan shrugged, downing his first glass of champers. "Seems Jean rather enjoyed himself, though." Calling over, "eh, Jean?"

Jean looked up, teeth bared and gleaming, as he was chatting up an American servicewoman with a blonde ponytail.

The evening continued like this. Lots of food, some small talk, but thankfully also good chats with down to earth soldiers, and plenty of booze. Dan felt rather merry at the end of the festivities: fed to satisfaction, laughing about stupid jokes, telling tales of his 'adventurous' past, while the bubbly and wine put him into a damn fine mood.

It was difficult for Vadim to keep from touching him, seeing Dan in such a brilliant mood, relaxed, having fun. But he kept his hands to himself, merely marvelled at Dan's smile and easy banter. He himself was far less relaxed, but managed to enjoy himself, mostly by listening and watching.

Dan was grinning like a lit-up Christmas tree, when they finally made their way back to the waiting Lannie. "I think I need a nightcap of something more substantial than fancy wines."

Jean nodded. "Hell yes."

Vadim opened the door and ushered both of them in, joining them, only to see the nightly desert slide past. "Did you get anywhere with that lady?"

"No, but she was really nice about slapping my wrist."

Dan let out a sound, suspiciously close to a snigger. "Guess you're stuck with little old us, then, aye? Join us for a nightcap? After all, we got two whole damn fine days off after this."

Jean grinned and leaned close to whisper to Dan. "If you're trying to take advantage of my sexual frustration, I'm game."

Dan's grin immediately took on gigantic proportion. "Maybe..." Whistling to himself and loosening the top button of his shirt and tie, as Jean grinned at Vadim, who found Jean's semi-drunk, dishevelled look more attractive than the camo and his professional face. He could imagine Jean half-dressed, shoeless, shirt open to reveal the chest, and moaning.

"Right then, let's go celebrate the shiny dangly bits some more." Dan leaned back, grinning.

When they arrived back in camp a few guys were still out and about, cheering at the three 'gentlemen' in their suits, with the medals pinned on their lapels and breasts. Dan was shaking his hips in an exaggerated fashion, parading the letter of commendation over his head, and gaining wolf whistles, before he made it into the hut, holding the door open for the other two. "Let's get properly pissed for the H.E.R.O.E.S.!" Laughing his head off. More for the sake of the onlookers, than for anyone else.

Jean laughed, while Dan locked the door behind them, then flinging commendation and jacket into a corner. Jean nearly fell down on the mattress, managed to get into a cross-legged position, while Vadim rummaged for the alcohol, found a half-bottle, and headed over to offer the bottle to Jean. Jean reached for Vadim's thigh and pulled him closer, while Dan watched, getting rid of tie, shoes and socks, when Jean suddenly buried his face in Vadim's crotch, which made Vadim almost jump out of his suit. That semi-drunken...what? Affection? He reached to touch Jean's face, pushed it away with a couple fingers. "What do you want?" he asked in Russian.

"I want to get off with you. Okay? Nothing sinister about it. Stop the fuck mistrusting me, I don't mean any harm, Vadya. I won't take Dan away from you; wouldn't work, anyway."

Dan stood, motionless and head tilted. Fingers on the last button of his shirt. "Is that what you fear?" Asking quietly. Booze or not, that had still gone all the way through him.

Vadim winced. As fucking superficial as Jean was, he had a way to hit bulls eye every now and then. "I..." Jean was at his belt, trousers, which made it difficult to find a good answer. Shit. He stepped out of his shoes, looked at Dan, saw Dan didn't really understand that fear, which only meant it never occurred to Dan Jean

could be anything but somebody he got off with. This was just sex, right? “I was...just so envious.”

Dan shrugged the shirt off his shoulders, throwing it onto the same pile as the rest of his clothes. “Of what?” Stepping close to Vadim, he pushed the jacket off the broad shoulders, fingers working on Vadim’s tie, pulling it off, while grinning all the time. “You’re the fucking sexiest man in the fucking universe.” Lowering his voice to a husky murmur, Dan flicked one button after the other through its hole, sliding his hands across the bare chest, as he moved even closer. “Fucking sexy...and fucking loved.” Lips on Vadim’s, he left no chance for an answer.

Jean pulled Vadim’s trousers down, got him to step out of them, while Vadim and Dan were kissing. Opening Dan’s trousers as well from his position on the ground, but Vadim’s hands worked on that, and Jean laughed to himself, took a big mouthful of whisky, swallowed, and moved between their legs, suddenly taking Vadim’s cock, which made Vadim jump, a surprised sound coming out. The whisky burn, the heat, and the sudden, unexpected feeling of Jean... “Not so straight, aye?” Dan murmured against Vadim’s lips, cranking up the intensity of his kiss, with one hand holding Vadim close, the other guiding his own cock, seeking out those lips that were closed around Vadim’s cock. Side by side, both hard, ready for the man on the floor.

Vadim couldn’t help but groan. Jean was certainly not as eager for cock as Dan, not anywhere as good, but he did it, sucking on the head, eyes closed, no reservation from the man who’d called him a freak and a whole lot other things. “Shit...”

Jean felt a touch in the corner of his lips and looked up, grinning, released Vadim’s cock and took Dan’s, looking up to him with narrowed eyes. Very closely watching what effect that had on Dan, then sucking with considerable enthusiasm. Vadim couldn’t tear his eyes from the Frenchman, who genuinely seemed to enjoy himself. “Not...straight at all,” he murmured.

“Oh...fuck!” Dan groaned, pulling in a hissing breath. Standing with legs braced, hard to keep his hips still. “Down...mattress...” managing to bring out, he wasn’t going to keep standing much longer, not with Vadim’s body rubbing against his and his cock in Jean’s mouth. Vadim. Jean. Oh shit. Jean couldn’t stop

the laughter, and had to pull away from Dan's cock to not choke on his laughter. He fell back, arms spread out, legs still under him, grinning. "Come on, then..."

Dan let go of Vadim and crashed down onto the mattress, deliberately on top of Jean. Claiming the other man with his lips, taking Vadim's taste with him. Grinding his hips down into Jean's, while his left hand was searching for Vadim's body. Jean laughed, freed his legs and pushed up against Dan, moaning softly as he got more friction, but there was still a lot of suit in between them.

Vadim's hand was on Dan's back, seeing him grinding against Jean, and he reached for the lube. That naked ass gave him an idea. Actually, both of them gave him an idea, and he rubbed Vaseline into Dan's ass, who bucked up, which only made him grind harder into Jean.

Dan's attempts to open Jean's suit trousers and get that shirt off were getting too erratic, when Vadim added a finger to prepare Dan to be fucked. He'd have him, and Jean would watch.

"Ah, shit!" Dan moaned, words swallowed by Jean's mouth. Lifting himself up a little on his knees, towards the finger, he pushed back and into it, fucking himself, before coming back down onto Jean.

Jean laughed, breathlessly. "You'll fuck him?" he asked Vadim, in Russian, using coarse soldier language.

Vadim nodded. "You bet."

Jean grinned, kissed Dan, whose breath came harshly, pushing his tongue into Dan's mouth, feeling Dan shudder as Vadim fucked him with a finger, and added two, Dan's cock rock hard. When Dan bucked up, Jean freed himself from underneath Dan's body. Glancing up, he could see Vadim pull free, move between Dan's open legs and position his cock.

Jean kissed Dan, hard, catching the deep groan that escaped Dan when Vadim entered him, fucking his mouth with his tongue, fiercely, and tender, so hard himself he doubted the alcohol had any effect on him except taking away some pesky inhibitions. "Good," he murmured against Dan's lips.

"Because I'll fuck you, too."

"No." Dan brought out, breathlessly, only for Jean to hear. "Not with...Vadim...." Losing coherence soon after, his eyes open, staring at Jean's face.

Vadim's cock deep in his arse. Jean's lips. Jean's s..."Cock!" Dan managed to get out, as he tried to get onto all fours.

“That’s what I meant,” said Jean, almost cool, almost calm, with a wicked smile, getting up onto his knees, crotch on Dan’s eye level, on all fours, Vadim kneeling between his legs. Seeing Vadim inside Dan, still accommodating, Jean’s guts tightened, knowing what that felt like, that glorious, hot ass, powerful and yet absolutely perfect to be fucked. He opened his own trousers, pulled himself free, and pointed his cock at Dan’s lips, which opened, readily, far too readily. Jean made eye contact with Vadim, who didn’t go berserk, instead, was that appreciation in those cold eyes?

Dan drew in a breath as Vadim stalled, poised, could feel the cock almost all the way pulled out of his arse, knowing the thrust would come the next second. Closing his eyes as his lips closed around Jean’s cock, and his mind went blank. No thought, nothing mattered. Just being a body, between two bodies. Cocks. Goddamned glorious cocks, and he braced himself. Muscles bunching, tendons like whipcords across his body. Bracing himself even further, spine pushed low, arse raised, his shoulders tensed to take the strain. He sucked Jean’s cock in all the way, as far as he could, and a damn fine cocksucker he was, hardly choking.

Vadim took his hips in a hard grip, to steady himself as well as Dan, and entered, knowing exactly how much Dan could take, but what devastated him was Jean’s fingers in Dan’s hair, guiding, demanding, using Dan and truly fucking his throat, and he timed his thrusts with Jean’s, slowly, but demanding. Entering when Jean pulled free a bit, and Jean grinned at him, lust on his features, that irresponsible air of just enjoying what felt good, and Vadim found himself grin and shake his head. “Cocky bastard,” he murmured, breathless.

Dan didn’t hear any of the words, nothing but a body that finally got as much cock as he’d always wanted. Groans suppressed by the cock down his throat, he was going half-insane by the thrusts that were angled so goddamned right, he was drowning in lust. His own cock hard, heavily veined, almost purple, each thrust made precum touch his scarred abs, and each thrust slammed Vadim’s groin against his heavy balls. Unable to suck Jean’s cock with any kind of coherence, he was just body, nothing else. Used in every damn way he wanted.

Jean groaned, pushed harder, pretty much forcing Dan’s head as far onto his cock as it could possibly go, pulling and pushing, as he was nearing climax, and Vadim’s powerful thrusts rocked through Dan’s body and kept forcing Dan’s face deeper, harder against Jean’s groin, until Dan could do nothing but frantically draw

in quick breaths when the cock was pulling out, and choke at the vicious, deep thrust. Seeing Vadim deep inside Dan made Jean's guts tighten up, seeing that whole, muscular bastard pound Dan's ass, stomach muscles such a perfect pattern, chest muscles showing clearly how much raw power Vadim possessed—a fearsome bastard, but bent on sex right now, with no inhibitions himself, and clearly enjoying the fact he was being watched. Jean flashed a grin at Vadim “Show off,” he laughed, breathlessly. Dan's muscles were standing out harder, whole body completely taut, like chords of steel beneath alternating tanned and scarred skin. The desperate sounds of hissing breath were getting more urgent. Body covered in sweat, gathering in the hollow of his back, he was losing the fight of bracing against the onslaught of two bodies.

Vadim came first, thrusting harder, for a few times, holding Dan's hips immobile as he thrust deep and hard, groaning from deep inside his chest. Pulling away once he felt that pressure gone, helplessly releasing Dan's hips, stroking his sides, and falling down onto his back.

Jean grinned, but Dan needed air, and the involuntary convulsions of the throat felt so good he didn't fight his orgasm as it approached, but he still slowed, drawing out the climax, keeping control. He didn't just fuck Dan's throat but increased intensity, his face twitched as it washed over him, shooting into Dan's mouth and throat, hand still in his hair, urging Dan to take it, and Dan was so far gone, all he could do was frantically swallow, whatever didn't shoot down his throat in the first place. Unable to stop it, impossible to act. Just react, body trembling, cock impossibly hard, painfully close, and he let out a sound, a mindless whimper, as his body collapsed when it wasn't held anymore.

Vadim immediately turned him, hands on Dan's thighs, lips going down onto the straining cock, an image that made Jean shudder, the need, the trust, the completely selfless desire to get Dan off, Vadim's face not cold now at all, not unfeeling, not aloof, but needy and tender. Shining with emotion, tenderness, things that seemed to have no place in the other Russian's face, and yet were there, unguarded, Vadim completely naked as he sucked off his lover.

It hardly took more than a few seconds, and Dan came. His whole body arching up, and he would have yelled down the entire camp, had Jean not had the presence of mind to cover his mouth with one hand. Cumming so hard, the crash-

down was just as extreme, and he could do nothing but lie in a boneless heap, eyes closed, and just breathing.

Vadim rested his head on Dan's hip, calming now as well, feeling Dan shudder every now and then. Jean moved to get some water, drank, and offered Vadim the rest of the bottle, who waved it away.

"Wow," said Jean, sitting down heavily. "Fuck. Dan, you alright?"

"Yeah..." Dan breathed out, keeping his eyes closed for a while longer. Nothing moved, not even a twitch in his body, until he cracked one eye open and coughed. "Whisky..."

Jean reached out and found the bottle, pulling it close. "There." He lay back, too, grinning to himself and at nothing in particular, while Vadim simply rested. Not moving, either, not even caressing Dan, who managed to bring the bottle to his lips, taking a few mouthfuls, despite his usual ranting against drinking whisky straight from the bottle.

"You're such a slut, Dan," said Jean, voice tender.

Dan grinned, his hand finding Vadim's head, stroking the short hair, causing Vadim to look up and smile.

"I take that as a compliment, Frenchie."

"It is. Fuck. That was...hot." Jean managed, finally, to shed the jacket and the shirt, and rubbed his chest thoughtfully. "No idea what it takes to be so good at cocksucking, but you're clearly far better than I could ever hope to be."

"Is that something you aspire to, Jean?" asked Vadim.

Jean grinned. "Hey. If I do it, I could at least try to do it somewhat decently."

Dan chuckled, which caused a twinge of discomfort from his thoroughly fucked arse. "It's something that comes naturally. You either got it or you don't." Dan lifted his head to wink at Vadim. "I was utter shit at my first one, but I learned quickly. Let Vadim tell you about my speciality of giving head at knifepoint."

Jean's eyes widened somewhat, and he looked at Vadim.

"Yeah, he strung me up like a Christmas turkey, pulled down my trousers, put his knife to my balls, and taught himself cocksucking like that. It was..."

"Damn nice?"

Vadim laughed. "Eventually."

Dan was laughing so hard, he gave up worrying about his arse. “Oh shit,” hiccupping with laughter, he reached for the whisky bottle once more. “When you put it like that, our whole past sounds like a fucking comedy.” Downing another couple of shots. He flopped back down, hand stroking Vadim’s neck. “Or what about that first kiss? Only you could shoot me at the same fucking time.”

“He what?”

“I wanted to kiss him, but he was an enemy, so I made him kneel, said something totally deranged...I think, I don’t quite remember, but I wasn’t quite sane at that point...and I needed to give him an alibi for being there. It was complex. I couldn’t just let him go, he’d survived our ambush—and that wasn’t good for him, would have made him look like a traitor. So I shot him in the shoulder...”

“That scar?”

“Yes. The exact same one. And I kissed him, because fuck, I was going insane for him at that point.” Vadim shook his head. “It’s a very bloody, somewhat crazy comedy, really. Dan fucked me up, I fucked him up, and while torturing and wounding and cutting each other, we discovered we were in love.”

“That about sums it up.” Dan shrugged, but despite his grin his dark eyes betrayed a softness no killer should ever show in his face. “That one’s his.” He tapped onto the scar from the bullet wound. “This one’s mine.”

Slipping his hand down to Vadim’s throat, he touched the cigarette burn at the hollow. “And this...” gently stroking his fingertips down Vadim’s scarred back. “And he saved me from this.” Touching his own thigh, where the bullet had hit him in the Mujahideen camp. “And the most important ones are these.”

Smiling, he raised his left biceps, showing off the ‘V’. “Not for victory, but for Vadim. He cut it.” And he pointed towards Vadim’s inner thigh, “and I cut ‘mine’.”

Jean nodded, then looked at Vadim. “And you stupid fuck are jealous of me? Look at him—no scar. None from me, and I won’t.” He took the bottle and had another big mouthful. “With all that stuff...there’s no place for me between you guys.” Running his hand through Dan’s hair, who looked up with a mocking grin.

Vadim kissed Dan’s biggest scar, the one on his stomach, that testament of agony and a pledge he—finally—managed to honour. “No. I’m not jealous now.”

“And I dare say there *is* a place for Jean between us.” Pausing for effect, Dan’s grin grew into a smirk, “I’m more than happy to swap places, and I wouldn’t mind pounding that virginal arse.”

Jean laughed, but was less than convinced. “I don’t mind a finger when you blow me, but a cock is...fucking big. I’m really not sure I want that. I mean, I’m pretty sure I don’t.” He shrugged, apologetically. “Sorry.”

“Nah, that’s alright, mate. I figured I’d never get to fuck you.” Dan shrugged, twisting to lean down to Vadim, so he could murmur into his ear while wickedly grinning up at Jean, “just as much as I vowed to you you’d never get to fuck me...again. Aye?”

Vadim grinned back. “You think he’ll get over it?”

Dan bared his teeth in an evil grin and shrugged.

Jean laughed, shedding the rest of his clothes. “I’m serious. I am still getting my head around the cocksucking part, which is already a leap for me. I’m not *that* gay. You can tell me all you like it feels good, but it’s really not something I can get into.”

“Alright, alright, whatever you say, Frenchie. I remember, a few months ago, when you claimed you were straight as fuck. That was before you caught the gay virus.”

Jean laughed. “You’ll have to hope it keeps spreading.”

Sitting up, Dan stretched to get a towel, used it to wipe his arse, before wrapping it around his hips. “Anyway, I can tell you one thing, the shitting of cum, after you’ve been fucked without a condom, is not my favourite part.” He grinned as he stood up and found his flip-flops. “You two behave while I’m off to the loos.” With that he unlocked the door and was gone.

Vadim laughed. “And there’s that.” He reached for the bottle and drank some water. Jean accepted the bottle after that. They both sat together in silence for a while, until Vadim glanced at Jean. “I guess because you were a friend while he hated me.”

Jean nodded. “Yeah, that would make sense. But that’s over now. You guys are back together, and that’s fine by me. Damn, it was causing me a headache, too. I mean, two guys so obviously both in love, and still fucking each other up. Granted, you did look like the bogeyman, though.”

Vadim lay back. “Felt like it, too.”

“Yeah.” Jean lifted himself on an elbow. “Would you freak if I kissed you?”

Vadim stared at him. “What? Why?”

“Because I like it? Stupid question.” Jean came closer, blue eyes searching his. Vadim didn’t get why Jean would possibly want this, and he didn’t feel the need to do it. He didn’t just run around kissing people, but Jean was just a breath away.

“You scared, spetsnaz?”

Vadim bared his teeth, felt Jean’s fingers on his chest, stroking his nipples. “Scared of what, soldier?”

“Scared you might like it, too.” Jean grinned. “Comrade officer. What was it?” “Major.”

“Nice. Major Krasnorada. You must hate being a normal grunt like everybody else.”

“I do.”

Jean leaned in closer and touched his lips to Vadim’s, as if expecting to be bitten, but it was a good touch, a good sensation, even though it was still puzzling for Vadim. Jean took his head, opened his lips, and suddenly kissed him deeply, tenderly, with fucking emotion, and Vadim couldn’t help it, put an arm around the other man and held him, while fully enjoying that kiss.

They didn’t hear how the door slowly opened, Dan coming back too quietly. Dripping wet, he’d been to the shower block, and was confronted with... something he had no words for. Mirror images, almost, those two blond and blue-eyed men, and yet the most opposite characters imaginable. He stepped inside, trying to make no sound, and carefully locked the door behind him as he stayed near the door, grinning down at the tableau.

Jean looked up, smiling, breaking the kiss that had left Vadim dazed, relaxed, oddly, still feeling Jean’s kiss—Jean! Or whatever his real name was. No spite, no anger, nothing left in Vadim, just pleasantly relaxed right now, like Jean had drugged him somehow.

“I didn’t touch him—much, honest,” said Jean to Dan.

“Whatever you’ve done, it seems to have an interesting effect.” Getting onto the mattress between them, Dan grinned from one to the other. “I have a suggestion. What about giving us old bastards an hour or two, and a possible nap,

and then more fucking? My arse is out, though.” Dan chuckled, “and since Jean’s is a no-no as well, I guess there is only one left...” baring his teeth in a face-splitting grin, Dan looked pointedly at Vadim.

Vadim gazed back at Dan, then caught what that meant, and looked at Jean, who grinned, and seemed to like the idea. “Okay.” His body liked the idea, too. Damn, even he liked the idea, couldn’t help it, just knew after that kiss it would be alright. Jean was not mocking him, he meant it in his strange, funny ways, there was some real emotion involved. Jean cared about him, and about Dan, and wanted them, but wouldn’t toy with them. Despite all his mocking and piss-taking, deep down, Jean was sincere. That was probably what was behind that chatty, annoying good-natured mask he showed the rest of the world. “Both of you?”

“If you let us?” Dan smiled. There were always options, and they’d simply choose the right ones together. Dropping his voice, Dan got down onto the mattress and crawled close while throwing the soggy towel into yet another corner. “If I fuck you first...I could suck you off while Jean shags you. I am sure Jean won’t mind fucking into another man’s cum...”

Vadim closed his eyes, nodding silently because he didn’t quite trust his voice, reaching for Dan to pull him down, while Jean gave a small laugh. “No, I don’t. Did it before...”

Vadim pulled Dan close, resting at his side, chest to chest, didn’t mind Jean pushed up against Dan from the other side. Jean’s chest against Dan’s back, Jean’s arm across Dan’s body, his hand touching Vadim’s abs, stroking him with his fingertips, nothing more.

“I think...part of the problem was that...I wanted him, too,” said Vadim, tonelessly near Dan’s ear, knowing Jean could still hear him.

“I can imagine.” Dan murmured, lips close to Vadim’s. His arm on Vadim’s hip, their chests, groins and legs touching, while his back was covered by Jean. “Who wouldn’t.” He grinned while rubbing his face against Vadim’s. “But whatever happened between you two, that’s past. All that shit is past. We can start with friendship tonight, aye?”

“Yes,” said Vadim, and part expected another joke from the other guy, but Jean merely laughed.

“Can we be friends after I fuck him? That’s the way things go, isn’t it? You end up in bed together, and then you realise you actually like the other guy. Happens every day.”

“You asshole,” said Vadim, smiling tiredly.

“Keep *that* thought,” Jean shot back, nuzzling against Dan’s neck. “Only it’s the other way round, comrade Krasnorada.”

“That would be *your* asshole, not *you* asshole.” Dan chuckled.

“Great. Grammar lesson,” said Jean, laughing again. He stretched to angle for the covers, but it was a bit of shifting necessary before he’d covered all three of them, at least halfway, and Vadim dozed off in that embrace, the alcohol dulling his senses, and the sex had so deeply relaxed him he hardly noticed how he slipped away, all the time being kissed by Dan, until he, too, was drifting off.

* * *

Dan woke a few short hours later with the uncomfortable feeling of a very full bladder. Finding himself enveloped by heat—as usual he was spooning Vadim, but this time he got more-or-less spooned himself by Jean, lying in the middle between the two men. Grinning sleepily to himself, he did his damn best to extricate himself from the bodies, without waking either of them. It was still pitch dark and when he glanced at his watch after a rigorous rubbing of his eyes, it was not even 4 AM yet. Plenty of time before the camp would wake. Vadim murmured something in his sleep and rolled over the moment Dan left, Dan found his towel and flip flops, making his way to the loos as quietly as he could.

When he came back, the picture had changed. Vadim lay there, on his back, arms stretched out left and right, the back of his right hand touching the ground near the mattress, head turned to the side, lips nearly touching Jean’s hair, as the Legionnaire was lying with his head on Vadim’s outstretched arm, with some—if not much space between their bodies.

Dan shook his head, murmuring under his breath, “greedy bastard,” and he smiled. Getting rid of towel and flip-flops, the lapis lazuli beads around his wrist clinking faintly with the movements, he paused to take a better look at the picture before him. In the almost dark, illuminated barely by one of the flood lights that threw a stream of light through the small window high up. Hardly enough to see

more than fairly indistinguishable features. Two heads with blond hair, two muscular bodies. One slightly less impressive than the other. They could be twins, Dan thought, at least in this light.

The longer he looked, the more the thought of twins travelled from his mind to his cock. Nice thought, damn nice thought in fact, better than going back to sleep. He quietly lowered himself onto the mattress, this time to Vadim's other side, dropping his hand between Vadim's legs, lightly caressing the smoothly shaved cleft, while studying the perfect body in the darkness. The longer he lay, head propped up on his elbow, the hornier he got. Two men, one arse, and damn, he wanted it.

Vadim responded, still mostly asleep, shifting his legs slightly as he hardened, moving towards the touch, waking more, and pulling free from Jean who lay there, undisturbed. Vadim woke enough to smile slightly, looking at Dan in the gloom. His hands went to Dan's chest, and his lips tasted of sleep as he kissed Dan, with little focus, but clear interest.

Dan smiled into the kiss, didn't say anything, reached over Vadim to the tub of Vaseline instead. He managed to open it in silence, guiding Vadim with his hands, making him turn so he lay with his back to him, while his hand kept caressing Vadim's arm, hip and flank.

Vadim turned, and became aware of Jean. Shit. Jean asleep. Jean. But if they were silent. He moved back against Dan, reached for him, horny himself, wanting this, and it was odd to feel Dan's hands on him, pushing the grease inside, getting him ready while seeing Jean no more than an arm's length away, peacefully asleep. The Legionnaire looked young and innocent, but most of all, he was fucking silent for once, which was certainly an improvement to his usual babble. Vadim grinned at that, thought he didn't mind Jean all that much after last night.

Kissing the back of Vadim's neck, Dan's lips ghosted along the jaw line, across one ear, while settling into the right position. Embracing Vadim, bodies so close, not a hand could fit between them, and Vadim guided Dan's cock. The same tender, slow way of 'making love' instead of fucking, which was reserved for Vadim and Vadim alone. On their sides, spooning, the angle barely enough to give pleasure to both. Dan's breathing seemed loud in the night, when he entered and rocked himself deeper and further. Vadim closed his eyes, fully concentrating on the feeling of Dan so close, his lust a strong, steady fire, no madness, no rush,

suppressing a moan with a hiss as Dan got deeper, curving his back to get more of that length inside, as much as anatomically possible. Rocking in an answer to Dan's motions, baring his throat. Jean was forgotten.

Until, that was, he opened his eyes briefly and saw Jean lie there, on his side, facing him, eyes open, and very much awake. Jean's lips curved into a smile at the moment of recognition, and he shook his head, as if saying 'Never mind me', which made Vadim's heart jump in his chest.

Jean studied Vadim's face, that lust, knowing exactly what Dan was doing behind him, which made that massive body shudder and coil with lust, while Vadim remained remarkably silent, even though his eyes burned with emotion, with need, his face twitching every time Dan moved. Jean leisurely moved his hand, baring Vadim's body, which had been half-covered by the blanket, a subtle motion, eyes travelling down the muscular front, the abs and Vadim's impressive erection that was clearly neglected. Jean's fingertips touched Vadim's cock, ran along the underside of it, silky and hot, making Vadim groan. He closed his hand around the cock, moved closer and only offered tightness, no motion, no pumping, knowing full well Vadim would have to move to fuck himself and get anywhere.

"Bastard," whispered Vadim.

The sound of Vadim's voice got Dan out of his almost delirious state, lifting his head while he kept the small rocking motions up. "No..." to Jean, "we have time..." before he shifted his angle, hitting deeper and increasing the intensity of his smooth thrusts. He was getting closer, and yet a long way still to go. Jean laughed silently and let go of Vadim, showing both hands as a sign of 'innocence'—only that Jean and 'innocence' didn't really belong in the same thought. He still moved closer, pressing his body against Vadim's, and before Vadim could protest or curse, Jean's lips were locked to his. The Legionnaire just assuming he granted permission, and fuck, he did, because Jean kissed with skill and passion, never mind the games he played, being pressed against one body and fucked felt fantastic. Jean suddenly holding him and grinding against him, his cock noticeably hardening against Vadim's abs, but there was no urgency, at least not from Jean. Vadim felt Dan shift again and groaned, finding himself cling to Jean who stroked and kissed him, but did nothing else, just fanning the fire. Vadim pushed back against Dan, wanted to beg to be fucked harder, but Jean's lips were always in the way, the bastard very skilfully increasing his need.

Dan laughed and groaned breathlessly, one sound bleeding into the next. Resistance of Vadim's body against Jean, making it all the better, as if he could go on forever, almost. Feeling the intensity of being inside Vadim, the heat and the friction, and the responses, as they reached his brain and cock with every tiny sound. Trying to watch Jean kissing Vadim, but the image too overpowering, making him want to speed up and cater to Vadim's impatient wishes.

Vadim felt the pressure build up, tensed, but no way he could come like this, not ever, too slow, not quite getting him there, and he broke Jean's kiss, just needed to breathe. Felt Jean hold him, run his hand through his hair with an odd intense tenderness, and grin at him, but he himself could do nothing but pant, groan, knowing even if he begged, Dan would just keep going. "T..." touch me, was what he wanted to say, but could hardly form words, instead reaching for Dan's hips and trying to pull him closer, again telling him wordlessly to speed up—or at least get him over the edge, lend a hand. He was getting desperate, and Jean laughed softly into his ear. "Try and relax. Enjoy it..."

"Fuck...you," breathed Vadim, and grinned to take the sting out, arching again which made Jean nip at his throat, a hand running over his abs, but never touching his cock. "Please."

"No." Dan groaned out in his back. Speeding up at last, but only for the most selfish reasons. Only to get off himself, to reach the point where he could crash over. Never touching anything but Vadim's hips, even when he changed the angle again, to have more leverage. "Not done...with you yet!" The last pressed out when he suddenly let loose, thrust faster, harder, using Vadim's body to fuck himself to his orgasm, while never allowing anything in return. Vadim's lips opened, a choked sound came out, and he felt Jean embrace him, hold him, but at the same time moving away a little so he wasn't pressed up that much, not enough to get anywhere himself, but the thrusts were what he needed, needed badly, but still not enough. It would take the thought of a touch to set him off now, and he tensed, clenched when Dan came inside him, trying so hard to cum. Couldn't. A groan of frustration as he reached for his own cock, needing to come, but Jean, laughing tonelessly, held his hands, pushed them away.

Dan was panting, trying to catch his breath, and pulling out within seconds of cumming. They weren't done yet, oh no, his Russkie was to be savoured. Rolling off and onto his back, Dan got onto his knees, hands in Vadim's back, neck,

touching all the time, leaning down to kiss and lick sweat off heated skin.

“Remember what you agreed to...” murmured, before he moved out of the way.

“My turn then,” said Jean, taking Vadim’s legs and turning him onto his back. Vadim was so dizzy with need he just let it happen, even though in the grey light of morning he could see only too well what was happening—would happen. Jean moved between his legs, straightened one of them, pushed the other knee up and turned it to the side, opening him up again, and all Vadim could think was that might get him there, it might be enough to finally, blissfully, please cum.

It was Dan’s turn, then, to kneel beside Vadim’s chest, head down, and watching. Jean, then back to Vadim’s face, watching every reaction, while his hand roamed across abs and chest, never touching the cock, but playing with nipples instead.

“Do you want my cock?” asked Jean, smiling.

Vadim found it near impossible to breathe, and nodded. He did. He wanted to cum more, but he hoped Jean would prove more merciful than Dan. Probably not the most sensible thing to hope.

Jean kissed his knee. “Do you want *me*?”

That, now, was an altogether different question. Cock or the man. Vadim gritted his teeth. “Don’t fucking play...”

“No?” Jean moved closer, while Dan chuckled huskily under his breath. Jean positioned himself lazily, and Vadim felt himself tense involuntarily. But not with revulsion. With greed. Greed that was worsened when Jean reached and found a condom in his suit trousers and rolled it down over his cock. Oh fuck. “Do you?”

“Yes.” The right answer, because he was rewarded with cock. Jean moved forward, sliding in, which was the good news, but the bad news was that Jean seemed fully controlled. Vadim’s hands formed into tight fists as his body tried, again, to cum, his cock twitching and weeping, but he just didn’t get that hair’s breadth of stimulation that was necessary.

“Don’t worry...” Dan murmured, when he tore himself away from the sight of Jean’s cock embedded in Vadim’s body. Vadim: his. Fucked by another man. His, his own, and damn, this was plunging him into meltdown: to witness his Russkie getting fucked. “We’ll take care of you...” Shifting to look into Vadim’s eyes, which were feverish, not entirely rational anymore, some of the usual clarity having been lost. Smiling, but despite the tender words, Dan was taking hold of

Vadim's wrists, pulling the arms up and pinning them down over his head. At first Vadim was too tense to be moved like that, not actual resistance, just his body so taut it refused to be manhandled, but his hands clung to Dan's, stretching the body out in the process, an offering to the other man, all stretched and taut muscles, gleaming, sweat covered skin, and the dark red, weeping cock.

"Take care of you...later." Dan kissed Vadim, in the most agonisingly tender way.

Vadim kissed like his life depended on it, feeling suddenly how Jean began to move, fuck him slowly at first, and lust and frustration increased again. Unable to do anything but take it, trying hard to not cry out every time Jean fucked him just right, knowing he had arrived at his limits, the limits of what he could bear. Drenched in sweat, arousal now painful, but, again, just held in check by pure lust as intoxicating as anything he'd ever felt. Jean, mercifully, thankfully, graciously, didn't keep the control up, instead speeding up, deep, powerful thrusts with a lot of his strength in every one, and Vadim could see Jean's eyes, his face, knowing by instinct Jean was relishing to be able to use his strength, could probably feel his body respond and resist, and how his body clenched again and again, trying to reach orgasm. At least that was what he thought when Jean pulled back a little, a smooth motion, like he'd thrust back in harder. Instead, Jean stopped. Froze. Didn't move a muscle.

Vadim stared at him, saw Jean grin at him, then look at Dan, a positively wicked grin, and something inside gave up resistance, as he accepted he had no power. No need, no reason, no chance to resist.

Dan nodded, a small movement, and only then did Jean take up his rhythm again, fucking him harder and faster, excruciating at this point, a deep, painful soreness worked into Vadim's body, but he still wasn't able to cum. If he'd ever known it could be used to reduce him to a sweat-soaked, shuddering wreck...But Jean did speed up, thrusting hard and fast and deep now, clearly not holding back, and the shudders became permanent, the tautness, impossible to relax, breathe, and Vadim knew he was making sounds, but nothing registered, no clear thought, no emotion, absolutely nothing.

Sounds that intensified, when Dan finally moved away from his lips, jaw line, throat, moving down, and further down, between the pecs, where sweat gathered, lapping up the salt, and further down, along the abs, until he finally

reached the cock. Stalling, before he finally parted his lips and pushed his head down, sucking down the entire length of Vadim's cock.

Jean gave a laugh, a strangled, sexy sound, and thrust harder as he felt Vadim go through another of those deep, powerful shudders, crying out as he came in an orgasm that doubtlessly killed a lot of brain cells. The way it sounded, that was seriously painful, and he thrust hard and vicious, coming deeply inside Vadim at the sight of Dan swallowing, bent over his lover's cock and sucking him dry. He pulled away, put Vadim's leg down and stroked heated, sweaty skin. Vadim was still shuddering uncontrollably, lying flat, stretched out like a slaughtered victim. Mind-blowing to see them together, and Jean pulled away slightly, to do away with the condom, and not sure if tenderness was welcome or accepted, feeling now the way Vadim reached for Dan—unfocussed, weak—showed more about them than he was really privy to know.

Dan followed the touch, laving the spent cock clean, before moving back up to Vadim's face, smiling, no wickedness now. Just sated tenderness. Hands cupping the face, as he leant down, kissing gently, while Jean stood, legs weak, to find water and something to clean up. Eventually found a towel and two bottles of water. He wiped some of his sweat off, then drank, pleased with himself, relaxed. "Be back in a little," he murmured, but neither man acknowledged him, then picked up his bundle of clothes, heading off to the loos and shower. First to his hut to get the basic items of clothing—wifebeater, camo trousers, flip-flops, and was lucky nobody else seemed awake yet.

Vadim moved only his lips, and hardly those, still catching his breath. Weak, tired, sated, he curled up on his side, breathing, and smelling Dan's skin close. Bone weary, every muscle in his body vibrating with tiredness and exertion, feeling that soreness in his ass, sticky and disgusting, if he could bring himself to care. He couldn't, but Dan did for him. Leaving him after another kiss, getting a towel to clean him up, while Vadim just lay there, passive, and couldn't forget the glance exchanged between Jean and Dan, Dan granting permission when Jean had paused. No. Couldn't have been that. Or was it? Confused, but sated on so many levels, unable to do more than lie there.

"And?" Dan murmured, moving behind him to spoon once more. The grey light of early morning was slowly intensifying, but he didn't give a damn if it was

night or day. “Regret your agreement?” He chuckled softly, kissing Vadim’s neck, holding him in a tight embrace.

Vadim needed a moment just to muster the strength to speak. “No. Don’t...think so. D’you?”

“No, not a second.” Murmured, lips close to skin, Dan fished for the blanket. Morning or not, they’d get some more shut-eye, too sated and bone-weary in the best possible way. “Watching you getting fucked...it just about blew my mind.”

“Not...many who do that. Fuck me. Few.”

“No, and it’s a shame.” Dan trailed off, leaving the cryptic remark out in the open.

Vadim closed his eyes, resting, relaxing against Dan, head, legs, everything in between touching, now under the covers preserving some of that heat.

“He...kissed me, too.” Even fewer who’d done that. How strange.

“Aye...” Dan smiled, “he’s good at that.” Adding after a few kisses of his own, “did you like it?”

“Yeah.” Vadim smiled softly into the kissing. “Like he...like he means it, yes?”

“I don’t think he does it in any other way.” Dan yawned, stretching as best as he could before spooning even closer. “Don’t think there *is* any other way to kiss.” Murmuring, once he had shuffled into the perfect sleeping position, “kissing as if one’s life depended on it.”

“Interesting...thought.” Vadim was dozing off as well, only mildly roused again by Jean returning and locking the door. Dan looked up, but said nothing, and when Jean entered the bed, his hair was still damp and he smelt of citrusy shower gel and water, clean.

“Stay there,” said Jean softly and slipped under the same cover. “Hope you don’t mind...my hut’s a bit lonely after this.”

“Suit yourself.” Dan smiled, even wriggled his hips in an invitation to Jean to move closer. Nothing would part him from Vadim, but having someone, a friend, like Jean, added to the intimacy? He would never say no. Too drowsy to do so anyway. “Wake me tonight...”

“Will do.” Jean moved close enough to touch and draw warmth, and placed a kiss between Dan’s shoulder blades, a tame notion after what they’d done before, but nevertheless heartfelt. “Door’s locked. Good night.”

“Good *day*.” Dan breathed out, before falling asleep. Ignoring the sounds of a waking camp and the voices of men all around him. Nothing existed, except for dreams, and warmth. Shared with two men.

1991 Chapter XXXV—Sudden Impact

December 1991, the Persian Gulf

Dan had been in a frightfully good mood since the previous morning, right after night shift. The camp was almost deserted, except for a few diehards like him and Vadim—who were all too keen on earning absolute shitloads over the holidays, while everyone else went back to their homelands. Whistling to himself, he had finished packing his bag, lighting a cigarette while looking at Vadim. “Ready for Santa?”

“You mean Father Frost?” Vadim answered, setting the last of the polished boots down.

“Aye, Father Frost, Santa, whoever. All the same.” Dan grinned.

Vadim straightened, feeling his lower back had locked up again, and he stood, slowly rolling his back, betraying the stiffness. “Okay. What will it be, then?”

“What do you mean? If you hope for gifts, forget it, it’s not really a shopper’s paradise around here, is it?”

Vadim looked at him ironically. “Well. We could kidnap that horrible plastic tree from the Mess, but the CO is rather fond of it, so that’s a no.” He put the rag and polish away, then pointed at Dan’s boots so Dan would put them away. “And any sleds with reindeers would get shot down because they don’t have a security pass, anyway.”

Dan laughed while moving the boots, managing to smoke at the same time. “I could get myself a Santa hat and wear nothing but the red and white bobbled thing over my John Thomas. Would that cheer you up?”

Vadim looked at him. “Am I not cheerful?” He paused for a moment, thinking about it, and didn’t believe he’d sounded particularly bitter or angry.

“Sure you are, but that’s a saying, you know? Cheer up and be merry.” Turning round, Dan picked up the bottles of booze—good booze—he’d managed to acquire, and packed them on top of his bag. “Got everything? Food, plenty of it, booze, and KY?” He was grinning from ear to ear, the scar in his face twisting.

Vadim extended a leg, touching his boot to his packed bergan. “Yes. Of course. Ever ready, as the saying goes.” He reached for the bergan and hoisted it up

on his shoulder. “Truth be told, I’m ready for a rest. Well. Afterwards. This is such a depressing place in winter.”

“Just remember we’re going to New Zealand in spring, smack bang into their autumn. Money’s a good thing at the moment, I need to check in what state the farm is in.”

“Yeah, I know, have been keeping my pay together for that, too.” Not that he had huge expenses. There was precious little to buy, and what did he want to get that he’d only have to leave behind? Work was cheap in Kiwiland, so Vadim had heard from a former serviceman from that country, and their combined pay should be good enough to get a lot of things done.

Hoisting his own pack onto his back, Dan grinned. “And two days and nights in the safe house, away from it all, is almost as good as a holiday, aye?”

“Don’t need much more to rest up,” Vadim murmured. “Sex and sleep and food will be a nice change of rhythm.” He followed, then locked the door behind them.

On the way out of camp, there was hardly a soul in sight. Jean was already off to France—he and Pascal had left the same day, and just Jean’s absence made this place seem pretty empty.

Dan finished his fag before they reached the camp gates, exchanging a few words with the soldier on duty. The general consensus was they’d be breaking up camp rather sooner than later, and the mercs wouldn’t be needed any more, at least not around this area. Dan nodded, glanced at Vadim, and shrugged. Plenty of places to go to, and he was used to never calling anywhere his home—except for the mountains and sky.

They soon reached the town, meandering through the streets, but without the need to cover their tracks or take any particular care, when they arrived at the safe house. “You got the key?” Dan asked.

Vadim reached into his pocket and pulled it out. “Aye.” He handed Dan the key, standing back, casting a glance over his shoulder. Being secure and feeling secure would always be two different things in his world, and the latter almost unattainable these days, unless he lay at Dan’s side, his view unimpeded. Or out in the open, something like a booby trapped cave, or an embassy, and even then, always an unspoken queasiness about his surroundings.

Dan was making a quip at Vadim as he entered, his head craned back. Stopping mid-sentence when a noise registered. A groan, harsh breathing, then a yelp of pain and the moment he whipped his head around, he was confronted with a body throwing itself from the bed, onto the floor, in the motion grabbing a weapon that had been close. Taking cover, and aiming the pistol at him, but Dan was already on the ground himself, hadn't had time to warn Vadim, as he threw bag, bergan and body half-way down the stairs.

Vadim had been a step behind, following inside, 'bringing up the rear', and locked the door. That was when he heard something. Human. And frantic motion, and he was down faster than any thought had registered. Rolling to the side, away from any line of sight and line of fire. "What the fuck?" he grunted, and then "Dan? See anything?"

"Shit!" Was heard from the ground, inside the room, and then an utterly desperate groan from the bed at the opposite wall opposite.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*" In a different voice to the first one, from the bed as well. That's when Dan raised his head, peering inside. "Matt?" Damn, he knew that voice, especially that groan. Turning towards Vadim, he gestured wildly, "I think..." he didn't have to finish the sentence, because the guy on the ground stood up, shielding the bed with his body as he did so. Lowering the weapon. Standing stark naked and with a flagging hard-on, the condom hanging from the circumcised head.

"Welcome." The voice commented dryly, only a hint of huskiness gave proof to what he had been doing, a few seconds ago.

Vadim stood, still looking around, feeling his pulse drop slowly back to normal. He leaned against the wall, door frame covering him, and looked inside. Focused on the man with the gun as he got an overview of the situation in the room. The dark haired guy with the condom wasn't Matt. So the guy on the bed was Matt, and since Matt had keys to the safe house, had brought himself some entertainment. Damn fine, dangerous entertainment. Vadim studied the man, all muscle, all tendons, physically perfect, as athletic as they came.

"Only that we're not," said Vadim, moving into the doorframe.

Dan had scrambled up to sit on the doorstep, shaking his head. "Fuck, that was close."

The guy with the weapon opened his mouth, when the other voice interrupted. “I don’t give a shit about welcome, close, or whatever the fuck.” Matt rolled onto his side, half hidden behind the other’s naked body, only his head and chest visible. Face was flushed, covered with a sheen of sweat, with an expression that was everything but happy. His voice breathless, and the way he slung an arm around the other guy’s thighs, hand tugging at the hip, left no doubt as to what had been happening. “I need to fucking cum!”

Dan stared at both, eyes—as usual—hidden behind the shades, and he was close to bursting into laughter. This was too fucking hilarious. He glanced at Vadim and winked. “Hey, Hooch, want us to leave for an hour?”

Vadim studied Matt, and ‘Hooch’, as it were, and now the smell of sex hit his nostrils, never mind all the signs of it: the sweat, the arousal, and Matt’s comical exasperation. Seemed Dan had been screwing with this guy, too, so everybody in the room was well acquainted on some level, but running into each other was still funny. “Don’t think it would take that long,” said Vadim, in a murmur.

“Suit yourselves.” The man drawled as he placed the weapon beside the pillow. Discarding the condom, he lowered himself down onto the bed. Matt was lying on his back, now stretching his legs while reaching for Hooch, who made no attempt at returning to what he had been doing before. Instead casting one last glance at the newcomers, seemingly deciding they were safe, before sliding down Matt’s body, who seemed completely taken by surprise, when he took Matt’s hard cock into his mouth. Without a sound and no further hesitation.

Vadim felt his guts tighten at the image, both men just so perfect, and that Hooch going about it with clear skill. They were dismissed as not dangerous, nothing felt like it was set up for their pleasure, they were simply not deemed a reason to stop with what they’d been doing. And watching those lips take cock wasn’t half bad.

Dan grinned. “Want me to introduce you? You already know Matt, Jarhead. And that’s Hooch, Delta. Not that they give a fuck at the moment.” Delta. American super-soldiers with a very unfortunate track record of being sent out into the deepest shit Uncle Sam got himself into. The equivalent of spetsnaz, SAS, and, yeah, a whole lot of other special forces. Matt, while a decent enough soldier, shared the room with three killers. One of them sucking his cock. Vadim came a

bit closer, but remained standing at the wall, feeling lust well up, just from the faint sounds and Matt's breathing.

Dan got up from his sitting position and slung the bergan onto the floor. Right beside one of the two chairs, which were the only furniture in the room apart from a low table and the fairly comfortable bed. Looking at Vadim, he shrugged and sat down on the chair, staring straight at the bed, as if the show had been put on just for his viewing pleasure.

"Want a drink?" To Vadim, as he angled for his pack. "It's Christmas soon, after all."

Vadim nodded, his mouth had gone dry, and it was hard to not look at either of them. Or both. "Yes. I need a drink." He looked at Hooch, who reminded him of Dan, back in Afghanistan. Before his hair had grown out of control, and before that scar on his belly; younger, fiercer, more silent, closed up, too. On the bed, Matt was breathing harshly, then tilted his head backwards and closed his eyes, oblivious to the others in the room.

Dan poured a couple of generous shots of good whisky into the tin mugs, and handed one to Vadim, never taking his eyes off the Jarhead and the Delta. Taking a draught, he leaned closer, put the mug down, and pulled the long sleeved shirt off his body. Sitting with his legs crossed, Dan leaned back, slouched, chest bare, working on finishing the whisky.

Vadim just tossed the whisky back—the situation demanded too much of his attention to savour it. He could have been drinking moonshine, it wouldn't have made a difference, and Vadim was pretty sure Dan wouldn't berate him for it. He cast his eyes towards the bed, couldn't help but watch, the situation so very odd, especially looking at Dan, savouring both whisky and the view.

He set the bergan down, still leaning against the wall, noticing everything about Matt.

The sounds Matt made were guttural. As suppressed as any soldier's, until his hips bucked up and one low groan escaped, coming from somewhere deep inside his body. His whole body jerked, fists twisting into the blankets, obviously cumming, while the Delta was just as obviously taking the orgasm in stride and swallowing Matt's cum, something that twisted and tightened Vadim's guts more. The Delta took it like a pro. Even waiting until he could clean the spent cock in one slow movement, before he lifted his head.

Looking at the spaced-out kid, there was tension in Hooch's back, which only now became obvious. Now, that he sat without movement, back to the room.

"And what about you?" Dan suddenly asked, finishing off his whisky.

Vadim shivered, crossed his arms in front of his chest, unsure what to do or say. These men were Dan's lovers, not his, but right now, he was too aroused to care. Delta. A fucking American. He hardly dared to breathe, not sure how the guy would react, but Dan knew him and probably approached him right. Hooch turned his head, one hand still on Matt's thigh, who was stirring, but too sluggish after the come-down to do more than breathing. "What do you offer?" Dan glanced at Vadim as he stood up, a broad grin on his face. "Not my arse." Re-enacting their first encounter.

The Delta's lips quirked into a miniature grin of his own. "Mine neither."

"Done the sucking."

"Yeah."

Dan was opening his belt, pulled it out of the loops, and dropped it. Opened button and zip. "Mind being watched?"

Hooch shrugged, didn't seem he gave a damn. He turned round to sit on the edge of the bed, while Matt rose enough to roll onto his side.

Dan pushed his trousers down and bent over to undo his bootlaces, giving Vadim a perfect view onto his arse. "Cocks?"

Hooch nodded after a second and stood up, while Matt got himself together enough to sit. Sated and entirely at ease, despite Vadim's closeness. Stepping out of the boots, Dan pulled the trousers and socks off, stood naked. His cock was mildly interested, as he regarded the Delta from head to toe. He nodded, appreciating the view. Good body, and the other knew it, there was no doubt. They stood close. No more than a hand between them. Assessing each other in silence.

Vadim sat down, blindly reaching for the chair. Dan. He'd imagined—well, torturously so—Dan with others, had seen him with Matt, with Jean, but that was an entirely different calibre. He wasn't jealous, strangely not, this was all nice and relaxed, 'at ease', as they called it, but he couldn't deny the impact it had on his body. All of it. Dan's panache, the ease with which the Delta operated, no urgency despite the sex. Two men seizing each other up, same thing on their minds. It was getting hot, and he shed the parka, blindly, unable to take his eyes from them. If he

squinted and blurred the lines, they were mirror images of each other, like past and future, drawn together right here and now. Vadim just barely breathed.

Dan, the older man, finally reached for the other, stepping closer. Tilting his head, he was met with a minute hesitation, before the Delta's head angled as well, accepting and returning the kiss. Two men, both dark, ten years between them. Killers, one mellowed, the other as much on edge as a blade in a soldier's hand. Kissing with intensity, no time for preliminaries, no need for niceties. Hands on each other's bodies, pressed close, hips pushing and meeting in fierce grips.

Matt moved off the bed, staring at both, just as much as Vadim did, and found himself the other chair. Both of the kissing, groping men seemed oblivious, but the sureness with which they steered themselves to the bed, moved and lowered gave proof neither had let their guard down.

Not until they lay side by side, facing each other, and all of a sudden Dan and Hooch turned into no holds barred. Making barely a sound, but each of their touches was intense, fingers gripping, hands merciless and bodies uncompromising. Teeth attacking, lips devoured, and the strength and vicious power with which their hips ground their cocks against each other's looked nothing but painful.

Vadim knew this well, knew Dan's fierceness like that, could feel every motion echo in his body, which reacted, demanding attention, too, every grinding movement making him more breathless. Muscles in his body pulled taut; he wanted—wanted to take part in this, but the way Dan focused on Hooch indicated this was for two men, not three. He wasn't welcome there, and he wasn't sure whether he could actually join, and he hesitated. Being watched, and having a complete stranger...and at the same time, he wanted to touch and bite too, trust or no trust, shame or not. He glanced over to Matt, nothing but a flicker of a gaze, with the kid looking on as if he was watching cartoons—with rapt attention. Vadim reached for the bottle to do anything that wasn't wanking, wondered why he didn't, but truth was, he didn't want to bare himself so much. Felt very much the guest.

The fierceness intensified, and so did the speed and the recklessness, yet neither man made a sound except for their harsh breathing. As if neither could give in, nor back down, and it seemed they were fighting each other rather than getting each other off. Yet suddenly, both bodies tensed, taut lines of hard muscles beneath skin, as hips came down brutally and hands gripped so hard, they'd bruise lesser

bodies. Teeth found skin and their movements became erratic, cumming with cocks trapped, mindlessly humping and grinding against the other's body.

Dan let go and rolled onto his back first. Groin and chest sticky, eyes closed, one arm thrown across his chest, he breathed into the come-down. It was Hooch who lifted his head after no more than a few seconds, looking straight at Vadim, not even blinking. "You?"

Vadim's throat tightened. Two. The Delta had brought off two men and was now aiming at number three. Him. He couldn't speak, throat too dry, too fucking aroused at seeing Dan cum. There was a 'no thanks' and it was a lie, ridiculous under these circumstances. 'I'm alright' was the other lie. Vadim looked at Dan, who might have heard the offer, or didn't care, more likely. Delta. Spetsnaz. Did it come down to regimental pride? Not be intimidated by the enemy? He met the gaze then, as Dan didn't react much, and gave the faintest nod.

The Delta moved off the bed, too damn smooth for someone who'd fucked, then blown, then ground into another's body like a man possessed. Wiped cursorily at his chest and groin, as if he couldn't be bothered by the mess. He stood, close to Vadim, before moving even closer, so Vadim had to open his legs, allow the naked body to step between his knees, and get onto the floor. Kneeling between his thighs, and despite it being winter, Vadim began to sweat. The Delta just did it. He really just did it. He couldn't take his eyes off the man, all that smooth confidence, and he could do nothing, not move, just accept what was coming.

Hooch didn't say a word, just reached for Vadim's fly, opened the belt, button and zip, pulled the fly apart, pushed down briefs, found a cock that was hard and twitched beneath his hand, and Vadim trembled, too aroused to play it cool. All the time Hooch kept his eyes on Vadim's face instead of on his hands. Working blindly. Still nothing, no sound, no reaction. Until finally, one corner of his lips quirked up in the same miniature grin he'd given Dan, and he lowered his head, sucked the cock between his lips, and proceeded to give head as professionally as a high class whore.

Vadim let a groan escape; different man, different way to do this. Alien, but good, it was forever since he'd had a blowjob from anybody not Dan, yeah, Gavriil, or Platon, fuck, the heat, the arrogance, and the motherfucking skill. His hands formed fists, pressed to his side, he didn't want to touch Hooch, and still wanted to. Body tightening up, knotting his guts, his tendons, and another groan came out,

and before long he was panting, the Delta just perfect, fierce, obviously loving it. “C-close,” he croaked, not sure he’d get included in the circle of guys that Hooch swallowed. He reached up, touched Hooch’s shoulder, hot skin, the man glowing with heat, like a piece of desert. Touched the side of his neck where muscles rolled, and tendons stood out under the smooth skin, and he bucked up, so fucking close.

But Hooch didn’t let up, didn’t acknowledge Vadim’s warning, instead increased his effort. Deeper, harder, and more reckless. Sucking Vadim off, without giving any chance to pull back.

Four eyes on Hooch’s bare back, Dan’s gaze flicking to Vadim’s face and heaving chest, and Matt’s eyes fixed onto each and every of Hooch’s movements.

Vadim was too far gone to feel watched, the universe was centred in his groin, and he came, the orgasm painfully intense, eyes closed as he came, teeth bared like he was in pain. Face flushed, sweating, breathless, no thought left, all paled and seared away with the force of the sensation. Only then, slowly recovering his senses, his eyes opened. Something didn’t make sense. Why would Hooch do that—he was obviously spent, and happily so. Sex always was about something mutual, unless it was the kind of sex he no longer wanted. Or only wanted when that darkness rose up. Right now, there was no darkness, just breathless astonishment. “Why...did you do that?”

Hooch shrugged, licking his lips as he sat back on his heels. Regarding Vadim in silence, Vadim’s eyes meeting his with that same, astonished expression. The silence was broken by Dan, who waved a hand negligently from across the bed, laconically introducing, “Vadim, Hooch. Hooch, Vadim. Spetsnaz, Delta. Delta, Spetsnaz.” Which caused Matt to grin and Hooch’s lips to quirk once more, before he stood up, still between Vadim’s legs.

Vadim nodded, tucked himself back in, the only guy in the room who was now pretty much dressed, and stood as well. He offered a hand, still meeting that unwavering gaze. He didn’t feel threatened—fuck, giving a blowjob was usually not a way to open hostilities—but Hooch seemed very ready, very prepared. “Whatever reason you did it, thanks.” Glancing over to Dan and now fully aware he’d been watched. By his lover. Eyes again returning to Hooch.

The Delta’s shoulder went up again, in his customary shrug as he shook Vadim’s hand. “Pay me back some other time.”

Vadim nodded. Now the world made sense again, but there was the thought that there would be another time. This was, then, not a singular occurrence, not an accident. He owed the Delta one, and that was a strange feeling, but logical. “Ok.” Never mind his guts tightened at the promise, or threat, or deal. Deal.

Hooch held the hand for one moment longer, before he let go and turned away, looking from Matt to Dan and back again, before pointing at the bottle with a questioningly raised brow.

Dan grinned and nodded, behaving as if nothing had happened. “Sure, there’s enough for everyone, Vadim and I were going to have a Christmas party, but I guess the party has already started.” He poured the drinks, laughed at Vadim’s state of dress, while the three of them remained naked, and listened to Matt telling them about going home for Christmas in three days—which took him approximately four sentences, and Hooch reporting he’d be off and sent to another place of high risk in the world—which took him about three words.

Vadim didn’t quite join in, he sometimes asked a question, but most of all watched and listened, relaxed, and finding himself liking Dan’s ‘mates’. None of them as grating as Jean.

Drinking, sharing their plentiful food, and ‘being merry’, until the two Yanks had to leave, and then they were on their own, enjoying each other’s company and bodies. Together, with the memory of a Delta lingering.

* * *

A couple of days later, they made it back into camp with barely an hour to spare before they had to be off on their first shift. They’d be working several doubles, and with Vadim being a temporary team leader for one of the two remaining teams, they’d be working hard for their money, but hell, it was triple pay.

The first shift went without any hitch and when Dan returned for hand-over, looking forward to get scran down his neck before heading out with the next shift, he was told his charge had cancelled and there was no more work that afternoon. He waited for Vadim to wave him off, who had to do his own double shift, and headed towards the post house, checking for any mail. To his surprise, there was a message from Matt, asking him if he could make it to the safe house that very afternoon, before the kid was about to head off for Christmas. All coded, of course,

in case of unlikely interceptions, and signed with Ho Ho Ho. Dan grinned and whistled as he went about signing in weapons, handing kit over and cleaning himself. He had enough time for shower and food, leaving a message for Vadim, in case he wasn't back on time.

Dan was soon off to the safe house, this time more careful, but the place was empty, except for the furniture, a load of water bottles, and the obligatory pack of condoms. He had barely enough time to settle in when the door opened and Matt entered, grinning like a kid on Christmas morning.

“What's up, mate? You look awfully pleased.”

Locking the door, Matt's grin grew even wider. “Got my orders, I'm not coming back. Going to stay back home for a while.”

“And that's a good thing?” Dan winked.

“Fucking A! Been forever since I've seen my boyfriend, can't wait for, like, some quality time.”

Dan laughed, nodding. “Aye, I can understand that. Wanted to see scruffy old me to say good bye?”

“Yeah.” Matt slung a bag off his shoulder and dropped it onto the table. “And to give you your Christmas present.” He rummaged through it.

“My...what?” Dan pushed the shades up onto his forehead, taken by surprise.

“Christmas. Present. December.” Matt grinned. “Remember, old man?” “It's not really jingle bells around here, is it?”

“Nope, but I'm playing Santa today, anyway.” Fishing a parcel out of his bag, Matt dropped it onto Dan's lap. “Open it.”

“Damn pushy for a kid.”

Matt rolled his eyes, sat down on the bed and proceeded to take off his tunic, while gesturing with his chin to the soft parcel, wrapped in gaudy paper. “Alright, alright, I get it.” Ripping the paper open, Dan found a football shirt, Matt's favourite team, a pair of running shorts and a running top, all from the shop the yanks had on camp. When he pulled the garments apart to look at them, something heavier fell out with a clatter. Dan picked up the box and stared at it in disbelief. “Love-Handcuffs? Where the fuck did you get them from? Do you have a sex shop sale on at camp?” Dan shook his head, grinning. “And are you trying to tell me something?”

Matt was laughing out loud, hands on his belt, grinning widely. “Thought you might appreciate them one day, buddy. You never know.” He winked while opening his fatigue trousers. “And where I got them from...it’s my secret.”

“Cheeky bastard. I should have taught you some manners when I had the chance, or is the Delta letting you get away with everything?” Dan grinned like a loon.

“Maybe?” Matt winked again, lifting his butt off the bed to slide trousers and underpants down. “Maybe not?”

“Which reminds me, you have forgiven me for meddling, aye?”

“Sure, buddy, even though I almost shat myself when he turned up.”

“Didn’t look to me as if you were shitting yourself, the other day.”

Matt just grinned and shrugged, seemed he had taken over Hooch’s infuriating habit of refusing to talk. He was unlacing the boots and getting out of them, before socks and trousers came off. Sitting naked on the bed, he really was a prize to behold. A perfect beefcake, all muscles, finely sculpted, and clearly not only enjoying his sports, but a great fan of the gym.

Dan huffed, reaching for his fags before putting the presents away, when a card fell out of the folded shorts. “Christmas card?”

“Can’t do without, buddy.”

Dan opened the envelope and pulled out the card, which sported a scantily clad Mrs Santa with long blond hair, and he laughed at the irony. Inside Christmas wishes and three addresses.

“My mom and pop’s, my apartment, and the other one’s my unit’s.” Matt remarked, as he lay back on the bed, head pillowed on his arms. “Do keep in touch.”

Dan smiled, touched more by this than he let on. “I will.” Reached for a pen in his own bergan, he scribbled Maggie’s address onto the back of the envelope. “You can contact me through the embassy, that’s the safest way. Haven’t got a clue where I’ll be going next, but don’t think we’ll stay here much longer.”

“Time for a change of view?”

“Wouldn’t say that.” Dan popped the envelope on top of Matt’s bag, pulled the shades out of his hair and grinned at the jarhead. “Not with a view like that.”

“I’ve got an hour.” Matt laughed, “I’m officially shopping on the market. You think you can get it up, old man?”

“I show you any time, kid.”

“As in, like, now?”

“Damn right.” Grinning, Dan peeled himself out of his clothes. Locating condoms and lube nearby, he sat down on the bed.

“And what do you want as a good bye shag?”

“Exactly that.”

“Would have thought you get fucked enough these days.” Grinning, Dan pushed Matt’s legs apart and knelt between them.

“But I *like* getting fucked.” Matt pushed a lazy fist into Dan’s abs. “Don’t forget that.”

“How could I.” Leaning down, Dan proceeded to kiss the kid thoroughly, before he came back up for breath, murmuring, “Or perhaps you should give me one last reminder.”

Matt was still laughing, with growing huskiness, as Dan was going down on him.

* * *

When Dan returned to camp a couple of hours later, sated and mellow, he walked past the mail room once more. It was about to close and the guy in charge was waving him inside. “What’s up?”

“Got a message here for Rocky.”

“Vadim?”

“Seems so.”

Dan picked up the piece of paper.

“Figured I can hand it to you just as well, since you’re an ‘item’.” The guy was making a kissie face.

“Aye, and Merry Christmas to you, too, asshole.” Dan grinned, flicking the birdie as he left the tent. Turning the piece of paper in his hands, it hadn’t even been folded over and the note was there, for all to seen.

‘Fri 1900—SH? H’

Dan grinned, wondering if Vadim would decipher the message as quickly as he had, and wondered, too, if the question mark turned into a full stop. Friday. Tomorrow. Vadim was on night shift, but Dan had the day one. They could

swap...and all Vadim would have to do was ask. Whistling a crooked tune, Dan kept turning the piece of paper. An opportunist, alright.

* * *

Dan had already been fed in the empty mess, which ran on skeletal staff, and was chilling out in the hut after a long run. His knees were aching, particularly the one which had had surgery, but he put it down to lack of running and too much gym work. Sitting on the bed with the shades over his eyes, he was smoking a cigarette, the room illuminated by a lamp with a single light bulb.

Vadim returned after the shift, handed in his gear; being teamleader, if only provisional, meant to work twice as hard, be twice as attentive, and probably twice as tired. Today, he felt every year of age, plus ten each for every year spent in prison. He needed a shower urgently, was pretty sure he could tell this country from all the others he'd served in by the taste of its dust and the particular way it fucked up his skin. Inside, he saw Dan sit there, and the smell of smoke immediately combined with the taste of dust. "Hey," he murmured, by way of greeting.

"Welcome back, you poor sod." Dan smiled and pushed himself up. "Double shift is a killer." He walked over to where they stored the soap bags and towels, took one of each of Vadim's, and gave a gentle prod. "Come on then, I'll take you to the showers."

Vadim nodded, thankful for the guidance. Good money, if he could even care right now. He was no slacker, certainly not, but back in the days, he'd been ten years younger. He just didn't recover as fast anymore. One day he'd wake up and feel every muscle ache. He peeled himself out of the armour and the layers underneath, ran a sweaty, dirty hand through his hair. "That farm of yours better be *really* nice."

Dan laughed, shaking his head 'no'. "It's a piece of rotting crap in acres and acres of land, with an old apple orchard that doesn't yield usable fruit anymore, and endless scenery of mountains and lush green land." With a hand in Vadim's lower back, he guided him out of the door and into the darkness. "'Nice' is not the right word."

"Mountains," snorted Vadim. "You know I'm a city kid."

“Aye, and fuck you, too.” Dan groused gently, getting a bright, if tired grin from Vadim. Vadim knew he was being grouchy, but, damnit, it felt good being grouchy. And it had the desired effect—attention, and Dan’s closeness and banter. Walking him towards the shower blocks, the whole camp seemed deserted, they didn’t meet a single soul, even though some of the men were still around.

“By the way, as for ‘nice’, there was a message for you.” Dan barely hid the grin.

“Oh shit. Katya?”

Dan’s hand in Vadim’s back jerked, as if hit by electric voltage. He almost stopped dead in his tracks, but got himself under control. “No. The message read ‘Fri 1900—SH? H’, pronouncing every letter and number.

Vadim frowned, thinking for at least ten seconds. They entered the showers, he deposited the wash bag and the towel and reached for the water, while Dan leaned against the stall, arms folded across his chest and slouching like a hooker. Vadim paused. “Fuck. Hooch?”

“Congratulations, bright-eye.” Dan grinned mercilessly.

Vadim seemed to consider something. “I’m on shift on Friday, anyway.”

“And I’m on the later one.” Pushing the inevitable shades up from his eyes, Dan waggled his brows before letting them slip back down. “And I’m willing to swap. If you want.” If you want him.

Vadim paused. Hooch. *If you want*. Technically, he owed the Delta a blowjob. He started the water and soaped himself, shedding the red dust fast, immediately refreshed as the water cooled his skin and made him feel far more alive. He closed it down again, grabbed the towel, dried his face first, then ran the towel over his short hair, his neck, then towelled himself down quickly. “He’s certainly fast to come calling for repayment,” he murmured, thoughtful.

“Repayment? That what you think of a chance at casual sex with a bloody fit body and someone other than little old me?”

“Well.” Despite the fact Hooch hadn’t actually spoken, Vadim didn’t see anything nasty or unpleasant in the message. Hooch inquired whether he was available. But was he really available? “Are you sure, Dan?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Picking up the pile of dusty kit, Dan wondered. “It’s just sex. I had plenty of it, I figure it’s your turn, and why not? We shared Matt, we

shared Jean, we even shared Hooch. If he wants you, and you want him, then just go ahead. He won't be here for much longer."

"I wouldn't...mind." Vadim still felt strange. Discussing the options with his lover, the only man he'd ever loved, desired, nearly died for. It was fair, wasn't it? With Dan screwing around with others, and Hooch would never become the bother than Jean was. Looking into Dan's face, he couldn't see any jealousy or reservations. Just sex. It was just sex. And it was certainly nice to be wanted. Funny thought. "Delta, eh?" He shook his head, laughed softly.

"Oh shit."

Dan grinned, "they are still way behind SAS. Don't you forget that." Slapping Vadim's towel-clad buttock, he pointed the way. "But tonight it's ex-SAS for you, with a plate full of sandwiches, a bottle of water and the need for a good grope before shut-eye." Dan's way of describing 'cuddling'.

Vadim grinned. "Delta? Overrated. Lost without all their shiny expensive kit." And more often than not tossed into battles they couldn't win, because the Army types were jealous or whatever. The typical infighting. It was a bit sad to know guys like Hooch could get killed because of some smartass wearing a general's uniform. But then, he reflected, that was pretty much the lot of the fighting man. "Make that two bottles of water." Following Dan to the tin hut, yawning already. Seemed the Hooch thing was settled. That was a date, then. Strange thought, but on the other hand, why worry more than Dan did? He was really too tired for that. What could happen? He'd repay the blowjob. No big deal.

* * *

Vadim was there first. An easy forty minutes before the time given in the note. He believed in being early under such circumstances. Had checked the usual stuff, but didn't actually expect any trouble. He was well-rested, but his stomach seemed tight, a bit nervous like he'd been when he'd stolen away to meet Dan in Kabul. Anticipation. Only, Dan had been the feast that had to last him and keep him sane for another stint in that godforsaken country. Here, it was more casual, but still strange.

He opened the door. Hooch wasn't there, yet. The bed. Two chairs. Vadim frowned, paced the room a few times. Thought Dan was out there on patrol, and

hoped Dan kept his mind on the job and didn't dwell on him, on what he might do, or not do. Ah, stupid—he'd most likely do it. Hooch had something Matt and Jean lacked. Maybe mystery? He grinned at that thought. They all had their story, each one different, some tragic, some epic, some just random. He sat down, ran his hand through the short hair, then decided to shed the parka. Sat down again, mostly to keep himself from pacing.

At exactly nineteen hundred hours, there was a knock on the door, a second pause, then the scrape of a key in the lock. Seemed Matt had given the Delta the key to the safe house. The door opened, but there was no silhouette of a man standing in the 'vertical coffin', instead a shadow, standing to the side before stepping through after making certain all was as he'd expected. Tipping a finger to his temple, Hooch gave a silent greeting before locking the door and walking closer. He stood, looking at Vadim, and the corners of his mouth twitched upwards in the trademark miniature grin.

Vadim nodded and gave a grin. Most small talk sentences, like 'I got your note' faltered. It was too obvious to mention it, really. He studied the man, thought of how Hooch had just gone to his knees to suck him, with hardly so much as a word. 'You'. That had been it. "I don't like debts," he murmured, continued to grin, though.

Hooch shrugged with another small grin, peeling himself out of the parka. He was chewing gum, which he fished out of his mouth and stuck to a piece of paper, stashing it in one of the pockets. Wearing a pair of fatigues, desert boots, and an army issue t-shirt underneath, he was going low-key. "No debt." Hooch shrugged again, "opportunity." He reached for one of the water bottles and emptied almost half of it, before he sat down on one of the chairs.

Vadim nodded. "Aye." Watching him drink, certain things about him like Dan—even though Hooch had very different facial features, they resembled each other enough to be from the same extended family. In a way, that was true. Who could tell whether Hooch had Scottish ancestors? 'Hooch' was very likely not the name in his passport. Vadim inhaled deeply, consciously filling his chest with air, then slowly breathed out, to centre himself. "Right. You must have found the single most unsuitable guy for small talk or flirting."

He gave a laugh and stepped closer, a certain amount of humour now creeping into his voice. He shed the jacket, the belt, the shirt, felt the cool air on his nipples.

Again that economic grin and Hooch looked up, all the way from Vadim's groin, up his chest, to his face. "No. I win those stakes." His hand reached for Vadim's hips and he pulled him closer, but not without waiting a millisecond before touching. A silent, split second request for permission. Equals, that was what he regarded Vadim as, and Vadim felt himself relax more; nothing bad would come from this and he followed the pull.

"What do you offer?" Hooch drawled, giving another pull, until Vadim stood between Hooch's legs, face right up against Vadim's groin.

Again, the blowjob. Different way to do it, and that motherfucking skill. Vadim grinned, felt his guts tighten. Remembered Matt's almost comical despair, his need, remembered Hooch grinding against Dan. All great options. Delta.

Killer. He bent down, looked at Hooch's eyes, the dark stubble, saw the strength in that man, and thought he'd like to see him cum, would like to see this man struggle with himself. "I'm up for anything," he murmured. "But Dan's a better cocksucker than I am."

Hooch nodded, one hand running up Vadim's inner thigh. To the balls, once, then back down again. "Mad Dog doesn't offer ass." One brow raised, the ghost of a grin. "You?"

Offer ass. Sounded less bad than 'fuck me'. Vadim looked at him thoughtfully, but thought, yes, he'd 'offer ass'. Nothing inside him struggled against that thought. It didn't seem to change anything—Hooch would probably not mock him for it. His jaw muscles tightened, once, twice. Not many men he'd trusted enough—few who'd ever tried. Truth was, Hooch was just as professional about it as a whore, nothing indicated scorn, spite or any nastiness. Strange. American. The very thought he'd allow himself to get fucked by the proper cold war enemy—that was defiance. It was 'fuck you' to the KGB. He'd choose this, and he'd enjoy it. "If you give a hand," he murmured and opened his belt.

"Sure." The dark eyes widened then returned back to their usual, controlled self. True to his word, Hooch gave a hand right there and then. Opening the button and zipper for Vadim, he pushed down trousers and briefs. One hand went up towards the bare chest, the other splayed on one muscular buttock, which made

Vadim move forward, tensing his ass. Leaning closer, Hooch trailed his tongue along the length of Vadim's cock, before leaning back and taking a good look. "Shaved." Silence. "Fucking good." He once more leaned forward, this time taking the cock between his lips.

"Was a...swimmer, once." Vadim groaned softly, hands reaching for Hooch. The neck, hair, shoulder, but he didn't push, allowed Hooch his own rhythm, his own way to do things, as he grew fully hard under that attention, that focus Hooch showed. No reservations.

Working on Vadim's cock, every movement and touch were controlled and perfect. Designed to arouse and keep the interest up, but never mechanical. His hands, calloused and warm, were wandering across Vadim's body, until Hooch pulled back, regarding the cock for a moment, then glanced up, meeting Vadim's gaze. Yet he said nothing, simply moved back down and swallowed as much of Vadim's cock as he could, making Vadim groan again and close his eyes. Taking his time. No rush, no pressure. As if he had all of the night, however unlikely.

Vadim gently moved with those motions, enjoying them, but keeping things under control—himself, lust. Felt Hooch's jaw move under his fingers, wondered how often the Delta had an opportunity for sex, because, damn, this felt good—something inside relaxed, as if lowering his guard actually involved a physical muscle. He knew why Hooch did it. Hooch made him relax, put him at ease, and he smiled at that thought.

Pushing Vadim's trousers down, Hooch finally came back up again. Getting out of the chair, he stood and offered another grin. Looking, watching, all the time, as he pulled the t-shirt over his head and threw it into the corner of the bed. Vadim shed the boots, socks, trousers and pants, removing everything, even the watch, as Hooch got rid of his own clothes, until they were both naked. Vadim met the Delta's gaze again, that deep, friendly, perceptive gaze Hooch used like conversation. Vadim sat down on the bed, still looking at the Delta's face, then lay back, pulled his legs up. "Back or front?" he asked. Hooch moved to the bed, standing close to it. "Front." He was merely half hard, as if the cocksucking was more of a business than pleasure. It probably was. Amusing. Much like Vadim had used cocksucking himself—to get a partner ready for sex.

"Okay."

Getting onto the bed, Hooch knelt, looking down at Vadim, gazing at his ass. Dark eyes intent. “Good ass.”

“Thanks.” Vadim stretched out, touched the wall with his fingers, then relaxed. Getting fucked face-to-face. He was up for that and he opened his legs further, bringing one knee to his chest. Enjoying the rapt attention, as Hooch focused on him with the same intent as if he disarmed a bomb, or held a target in his scope. It was a great feeling, taking up somebody’s mind like that. Hooch’s hand moved between Vadim’s legs, touching, gliding, the other joining the travels across dam and balls, towards the cock, but never quite touching, instead staying close to the hole, circling. Slowly urging Vadim, without pressure, to lift his legs, and Vadim raised them, brought them up without a second thought. He wanted Hooch, wanted to get fucked, and he stared at Hooch’s cock, which hardened under the scrutiny. It had a good size. He’d take that, and he assumed Hooch knew exactly what to do with it, probably had the same skill and control. His own cock twitched at the thought.

“Do it. I’m quite...ready.”

Hooch’s lips quirked up once more. “I wasn’t.” An odd admission, delivered with a strangely relaxed humour, which made Vadim pause, then smile. “Okay.” Maybe he should suck his cock, too, and Vadim considered it when Hooch turned to the side, reached purposefully beneath the bed and brought out a tube of Astroglide and a condom. Dropping both onto the bed, Hooch’s eyes narrowed slightly as his hands once more moved up the inside of Vadim’s thighs, to the knees, resting there, as if trying to feel the pulse through the muscles.

Vadim shifted his weight slightly, moved closer, then remembered the scar down there and wondered if Hooch knew what it meant. This scar didn’t look like an accident. He reached up for a pillow and stuffed it under his neck.

Leaning forward, Hooch lowered his head to leave a wet trail with his tongue, running all the way from between Vadim’s pecs to his cock, then lingering at the scar, as if he could read Vadim’s thoughts, making Vadim squirm and shiver, his muscles tensed lightly, playfully, and Vadim curved his back with the kisses. The tenderness endearing, Hooch so focused on him despite the fact he hardly spoke. Vadim couldn’t help but wonder what was going on in the Delta’s head, but couldn’t ask. He wouldn’t get an answer.

Hooch came back up, the miniature grin ghosting across his face until it settled in his eyes and tugged on his lips. Tearing the condom open like a pro, Hooch showed nothing but concentration, measured control, his cock remaining hard and unwavering as he rolled the condom down. The lube at hand, his fingers worked cool, slick gel into Vadim's ass.

Vadim lifted his hips, fingers entering him, warmth and coolness, strength and slickness, and he couldn't help that moan. Knowing he'd get fucked properly very soon, wanting this, from this man, too, while Dan was doing his shift. Vadim's breath caught at a clever twist of fingers, and he lifted his legs further, watching Hooch, expecting him to move on. He found another pillow and stuffed it under his ass, his hands then free to touch Hooch's arms, the tanned skin, dark hair, the whole man fit and younger than he was, and half grinning down at him.

Coating his own cock, Hooch focused once more on Vadim. Eyes fixed on Vadim's face, as if reading each and every reaction, feeding from every sound and breathless movement. He remained poised for a moment, just looking, concentrated, while his fingertips trailed back up towards Vadim's pecs, to circle, touch, then twist the nipples, which made Vadim groan, more eager now to get fucked, if that was possible. Just the skill—different to Dan, but with all the consideration he liked. With fucking respect.

One hand guiding his cock, Hooch began to enter with excruciating control, drawing another long groan from Vadim, making his legs and ass tense, only to get the most out of it.

Slow, so slow, with no urgency whatsoever, sliding in and filling, stretching, the feeling with the condom slightly different, but of course, made sense to be safe, even if Vadim would have liked to tear that barrier away, feel him properly, feel him cum inside, too, but they weren't there, yet. His own cock twitched at the thought, the intrusion, and that intense look of concentration on Hooch's face. Vadim suddenly laughed, semi-breathless just from the building tension. So careful, so deadly. His fingers tightened in the blanket and he bared his throat, unconscious, but the heat and being filled felt so fucking good.

Hooch's half-grin changed when his lips parted. If possible, his dark eyes became even more intense, more focused. Nothing escaped their gaze, and even when Vadim had loosened enough to accommodate his cock fully, he remained poised, deep inside. Making no sound, except for an expelled breath, with Vadim

breathing slightly faster, so alive in this moment, so much enjoying himself. Still, once more, hardly a movement except for the most minimal rocking, which nevertheless echoed deeply in Vadim's body, making him groan. Hooch's hands started to wander across the body beneath him. Nipples, cock, the inside of Vadim's thighs, all the way up to the arms and shoulders, taking his time. Some touches light, almost tender, others deliberately strong, surprising Vadim with that tenderness and consideration. That man clearly in awe with his body, fully focused on making this good for him, and Hooch seemed to have no intention of ending this treatment. And what about him? Did he delight in the control? Delight in the way his partners lost control? Vadim bared his teeth, grinned up at Hooch, felt trust and heat and a strange kinship to the American, and thought he got it. Hooch drank him up, feasted on him with all his senses. Seeing this man gorge instead of taking small bites and savouring...that had to be a sight to behold.

"You're killing me," murmured Vadim, and Hooch's head tilted slightly, listening with the same intensity with which he watched and touched, while keeping himself hard deep inside of Vadim's body. "But you...know that." Vadim reached up to Hooch's left nipple, twisting it, which seemed to actually surprise the Delta, whose parted lips twitched. Vadim grinned. "Let go, soldier. I...can guard your back."

All movement ceased, for one moment, as Hooch looked down, reading the flushed face beneath him. His hands travelled up Vadim's legs, resting at his shins, and pushing, slowly, without demand, but Vadim was quite willing to be opened further, allowing it to happen. Vadim's legs went up until they were pressed against his chest, allowing Hooch to lower his body, change the angle, until their faces were barely an inch apart, making Vadim groan again.

"Spetsnaz..." Hooch murmured, before a grin flashed across his face and he nodded. "Yeah."

And that was it. Vadim didn't have time to think about him being Spetsnaz, getting fucked by Delta, the old enemy thing paled as a kiss followed—another surprise—and as demanding as anything before had been controlled. Devouring, now, with taste, teeth and lips, where only Hooch's eyes had feasted before, with Vadim welcoming the lips, hungry. Opening up, his own kisses desperate, heated, answering a bite with a bite, a sucking, open-mouthed kiss with a groan and the same. Further heated up by hips moving in sharp, small thrusts, as if Hooch's body

had to get used to abandon, building up the heat as much in himself as in the other. Vadim could only use his hands, pulling, kneading, massaging what he could get, arms, shoulders.

Touching that throat, too, feeling pulse thunder underneath, arching his body to greet and take, but also give, working against Hooch, eyes every now and then flickering to the door. But they were safe. Safe with each other and in this place.

Hooch's eyes never closed, but he was still trusting Vadim to guard his back. The older man and seasoned soldier. A comrade in arms of an unlikely kind and a comrade he'd trust. Arching up, away from devouring Vadim's lips, to change the angle once more and find leverage once more. Vadim still tasted him, felt his lips echo with the other's, intimate just like the fucking, trust, need, hunger. Saw Hooch's muscles move, smelled him, primal and male, dust, testosterone, a smell that was Hooch, and he groaned again as Hooch shifted. Small wonder the Delta had taken this position—it gave him all the power over what angle, which speed, how deep. It wasn't about being face to face, it was, like everything, about control, about the ability to build the lust slowly and completely at his bidding. But Vadim wasn't complaining, when it all changed again.

Thrusting hard suddenly, fast, with an abandon that still contained control, as if Hooch's body was simply unable to give it up fully. No sound, except for harsh breaths, and those dark eyes fixed on Vadim. Face, body, movement, as he fucked Vadim with hard, rhythmic thrusts. The violence as controlled as the essence of the man.

Vadim opened his lips wider, panted, fought the sounds, but wasn't quite successful, because it felt so good and he didn't have to hide it, didn't have to pretend. It wasn't the barracks. Never more one of those quick, desperate fucks, he was free to make a sound. Perfect. Hooch read him and gave him exactly what he needed, how he needed it, but their deal had a sharp, barbed edge to it. Instead of losing control, Vadim had to fight to preserve some of it. Mutual control, mutual watchfulness when he wanted nothing more but to close his eyes and let go. Vadim tightened his muscles, felt the pressure build, but he wouldn't be able to cum, didn't want that fucking control, wanted to be swept away and it was impossible, and at the same time, his body was rapidly heating up, ready to explode.

Hooch's head snapped to the side, sweat dripping from his neck, chest and face onto Vadim. Swift glance to the door, his thrust slowed, but never decreased in intensity. Vadim groaned loudly, didn't want it to slow, wanted it to go fast, hard, frantic, brutal. Tried to cum, felt himself tighten, but couldn't get there. Slower, still, more excruciating, and Hooch's hands kept running from Vadim's thighs up to his ankles, back down again, until they moved from the abs to his panting, slick chest. Resting there, as Hooch lowered his head. Lips across Vadim's, murmuring hoarsely, "I take watch."

Vadim met the gaze, felt sweat trickle down his temple, his nostrils flaring at the smell, their smell, mingling, fresh, healthy, sweat. Watch. Double. Meaning. Watch his back. Watch. Him. Watch him lose it. It wasn't control, that Hooch was after, not all of it, it was again that feeding off him, that delight in watching him. And Vadim smiled, realising fully how much he liked being watched, see himself reflected in another man's dilated pupils. He nodded, pulse beating into his throat, and he reached to his cock, stroking himself. Eyes falling closed, entering his own space, leaving anything outside this room outside, the other man fully inside him now in so many different ways. And Hooch sped up once more, intensifying the thrusts, if at all possible. Rhythmic, hard and without the slightest attempt to hold back any strength of his body. Trained to kill, honed to survive, and fucking Vadim as if it was the last thing his body would do in his life. All the time staring down, not the smallest nuance in Vadim's face escaping him.

Vadim clenched again, deliciously tightening around that cock inside him, legs shifting to pull closer, demand, ask, invite, fist tight around him, filled to bursting, and, arching his back, he began to finish himself off. Tensed up, taut, tight, all power now focused on himself, that selfish need to cum, and it was easy, knowing he was watched. Easy to let go, groan as he fucked his fist, every motion intense and nearly brutal, as he found that edge and crossed it, cumming so very hard across his hand, stomach, chest.

Instead of becoming erratic, Hooch slowed when Vadim came, savouring every expression, each sound, never getting enough. Only then, when Vadim fell back, chest heaving to try and catch a breath, splattered with his cum, did Hooch launch into the last few short and extremely powerful thrusts. That was all he needed to cum, transfixed on the man beneath him, dark eyes almost closing with the intensity of his orgasm. Letting go as much as he could, but without a sound

except for noisy breaths, inhaling harshly. He shuddered during the come-down, head lowering, but eyes still open, still focused on Vadim's face.

Vadim's blue eyes in stark contrast to his flushed and sweaty face, nearly serene in their sudden and complete clarity. Truly seeing the man he'd accepted as a lover, and Vadim marvelled at the other man's expression; it wasn't openness or vulnerability so much as maybe joy, something amazingly human and untainted.

It took Hooch mere seconds to get himself fully under control once more, but he'd been there, had lost it as much as he'd ever be able to in such circumstances; had fed on lust and given in return. Lowering further until he could kiss Vadim once more, who kissed back, still amazed and also very lazy. Legs falling back down, while Hooch one-handed secured the condom and carefully slid out. Sweat making their bodies glide against the other's. Vadim pulled the pillow from under his ass and instead stuffed it under his neck too, then reached up to pull Hooch close, in the last moment not just pulling him close, but merely touch his neck in an invitation. The hint of a pull, hand running over Hooch's shoulder, as the Delta followed the invitation.

Rolling off Vadim, but lying close. Bodies touching. Resting after another glance at the door and a swift check of the room.

"Strange," Vadim murmured. "Feels...like I understand...when I really don't. Do I? No idea."

Nothing at first, then a dry chuckle, while Hooch's hand moved through the cooling cum across Vadim's body. Trailing lazily, until he reached the spent cock. Just lying there, covering. A strange and affectionate gesture.

"Spetsnaz, eh?" That was all Hooch commented, but when he lifted his head, a hint of a smile played on his lips. Seemed Vadim understood better than he was giving himself credit for.

"Vympel, even," said Vadim. Another act of defiance to flaunt a word that had been a secret once. Two superpowers outdoing each other in secrecy and creating killers. He stretched out, looked at Hooch, his body heavy and resting. A strange, tender feeling—'just sex' Dan called it, but Vadim had the odd feeling this would stay with him. "All told, you're much saner than I was at your age...I dealt with it differently. Both inside the barracks and outside." He reached for the water bottle and offered it to Hooch, who took a long draught, while Vadim wiped himself down with a piece of the blanket, and Hooch wiped his hand before it

wandered back to its resting place. Strangely possessive gesture, and yet there was nothing demanding about the man who had gone to his knees and sucked a cock after no more than a single word.

“Different culture, different traditions,” Vadim mused. “Much changed in the meantime. But I remember the pressure...that bone-grinding pressure. I wore that mask, and sometimes, I ripped it off and turned into a savage, screaming for blood like an animal. Ultimately, that was the only thing that kept me human.” He smiled at Hooch, feeling protective of this younger killer, hoped against hope Hooch would remain saner, never truly descended to that level.

“I don’t flip on the job.” Hooch shook his head, before he rested it on Vadim’s shoulder. At ease with the other’s body as if he had known the man for many years. “Just do what needs to be done.” He shrugged and the corner of his lips twitched once more, the indication of a grin. “Got my opportunities.” And Vadim was undoubtedly one of them. And Dan. And, it seemed, the kid. Vadim nodded, studying Hooch’s features. Opportunity. Yes. He’d been that and more, because Hooch had given so much more and, reflected Vadim, so had he. He inhaled deeply, a contented sigh, touching his forehead to Hooch’s. Assuming Hooch had time. He had. Dan’s shift would end in the early hours of the morning. Pulling a double, so he could meet Hooch.

Generous, hard-working Dan. “My watch...I have time.”

“Got a couple hours.” Hooch nodded before falling silent. He had used up his contingency of words, but he didn’t fall asleep. Those eyes of his didn’t seem to be able to close. Letting his hand wander across Vadim’s body instead. Slowly, deliberately, exploring with his fingers what he couldn’t have asked with words. Silently mapping another man’s terrain, and being completely at ease. As much as he ever could.

Vadim watched him, didn’t mind him touching the scars, reading his muscles, enjoyed in a relaxed, calm way how much appreciation was in that focus on him. His hand in turn touching lines of muscles, the round firmness of a shoulder, the stubbly skin of a throat, the small dark nipple on that sculpted chest, the navel that sat there, undisturbed, with no scar, no moonscape of scars and craters, smooth, inviolate, bronzed flesh. Physically in peak condition, with that disciplined mind, his sharp senses. What a soldier.

Hooch remained silent all of the time, while some of it his hand rested, but his eyes never fully closed. Until it was time for him to get up, take a leak and wipe himself down with cold water. He was still watching Vadim as he climbed back into his clothes. Watching, as he zipped up the parka, and watching, as he tied his boots. Still looking down at the naked Vadim on the bed, who'd stretched out comfortably, gazing at him. Hooch suddenly decided something and fished a pen out of his jacket, together with a dog eared note pad.

Scribbling down a few lines and numbers, he ripped the sheet off and put it onto the chair close to the bed. "Be in touch." Not a request, not even a question. A statement, but not a demand.

Yes. Dan had said Hooch would soon be on his way. Off to fight his country's wars. Vadim stood, stretched his legs by standing on his toes for a moment, then crossed the distance and took Hooch's hand, pressing it, his left hand briefly trailing the lower arm, touching the skin while returning the gaze. The barrier was back, the mask, Hooch would leave the room and be the man his comrades and superiors knew. "I don't have an address," Vadim murmured, almost as if to apologize. "But I will be in touch. Godspeed, soldier."

Hooch's hand remained in Vadim's for a while longer, the grip firm and steadfast. His lips curled up in his trademark miniature grin, before he nodded once. "Greet Mad Dog from me." His grin grew for a second, before his hand slipped out of Vadim's and he turned and left towards the door. Unlocking and checking. His back once more showing the constant alertness and concentration. Control, or his life would be worth nothing.

With that he left into the night.

Vadim closed the door, locked it behind the man. He was relaxed, well fucked, more than that. Something there. Something that was way beyond 'opportunity', well beyond 'just sex', but he couldn't place it, couldn't quite name it. He stretched his arms, shoulders, his back—getting fucked like that always put a strain on his lower back, just a twinge, but nevertheless noticeable.

He looked at the bed, thought he could rest, maybe sleep, but then he could rest in the tin hut in camp. He got dressed, checked the time. Two and a half hours until midnight. He'd get a good solid sleep in before Dan returned. He tidied up the room—ready for whatever encounter happened here next—then unlocked the door and returned to camp.

He showered, got himself a bite to eat, mulling things over, thinking about Hooch and at the same time vaguely amused the American occupied his mind so much. But he did. Vadim did a basic, short workout, largely based on isometrics, then had another quick wash, merely freshening up, shaving. Returning to their tin hut, he cleaned and packed his kit, the mindless routine of any well-disciplined soldier. Eventually, when everything was sorted, he lay down, face buried in Dan's pillow, with Dan's smell on it.

* * *

The sound of vehicles arriving in camp was later than usual. Almost an hour late, accompanied by the sound of tired voices. Dan amongst them, with additional duties as team leader, it took another half hour before his footsteps were finally heard approaching the hut. Stumbling with tiredness, he was caked in dust when he entered the hut. Still trying to be quiet, hoping to find Vadim there and not in the safe house, and hoping not to wake him, but damn, he was bone weary.

Vadim woke, pleasantly though, not a start, no terror, no fear. Just awake, knowing it was Dan. He reached over to switch on a small light, then stood up, yawning, as Dan smiled at him, hardly able to stay still without weaving, too drowsy.

"Hey, sorry Russkie. Didn't mean to wake you." Smiling, he wiped his eyes, leaving a streak of clean skin in the dirty face. "Was a shit shift."

"Yeah. My shift. Don't worry." Vadim helped Dan out of his red dust caked kit, and slipped into his camo trousers himself to walk him to the showers. The least he could do, and natural by now, one of them always helping, covering for the other, like Dan did for him. One of the perks of being in this place together.

"Had a good time?" Dan managed to get out before he was shoved gently under the hot spray of the shower. Eyes on half-mast.

Vadim grinned. "Better than yours, I can tell." Taking Dan's hand and squeezing some shower gel into it. "I'm afraid I can't wash you in camp. The rest of your team should hit the showers in a few moments." Well, his team, strictly speaking. They did arrive soon, all weary like Dan. They'd been funnier and wittier before the shift started, and Vadim nodded and waved and dragged Dan back to the tin hut, to towel him down and tug him into bed.

And Dan just followed like a puppet, standing with his head drooping as he was towelled down. When it seemed he had already fallen asleep, he suddenly raised his head, smiling tiredly, as his hand went to the back of Vadim's neck. "Was it worth it?"

Vadim met his gaze, felt almost caught for a moment, didn't quite know how to take it, how to understand it. Why did Dan ask? Worth it? Exchange Dan's work for his pleasure? Was it? "You were there with me, in that room," he murmured. "He sends greetings, too."

"No, that's not what I meant." Dan rested his forehead against Vadim's, still smiling sleepily. "And I sure as fuck hope I wasn't there with you. If it's a hot threesome, I'd like to be there in body as well." He chuckled and even that sounded tired, giving his voice a raspy softness. "Was it worth a goddamned double shift? Did you enjoy yourself? I bloody hope you did. Hooch's a good guy." He added, with another tired chuckle, "I think."

"He is. And I did." Vadim opened his arms and pulled Dan into a tight embrace. Kissing his neck, affectionate kisses that didn't lead to anything. "I enjoyed myself a lot. He's a strange guy. But it's good I got to know him a bit better." Getting Dan down onto the bed, covering him and still holding him tight, but Dan turned, until they lay face to face. Not saying anything for a long time, his eyes closed, breathing evenly. He wasn't asleep, though, his hand in the back of Vadim's neck, thumb occasionally stroking.

Dan opened his eyes suddenly, with heavy eyelids. "I do love you, Russkie. Just so you know." As if Vadim didn't, possibly couldn't know, and he smiled crookedly.

"I know. Fuck, I do, too." Vadim kissed Dan's forehead, his lips, felt that deep tenderness again, but without desperation, just acceptance, and calm. "Kept...thinking of you, comparing." He should probably shut up right there.

"Nothing like you, nobody."

"Don't do that." Dan shook his head, eyes finally succumbing to tiredness again. "It's alright, aye? Just enjoy what you can get as long..." and the crooked smile grew into a grimace for a second, "as long as you love me." Admitting far more than he had intended. An insecurity he hadn't known was there, and which vanished as soon as it had arrived and voiced itself. "Aye?" Murmured.

Vadim inhaled deeply. Like that was the price. Like being able—allowed—to do this meant he'd never grow resentful, and it never touched their love.

Liberty the price to pay for being able to stay together. Was that why Jean was still in the equation? "I wouldn't stop. Not even if..." He didn't want other men. Maybe that was one of the reasons why Dan had encouraged him yesterday, so he tried it, alone, without Dan involved. Encouraged to take a liberty he hadn't wanted. But now he did. Now he was glad for it. And Dan had others. Even if that itched—especially if it was Jean—if that was a liberty Dan needed, he'd accept that. They were both free. No marriage. No exclusive vows, no reason to turn down an opportunity. That last word was now so tied up with Hooch it made Vadim smile. "As if I could ever tire of you, stupid fuck."

Dan's smile turned into a grin, before rapidly drifting out of consciousness. "That's good." Murmured, he yawned and burrowed into Vadim, hardly able to string the last words together. "And you'll always be my cunt."

Vadim laughed, softly, barely more than audible breathing. "Sleep, Dan. Tomorrow is another day."

And we'll be together.

Holding Dan who relaxed into sleep, it was strange to hold one man and remember another, fondly. Like a comrade, with some odd kinship, an understanding he found hard to put into precise thoughts or words. Protectiveness played a role, recognizing something of himself—younger, and simultaneously less and more messed up—in somebody who used to be an enemy and now was just another fighting man. Part of a select elite of killers, impervious to normal moral standards. Dan had found a friend in Jean. Hooch very much felt like a friend to him.

1992 Chapter XXXVI—NAAFI

February/March 1992, the Persian Gulf

Dan pulled the towel from around his hips and threw himself down onto the mattresses, lit fag dangling from the corner of his mouth. His hair dripped water onto the blankets, with single drops rolling over his skin. Vadim put the shining boot down to marvel at the toned skin, and wrapped up the polishing kit.

“So,” Dan inhaled, “fancy a stint to my home country before heading to France?” Exhaling with a sound of contentment. He’d just come back from a particularly gruelling shift, and the first moment of relaxation was always the best. Right *after* wolfing down the food.

“Scotland?” Vadim had learned Dan did not really consider himself a ‘Brit’, and it seemed to count for something to call him Scottish or even Scots.

“Aye, Scotland. Land of the Brave.” Dan grinned, stretched his legs all the way down to his toes before flopping back into a boneless heap. “We’ll be in Europe anyway, and I’d like you to see some of the most beautiful parts of Scotland, especially the Highlands. Show you my peasant roots.” He laughed. “But you are my favourite peasant, Dan. Too much culture would spoil you, and make you moody, like I am.” Vadim rested his arms on his knees, studying Dan doing his best cat impression: lying there like he didn’t have a care in the world. He looked like he could revert from awake to asleep within a split second. “I’d like to see it.”

“Good, that means we’ll have a look at Edinburgh and instead of going to every bloody museum and historical site I get to enjoy the pubs, aye? And then, of course, off to the North. I want you to see the area I come from. It’s just a tiny village, though, nothing interesting.” Stubbing his cigarette out in a makeshift ashtray, Dan pulled a couple of pillows close and propped himself up.

Vadim smiled, but the thought struck him that, if it was such a tiny village, they would run into friends, acquaintances, and the whole host of Dan’s contacts from his youth, childhood, and whatever time he’d spent there on R&R. And his family, obviously. His face darkened at the thought and there was unrest, suddenly. “We should be subtle. About...us. About what we are to each other.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Dan’s brows furrowed, scratching his scarred abs.

“Your family. If we meet them...they don’t know you are homosexual, or do they?”

“Why would we meet my family?” Dan’s brows rose even higher, completely forgetting the second part.

“Do they still live in that village? Why else are you going there?” Vadim felt he was on thin ice, somehow. Of course a visit to the home village would mean a visit to the family. What else? And why not? It would be rude to not at least pay a visit.

“Aye, they do.” Dan shrugged, “but wasn’t exactly planning on staying over.” Reaching for a water bottle, he took his time unscrewing the cap. “Last time I saw my brother, wife and kids, was when I visited my father shortly before he died. I was on R&R from Afghanistan.” Tipping the bottle to his lips, he took an even longer time drinking. “It was right after the shit with the Muja corpses.” Wiping his lips, “that’s, what, how many years ago? Can you remember?”

“Five or six?” Vadim realised it was guesswork. He didn’t know. He didn’t want to remember, had pushed Afghanistan as far away as he could.

“Hmm...84? Hang on, I forgot, I actually went up again in 87, when I got out of the army. Went to see my brother to settle some finances. I think that might be about it. Makes it five years.” Dan shrugged, while Vadim didn’t want to think about when his father would die. He was old, even frail by now, but he might still have five, ten, or fifteen years in him. Years spent away from his x-daughter-in-law, with his brother and other relatives. But in essence, his ‘old man’ as the Yanks called it, was alone. A disturbing thought. “So, just that brother and his family? Are you not on good terms?”

“Sure I am, my brother has been dealing with my finances for years. He was the one who invested my money in property and sold the houses for good profit when I needed the cash.” Dan shrugged. “He’s a good guy, but I’m just not close with my family. Never got to see them regularly. Was always out and about, and figured it was a damn lot easier to stay away in case I got killed. Don’t want anyone to shed a tear, aye?” He produced a mock-cheerful grin. Vadim frowned, then sat down next to Dan, to run a hand through his hair. He hadn’t realized all those years Dan had been completely alone even at home. It made his guts clench. To refuse human contact only to make sure he wouldn’t be missed. He was speechless, shocked.

“Hey,” Dan poked Vadim’s ribs. “What’s up? Did you think I was doing the job, all on my own for all those years, with a big loving family behind me?” He laughed without humour.

“No, but I didn’t think it was that bleak. I thought there was...more for you.” More? Like a loving, supportive wife that watched his back and lived a lie? “More? What the hell would that be? I fucked bimbos, got pissed with mates. Stuffed holes left right and centre, that’s all I wanted and needed. Until...” He trailed off and mock-punched Vadim’s ribs, more a gentle touch than anything. “No one at home knew what I was really doing. OK, SAS and all that shit, and my father was bloody proud, but I was on secret missions, and you know as much as I do it’s better for everyone on the outside not to know too much. Safer. For them, for me.” He shrugged and smiled. “Besides, I got you, and now you’re on *my* side, I have all I need.”

“I was on your side for quite a while longer,” said Vadim with that rare, tender smile. “Only not official. And not quite exclusive, but I’ve been yours for a long time now.”

Dan smiled, leaned his head against Vadim’s. “But you’re mine now with all the bells and whistles, aye?”

“Official, blood and guts, breath and everything else.” Vadim lay back on his elbows, taking Dan’s head with him, looking thoughtful. “Do you want to visit your brother, then?”

“Do you think I should?”

“Wouldn’t it be rude if you didn’t? He’s your brother. Just, you know, catching up. I can stay at the hotel while you meet him and his family, it’s no problem.”

Dan laughed again, this time the humour was back. “There are no hotels as far as I remember. Just B&Bs. Guess they’d be looking funny at us if we booked a double room.”

“Then we’ll book singles.”

“Nope.” Dan shook his head, “no fucking way.”

Strange, Vadim thought, that it was easier to live as a couple in a mercenary camp than in one’s own hometown. Well, ‘easier’ as in getting beaten up, ambushed, constantly sneered at—until the point when one had actually proven one had more balls than the rest of them. “It’s no problem.”

“As I said, no fucking way. I’d rather not go back.” Sitting up, Dan studied Vadim. “I don’t give a shit what my family knows or not. I never told them I’m gay because it didn’t matter to me if they knew or not. Besides, back then I wasn’t quite...” Dan shrugged, couldn’t find the right word, “anyway, five years ago I wasn’t as much ‘me’ as I am now. So, we either fucking go as who we are, or we don’t fucking go at all.”

“Oh damn.” Vadim shook his head. “What would you say? ‘This is Vadim, my gay partner’?”

“No. More like ‘this is Vadim. My partner’. Bloody unnecessary, the ‘gay’ part, isn’t it?”

Vadim felt another wave of dread, just the thought of being exposed again, of seeing people—family—shocked, appalled and disgusted again. Why not simply let them live? Leave them their illusions? “Why hurt or disturb your family, Dan? For what? Why can’t we just keep a low profile?”

“Why the *fuck* would they be hurt by who I am? And what the *fuck* does that matter to them? I am fucking *me*! If they have a fucking problem with that, they can shove it up their fucking arses.” Dan had gone from mellow to extremely pissed off in a nanosecond.

Because. Everybody had a problem with it. Vadim remembered too well the hurt in his father’s eyes, the ‘how could we have helped you’, the guilt, the shame. He didn’t want to go through that again.

“It’s *their* problem, not mine. If you want to get through your bloody life lying all the way, then guess what, Russkie, you can do it on your fucking own.” Dan sat up, tense, dark eyes on fire.

“It’s just that it’s nobody else’s business, Dan.” Vadim stood, needed to take the brunt of the rage standing. Lying. No, just keeping a low profile. It wasn’t lying. Not technically. “Why do we have to go...out of our way to rub it in their faces?”

“What the fucking *fuck* do you mean with rubbing it into their faces?” Dan jerked, as if wanting to get up as well, but remained sitting, fists at his side. “I just am who I am, what the motherfucking fuck’s ‘rubbing’ about that? Every stupid dripping cunt can eat the fucking face of her fucker in public, but if I simply turn up with my partner, that’s ‘rubbing it in’?” Dan did finally get up, naked or not, he

was fuming with rage. “Fuck *you*, together with them, if that’s your idea of leading your life.”

Fuck you. Vadim’s words died in his throat. He knew he was being a coward and now he was ashamed of that, too. He’d either get all that disgust, or Dan’s rage. Dan was pushing him into it, but he just couldn’t do it. He’d be ashamed either way, for what he was, for what he felt. Degenerate. Coward. Broken. He couldn’t meet that bristling gaze, looked to the side instead. Standing there, feeling cold and numb. “Need shower,” he pressed out, trying to make it sound normal and reached for his shower kit. Retreating so fast that, yes, the fact it was ‘running away’ was really damned obvious.

Dan was still raging, even when Vadim had fled. Pacing the few yards in the hut, to and fro, while smoking a fag, and then another. Finally grabbing a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, he got his feet into trainers and stormed out of the hut with the third fag between his teeth and a water bottle under his arm.

Knackered from the shift, knees aching, but he had to get rid of the aggression that was eating him up from the inside. Couldn’t understand why the fuck Vadim behaved like such a coward, and what the fuck was bad about being together? If they’d survived the likes of Midge and his cronies, emerging victorious, what the hell was wrong with being who they were and being together?

He got himself into the gym, and ignoring the aches and pains of his aging body, he beasted it in a merciless regime, with more weights than he usually used, and many more repeats.

Vadim had a long, drawn-out shower, which didn’t quite relax him. He could still feel that dread in his body, a very physical reaction. Body so tensed up from it, he felt stiff and weakened. Eventually he returned, to find Dan gone. Jean hadn’t seen him, nobody seemed to have, and the Mess tent was also devoid of Dan. Left the gym. Vadim walked there and, sure enough, Dan, in the process of working his muscles so hard he’d ache in a million places tomorrow. Vadim inhaled deeply, stepped behind the bench on which Dan was lying, and took the weight from his grip when Dan started to struggle pushing it up. Apart from another guy in the corner doing pull-ups, they were pretty much alone.

Dan was looking up, straight at Vadim. Face drenched in sweat, he said nothing.

Vadim crouched near Dan's head, elbows on thighs, head lowered, speaking in a hushed tone. "I'm not ready for that. I...when I see that disgust, it still...hurts me. I can't just shrug it off like you can. They...called me all these things. The KGB. They said homosexual...activity would extend my jail sentence. They insinuated...things. Like I'd slept my way up, I enjoyed to debase myself by getting fucked, I'd raped my son...all these things. I'm not...not ready to face that kind of thing again, Dan. I'm not strong enough. I'm not like you." He stood, turning away because the dread was worse, had transformed into weakness, leaden weakness, the feeling and taste of defeat.

Dan did nothing, lay there, silent. Too shocked to the core to move a muscle. He hadn't...hadn't known...couldn't even make sense of any of his thoughts. Got finally up, felt more shattered than could have been caused by his workout. Every movement worth a lifetime of dread.

He still didn't say anything when he got up and wiped his face with the edge of his soggy t-shirt. Not even when he placed his hand into the small of Vadim's back. Finally a word, just one. "Come." Leading Vadim out of the gym and back towards the hut.

Vadim followed, felt the shame of being so fucking weak, but at the same time the touch had replaced Dan's rage. He didn't know what to expect, but he was glad Dan didn't shout at him now, was glad for the contact.

Dan closed the door behind them, and took a step closer to Vadim, until there was hardly a hand's breadth between them. He touched Vadim's face, tracing the cheekbone, along the jaw line, until his fingertips merely rested on smooth skin. "I am so fucking sorry." Quietly, while looking at Vadim. No rage now in his eyes, just a deep seated sorrow. "I didn't get it. I told you I'm no fucking brainy, just didn't realise I am such an idiot." His lips twitched, trying to turn into a smile, "forgive me?"

"Nothing to forgive, Dan. Nothing at all. I'm not...not ashamed of what I feel, but of what...I see in people's faces. I can't explain all that. I can't take that from them, that...disgust. It's better they think I'm...I fit in." Found it still hard to breathe, pressed Dan's hand to his cheek. "Maybe one day."

"Aye," Dan nodded and swallowed, "maybe one day." Remorse unveiled in his eyes. Too open, too readable, and too damn straightforward.

“Don’t. You are...good like you are. Your confidence, your balls.” Vadim tried a smile and touched his forehead to Dan’s. “We don’t have to visit your family. Maybe...hire a caravan, and we won’t even have to deal with any bed and breakfast owners. There are always alternatives.”

“I just wanted to be...” Dan trailed off and never finished the sentence, just shrugged, drawing in a deep breath. “Don’t know if I want to go. Better to just stay far away.” Shrugged again, “they say Sweden and Denmark are cool places. They marry in Denmark, you know. Blokes.” Kept shrugging. “I don’t ...” didn’t finish that sentence either and pulled his lips into a smile instead, before taking a step back. “Got to go for a shower.” Turning away. Looking for his towel and soap bag.

Seeing Dan so flustered hurt. It hurt because it was his fault, caused by being a coward. Konstantinov. The torturer was right. He’d never fully recover. Shame was one of their weapons. And now they had hurt Dan, too. “Dan, I...” I’m scared, I’m so ashamed, I’m so fucking broken. “... want to go. I want to see Scotland. And where you’re from.” Even if that meant being not welcome, worse, being hated and feeling another wave of disgust and disdain. “I...can face it. I will face it. It’s...alright.” And at the same time, he was scared, could feel himself shudder at the thought, because of the tension building up inside. “We’ll see, OK?” Towel and soap bag under his arm, Dan tried another smile while patting Vadim’s shoulder. “Plenty of time left, we just decide closer to April, alright?”

“Okay.”

Taking a step to the door, “I’ll see you in a bit. Just...shower, you know. Stuff.” With that he slipped through the door, closing it quietly behind him. Vadim nodded, wincing inwardly, wondered if he should keep Dan back, but didn’t want to be hysterical. Just felt that horrible thing, being helpless, having made a mistake, with no way to repair it, no way to make it vanish. He rubbed his face, restless and nervous, sat down on the bed. How was it that everything was alright when they were alone and together, like in one of those fucking caves, but somehow, once outside factors were drawn in, they screwed everything up?

Dan returned after half an hour, more than double the time he usually took. Bringing with him a pack of biscuits, one from the stash he’d been sent by the Baroness and which he hoarded in the other hut. Cigarette between his lips, towel around his hips, his smile was pretty much back to normal when he stepped through the door. “Fancy some bikkies? Was thinking of getting a brew on.”

“Tea?” Vadim checked the time. “Of course, tea.” Nothing in the world that tea didn’t make better, he heard Dr Williams say, and the thought of the older man was somehow reassuring. “Yes. I could start it? Or at least try and find milk.

“Aye, tea. Milk and sugar.”

“I remember,” said Vadim, lightly, glad he could get busy and do something, even if it was just making tea.

Dan threw himself once more onto the mattress, exactly the same way as before. He grinned up at Vadim as if nothing had ever happened, and Vadim served the tea and sat with him. Between biscuits and tea, Dan did not bring up the topic again, and neither did he later. Not a word. Not now, not through the night, and not the days after. Joking and grinning, the same irreverent, easy-going man as before, with the same appetite for sex and Vadim. The same arms wrapped around Vadim at night and the same body spooned behind him.

Vadim, however, didn’t quite forget. Wrestled with the thought, and how to bring up the topic again. And most importantly, when, and in what way. He carefully examined himself, as he always did, and expected for Dan to bring it up, but it didn’t happen.

One night, after sex, Vadim murmured: “We should book flights for Britain...and I should call Dr Williams. I was thinking we could meet him and then go by train up to Edinburgh. Rent a car, and you show me...your area.”

Dan had drifted off, sated to the bones, and utterly relaxed. “Hm? Britain?” Murmured, he had hardly caught half of it. “Weren’t we meant to go to Kiwiland when we’re done in this place?”

“It’s a long flight to New Zealand...I thought we’d stick around in Europe until Jean gets his ring on his hand.”

“Mmm...guess that’s right. Got a couple months to kill before our next destination. Heard rumours it’s going to be the Balkans.” Dan yawned, rolled onto his back and stuck his feet out of the blanket. Stretching his calves while his eyes remained half-closed. “Didn’t think you...we should go?”

Vadim shifted, adjusted his body, rearranged his limbs until his head rested on Dan’s shoulder and he could see the stubble on Dan’s throat close. “I’d like to see where you come from. Where...they make people like you.”

Dan chuckled in the back of his throat, which vibrated through Vadim. “People like me? You mean Scottish peasants, aye?” Twisting his head until he caught the tips of the short-shorn hair, kissing Vadim’s head.

“My favourite type...”

“But if we go, how do you want to do it?” Dan paused for a while, the topic wasn’t one he’d wanted to engage with again, but he was sated and mellow enough this time to give it another go. “Twin rooms? Mates do take twin rooms, cheaper that way. Because, I swear, on everything that is important to me, you won’t get me to take single rooms. I will *not* sleep in another room from you. Not on R&R.”

“Ah. Twin. Separate beds. That could work. And we’d just move the mattresses on the floor and still sleep together. I doubt we fit both into the same bed...not in case there’s some...vigorous movements going.”

“Or we just don’t have any sex but at least fall asleep, squeezed into one bed. You can chuck me out when I’m snoring.” Dan smiled. “And if we do go, we will lie when we’re in rural areas. Aye?”

“Aye.” That should work. Be careful where it counted and less careful where it didn’t mean a thing. “And regarding your family? Should we meet up at a restaurant and have a friendly chat?”

“There are no restaurants, just pubs, and I don’t think you’d quite fit into a Highland pub.”

“No?” Vadim raised an eyebrow. What *was* this place that it was so very peculiar?

“No. You’d be sticking out like a sore thumb.” Dan yawned and shrugged, he didn’t feel comfortable, but wouldn’t let on. Not this time. “I call my brother and let him know I’m coming, bringing a ‘mate’ with me, who happens to be a fellow merc and who happens to go to the same wedding of yet another fellow merc and mate, and who happens to want to get a chance of travelling round Scotland, so I happen to take him along.” Dan shrugged again, “but I warn you, I am a shit liar.”

“Dan, but we are comrades. Okay, we are more than that, but if we just stick to the official version.”

“The official version, Vadim, is that: We. Are. Lovers. So don’t start with that one again, aye?” Dan smiled to take the sting out.

“The *other* official version, then.” Oh fuck, he was starting to think in Doublethink. Doublespeak.

“Whatever.” Dan stretched his legs out once more. “I don’t want to discuss it, OK? I do what you want and I take you to Scotland as a mate and nothing more, but I just don’t want to talk about it.” Yawning. “And besides, it is time to sleep. Aye?”

Vadim nodded. “Yes. To sleep, perchance to dream.”

“Is that one of your depressing authors?”

“No, that’s the Bard of Avon. Old Bill. William Shakespeare, your one true national genius.”

“Oh shit, he’s the one we had to read in school. Romeo and all that crap. A balcony and a stupid bint making great literature? I tell you, that bastard was a sadist and I’d like to punch the guy for every dreadful hour we had to spend reading that bullshit.” Dan grinned.

“Really? Did it never strike you that friend of Romeo’s was quite in love with Romeo? And then Romeo falls for the girl?”

“Huh?” Dan rubbed his eyes, yawning again. “I can’t remember jack shit, but if they got it on, that Romeo guy and his friend, even I would read it.”

“As far as I remember, there’s some evidence that they did...Some hints in the text. I can’t quote it, but when I was reading it, I thought this guy—Mercutio?—was being very jealous.”

“*Hints*? Oh come on, Russkie, I don’t do hints. Give me full-on porn or nothing.” Grinning, Dan poked and prodded Vadim until he lay on his side and Dan could cuddle up. “But if you ever come across a good porn book,” yawning, “let me know, I’ll read it, even though videos are better.”

“You savage. I thought your favourite was the live thing?” Vadim’s hand moved to Dan’s flank, stroking the hip and thigh.

“Of course it is.” Nuzzling the back of Vadim’s neck, Dan grinned sleepily. “But sometimes a man’s got to wank. Easier on the system.”

“True.” Vadim’s fingers tightened on Dan’s leg. “I’ll let you recharge, then. It’s in my own best interest.” Chuckling lowly and relaxing against Dan, who’d already fallen asleep. He was pretty much awake, but would just try to sleep. Thinking, going through what had happened, retracing the day, the week, and then moving forward. Planning, as far ahead as he could. It still didn’t sit quite right

with him that Dan didn't want to talk about Scotland, but he respected that. Family was always a tricky business.

March/April 1992

Dan had promised Vadim he'd organise everything, but he otherwise didn't engage in conversations about the plans. He happily talked about France and the wedding, even about his worries regarding the best man speech, but Scotland was strangely off limits. They'd go straight to the Highlands, that was all he'd told Vadim. Stopping over in Edinburgh later, flying from there to France for the wedding.

When the day came, Dan stood impatiently beside a Lannie, his bag slung over his shoulder, waiting for Vadim. "We'll miss the bloody flight!" "Then we book another one." Vadim came closer, duffle bag slung across his back.

"And spend even more money? Bollocks! Get a shift on, Russkie."

"Relax. As long as the gate's not closed when we get there, we should be okay."

"Not my idea of a relaxing start to R&R." Dan grinned and slapped Vadim's arse before getting into the car.

Vadim gave a surprised laugh at the slap, which actually stung a bit, and he plonked down in the car. "Alright, alright." Watching Dan as he drove. "Like that would break the bank." "I got to watch my money. Remember the farm? I want to get that done before this body breaks down." Dan flashed a grin, but the humour wasn't entirely there. More tense than usual.

"I know, but we have my money, too. And if we can't afford the work, we put it back together ourselves. And besides, even if one of us gets fucked up, there's still the other. We don't have to worry about it."

Dan shrugged, but got them to the airport in record time, left the Lannie in the car park to be picked up by one of the mercs later, and they legged it to the terminal, where the flight was being announced.

"See? It's not 'last call to Heathrow' yet," huffed Vadim. Running, however, right next to Dan. "The gate's still open."

“But not for much longer.” Flashing IDs and tickets, they just about made it to the plane, where they threw themselves into the seats, catching their breath.

“Right.” Dan fastened his seat belt, “from Heathrow it’s change-over onto a plane to Glasgow, then straight up along the West Coast. I got a hire car booked for us.”

Vadim smiled. “We’ll take turns driving. Do we stay somewhere overnight or when are we expected where?” Pulling the seat belt tighter and stretching his legs, getting comfortable for the flight.

“Aye, we stay in Glasgow for a couple of days. Didn’t you want to have a suit made for the wedding? Besides, we’d arrive too late to drive up to my brother’s.” Dan turned his head and looked out of the window, staring at nothing while the plane began to move on the runway.

Vadim reached across the armrest and placed a hand on Dan’s knee and Dan turned his head, looking at him through the shades, with clear surprise. Vadim took Dan’s hand as the plane accelerated and finally lifted off. The land beneath them bleeding away and they were soon on the way to Europe. Scotland. Britain. The island nation that had taken him in. It felt odd, like a meeting with a stranger, even after Selection. He’d be walking around, not cloistered away in barracks, not training for any specific purpose, but actually encountering his adopted country. Not a mother—or fatherland, but a sanctuary nonetheless. “I’m actually looking forward to this,” he said, as if surprised by the thought.

“Are you?” Dan was still holding onto Vadim’s hand, the gesture a novelty, at least in public. Semi-public. “I didn’t think you were.”

“I’m curious. And it will be good to not wear camo for a while.” Vadim looked at him. “I think it’s a good kind of nervous.”

Dan was looking at him, even pushed the shades off his eyes. His expression entirely neutral. “Aye, but you told me you didn’t want anyone to know who we are. Are you still adamant about that?”

Who we are. Not what we are. Vadim frowned at the curious way to put this. What—answer: lovers. Who—answer: Dan and Vadim. How was the orientation thing part of the Who instead of part of the What? “I don’t know how they will react, that’s all,” said Vadim, feeling the dread again, but fighting it this time.

“I don’t know either.” Dan shrugged, kept looking at Vadim, but when nothing else was forthcoming, he shrugged again. “Alright, I’ll lie. Shouldn’t be

too difficult, even though I'm a shit liar. Am not exactly on intimate terms with my brother and his family, haven't seen them for a few years, but he does keep my finances in bloody good order."

Vadim nodded. "I'm sorry I'm such a coward," he said, almost tonelessly, again the dread replaced with shame. "It's OK." Dan drew in a deep breath, "guess I should apologise for being pushy. I know they fucked you up, but it's hard to fully understand what it did to you."

Vadim pressed his lips together, looking around for the bustling stewards who were just getting the trolley ready behind them. Taking the moment to swallow and keep his composure, while Dan squeezed his hand.

"But I don't think you ever *were* happy with being gay, aye?" Dan asked quietly.

Vadim inhaled. "That's not...an easy question, Dan. It's not as simple as 'yes' or 'no'. Did I...did I wish I wasn't? Yes, I did. There were times when I cursed it. When I wanted to fit in, to not be a target. When I...was ashamed. But that's always from outside. It's when they fuck my mind. When they tell me I'm a criminal for sleeping with men. A degenerate. My...the masseur once told me I should never believe them when they told me I couldn't win because of my feelings. That was good advice. He said I should never believe my feelings weaken me. When there's nobody else, just you and me, or just me, I'm not ashamed. It's part of me, I accepted it long ago. I know my life would have been different if I wasn't what I am," not who, "and it's certainly tougher, but I am not ashamed of you, or what I feel for you. It's what other people think of me, how they treat me for it, how they assume I'm a criminal for feeling the way I do. A limp-wristed faggot who slept his way up, another man's suka. That...is tough to bear. To see that contempt and disgust in people's faces. And I know I shouldn't care, but it bites."

Dan shook his head, opened his mouth to say something, but shut it again. Couldn't come up with anything to say, just kept looking and holding that hand. Murmuring something under his breath, while leaning his head against Vadim's shoulder. Didn't get it, couldn't understand, because he'd never felt like that. Ironical, really, that he, the gay-basher, who'd fucked himself through dozens of bimbos, to prove he was a stud and straight as hell, couldn't give a shit about anyone's comments or thoughts. But what did it matter. Arguing anymore or trying to

understand each other, wouldn't get them any further. Thus he said nothing and simply stayed close. Physical contact had always worked for them throughout the years, he'd simply have to cling to that as long as Vadim let him.

Vadim pressed his hand for a long moment and rested his head against Dan's. Hoped Dan would understand. Being gay didn't actually make him a happier or unhappier person. It didn't make him better, or worse. It just was. No reason to be happy about. Something like the blood type, or eye colour. "But it's good you're happy with it, Dan. Very good."

"Happy as in 'I don't mind it. It's fine. It's the way I am.'" Dan sighed, ignored the second steward, "that's the way we use 'happy' in English. Not running around ecstatically, shouting out to the world how deliriously happy I am because I am gay."

Vadim laughed softly at the image. "Okay. Then I'm happy about it, too. Most of the time, at least, unless some bastard mocks or attacks me for it."

Remembering, he thought he'd stood his ground against Dan, back in Afghanistan, before they'd stopped to try and kill each other. But then, there had been different rules between enemies.

"There will always be people talking bullshit." Dan shrugged, "at least we're not in the same shitty position those guys were in, I was beating the crap out of. Back in the bad old days." Finally acknowledging a steward when they came past for the third time, sitting up to get his drink and morsel of food. He stretched as best he could, before leaning back in the seat. "Well, at least I get to show you my country. Scotland. That should be worth something, aye?"

"Everything, not 'something'." Vadim accepted his drink and food with a nod towards the steward. Trusting Dan to make the decisions when they'd be in the country. He didn't expect any kind of trouble, but was looking forward to actually seeing the places that had produced somebody like Dan. Moscow would very much remain off limits, so Scotland would have to do.

The rest of the flight was spent uneventfully, with Dan either snoozing or gazing out of the window. He never tired to watch the endless sky and the clouds beneath, wishing himself back into the Afghan mountains, a place he'd probably never see again, even though he hadn't given up on it yet.

Landing in Heathrow, they had to navigate the moloch of an insanely busy international airport in an even more insanely busy capital city, and while they

were waiting in the queue for ‘EU citizens’, holding their identical looking passports in hands, Dan turned to Vadim. “Have you actually been anywhere in Britain?”

“Apart from London and the...” Vadim paused, knew he’d slipped up, but also knew he had to mask it well now, because, despite everything, he had no idea how Dan would react to the whole London episode from years back, “the little place, what was it called? Hereford? No.”

“Ah, yes, guess they shipped you to Hereford via London, aye? Wouldn’t surprise me, everyone seems to stop over here for everything.”

“All roads lead to Rome.” One day it might slip. One day. But not today. Ideally, never. Vadim had very few secrets, but this whole ‘go off to London and commit a murder’ episode—never mind the people he’d met there, Darren and...what was the other man’s name again? He couldn’t remember. He’d fucked him, had seen him bared and vulnerable and kind, but he didn’t remember.

Dan grinned, stepping forward to the glass booth and having his passport swiftly examined before making it through and waiting for Vadim on the other side, who was still amazed he could cross borders this easily. “I’m afraid I think London’s a bit shit. Too expensive.” He shrugged when Vadim turned up as well.

“It seemed very big, very crowded, and...not much else. But very free.”

“All big places are. Go to Newcastle, and shit, you can’t be freer than that. Or Glasgow, but you’ll see for yourself.” Dan chuckled, “good thing, though, we can fend for ourselves, because Glasgow is a dangerous old dump. Comes with the freedom.” They didn’t have to hurry this time and could make their way leisurely through the corridors to their destination gate, to catch their connecting flight.

“Want anything?” Dan pointed to a stall with hot drinks and sandwiches. “I could do with a cuppa, but coffee’s shit around here, as far as I remember. Never got a single decent brew in this country. Usually instant or stewed acid.”

“Tea? It’s hard to make tea entirely unpleasant.”

“This is the land of tea, I’d think even an airport will manage.”

As Dan was turning towards the stall, fishing for his wallet, Vadim touched his shoulder briefly. “And something to eat—something small, like a Snickers.”

“Snickers? Pah! You mean Marathon. Damned renaming of old favourites. But aye, I’ll get you one, might grab one for myself.” It took about ten minutes

before Dan returned. Balancing a couple of paper cups and a handful of chocolate bars.

“Couldn’t make up my mind.” Dropping an assortment of Snickers, Mars, Bounty, Milky Way, Caramac, Galaxy, Curly Wurly and—worst of all—a large peanut butter energy bar—into Vadim’s lap, then holding one of the cups out to him. “There you go. We’ve got half an hour if there’s no delay. Feast yourself on the airport’s finest.” He grinned and sat down.

Vadim took the cup and glanced accusingly at the energy bar. “Peanut butter...will haunt me to my grave, aye?” However, that was the first one he ate, while Dan kept laughing. He still liked the flavour and it worked alright with the bitter dark tea to wash the cloying sweetness down. “If you want any of these...be my guest.”

“Thought you’d never ask.” In the next half hour, Dan worked his way through all of the chocolate bars, except for the Snickers, which he waved in front of Vadim’s face as their flight got called. “Wasn’t that the one you wanted?”

Walking in front of him, like the proverbial carrot on a stick, while boarding. Vadim laughed. “I’d tell you what I want, but then we’d get thrown off the plane for gross indecency.”

“No Mile High Club for me?”

“What is that?”

Craning his head, Dan murmured, for once keeping his voice down, “it’s the ‘club’ of all of those who’ve fucked in the loos of an air plane, high up in the sky.”

“No. None of that for us. Not this time.”

“Damn.” Dan grinned and managed to sashay his arse in front of Vadim, to the mild shock of an elderly couple who’d already sat down along the aisle. Grinning, he got into the window seat, and the whole rigmarole of boredom started up again. At least the flight was mercifully short and they had barely time for a drink.

When they arrived, it was waiting, queuing, shuffling and waiting some more, before they got to their luggage. “I tell you what.” Dan frowned darkly, as they stood around the carousel, trying to spot their kit. “I’ll never fly anything but first class again. Civilian air traffic is shit.”

Vadim laughed. "It certainly has more leg room. They must have designed those seats for people who are five foot six the most."

"I thought it wouldn't matter for a short hop, but bullshit. Give me a Hercules any day." Spotting his bergan, Dan snatched it off the rotating band, closely followed by Vadim who'd spotted his and just checked whether everything was in order.

"Done? If we're lucky we make it to the hotel in time for dinner. I'm bloody starving."

"You are always starving, Mad Dog."

"Aye." Widening his eyes, Dan produced a face splitting grin while wagging his brows. "I might be forty-two, but I'm always starving. And I don't mean food." Overheard by a somewhat confused looking girl, he flashed a grin at her, before heading out of the baggage hall. Shoulder to shoulder with Vadim, who figured escape was the best they could do now, and walking unhindered through the green tunnel.

In the arrivals hall, Dan swivelled slowly around, until he spotted the hire car sign and right beside it the info about the airport hotels. It took quite some time, with all those people in front of them, but they finally had the keys for a car and information about the hotels surrounding the airport.

"I didn't book anything, figured it wouldn't be a problem." Dan held the brochures out to Vadim. "Pick one, anyone. They are all modern and probably crap, but it's only for one night. Ramada, Express or Holiday Inn?" Waving the Ramada brochure a bit higher than the others, and the place had three stars at least.

Vadim shook his head and confirmed the decision. "Make it Ramada. Even though it reminds me of 'Ramadan'. What a shit name."

"As long as we get some food I don't care." They found their car without trouble, a medium sized, plain and boring vehicle, nevertheless perfect for the journey, and drove the few hundred yards into the hotel parking lot. The reception area was bustling, but Dan strolled purposefully to the first available clerk, a pretty blonde girl. She had the broadest Glaswegian accent when she opened her mouth to greet them.

"Do you have a double room free?"

"Yes, of course, Sir." She pulled out her reservations list and checked the free rooms before looking up at him. "Would you please fill in the form?" Handing

the form and pen over to Dan, she acknowledged Vadim, who'd been behind him.
“And what can I do for you, Sir?”

Vadim needed several moments even to understand her—more guessing than truly understanding her question, and he was very close to acting as if he didn't speak any English, which would have forced Dan to jump to the rescue. Dan had ordered a double. Whatever he said that seemed inconspicuous was, at the same time, offensive to Dan. Vadim's jaw muscles tightened, and he could feel his heart beat. If they got kicked out here, there were more options. He only hoped she wouldn't get unpleasant about it. “No, I'm...good. He is booking already.”

“Oh...,” her eyes widened, looking from one to the other, and then she smiled. “But of course, that's no problem.”

Wasn't it? Vadim felt surprise, relief, and didn't quite trust the situation yet. He expected the hammer to fall. “Good. I mean, thank you.”

Dan had filled in the form, even though there had been a moment of tension, pushing the form back to her.

She glanced at it and nodded. “I hope you will enjoy your stay here. Breakfast is between 7 and 9 AM, and we have a licensed bar as well as a very comfortable restaurant.” Leaning across, she picked up a key, still smiling brightly. “Third floor, just take the corridor to the left.” She handed the key to Dan, who took it with a nod and an all too relieved grin.

Vadim gathered up his bergan and followed Dan to the elevator, which, thankfully, opened very soon and allowed them to escape into the private space of the small cabin. Glancing at the mirror, Vadim noticed he hadn't flushed—even though he would have expected to, the way his head was feeling.

“Well, that wasn't all that bad.” Dan smiled.

Vadim shook his head. “No, it wasn't. She...took it in stride.”

“Of course, she's a youngster. The times they are a-changing.” Dan grinned and leaned closer, to all intents and purposes about to kiss. Vadim glanced at the door, hoped it wouldn't open yet, and kissed Dan, too, couldn't really help it, wanted to, and just hoped the timing would be lucky.

His luck held and they didn't hear the ‘ping’ for the third floor before they'd moved slightly apart.

“Want to have a quick shower and then head into town for food?” Dan stepped out of the lift, “or a quick shower and a meal here, and then head into town?”

I'm starving, but I really do want a good pint of ale, the stuff you can't get anywhere in the world but the UK. Not that American bear's piss." They reached the room and Dan let them in. It was spacious enough, and while it was bland and meaningless, it would serve well for a night. The bed was certainly big enough.

"Just order the food to the room while I'm showering and it should be there when we've showered and changed. Saves time. I'm having something with meat or fish." Vadim set the bergan down and closed the door behind them. "Nice enough..." He undressed, headed to the bathroom, showered, all quick, efficient, washing the long flight off. It would be good. Different, but good. In the meantime, Dan got the food sorted, and was already stripped naked when Vadim came out of the bathroom. "Food should be here any minute." Stepping into the steamed-up room, "I'll just have a shower and a shave and we're off into town after grub. I got reception to get us a taxi in forty-five minutes." Dan's ablutions took even less time than Vadim's, if it hadn't been for the shaving. Twice a day, and it wasn't getting any better.

His hair was still damp when he came back out into the room to the smell of steaks with roast potatoes and vegetables, and a couple of beers. Vadim was just arranging the cutlery, having dressed in what amounted to shockingly civilian clobber—dark blue designer jeans he'd got in Dubai on their last holiday, a nice dark grey jumper, flat polished shoes, with his outdoors jacket expensive enough to fit the whole composition.

"Bloody hell." Dan threw himself onto the bed with a bounce. "You look like a GQ model, or Mr Gay 1992."

Vadim laughed and shook his head. "Keep the flattery coming, Dan. You know I have a weak spot for that..." Dan smirked, reaching to pull the trolley closer. They only had one chair and he was happy to leave it to Vadim. "If you're looking *that* good, then I better get you to dress me as well. After all, you packed most of my bag."

Vadim glanced at the bag. "I think the suede trousers. Judging by the weather, that might be just the thing for you."

"The what?" Dan had been lifting the lid off his plate, stopping in mid-motion. "I have *what*?"

Vadim smiled at him, the kind of satisfied smile that indicated one of his plans had come to fruition. “Oh. The dark brown suede trousers I had tailored for you on the basis of your favourite jeans.”

Dan almost dropped the lid, and if he had had any food in his mouth yet, it would have spluttered across the room. “You had *suede* trousers made for me? Can it get anymore faggoty? Fucking hell, I thought you were the one uncomfortable with being gay, hadn’t expected you to turn me into an uber-poof.” Despite the words and the righteous ‘outrage’, amusement was tugging at the corners of Dan’s mouth.

“Put them on and then we’ll decide how gay you look or don’t look,” huffed Vadim. “I think they are fairly subtle.”

“Aye, maybe, but don’t you think I’m too old for being a designer-fag?”

“Not for me. Or did you have a different audience in mind? Jean’s not here.”

“Jean would piss himself with laughter if he saw me in that.” Dan grinned, “but wait till I have my best man’s outfit sorted, if he laughs about that one, I deck him. Groom or not.” Dan finally put the lid down and picked up the cutlery. “Before I start eating, any more surprises? What am I going to wear on my feet, what on my upper body, and what on top? Eh?” Hardly able to suppress the grin.

“No, you’re free to choose based on the trousers.” Vadim took the lid and set it down on the floor.

“You know as well as I do, that I haven’t got a fucking clue, so you better give me a hand choosing the rest, if you want the things to go together.” Dan grinned and started to eat, shovelling the food inside.

“Of course.” The food was decent enough—probably another good reason to choose the best hotel in the available range. The steak at least was more than decent. When Vadim started to eat he noticed himself how hungry he’d been, the nervousness had suppressed the appetite. “I just like the smell of leather,” he said, somewhat innocently.

“In that case,” chewing then quickly swallowing, “why do we even bother with going out? We could just have a noseful of leather and fuck.” Subtle as ever, Dan washed his mouthful down with beer, grinning. “Besides, I like the glint and coldness of steel, but did I take any blades with me? Did I hell.”

Vadim laughed, but his body liked the idea, and the laugh was more husky than he realized. “We can always improvise.” He grinned, soon finishing the steak, washed everything down with water, then dug into Dan’s bag, finding the trousers, the shoes and the top. “Just put these on, then.”

Dan finished off his beer, laughing when he saw how deftly Vadim pulled the clothes out of the bag. “I knew it! You packed the whole outfit, didn’t you?”

“I plead innocent.” Vadim’s smile was anything but.

Getting up, Dan lost the towel and shook his damp hair. “Give us the kit, then, and you tell me what you think.”

Deliberately turning his back to Vadim, Dan bent down, presenting his arse, which got him another, now huskier laugh, while stepping into the leather jeans. The suede felt warm and smooth, gliding up his legs. They fit like a glove, and when he closed the zipper and button, they felt and looked like a second skin. Swiftly stepping into socks and shoes, he threw the long-sleeved top over his head and slowly turned around his axis. “Content?”

“Ah. I knew it. You manage to pull this outfit off.” Vadim stepped close, ran his hands over Dan’s leather-clad ass. Great idea. Fantastic idea. “Works for me.”

“I would have expected something better than ‘works for me’. After all, how many ex-SAS do you think you’ll find, who let themselves get dressed up like a Barbie doll.” He grinned, “or was that ‘Action Man’?”

“If I said you’re making me hard, we would piss off the taxi driver, Mad Dog Action Man.” Vadim laughed at him and pulled back. “Come on. Get your shoes and let’s go out. And keep that thought.”

“I’ve got my shoes already. Too distracted by my arse to notice, eh?” Dan laughed and snatched the jacket. Looking at it for a moment. “And where the hell did you get that one from? I don’t recognise it.” Slipping into the expensive outdoor jacket. Just as short as the top, and very definitely not covering his leather-clad buttocks.

“Same place I ordered mine. You warned me about the weather in the UK, so I figured these make sense.” Opening the door for Dan.

“You’re lethal in our Western consumer society, you realise that?” Dan shook his head, laughing. “Buying all that stuff no one needs.”

“Bullshit. We do need this stuff.”

Dan pocketed the key and they went down into the lobby, where the taxi had just pulled up outside. “Let’s see if I remember where to get pissed.” Dan told the driver to take them into the centre of Glasgow, getting out at the edge of Merchant City.

“Alright, Russkie, I figure we just walk along until we spot a suitable pub.”

“Okay?” Vadim glanced around and stayed close to Dan without actually touching.

Dan realised all too quickly he had absolutely no idea where he was heading, only vaguely remembering the city, and not having the faintest clue about any hostelrys. Walking on, the last thing he wanted was to lose face and look like an idiot. Stopping at the sight of a traditional pub that looked welcoming. The sign said ‘Bennett’s’, and it was otherwise fairly unremarkable. “What about this one? Looks good to me.”

“Sure. Take point, I cover your back.”

“It’s a pub, Vadim, or bar, or whatever you want to call it. I don’t think you need to cover my back.” Dan grinned, as he purposefully walked into the establishment. Heading straight towards the bar, where a friendly landlord looked up with a smile. “What have you got on your pump?” Spotting the 80 shilling before the guy could point it out to him, Dan ordered two pints straight away. “Doesn’t look too bad, does it?” Quietly to Vadim with a smile.

Vadim glanced around, seeing not quite the regular scruff he remembered from the pub in Hereford. Most seemed better groomed, and most were male. There were a few women, but strangely, these were sitting in pairs. And most of all, in a country where nobody ever made eye contact, the majority of the people in the room—that was, the men—eyed them with interest. In fact, he was pretty sure there’d been a hush falling over the room the moment they’d entered. “I sometimes wonder about your luck,” he said, suppressing a laugh. “What do you mean?” Paying for the pints, Dan handed one to Vadim before turning round to face the pub. “The music’s good, the patrons seem to be alright, the landlord’s a good chap, and the beer’s from the hand pump. I call that good luck.”

“Yes, quite. And I doubt any of the men will be going home with any of the women tonight.”

“Oh...” Dan finally clued on and grinned into the room, catching a few somewhat interested smiles in return, despite his scarred face and the look of a man

more dangerous than most. Or perhaps because of. Or maybe it was Vadim who got the reaction. “Best get ourselves a table then, aye?” Dan grinned contentedly and looked around for a seat in the rather busy pub.

Vadim scanned the room. “I guess we’ll have to share,” he said. “Or wait till some of the guys leave.” But it was early in the evening, still. He really had no idea how things would go. Only that if the girl in the hotel had the regional accent, he wouldn’t understand a word that was going to be said. But Dan was right: the music was good enough and put a little spring in his step.

Dan found a table with a couple of free seats on a comfortable looking bench. The guys at that table seemed friendly enough, and willingly shifted closer together when he asked if there was space. They had just about sat down, when the first of a barrage of questions started, right after an introduction of names. He hadn’t quite expected to be taken in within seconds, and grinned at Vadim with surprise. Gay or not, they were still Brits and Brits just didn’t *do* outgoing.

“You two from around here?” One of the guys asked, whose name was Martin, and whose accent was far easier to understand than the thick Glaswegian.

“Not really.” Dan took a sip of his beer, “we’ve just come from Kuwait.”

Vadim sat close to Dan, part by choice, part by necessity, and looked around the table, trying to work out the rules. Meanwhile, he tried the beer. Not something he’d ever really get used to, he preferred hard stuff to get drunk, but it was drinkable. “Through London,” he added.

“Aye,” Dan nodded, and downed half of his pint.

“Kuwait? Are you businessmen?”

Vadim shook his head. “Soldiers.”

Dan grinned into his pint glass when he heard an audible intake of breath. “Well, not anymore, technically. We were. We’re mercenaries now.” It all came back to him all of the sudden, the way he’d played the girls, back in the day, and he added with a gesture of his scarred hand, “Vadim was spetsnaz, Soviet special forces, and I was SAS.” Smiling innocently as if he didn’t notice the reaction.

“You’re taking the piss!” One of the guys exclaimed, but the way he leaned forward it was more than obvious how he wanted this to be true.

“Nope.” Dan placed his hand on the table and tilted his head, so the scar in his face became more prominent in the light, “or do you want us to show off more of our scars?”

“Uhm...” said one of them.

Vadim looked between them and thought, how strange, that did draw instant reactions from pretty much the whole table. The mix of awe, incredulity, and, he'd swear, interest. The men were looking at Dan's scarred hand, and they apparently did believe. He laughed softly, not quite believing this himself. Suddenly oddly comfortable as Dan grinned at them, a broad, sharp grin that wasn't too far away from Dan's whole tiger thing. He shed his jacket, enjoying Dan's confidence and predatory glee. To him, the strangest thing was the fact there was no hiding. Just by being in this place everybody knew they were gay, and everybody else was gay or looking for gay company. Vadim looked into the faces and wondered who was seeking what. “Aye, we have the scars to prove it,” he acceded, pulling the jumper down a little at the collar, to bare the old burn scar for a moment.

“And that, actually, is mine.” Dan said out of the blue, earning himself some more stares. His predatory grin increasing in sharpness. “What, you don't believe me? Want to see the scar where he shot me in the shoulder?”

There was a gasp and one of the guys slowly moistened his lips, while another found his voice. “You really are taking the piss now.”

“Am I?” Dan's brows rose into his hairline. “Since when were SAS and Spetsnaz friends in the last decade?” He leaned forward and pulled the neckline of his top down as far as he could, revealing a glimpse of the bullet scar and faint lines of some of the others, before he sat back.

The same effect again—more awe, and more interest. Vadim was sure they would have free pick amongst the table if Dan kept this up. They probably already were free to choose. Likely, all they had to do was point at a guy and say ‘You’. He doubted there would be more than a second's hesitation. “Let's say, the Cold War wasn't quite so cold for the two of us,” he murmured, drawing a nervous laugh from the guy called Martin.

“It's a dangerous game, fucking a special forces soldier.” Dan commented, lighting a fag.

“Not if he's tied up nice, eh, Dan?”

Dan's grin widened, pulling in a lungful of smoke. They'd never played this game together, had never played *any* game in fact, and the effect was like an aphrodisiac. “Aye, or a blade on his throat or a muzzle in his back, while getting

fucked close to patrol.” He showed his teeth in a sharp grin, while another guy, who’d introduced himself as John, was turning suspiciously red. Vadim, too, felt his guts tighten; yes, that fuck. That near-rape, that thing that could have got Dan killed, and him disgraced. Oh fuck. The memory never failed to arouse him, and he was lost for words. Their intimate history now teasing complete strangers.

“And the garrotte ensures there’s no screaming,” Vadim added, helpfully.

“You’re not...making this up?”

“You want me to *show* you?” Dan dropped his voice to a dangerous huskiness, and the guys were visibly torn between yes, please, and no, no, just a joke. Haha. Shocked, but completely enthralled.

“Show...what?”

Dropping his voice even further, Dan let the smoke escape his nostrils before he leaned close to the guy who’d asked. “What it’s like to meddle with special forces soldiers...”

Met with a wide-eyed stare and a very visible gulp. “I...”

“You what?” Dan smiled with all the innocence he could muster.

“I...”

Dan turned to face Vadim, dropping his hand in his crotch, without the slightest attempt at hiding as he briefly stroked Vadim’s cock. “Don’t think he knows what he wants, hm?”

Vadim saw attention now on him, on the way Dan touched him, how very visibly Dan aroused him. He wanted to be back at the hotel now, fucking, getting fucked, as brutal as they both could manage, celebrate the very thing that aroused the civilians—their fucking deadliness, the fact they’d spilt each other’s blood. His lips opened, to say something like that, let’s get a taxi, but he couldn’t think that clearly anymore. If Dan kept this up, they’d end up as the centrepiece of a gay orgy. He bared his teeth in a fierce grin and leaned in to bite Dan’s neck, hard enough to sting, rolling the muscle between his teeth. Dan sucked in his breath, then tilted his head, allowing a view onto the vicious bite as well as better access. All eyes around the table were fixed onto them,—attention growing all around. “Guess we are not...” briefly closing his eyes, “in the right place for this...” murmured, not that he had the faintest idea what the right place would be, but the way he felt right now, a comfortable pub was not it.

“You could...” Martin again, clearing his throat, “try Club X, the only gay club in Glasgow, but...” he never finished his sentence when another guy, who hadn’t said anything but his name yet, finished it for him.

“Or you could come with us. Martin and I live quite close.” Gordon’s voice sounded nervous.

Vadim turned his head, Dan’s flesh only then slipping out from between his teeth, which had to sting, but Vadim could feel what effect that had on Dan. Could see it in his eyes, the way he breathed, the way Dan opened his legs. Pushing them apart. Looking at Martin, who had a rather plain face, but looked fit, and at Gordon, who did have good features, a fresh, manly attractiveness that was probably owed to good diet, exercise, and a healthy dose of vanity. “Sounds more interesting than our hotel room,” murmured Vadim, in Russian, by way of speaking code. “Do you want them, tiger?”

Dan kept looking at the two men, not Vadim, answering in Russian, “I want them tied up and sweating, on their knees, and begging for my cock.” And fuck, he didn’t have a clue where that had come from, but didn’t give a damn either. “And I want you to watch me fuck them,” stubbing out the fag, he drew in a breath. Turning his head to glance at Vadim, then back at the others, still in Russian, “and then I want them to suck you off while I fuck you.”

Vadim stared at him, at that crude, unashamed lust. Dan’s coarse Russian, very much how a soldier would use the words, went straight into his guts, a knife that aroused him, badly. It suddenly became ironclad, not just a possibility, no longer a game. This was moving into dark territory, and part of him felt the heat rise, as he just nodded, then turned to the men. “Good,” in English. “But we do play hard.”

Martin’s eyes had gone bug-eyed and he didn’t say anything at all, while his mates stared at him. Gordon, though, nodded, albeit nervously. “We don’t know either of you. You could be crazy killers.”

Dan flashed a grin that was far closer to insanity than humour. “We *are* killers, just not of guys like you and Martin. We’re killers because it’s our job, and if you are worried, why don’t you take your friends with you.” Gesturing across the table, the others visibly cringed. None rose to the challenge, but every single one of them appeared tempted.

“I thought you liked mercenaries because they *aren't* safe,” said Vadim. “As we’re not wearing the camo, that’s really the only reason, isn’t it?” He leaned in. “If you want the real deal, it’s without in-built security. It’s risky, but so’s crossing the road.”

“So, what do you say? Still up for it?” Dan’s dangerous grin was back, before he emptied his beer.

Martin nodded, quicker than Gordon, his cock had made the decision for them.

“OK.”

“You got booze?”

Gordon nodded, “there’s an off-license on the way.”

“That’s it, then.” Standing up, Dan took his time with the movement, until he stood to his full height. He was still wearing the jacket, but it only enhanced the breadth of his shoulders and the solid state of his body. Not a gram of fat, not anywhere, just muscles. “Hope you don’t mind scars...” he flashed another grin, before he slipped out of the bench. “Nice to meet you.” To those who stayed behind in silence, and who only nodded.

Vadim gave them a nod, thought that stunned silence was part frustration, part envy, part debating whether they should join, but he assumed Dan had just steamrolled the whole lot so badly none of them would find his balls before they were out of the room. Almost light-headed at how simple this was, meeting up, making people hard, and then going to somebody else’s home. The one time that had been similar he’d acted like a bloody beginner. Darren had found him pretty much like a lost puppy, but he had been weakened by the whole shit. By falling in love. Now it was Dan and him, on the prowl. He let Gordon and Martin go first, slipped into his jacket and murmured: “That was fast...I’m only glad we did manage some food before we went out.”

“Just pissed off I didn’t get my pints.” Dan grinned, looked everything but pissed off, horny instead, with that glint in his dark eyes Vadim knew too well. The edge was back, the old Dan, the man who fucked at knife point. “What about pints later?”

“If we get back before last orders at 11, I’ve done something wrong.” Dan grinned shark-like, before heading out after the guys.

Vadim grinned back, the situation really getting to him, but above all, Dan's recklessness, his pure balls to go through with it. Two strangers. He walked behind Dan and gripped his ass on the way out, kneading the firm muscle, which made Dan slow down, allowing some time, before they stepped into the street.

Martin and Gordon were waiting for them, hands in their pockets, jackets zipped up, braving the miserable cold and damp of Glasgow in late March. Gordon nodded at them, taking the lead. "It's just about fifteen minutes away on foot. Is that alright?"

Dan bared his teeth in another kick-ass grin. "Ask me to march twelve miles with a sixty pound bergan on my back and I might complain. This here is a doddle."

"Well, this place isn't the Afghan mountains," Vadim added, mostly to hit the same spot as Dan had.

Dan nudged Vadim when Martin's eyes went wide once more, but the guy said nothing. Seemed the soldier fetish went deep, and Dan was determined to find out what that entailed. How well would they obey an order?

They went onto their way, saying very little, with an awkward silence hanging between Martin and Gordon, while Dan just grinned and walked close to Vadim. Suited them well, the lack of attempts at conversation. Stopping over at an off-license a couple streets further down, they stocked up on booze, then went on until they entered one of the typical Glasgow streets with impressive turn-of-the-century buildings, boasting high-ceilinged tenements and granite fronts. Stopping on the steps in front of the entrance, while Martin fumbled with the keys.

"Been living together long?"

"A couple years," said Gordon. "Martin moved in when he came back from the States."

"Does that mean I'm getting to fuck another Yank? My last one was a jarhead." Dan grinned.

"Uh, no, he'd just been working there for a while," Gordon said, when Martin still didn't manage to get anything out.

Up the steep stairs, finally, with worn steps that betrayed age. The first floor flat had the high ceilings that the building had promised, and Gordon led them through into a large living room that had a fireplace—long since abandoned

in favour of modern heating, the space now filled by a large plant with leathery, shining green leaves that stretched as far as the walls on either side.

Dan stepped inside and shed his jacket. The place was warm enough, but definitely not overly heated. Looking around, he watched Gordon switch on some low lights and Martin busying himself in another room, which seemed to be the kitchen. Gordon was holding out his hand to take Dan's and Vadim's jackets, when Dan went straight to the point.

"So, what is it you want? And do you both want the same?"

"I..." Gordon hesitated, glanced over to the kitchen. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" Dan raised his brows. "That smells of bullshit. You got us here, after all, and it seemed to me you knew damn well what you wanted, back in the pub."

"It's just...we haven't done this before."

"What, getting fucked by strangers?" Dan flashed a grin.

"No, this." Gordon moved his eyes from Dan to Vadim. "A couple. And... guys like you. Soldiers. Mercenaries." He shrugged. "Shit, this whole thing is a fantasy of mine, and now you're here, I...don't know."

"And it's too much in reality?"

Gordon shrugged his shoulders, somewhat helplessly, but not agreeing either.

Vadim sat down on the couch, watching Martin bring in a tray with pint glasses of beer and a four-pack of red McEwan's export cans under his arm, looking up in surprise at the exchange. Surprise, or nervousness. Vadim didn't actually want to calm the guy down—it seemed very much like it was the danger that was attracting them. The not knowing, with plenty of things going on in their heads, probably their history as well, the things they did in bed and that fascination for soldiers. Vadim leaned back, one arm on the back of the couch, thinking about what Gordon had said, then nodded.

"Gordon." Finding that speaking somebody's name often put them at ease while also making them listen. "Question is, do you want the same thing? I know Dan, I know what he likes. That's all experience. We don't have that with you, so we need to know what you like. What you want." He looked up at Dan. "As Dan knows what I like...as you guys know what you like. If we're too much, I get Dan

back to the hotel and no hard feelings.” He laughed. “Well, in a manner of speaking.”

Dan grinned at that, surprised when it was Martin who answered, while he was putting the tray and the cans down. The quiet one turned out to be the tie-breaker. Again. “Yeah, we do both pretty much want the same.” Standing closer to his partner, “we do a lot of role-playing, to keep the sex interesting, you know. And we switch, but, like, neither of us is really a dom. So we met someone in Club X, just once, and that guy was into dominating, so he did it for us.”

Switch, thought Vadim. Back in the world of confusing concepts, top, bottom, switch. And the thing Darren had called him. ‘Prime slave material’. “And?” he asked, curious.

Martin shrugged, “was alright, but...”

“But?” Dan couldn’t help but grin at Martin’s American way of phrasing things, reminding him of Matt and—if he talked—Hooch. Not a bad thing being reminded of either of them.

“Not quite the ‘real’ thing?” Gordon finally found his voice again.

“That’s easy, then. Tell us about your fantasies. Tell us about the ‘real thing’.” Dan took a glass and downed almost half of his pint. Not bad for a canned beer.

Vadim left the beer on the tray for the moment, interested to hear these strangers’ fantasies, but didn’t want to stare. Dan’s typical way to just barge ahead. There was no question really who’d be the ‘dom’ in this game, and, if he was honest, he really wanted to see that, wanted Dan to run this. He studied the bodies, both fit and trim for civilians. Groomed, better than the average of what he’d seen of British men so far.

Gordon actually managed to turn beetroot red and said nothing, while Martin quickly went for his pint and buried his face in the froth. Dan waited for a moment, but when nothing happened, he finished his pint, put the glass back onto the tray, and in one swift motion pulled his top over his head and threw it over the back of the sofa, then sat down beside Vadim, grinning. Met by two sets of eyes, staring at him in what seemed either shock or disbelief at the deeply scarred but perfectly honed killing machine, with its history and purpose written all over it. “Still waiting...”

That did it, Gordon finally opened his mouth. "OK." Muttered, still staring at the body before him. "Shit." He took his pint and sat down on one of the comfortable chairs, opposite to the sofa.

"No worries. Chances are, we've already done it," said Vadim, softly, feeling Dan's skin warm and close.

"Guess we don't get what we want if we don't tell, aye?" Laughing nervously, Gordon took a few mouthfuls of beer, while Martin perched on the armrest of his chair. "We've been talking about this, trying to do it, but when we play together, it always means that one doesn't get what he wants." Another mouthful of beer, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "And what we want is not to have any control. We want to..."

"...get fucked. Be made to suck." Martin continued.

"And we want to be tied up. Helpless." Gordon finished, while Dan was leaning closer, drawn to the words and the images they conjured.

"Our favourite scene is playing prisoners." Martin added after finishing his beer, and Gordon nodded. "Can you do that?"

Vadim leaned in to Dan, murmuring into his ear. "Good choice, these." He stood, liked the eagerness, the courage of these guys offering to throw themselves at the mercy of complete strangers. Mercenaries. Killers. "Dan is good at the prisoner game," he said, smiling. "Entertained me for a week or two, up in the Afghan mountains."

Dan looked at him, without saying a word, but with barely disguised surprise. Vadim slipped his jumper off, tensed his chest and abs, smiling at Dan. "Only, back then, he didn't take advantage of that Soviet he'd caught. I still think that was a bit of a waste." Smiling, part mocking, part tender.

"Well." Dan caught himself when he saw the awed look on the two guys' faces, as they stared at the perfectly chiselled body. Smooth, with hardly a scar except for the burn mark in the hollow of the throat. Dan stood up as well, placed his hand on Vadim's shoulder.

"At that time, twelve years ago, I was more into torturing the Commie bastard." With light pressure getting Vadim to turn around and present his back.

He didn't know which of the guys let out a shocked "shit!" and who was the one who inhaled a hissed breath, but both of them, when he turned to look, were moistening their lips and unable to take their eyes off the scars on Vadim's

back, while Vadim felt it surreal his old scars would have that effect. And Dan's hand on his shoulder felt good. Strong, firm, a commitment and a trust that would never be touched by anything.

"You did that?" Martin could hardly get the words out.

"He did. Hard to explain the scars when I managed to return to my side." Vadim glanced over his shoulder. "And I wanted him even then, the fucking bastard." Feeling the memory heat up his blood again, the memory of torture, of offering his body to appease the enemy. Well, at least he wasn't the only one who was horny because of these old stories. Their faces told the truth. Nice, uncomplicated truth.

Dan turned him around again, stepping half behind Vadim, only to grope his arse, grinning predatorily, and Vadim tensing, pressing slightly against him. Ready for anything, Sir.

"Helpless, you said. Do you have something to tie you guys up?"

Gordon nodded. "We...have toys."

"Toys?" Dan's brows rose. Fortunately, his question wasn't taken for the ignorance it was, but the cue for Martin to jump up.

"I'll go get them. They're...in the bedroom." Vaguely pointing towards another door, reluctant to take his eyes off Dan and Vadim.

"OK." Dan nodded, not having a clue what on earth 'toys' meant, wondering if they were going to be presented with a set of Action Men. That thought made him grin, but he soon forgot the funny side when he was met with a look in Gordon's eyes that was so hungry, Dan could almost taste the need on his palate. He suddenly had an image in his mind, which made him lean over Vadim's shoulder, hands busy opening Vadim's fly.

Vadim breathed deeply, hands motionless at his sides, being bared and presented. Fuck. And how much that aroused him.

"You want to get fucked. I assume you got condoms, lube, and get yourselves cleaned out first." Dan's cock hardened as much at the memory of a fist up his arse, as Vadim's cock did, freed, in his hand.

"Aye," said Gordon, staring at Vadim, who struggled to not speed things up by demanding anything. Anything more. Gordon left for the bathroom. Dan was stroking Vadim lightly, leisurely, when Martin returned with a large wooden box, unsecured, and set it down on the living room table, right next to the cans of beer.

Eyes on Vadim's cock, Martin didn't do anything for a moment, before opening the box and presenting Dan with the 'toys' inside, looking up with an eager expression.

Dan grinned briefly, "I will take a look. You better get into the bathroom, your partner's there."

Martin nodded, visibly swallowing, before his eyes were once again on the way Dan slowly stroked that cock, and how Vadim's smooth, pale skin seemed to glow in the low light.

"I want both of you naked when you return."

Martin nodded again, tore himself away from the display, and left for the bathroom. The sound of water running and loo flushing was heard for a long while thereafter.

"Hmmm..." Dan smiled at Vadim when they were on their own, and he stepped in front of him, suede clad crotch pressing into Vadim's cock, which made him inhale, deeply.

"Oh fuck." Vadim reached for Dan's hips, pressing him closer for a long moment, just the feeling of leather was good.

"Best have a look at the toys, then, won't we?"

Dan let go of Vadim, about to step to the box, when he turned back. "And you better get naked yourself, aye?"

Vadim glanced over towards the bathroom, unsure what his role would be. They hadn't negotiated that. But then, they didn't need to negotiate. He looked at Dan for a long moment, who smiled at him, and trusted that Dan wouldn't go too far. Whatever went on in his head. He sat down, shed the shoes, socks, jeans, underwear, piled it up neatly, while Dan went through the toys. "Holy shit." Dan let out under his breath. "I've never seen gear like that."

Pulling out restraints, leather cuffs, harnesses, leather straps with hooks, buckles and metal fastenings, collars with heavy buckles, some strange clamps with what appeared to be weights, something else that made no sense until he turned it over a couple of times and realised they were two gags with black silicone mouth bits and holes in them for breathing. Blindfolds and metal cuffs, some smaller buckled gadgets that made no sense to him until he figured out what the metal ring was supposed to do, and a whole arrangement of dildos and butt plugs.

Vadim watched him, but got the impression whatever would happen, Gordon and Martin had, in their own ways, a few experiences more than they did.

“Holy fuck.” Dan turned to Vadim, the assortment laid out on the table. “I think I missed something over the years.” Holding the small metal-ringed leather straps up. “And I assume this is a cock ring, aye?”

“How should I know?” Vadim gave a short laugh. “Faced with all this stuff, I’m completely innocent.” In Russian, though, to not allow their hosts—sex partners to be—an idea that neither Vadim nor truly Dan had a clue what they were doing. He picked up something that looked like it belonged on wrists: soft leather restraints that could be connected with metal rings and carabiner hooks.

“Innocent.” Dan commented in Russian, switching fluently to English, “aye.”

He grinned. “Any idea what this is for?” Holding up the clamps.

Vadim took them from his hand, examined the pressure with a finger, noticed the blunted edges, like they were intended for something tender. He nodded. “I know what I’d use them for. It’s a pair—two.” He glanced down at his chest to give Dan the idea.

Smirking, with too many teeth on show, Dan took the clamps back and carefully placed them on the table, then returned some of the things to the box, including the collars, and kept an assortment of restraints, the cock rings, and the gags on display. He was exponentially fascinated with the dildos, keeping all of them out on the table.

“Time for another beer before they return.” Opening a can, Dan poured himself a pint after glancing at Vadim’s glass, still untouched. Patting the seat beside him, he sat back on the sofa, enjoying his second pint as Vadim sat down next to him, touching his thigh, hip, arm, shoulder. Dan leaned closer, letting his hand run over the smooth skin of Vadim’s thighs, then groin, up to the chest, with Vadim’s face twitching as if he was trying to fight the lust at the touch, tried to hold back. “Will you do what I tell you tonight?” Dan murmured with growing huskiness, “or will you want to be my ‘partner’?”

Vadim shook his head. “I have...no idea.” Prime slave material, he heard Darren again. How weird that it came back up and kept echoing in his mind. “What...would turn you on more? I think I could do either.”

Dan leaned closer, lips and tongue travelling along Vadim's shoulder, neck, towards his face. "Are you mine?" Question answered with question. "I...am." Vadim turned enough to kiss Dan. Deeply, passionately, just to show he was getting hungry for it, the touches and images keeping his lust on a simmering level. Hands running across Dan's naked chest, arms, to his powerful neck, the wild hair. "I...will do what you tell me," he murmured into Dan's ear. "Whatever that is."

Dan smiled against Vadim's skin, no words necessary, kissing his way to Vadim's lips, deeply once more, possessively. He was still kissing him, half leaning over Vadim, when the bathroom door opened and the two guys came back out. Naked, freshly showered, and sporting hard-ons. Stopping and staring at the two men on their sofa.

Vadim turned to look at them, old soldier reflexes demanded the need to respond to a change in his environments. He looked at the guys, appraising them. Not bad. They both worked out, if less obsessively than both Dan and him. But he assumed there was more competition to the gym in Glasgow, and they didn't have the time to work out in every free minute like they had done, all their lives. He gave them a nod, acknowledging the men to put them at ease, and saw them glance at the toys that were laid on the table—probably trying to assess what Dan had in store for them. Only that Dan would most definitely surprise them. Whatever you tell me, he thought and stood, too, but Dan shook his head and smiled at him, patting the sofa once more. Not you, the smile said, *you* are special.

"You." Dan pointed to the two guys, standing up when Vadim sat down again. "You wait here. Don't move. You'll be watched." He turned and walked into the kitchen. Not hearing a sound, he smiled to himself, as he closed the door behind him. Rummaging through the kitchen drawers, he found what he was looking for, and slipped it into the back of his trousers, feeling the familiar chill at the small of his back.

When he returned to the living room, he glanced at Vadim for a moment, who sat on the sofa, legs spreads and one pulled up, displaying the goods, as it were, then looked at the two guys. "So," slowly stepping closer, "who owns this flat, then?"

Gordon met his gaze. "I do...Sir."

Vadim inhaled, feeling his chest expand at the word. That word meant so many things, far more than this Gordon probably knew.

Dan's eyes widened, darker than before, but nothing else could have warned the civilian. Except for Vadim, who'd have seen muscles tense, the tiger ready for the kill. Dan moved, fluid motions, a killer who had not lost his deadly skills, and the next moment Gordon was grabbed from behind, hands pulled back, the blade of the sharpest kitchen knife at his jugular.

"Well, then..." Dan hissed, the body in his hands completely frozen in shock, "and now we play prisoner!"

Vadim was transfixed by the glint of steel against flushing skin, the way Dan handled the strong body, and the way the man responded to him, remaining hard. His lips twitched as Dan had borrowed one of his phrases, again refreshing the memory of their own prisoner 'games'.

Martin was trying to move but Dan barked at him, "Down! Get the fuck down and Do. Not. Move!"

Intimidated by the shouting, Martin scrambled to his knees, then down, flat on his stomach, as Dan kept shouting at him. Body tense, Martin moved his hands to protect his head, shuddering, no doubt with fear.

Vadim licked his lips and he set the foot down to bend forward, watching Dan easily handle two men.

"You!" Order sharply barked at the man on the floor. "On your knees, to the table. Bring back what Vadim is handing you." Dan nodded to Vadim, not needing any words. They both knew how to restrain a prisoner. They'd been there, done that, and they'd do it again. Right now.

Gordon was hardly breathing, his whole body flushed, heart hammering against his chest. So strong, Dan could feel it, the man in his arms like a puppet.

"Faster!" As Martin crawled over on all fours.

Vadim carefully selected the restraints—the leather cuffs—and took a few moments to assemble and connect them, preparing them to be used. No bruises from these ones, he thought. He let them dangle in front of Martin's face, and, following an impulse, he shook his head as Martin reached for them. "With your teeth," he said, deceptively softly, but he did hold them up so Martin could gather both in his teeth and crawl back.

Vadim looked at Dan, whose face had changed into a truly frightening smile, and studied the beauty of a helpless man held in check by a blade.

“Back onto your belly.” Dan’s voice deceptively soft as he felt Gordon’s body sweat under his hands. Slick skin and frightened heartbeat, and yet, when he shifted the blade in his hands, dropping one hand down to Gordon’s cock, he felt the hard-on. The man had never softened, and Dan grinned. Martin dropped the restraints from his teeth and threw himself onto his belly, lying quivering, with his hands behind his head.

“You...” softly whispered into Gordon’s ear, “you will now restrain him. Nice and tight.”

Gordon did not move, just breathing, frantic, shallow, as the knife at his throat twisted gently.

“Do you understand me?” Dan repeated, the blade pressing closer into the throat. “Nod if you understand me!” And Gordon did, a miniature jerk, and only then did Dan let him go. Gordon went to his knees, took Martin’s hands, opened the restraints and placed them around his lover’s wrists. Tight, as requested, but making sure he was still safe.

Vadim watched him, lazily stroked himself to keep the arousal. Something touching about one lover restraining the other, so Dan could have his wicked ways. He gave a toneless laugh, part of him knowing he was everything but immune to this.

Gordon remained kneeling, head lowered, only shifting slightly to remain at Dan’s feet, but Dan did not touch him, instead pushed the second set of restraints between Gordon’s teeth, while Martin remained flat on his belly. “Get over there.” Softly, but when Gordon tried to get up, he sharply ordered, “on your knees!” And Gordon did, crawling over to Vadim, with the restraints in his mouth.

“Tie him up.” Dan smiled, the outline of his cock in the tight leather trousers hard and obvious. “Then send him back over to his lover.”

Vadim nodded, as Gordon already dropped the restraints at his feet. “Nyet,” said Vadim, somewhat drawn out. “Into my hand.” Stretching out a hand, forcing Gordon to go down with his teeth, pick them back up and push them in his hand, the man’s eyes burning with arousal and lust at the simple game, and Vadim was tempted to pet his head. “Turn.” The man scrambled around, offering his wrists.

“Higher.”

Gordon bent down to offer his wrists closer to Vadim, who gingerly fastened the restraints, and ran his fingers over Gordon’s tensed shoulders. Dan had

got down onto one knee, the blade of the knife whispering along Martin's spine. Rewarded with a drawn-out whimper, and a shuddering of the body that started to sweat. "On all fours." Dan murmured into Martin's ear. His voice gentle, just allowing himself to go with whatever came to his mind. "On all fours and legs spread. Arse in the air."

And Martin did, shaking, but getting himself into the position that Dan demanded, despite not having the support of his arms. His cock as hard as Gordon's had been, he knelt like a dog. Head low, face pressed against the floor, shoulders down, trying to keep them off the ground, arse high, and thighs spread.

"Pretty." Dan smiled, the dangerous smile of a predator, "don't you think?" To Vadim, while the blade caressed Martin's spread arse, causing his whimpers to intensify.

Vadim nodded and spoke close to Gordon's ear. "I think he looks very needy, your prisoner, Dan." The Russian accent really now only there to fuck Gordon's mind. "Now, head on over..."

And Gordon did, without hesitation, but with difficulty to keep himself on his knees, his hands were bound in his back. Just like his lover's, his cock was rock hard.

"Face him." Dan ordered, softly, nudging Martin's head up from the ground when Gordon came to a halt. Face to face, until they touched each other. Held in the stress position by nothing but the strength of their thigh muscles. The way Dan had arranged them they were perfectly presented to Vadim on the couch.

"Kiss." Dan murmured, when they didn't comply immediately, he delivered a hard slap onto Martin's arse, who yelped, and Gordon reacted the same way, his arse slapped hard by Dan's hand. "I said, kiss! And don't dare to stop, whatever happens."

They needed no more encouragement, desperately clinging onto the other's lips while their bodies shook with the effort of staying in the position, no hands to support themselves.

Dan grinned, watched them for a moment, before slipping the knife back into the waistband of his trousers. Walking over to the table, he stopped in front of Vadim, who straightened again, gazing up at Dan.

"Prepare them." Dan smiled, tenderness in his voice despite the order, as he took one of the dildos in his hand, "for this."

Vadim stood, picked up the lube, while Dan sat to take off shoes and socks, but the skin-tight leather trousers stayed on. He was the only one partially dressed, and he didn't know why, just that it felt right.

The two others were still kissing, just as ordered, and Vadim considered who to 'prepare' first. Probably Gordon. He squirted some of the cool stuff in his hand, nudged Gordon's legs further apart with a bare foot, then brought the lubed up hand to his ass, pushed a thumb in and felt the man shudder, but welcome him. Gordon groaned as Vadim pushed more lube in with two fingers, pushing them in and out, quickly, with power, which made Gordon push back, clearly willing. The heat and tightness inviting, clean, prepared. Vadim grinned at Dan. "This one's ripe." He slapped Gordon's ass, harshly, after he'd pulled out, and Dan grinned in reply, picking up a 'toy' of his choice. Two butt plugs, or, dildos to his mind, that would stay where they were supposed to stay.

Vadim then moved over to Martin, who tensed when he pushed in, none too tender. Pushing deep and hard with the slicked up fingers, using less lube in this case, which elicited another yelp from the younger guy. "Don't worry, you'll get fucked well tonight," he said to Martin, added more lube and again pushed in and out, with strength, really just to prepare him and drive home the humiliation. "Yes?"

"Yes...Sir," Martin managed to get out, but he'd forgotten about the order and Dan, who was standing between Gordon's legs.

"Did I tell you to stop kissing?" Dan demanded.

"N...no, Sir!"

"Punish him." Dan murmured, looking at Vadim, dark eyes as intense as the day he'd cut a word into flesh. "make him feel it, and make him watch in return. Make them understand they are doing this to their lover." Holding the second butt plug out to Vadim, who took it, still behind Martin.

"You heard him," Vadim whispered into Martin's ear, as he slicked up the toy that felt quite thick in his hand, thick and heavy, and positioned it at the younger guy's ass. He'd have loved to fuck him now, to 'punish', yes, hard and fast, and his breath accelerated. Slowly pressing in, Martin tried to pull back, but Vadim held him down with the other hand, almost doubled him over with pure strength until Martin very nearly kissed the floor. Ass bared, helpless, open to the assault, and Vadim relished the shudder and the way the guy's breath sounded

forced as the dildo went in. Deep, against resistance and probably causing discomfort, but Vadim understood well how he would welcome that pain of being stretched and taken. And, he was right, Martin did push back eventually, with gritted teeth, until the thing was firmly lodged inside.

Gordon, too, cried out when the dildo was forced inside his body, breaching a hardly prepared muscle. Dan pulled back and pushed deeper, getting fucked mercilessly by the makeshift cock, until the thick girth was embedded as deeply in the tense body as it could. Staying there, held in place by the tight muscle itself.

Vadim looked up to Dan, eyes resting for a moment on Dan's cock inside the tight leather. Half breathless, half expectant, lips and throat dry again. "Sir?" Dan smiled, a sudden recognition, a moment of eyes and soul laid bare and open. Mountains. Heat. Blood. Blades. Mercy and want. Dust and desert. A lifetime of extremes.

"Sit down." To Vadim, who sat back, also on his knees now, but still free to move his hands. Turning to the others, who were struggling to stay on their knees. "Keep him hard. Kiss, suck, lick. Don't touch, don't..." suddenly a thought, "don't look."

Glancing at Vadim, who seemed surprised, especially as Gordon dipped down to lick his cock, which made Vadim groan, made him want to take Gordon's head and impale him on his cock. It took all his willpower not to do that, especially as Martin went down, too, both men licking and sucking, but none quite taking him in. Vadim's lips opened and he tried hard not to move. Closed his eyes, couldn't bear watching them run their tongues down his length, especially when Martin went up his body, taking his nipple between his teeth, expertly sucking and chewing.

Dan went to the table and retrieved the blindfolds. "Here..." as if he were cooing to a dog, "come here...pretty men..." He stood near to Vadim, who turned his head, eyes closed, reaching for Dan's leg and pulled him closer, unable to speak, as every word would betray he was getting desperate. Martin and Gordon looked up, and Dan knotted the blindfolds over their eyes. "Suck him." He ordered. "Kiss him. Worship his body, but Do. Not. Make. Him. Cum." And he stepped away, watching.

Vadim almost jumped to his feet when suddenly a hot mouth opened for his cock. Slowly, so very slowly taking him in, while lips were pressed to his. He

didn't care which one of them, didn't want to look at them, was just kissed, and tasted. The other guy's need obvious, hunger and tenderness merging. It was really too much—no way he could even look at Dan, or protest, as the sensations threatened to just overwhelm him. He found a straining cock, pumping whichever of the two, and felt them press close, taking turns sucking him incredibly, excruciatingly slowly. "Dan..."

"No." Softly. "No mercy." Whispered, lightly slapping Vadim's hand away from the guys' cocks, while a blade ghosted across Vadim's throat, which made him freeze, and shudder. Just the memory of knife, and Dan, and heat, while both guys were now on his cock and balls. Vadim felt his control slip, felt he was starting to lose it, all he wanted was to cum, and be fucked, ideally both. He stretched his throat and groaned as one of those cunning bastards sucked on his balls.

"Do you want to get fucked?" Dan whispered in Russian. Lips caressing Vadim's ear.

"Yes." In English. Vadim couldn't beg, but he was ready to beg, would have begged.

"Do you want to be on all fours, being watched?" Still Russian.

Would you suck me off if you could?

Vadim winced, dizzy with lust, interrogator and Dan moving into one, but he was too far gone to be scared, or nervous, or even ashamed. Dan. Safe. Whatever happened. He opened his lips, moaned as he felt teeth on his balls, and nodded, just that. Nodded again, wanted to say yes, but didn't trust his voice.

"Then don't...move..." Russian once more.

"No." Not that he could.

Dan didn't interfere with the two guys, still blindly sucking, kissing and licking, went to the box instead. His hand hovered over leather and steel, glancing back at Martin and Gordon, before a slow smile spread across his face. That would do it, and nicely so. He returned to the tableau, slipping a leather collar around Martin's throat first, who groaned, but did not dare to make any other sound. Dan pulled the buckle snug, closed it, then did the same to Gordon, who was tensing, but like Martin, merely let out a suppressed sound while continuing to lick Vadim's balls, with Vadim flushed and sweating, taut with lust.

Dan leaned down, fixed a carabiner hook onto each of the D rings on the collars, then looked at Vadim with a smile, who met his gaze, unsteady as the sensations were threatening to wash him away, but unable to cum from this treatment.

“Watch...” Dan hooked his fingers into the back of the collars and pulled the men away from Vadim, who shuffled unsteady on their knees. Arranging the men to face each other, still blindfolded, he stroked their sweat damp hair briefly. “Aren’t they pretty? I wonder how much they love each other...and I think I’m going to find out.”

Vadim cleared his throat, knew that breathing was the answer, like with any kind of pressure, or pain. Breathing was the key, and he fought hard to keep it under control, but he wanted to cum, badly. “They are...pretty.” And they were. Both men looked very nearly the same now. Short, sweaty hair, their personalities washed away by the primal response to lust, their features made anonymous by the blindfolds.

Dan smiled once more, his lips twisting into a grin after a moment, when he went back to the table and picked up a few items before returning to Gordon’s back. “They’ll be even prettier...”

Pushing his thumb into the corner of the man’s mouth, who was forced to open it, Dan pushed the gag between Gordon’s lips and teeth. Securing the leather straps with a buckle in the back of the head. Gordon whimpered, a suppressed sound, as breath hissed through the breathing hole in the gag. “What do you think about him, isn’t he even better now?” Dan murmured, looking at Vadim as he walked into Martin’s back, repeating the treatment. Vadim stared, his throat tight just from watching Dan apply the gags, and his easy way of keeping the men under control. Not a moment of hesitation, nor shame.

Both men gagged, Dan pulled metal items out of his pocket. “Too curious to find out what those are like...”

Bending down, but never obscuring Vadim’s vision, Dan fitted the first of the clamps onto Martin’s nipple, who let out a tortured whimper, but his cock jerked nevertheless. Vadim couldn’t help watch their reaction, notice how they enjoyed it, how, again, discomfort and lust mixed. Dan gave these out so easily. Continuing without a word, Dan finished Martin, then went onto Gordon, who was trembling and visibly straining to try and understand what was going on, but soon

enough the clamps were biting into his swollen nipples, and he breathed harshly, body covered in a sheen of sweat, and Vadim winced in sympathy.

Regarding his work, Dan stood back, glanced at the two men who were kneeling opposite each other, before he walked back to the chest. “With those as the finishing touch?” Picking up the cockrings made of leather and steel. They were beautiful things, perfect, and Vadim nodded, fighting hard to get even a semblance of reason. “What...what are you planning?”

“For them to watch you.” Dan’s smile didn’t seem entirely sane, as he waved Vadim over, holding the cockrings out to him. “But first...fix them.” They might not have seen such things before, but they weren’t ex special forces for nothing.

Handing the leather and steel items over, Dan leaned down between the two men, commenting quietly, “that would look so much better without hair. Shame we haven’t got time to shave you...” Resulting in a violent jerk by Gordon, which brought the collar closer to Dan’s hand and he took the hook in one. Martin’s whimper stopped abruptly, when he took the hook of that collar in the other, and pulled him sharply closer.

Vadim shuddered, the build-up killed him, and he’d thought a shift in the Iraqi desert was bad. This was much worse. At work, he had to focus, and time passed quickly when he was focussing, but this, while it couldn’t have been going for longer than half an hour, killed him. He reached for Martin’s cock first, pulling him close by his cock and slipping the thing over the hot flesh, pumping him once, twice, for good measure. Then over to Gordon, who turned his face blindly towards him as Vadim fixed the cock ring as well, feeling the man shiver with need when he touched him and rolled his balls in his hand.

“You’re lovers, aye? It’s time to prove it.” Hooking the carabiners together, Dan caused the helpless men’s faces to touch each other, unable to kiss, the thick leather of the heavy gags preventing any contact.

Vadim remained on his hands and knees, watched the two guys, close but powerless, and couldn’t help but want them. Them, Dan, anyone, really. He’d fuck either of them, or Dan, but that was out of the question. He’d get fucked, and he hoped it would be by Dan. But, truth be told, it didn’t matter all that much right now—anybody would do, as horny as he was.

Dan looked intensely at Vadim, the heat rising with every heartbeat. Impossibly hot, unbelievably ready. This, here, for which he didn't have a name yet, it was driving him half insane with lust. Something inside of him, though, remained strangely detached and cool, knowing exactly what he was doing, which steps to take. Each second of control, every suppressed whimper, and each touch of sweat-slicked skin felt right. Hands on the blindfolds, Dan leaned down, his husky voice a mere whisper.

"Watch..." and as the blindfold came off, the two guys tried to move their heads, but their collars were hooked so closely together, they could only move in tiny increment and in perfect sync.

The moment Dan stepped over to Vadim, his whole attention was on his lover, ignoring the others. Nudging Vadim until he knelt on all fours, cock hard, weeping, as hard as it could possibly be.

"Have you got any idea how fucking perfect you are?" Dan's husky voice washed over feverish skin. Retrieving the lube, he took his time to caress Vadim's head, face, his neck, moving so close, his leather clad crotch nuzzled into Vadim's face, and Vadim opened his lips to trace Dan's cock with his teeth, ready to take it, lips, ass, both.

"Show me. Fuck me. Fuck me, Sir." The last sentence was spoken rough, gentle, with a hint of humour but no less intention.

"I will...soldier." Dan caressed Vadim's face, before stepping between his legs that opened further. Cold lube on his hand, he took his time preparing Vadim, who pushed back with every motion as slow, sure, fingers opened him and slicked him up, while the bound onlookers were making small suppressed noises, desperately trying to see everything.

The fingers were a good start, Vadim thought, but they didn't move deep enough, not enough power, not nearly enough force. He lowered his head, stared at the floor underneath without seeing anything, focussed on his ass, Dan's fingers, and what he needed, above all.

Dan opened his fly, allowing his hard cock to spring free at last, then reached to his back, pulled the knife out, almost in an afterthought. The blade whispered along Vadim's spine, who immediately understood what it was. Remembering the knife, and his body froze, especially as the cool tip lay in the

hollow of the small of his back, as Dan positioned his lubed-up cock. “Ready, soldier?”

Knife, ‘soldier’, the knife was there, but not dangerous, more like a promise, or was it? Vadim didn’t mind either way, if Dan wanted to cut him, alright, he’d take it, as long as he finally fucked him. “Yes, Sir,” he breathed. And Dan did, knowing each other so well, he knew exactly what Vadim could take, how fast, how deep, and always a bit more. Pushing further and harder to go beyond well known limits, Vadim met him with every thrust. Legs spread wide, tensing to add friction, and that pain of being stretched like that, but he was really beyond pain. Dan fit him so well, still using so much strength that Vadim could feel every thrust in his bones, groaning harshly when Dan got him just right, his body tensing in a futile attempt to achieve orgasm.

Dan groaned, feeling the eyes of the bound guys fixed onto them. Fucking Vadim, but never quite fast enough, never touching, never quite hard enough, never enough for Vadim to cum, while Dan got closer and closer. Vadim was soaked in sweat, getting so desperate he was close to try taking those thrusts just with one hand on the floor, finishing himself off, but he wouldn’t have the balance, not with Dan’s strength. Desperate, and getting worse, the arousal approaching anguish. “Dan...Sir.”

But Dan laughed, a short, breathless sound, and slowed down, no matter how difficult it was. His own body thrumming, sweat running down his temples, down to the small of his back. Control, not just over the others, but over himself as well.

Vadim shuddered, bit his lips not to beg. Didn’t want to beg, but into that struggle he heard Dan’s voice. “Come here...” to the others, who laboured hard to shuffle closer, while Dan moved within Vadim. Tiny increments, as slow as he could without screaming in frustration, and, again, making it worse for Vadim who’d have done anything to force him, force his release. The two men reached them at last, and while Dan’s cock remained buried deep inside Vadim’s arse, he unsnapped the gag bits that had been kept in place, pulling them from between desperately clenched teeth. “Get him off.” Two faces staring at him, jaws half-hidden by black leather, but mouths free, necks locked together. “He’s clean. Suck him. Cock, balls.” Pulling out, slowly so slowly, until he remained poised, merely the head still clenched by Vadim’s arse. “Get him off!”

A strangled groan came from Vadim at that order, his cock twitched, but still not enough. A hair's breadth away, impossibly close and yet not enough. Martin and Gordon scrambled to obey, strangled sounds from their throats as they managed to somehow get beneath Vadim, despite bound hands and the collars pulling viciously on each other's throats as they moved. Dan knew when their mouths had reached their goal, because Vadim's whole body shuddered, and he slammed that very second back inside. That was too much, the added sensation, that exact moment brought Vadim over the edge, with one mouth on his cock and sucking, another mouth busy with his balls—it wouldn't have been enough to get him there on their own, but that thrust did it, pulled the trigger, and with a strangled half moan half cry, Vadim came, thrust towards the other's faces, the motions near powerless, pure reflex.

Dan rode into the mindless release, letting lose and casting away control. Forgetting about anything but the body beneath his hands and the tight heat clenched around his cock, convulsing. Only a few more thrusts, and he crunched his eyes shut for a moment, tensed until all muscles stood taut, and came, deep inside Vadim, the sensation breathtaking.

Pulling out, Dan fought to regain his breath, but the first words, while his hands were still on Vadim's hips, caressing, were as sharp as before. "Get back!"

Martin and Gordon fell over when they tried to obey, struggling to get back onto their knees, but unable to find their balance. The two men were a heap of limbs and desperate sounds, their cocks so thick and hard, their balls so dark in colour, they seemed close to exploding.

Dan hadn't tucked himself in yet, when he leaned close to Vadim, kissed the Shivering body, thighs, buttocks, base of the spine, which relaxed under the caresses. Vadim sank down to lie there, stretched out, unable and certainly unwilling to move.

Dan returned to the others, spent cock in his open fly. He didn't say anything as he pulled them back up to kneel once more. Ignoring the others, he turned his head to smile at Vadim, who regarded him, head tilted his way, glancing over his arm that lay close to his face. Dan's voice was tender, "get washed up when you're ready. I'll follow shortly."

Once the guys knelt once more, face to face, whimpering at the way the weights pulled on tender nipples, Dan retrieved the gags. He didn't use force this

time, simply murmured with a sated voice, “take them.” And they did. Mouths opened willingly to allow the gags back between their teeth, Dan snapped them shut, the blindfolds following.

Vadim closed his eyes for a moment, acknowledging the order, but didn’t want to move, not just yet. Breathing for a little while, he slowly managed to get his hands on the floor and pushed himself up, into a crouch. Then standing, ass sore, but feeling great, tired, sated, he managed to find the bathroom.

Dan looked down at Martin and Gordon with that odd smile, caressing each head and the short damp hair, before he followed Vadim into the bathroom. Inside, Vadim just flushed the toilet and started the water. He filled his hands with the cool, clean liquid and washed his face, running a wet hand across his neck, down to his pecs, then looked around. “I...” Seeing Dan, he stopped, and smiled. “Adore you.”

Dan was about to laugh at the words, but the laughter got stuck in his throat and he tilted his head, smiling. “Why?” Reaching for the tap with hot water to clean himself up.

Vadim only stepped out of the way enough to allow Dan to wash himself, lips finding Dan’s hot skin, smelling the fresh sweat, and his hair. “Because...you can make this stop.” Vadim touched his temple. “You can kill all thoughts, all memories.”

Dan shut the tap off, dried his cock and tucked himself back in, biding his time. Turning back to Vadim, he raised his hand and touched the temple at the same place, caressing the short hair. “All bad memories?”

Vadim leaned in to kiss Dan’s wrist. “Everything. Those, too. I don’t care about them anymore, and then they’re gone.” He placed a hand on Dan’s ass and pulled him close and around enough, to kiss him. “You...” he murmured, “would blank out the sun, Dan. Everything.”

Allowing himself to be kissed, Dan held Vadim close, stroking the smooth skin, before pulling back a little, murmuring, “I think we can have a lot more fun with those two guys.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

Dan winked, placing another kiss onto Vadim’s lips. “And I know exactly what I want to do to them. As I asked before, how much do they love each other?”

“Yes?”

“Well, they’re going to ask themselves that question tonight.” Dan grinned, stepping away, but his hands remained connected with Vadim. “When we get back, I want you to remain silent when I separate them, and make sure the blindfolds stay on. Take Martin and prepare him on the couch. I bet those bound arms in his back are going to kill the guy. Civilians and all that.” Dan flashed his teeth in an evil grin.

Vadim laughed. “Okay. I think I’ll manage. And then? What’s your plan?”

“I want him on his back, legs up and open, find something to restrain him, because you’re going to fuck him with their nice selection of dildos, since they seem to be so fond of them...”

Vadim briefly closed his eyes, grinning. “Poor bastards. And they’ve been really nice to us. Especially to me.”

“But that’s what they want.” Dan smiled with another tilt of his head. “And because of that we are extremely nice to them by doing what we’ll be doing. Aye?” He patted Vadim’s buttock.

“Aye.”

“Since Gordon seems to react that much to knife and danger, he’ll get what he wants, too.” Dan winked, then opened the door, placing a finger onto his lips before they stepped out of the bathroom.

The two guys were still kneeling in almost the same way as before, their bodies under extreme tension. Dan nodded to Vadim, then stepped to the bound men and unhooked the collars, before turning away. Vadim moved in, placed his fingers between Martin’s throat and his collar and pulled him with him. Martin doubtlessly thought it was Dan, and followed, insecure in his movements like he was expecting to collide with something, but Vadim just pulled him towards the couch.

Gordon’s head was going wildly into all directions, trying to gauge what was happening, but Martin’s presence was gone.

Wordlessly, Vadim nudged Martin onto the couch, then held him there for a moment, by his shoulders. “Don’t move,” Vadim said tonelessly against Martin’s ear, then rifled through the box. There were leather restraints and more stuff. He saw something like ankle cuffs, but that wasn’t quite what he was looking for. A moment’s thought as he worked through the kind of thing he needed, and, sure enough, found it in the box. It was a leather piece, long, with two hoops that could

be tightened, and Vadim slipped the hoops around Martin's legs, up over his knees, then pulled the middle part over Martin's nice, toned neck, before he took mercy and uncuffed Martin's wrists. "Don't move," he warned again, just as tonelessly, discarding the cuffs for a moment.

"Lie down, on your back."

Martin lay down on the couch, struggling to orientate himself, moving very carefully, but then lay down. Vadim got between his legs, adjusted the leather straps that brought Martin's legs up, close to his chest, the weight of his legs supported by his neck. Vadim caressed the straining cock, gathered a drop of precum from the tip and rubbed it all around the crown. Martin whimpered, but Vadim walked around him and merely put the cuffs back on, in the front this time. There was nothing he could fix him to, which was a shame, and Vadim frowned, thinking if there was a way around it. There was another long leather strip, with a carabiner hook and he connected the cuffs again, pulled the arms up over Martin's head, and hooked the cuffs to the strip which he tied around the couch leg, shortening the strap to stretch Martin out and curve his back nicely.

Dan was watching, eyes fixed on the sight, and something deep, dark and full of lust once again stirred inside of him. The sight, the helplessness, and a body laid out for whatever they were going to dish out on it. He walked to the table, Gordon's head following the sound, but unable to make anything out. Dan picked up the lube and chose a dildo from the selection, by no means small and he wouldn't go near Vadim with that thing, but those guys seemed to be well into that sort of play. He stooped to pick up his knife, then handed dildo and lube to Vadim, grinning at him like a predator. "Take out his butt plug, and prepare him to get fucked with that thing." Dan whispered tonelessly in Russian, for only Vadim to hear, adding, "but don't make him come!" Then walked back to stand behind Gordon, who was getting more and more agitated and whimpered into his gag.

Vadim glanced at the size and thought that would take quite a bit of work, then nodded to Dan. He ran a finger around Martin's stretched muscle that kept the dildo inside, which caused more shuddering breaths, and shifting, but there was very little Martin could do in that stance. The sound when Vadim freed the dildo and pulled it out—slowly, working mostly with the natural resistance of Martin's body, was unlike any before. Like Martin expected the torture to end now, and welcomed that, and, at the same time, really wanted it back. Vadim looked over at

Dan, grinned when he saw the downright unpleasant expression in Dan's eyes, a kind of fierce satisfaction.

Vadim put the plug away, squeezed plenty of lube into his hand, rubbing it into the reddened, stretched ass, doubtlessly cool and cooling, and at the same time promising more. He reached for another dildo on the table, in size between the one Dan had given him and the one that he'd just removed, and slid it in, in one quick motion, making Martin groan and tense, resist as he was stretched further.

Gordon tried to talk into the gags, desperate sounds as his head moved towards the sofa, clearly disturbed by his partner's groans. The cock ring ensured that his hard-on remained as before, despite the obvious agitation. Dan did nothing, though, stood absolutely still, while watching the guy on the couch being used and wanting more. Oddly touched by Vadim's choice of the smaller dildo, and wondering if he had been too reckless, but the way Martin pushed towards the intrusion, his cock and balls almost purple, and the sounds he was making had turned frantic, he knew there wasn't a limit. Not yet, not even close.

But Vadim's merciful stroke ended when Martin had fully accepted that size—that was when he lost the dildo, again to be left empty and needy, as Vadim moved to the bigger size, the one Dan had given him. Pressure and moving slowly, but, much like Dan sometimes did, with no mercy, no hesitation, giving Martin only the choice to take it. He winced at the size and the way it made Martin look, shameless and degraded in complete abandon, taking the huge thing.

Dan still did nothing, watching, allowing the heat to pool in his guts once more, until Gordon twitched when Martin let out a particularly desperate noise, trying to shuffle towards them. That was when Dan struck, lightening fast like before, the killer once more on the prowl and killing his prey. In one fluid motion jerking Gordon up in a choke hold, pulling the blindfold off the disorientated man, and pressing the blade against his throat. Almost breaking skin, right beneath the collar. "Keep still!" Dan hissed, and the body in his arms froze.

Vadim glanced over, a wicked grin at Gordon's obvious panic, and he pushed the dildo in harder, smiling at Gordon with something like glee. He was fucking this guy's partner, and they all enjoyed the sight.

"Look at him." Dan murmured, hardly above a whisper, and yet his voice seemed loud in a room where nothing but Martin's hissing breath was heard, as he frantically breathed through his nose. "Look closely at your lover. Look how that

thing enters his body. Look how his arse is stretched.” Gordon’s eyes widened even more and his whole body shuddered, no matter how hard he tried to keep himself under control, with the blade an all too real threat.

“We can fuck your lover until he goes insane with need, and never allow him to cum. Or we can grant him release.” Shifting the grip of the knife handle, the blade pushed harder against the throat, and yet Dan handled it with that much perfection, it never broke skin. Nevertheless Gordon didn’t dare to swallow. “I asked you before...I ask you again. How much do you love him?” Pausing, while Martin let out choked screams behind the gag. “Do you love him enough to bleed for him? Do you love him enough to convince us to let him cum?”

Vadim saw every muscle on Gordon’s body stand out at the question, the man’s eyes wide, rolling like that of cattle trapped in a thunderstorm, as he clearly thought he’d get his throat cut in exchange for Martin’s release. Dan had a way to put mortal fear into a man, part the knife, part his voice. Gordon shook so hard he’d need a steadying hand soon, as he said something against the gag, something that was pleading, and tears came to his eyes as he tried to nod and...agreed.

“Seems you love him enough.” Dan nodded to Vadim, a strangely tender expression on his face, which was almost immediately replaced by vicious lust, as Vadim set about making Martin cum. Martin, who was screaming into his gag, as if trying to stop this insanity and keep his lover from sacrificing himself, but his body had other thoughts. He was too helpless, too far gone, and too lost in pleasure and pain as Vadim drove the dildo in harder and faster now, absolutely positive Martin could take no more, then, with the dildo deep inside, he took Martin’s cock in his hand, unwilling to suck him off. It didn’t take more than one strong, hard, slick stroke to make Martin scream mindlessly into the gag, hips moving, cock twitching and shooting his load. Across his chest, over Vadim’s hand, very nearly passing out, while Vadim carefully removed the dildo.

Gordon was crying while whimpering, held up in Dan’s arms, his body both tense and shaking, cold sweat rolling down his skin, as the blade whispered once, twice, across his throat. Dan applied more pressure into the choking hold, leaning down without Gordon realising, whose eyes had rolled back into his head. He was paralysed with fear, clearly convinced he was about to die, when Dan’s hand touched him, took his cock.

Vadim, still between Martin's legs, watched how Dan's hand brought Gordon off with one single touch. The stimulation was so extreme, Gordon nearly passed out when he convulsed. The blade left his throat while he came, and the arms that had been merciless before, were keeping him now in a secure embrace, gently lowering the shuddering body to the ground, where Dan knelt beside him.

"Time to get you two some quality time together, hm?" He murmured, immediately starting to strip the toys off the trembling man, who hadn't quite cottoned on he wasn't dead and had just had the most mind-blowing orgasm ever. Vadim did the same for Martin, removing the straps, clamps, the gag, too, and felt a strange tenderness that made him lean over the young man and wipe his face, caressing him, the jawline, the thundering pulse under the skin. Alive, blown away.

"Aye, I guess these two should go into the bedroom," Vadim murmured. Dan smiled, crouching down to take Gordon's collar off, caressing the throat as he did, and smiling at the tear streaked face when Gordon finally opened his eyes. "You really did think I'd kill you." He murmured, before giving in to the impulse and kissing the man, whose lips moved against his, as if Dan still owned him. "Silly civilians." Whispered, before he came back up and helped Gordon to sit, taking the restraints off the wrists, before helping him to move across to his lover.

"You..." Gordon's voice was rough and dry, "you didn't..."

Dan shook his head and placed a finger onto his lip to hush the other. "It's what you wanted."

Gordon stared incredulously at him, but finally lowered his eyes and nodded once. They reached the couch the moment Vadim lowered Martin's legs. It took a moment before the younger man regained some coherence, turned his head and looked at Gordon, smiling feebly. Dan didn't think he'd ever seen anything quite so emotional, when Gordon wrapped his arms around his partner, caressing each other's faces with their own.

Vadim moved back, as silently as if he'd had to leave the vicinity of a guard out on patrol. He went into the bathroom and poured hot water over two towels, wrung them, then rolled them up, and took two dry towels, too. "Well." Dan cleared his throat, but forgot to say whatever he had meant to say, instead opening a couple of the remaining beer cans. Pushing one into each of the men's hands. "Guess you're thirsty, aye?"

Vadim returned a few moments later and handed one damp towel each to the guys, and one dry, giving them time to clean up after they'd quenched their thirst. The living room was a mess, but Vadim supposed they'd done that before. He slipped into his jeans and sat down on the other couch—the one that didn't have Martin and Gordon all over each other, shaken, tender, and he looked at Dan. Like they'd been when their soldiering had cut too close to the bone. For his part, he couldn't help but smile, a tired, sated smile that betrayed there was no darkness left in him. Right now, he was a man who relished in being sated and tired, with nothing haunting him.

Dan smiled back, giving a small nod before he got up from his crouching position. Walking over to Vadim, he let the guys clean each other up. He sat on his heels between Vadim's legs, looking up. "Guess we should be leaving, aye?" His arms went around Vadim's waist.

Vadim regarded him from under heavy lids, cool blue eyes serene and placid. "Four is big for any bed," he murmured. "Three works, four is plenty. And I'm tired."

"But did you enjoy it?" Barely murmured, ignoring the whisper from the couch when he added, impossible to be overheard by the others. "Before you ask, I have no idea where all of that came from."

Vadim flashed a quick smile. "I do, Dan. I know where that's from." He shook his head, still smiling. "You had it with you all the time. Maybe we haven't changed all that much?"

Dan tensed, his eyes searching Vadim's. "Are you saying I'm back in the mountains, cutting your flesh?"

Vadim shook his head. "I'm saying it takes a lot of strength to control a man, body and soul. Get into his head. Fuck his mind. You fucked mine. You fucked three guys tonight, Dan." Vadim raised a hand and touched the side of Dan's face, who smiled, pulling him closer. "But you no longer destroy."

"I'm bloody glad I...grew up." Dan's smile became even more tender, tilting his head to touch Vadim's forehead with his own.

Vadim switched to Russian. "But I don't doubt for an instant that Gordon would have cum if you *had* cut his throat."

A low chuckle escaped his throat and Dan's smile turned into a grin. "There is that, and it reminds me of a certain Russkie." Lifting his head, he smirked with all of his teeth on show.

"Wouldn't have been the worst possible death..." Vadim grinned back and yawned before reaching down to find his socks and shoes, forcing Dan to let go of the contact. He put them on, then stood to pick up his jumper, while Dan stretched, standing, looking for his top.

"Fuck. Call us a taxi back? I could use some shut-eye." Vadim gave another glance at the guys, who were still hugging and kissing, and would probably not stop for a long while yet. "Or maybe there were taxis in front of that pub?"

Dan was about to say something when Martin lifted his head and shifted on the couch with a wince, until he got into a sitting position. In discomfort, but smiling. So sated, he looked as if he'd drop off any second. "Wait. We'd just like to say something."

Dan slipped the jumper over his head and raised his brows, questioningly. "Aye," Gordon nodded. "This was the most amazing thing ever. So fucking amazing, it blew our minds. Martin and I..."

The younger guy took over, "we were wondering if you are going to come back by any chance? If we could meet again?"

Vadim grinned. "That's Dan...an instant success." He gave another laugh, shaking his head, deeply amused. Of course Dan was irresistible. Mad Dog Dan, the reckless SAS bastard. He looked almost mockingly at Dan, who was scratching his head. "I guess we'll come through this city on the way back." If you want them. I'm game.

"Well..." Dan fished for his fags, absolutely desperate by now, but he hadn't seen any ashtrays, and smoking hadn't been on his mind. "Aye, we could come back here. We're off to the Highlands tomorrow, for about a week or so, and then back down along the East Coast, before heading into England. That's..." checking his watch and the dates, "two weeks, so we could be back here by the following weekend." One and a half weeks, plenty of time.

"Great!" Martin grinned from ear to ear, and Gordon nodded. "How much time do you have?"

Dan glanced at Vadim, "what do you mean?"

“You could stay the weekend.” Gordon ventured, “you know...” hesitating,
“24/7.”

“24/7 *what?*”

“Us.”

Dan glanced at Vadim again, this time his eyes had widened in an almost comical display of ‘not getting it’.

Martin added, helpfully, when Dan didn’t reply. “Slaves. For a weekend. We like to be, like, dominated. You know...”

“Oh.” It took Dan a while before the grin returned to his surprised face, and he looked at Vadim, switching to Russian again. “Do you want that? A game of more than a couple of hours?”

“They ask so nicely for it,” murmured Vadim. “And yes, I’d try this again.” He moved over to Dan, placing a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it. “No problem.”

“OK.” Dan nodded. “We’ll be back.” His grin was answered by both men, and Gordon got up with some effort, walking over to a sideboard to fish for pen and paper, scribbling down their address and phone number.

“It’s a deal, aye?” Handing the paper to Dan, who pocketed the address.

“Aye, we’ll call the day before.”

Smiling, Gordon held his hand out to both of them in a touchingly formal way. “Thank you. Oh, and do you want a taxi?”

“Cheers, but I’m fucking starving, will grab a kebab on the way to town and get one there.”

“Alright.” Gordon smiled and shook Vadim’s hand, who held it with both his for a moment, while Martin waved from the sofa, quite happy to stay where he was without having to move.

“Before I forget.” Dan turned back, already on his way to the door, fag packet in hand, “where did you get those toys from?”

“Those?” Gordon grinned, holding up his hand that showed faint red rings where the restraints had dug in while he’d struggled. “It’s mail order, hang on, I get the catalogue for you.” Retrieving it from a stack of magazines near the telly, he came back and handed Dan a colourful printed mag, quite thick as well. “We got the latest issue, but this one will do, they still have everything in stock.”

“Cheers again.” Dan grinned like a shark once more, rolling the catalogue up to stash it in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Vadim gave a silent laugh. Mail order torture. The thought was bizarre. Dan had had a taste of blood, and he assumed Dan would read this cover to cover.

“Best we’re off, or we’ll be falling asleep on our feet. Not that young anymore.”

Dan laughed as he waited for Vadim to get through the door. “Until the following weekend.” He turned his head, “and...thanks.” Smiling, he closed the door behind them.

Vadim didn’t speak until they were outside in the dark, and he wanted nothing but put an arm around Dan’s waist and get manoeuvred back to the hotel. Instead, he walked close, arm every now and then touching Dan’s. “Strange. Didn’t speak more than fifty words with them, all told, but I liked them.”

“Aye,” Dan nodded, leading them back to the centre, he stopped in front of a brightly lit kebab place. “You never know, we might get ourselves a strange set of weird friends in our old age.”

“You have a talent for making friends...” Dan truly had. But that was alright. One of them had to be good with people.

Dan laughed and looked as if he were about to kiss Vadim, before he pulled himself back and ventured into the chippie to get a large portion of doner kebab, and some for Vadim. Vadim wolfed the food down, which made him even more tired, stumbling across a taxi just a little later.

That night, once they were back in the hotel, they slept dreamless and deep. Embracing each other and staying close, as close as anyone could get.

~End of Mercenaries I ~

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