

Special Forces: Mercenaries (1989-1992)

Part 1: Chapters 19-34

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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.

Mercenaries I—1989-1992

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1989 Kabul—Prologue

Vadim woke with a start. Past five. He reached for the watch. Yes. Later than he usually got up, but enough time. Dan was still lying on top of him. Had slept there. Vadim reached up to touch the sleeping face, then rolled over, easing Dan onto the mattress while levering his body out from underneath.

Groaning, Vadim got up, sore and in pain from the cut, but that was exactly what he'd wanted. He went into the bathroom to piss, then had a quick shower with the bandaged leg outside the bathtub, making a mess with water going everywhere. He towelled himself down, leaving the wound alone, and headed back into the hotel room to find Dan sitting on the bed, rubbing his eyes.

Vadim found the uniform—all of the pieces, anyway, then began to dress. He wasn't hungry, but had a few slices of left-over roast beef.

Dan watched Vadim, determined to take in every last view of that body, but he didn't try to touch, knowing it would break his resolve and whatever else he'd managed to build up around him. Was this what millions of women had felt like, in all those uncountable wars, when their lovers and husbands left for the front? Cursing himself, he shook his head with a wry grin before he got off the bed, padding over to the remains of the feast.

“Your flight’s today, aye?” He stuffed random food into his mouth, just something—anything to keep him going. It all tasted like ashes anyway. Finding his trousers, he jumped on one leg while getting into them, and winced. Fuck, his arse would hurt for a long time.

“Yes. The luggage should be there already.” Vadim closed the buttons of the tunic, struggling a little with the cuffs, too distracted by thoughts. “I’ll get picked up by driver. I have enough time.” He straightened, still felt Dan, which would make the long flight interesting at best. “In Moscow, I’ll stay at my father’s place for a couple days, until I know what my next orders are.” He glanced at Dan, who nodded while sitting back on the bed, pulling on socks and tying his boots.

Vadim found the peaked hat, and turned it in his hands. “I’ll just leave, Dan. I can’t...stay longer, can’t do it...here.” Tapping his chest with the hat. “I said all I needed to say, and I meant it too. It’s no different from other times, yes?”

Dan nodded. He understood, because it started to hurt so much. All he wanted was to let go of the pain and cry, but he’d be fucked if he allowed himself

that luxury. He gathered knife and pistol, before taking hold of his t-shirt. Kabul in winter was cold, but he felt reluctant to start piling the layers onto his body. Not just yet, not while Vadim was still close. Dan straightened, clad only in jeans, boots, weapons and scars. “I will see you again, Vadim. We will meet.” He tried to convince himself as he stepped closer, touching his face. Fingertips, no more, or he’d break down.

Vadim’s jaw muscles tensed under the touch, and his hand covered Dan’s, held it there, as he inclined his head and kissed Dan’s wrist.

“We will be together, come what may.” Dan finally found the words he wanted to say.

“Yes, we will. Just little more patience.” Vadim suddenly smiled. “No: *A* little more patience.” He took Dan’s hand down and pressed it with both of his. “And thank you for breakfast and company.” Another firm pressing of Dan’s hand, who tried to smile, then Vadim released him, took the greatcoat off its hook and opened the door. He cast a quick glance back, despite his best intentions, and gave Dan another of those bright smiles, while his eyes swam, then turned and was out of the door.

That was it. Dan let go the moment the door closed behind Vadim. For once, simply giving up and giving in, allowing the tears he’d been holding back with all his will to flow. Didn’t care he was crying while slipping the t-shirt over his head, didn’t give a damn that he was an utter fool to step to the window and push the curtains apart. Hurting himself with one last glance, but he just had to. One last view of the man before he vanished.

Standing at the window, Dan opened it quietly, leaning out to look down onto the deserted street. Any moment now, and the tall figure would appear and walk away.

* * *

Vadim half-blind with tears, found his way only by outlines and blotches of colour. He managed to slip into his coat while walking briskly, as if speed could help him escape the pull of gravity. The lobby was empty. Nobody there. Good. Nobody would see him, then.

He stepped outside and paused for a moment to cross the road. A voice said, “Vadim Petrovich?” He turned, and saw two men, no, comrades, knew them from the barracks, pistols in their hands. An engine howled as a car turn the corner from the side alley. Screeching brakes, doors opened, something hit him on the head, blurring his mind, making his body go powerless, but not quite unconscious. He was half pushed, half pulled into the car. Somebody held a gun to his forehead. Somebody else covered his head with a bag. Then his hands were tied. “You’re going home, traitor,” a voice murmured close to his face, then something hit him against the temple, and the lights went out.

* * *

Dan saw Vadim emerge from the hotel, pause, turn to face something he couldn’t quite see. Suddenly, a flash of motion. Car. Men. Someone hitting Vadim. Dan clung to the window frame, leaned out and yelled as if he could stop them. “No.” The great body went limp, was forced into the car. Death-grip on metal as Dan almost jumped out of that goddamned window even if it did mean breaking his neck. “No. Vadim.” As if he could stop the horror, “Vadim!”

The car sped off. Dan’s heart raced, adrenaline burning through his body and mind, frantically trying to make sense of it all. He hadn’t been able to hear what they said, but the car, those men, just like Vadim, and Vadim was more than a soldier and then...KGB.

Dan pushed himself away from the window, ducking his head by instinct. Windows, door, coffins and targets.

Fuck, how had they known? If they were KGB, then...he couldn’t finish the thought. The sound of wood crashing tore through the silence. Dan’s instincts kicked in. Once Special Forces, forever SAS. He threw himself sideways to the floor, behind the bed, just as the door was kicked in. Too much adrenaline to notice any pain. Pistol already in his hand. Twelve shots. No more. The other clips were in his bag.

Russian orders, “Get him.” from the door. An AK bellowed, tearing chunks out of walls, carpet and floorboards. Heavy steps sounded. “Come out, you bastard,” somebody shouted. Both advancing men wore the full Spetsnaz kit, much like on the day when Vadim had stormed the house Dan was trying to protect.

He crawled under the bed, thankful for the valance that covered the gap, edging forward on his belly. Not away from them, but closer. Fucking Spetsnaz, so this was serious then, they were out to kill him. His only chance was getting up bloody close—and fucking personal.

He pulled the knife out of its sheath at the small of his back, and slipped it between his teeth. He'd need his left hand, fucked, but functional. Closer. They were searching the room, He only had seconds before they realised he wasn't in the bathroom or the wardrobe, so must be under the bed. Before they cottoned on, one of the men came near him. Dan could see his ankle. He snatched at it, left hand pulling hard to knock the man off balance, in the same motion catapulting himself forward, sliding between the soldier's legs. He turned onto his back, firing his pistol upwards. Once, twice to make sure, couldn't waste ammo. The soldier only had time to scream before the bullets tore open his guts all the way to his brain.

The AK sounded in the bathroom. The shower curtain died.

Dan rolled away from the falling body, blood splattering all over him before he wrenched the AK out of the dying man's hand and got back onto his belly, aiming at the bathroom door. Knife still between his teeth, at the ready, but he didn't need it for the second man who didn't know what hit him when Dan let loose a round, the Kalashnikov shredding the body apart.

How many more?

Dan scrambled to his knees, wiping the blood that was blurring his vision away from his eyes. Turning, he reached for his bag, cut it open with the knife and pulled out a couple more clips. With knife and ammo now stashed on his body, he crawled to the first corpse to grab the man's pistol. Two pistols, now, both in his waistband, AK in his hand, and the second AK slung over his shoulder. Fuck the weight, he'd need all he could get.

Heard the sound of boots running up the stairs.

He stood, glanced around, judging his chances. Where could he go? Door: would be crowded with more bastards. Window: too high. Bathroom: no window, no exit. His gaze fell onto the table, food, silver plate and bottles ripped into shreds by the bullets, but the long tablecloth still draped all the way to the floor. A cold grin ghosted across his face as he leapt towards it and crawled underneath. Directly opposite the door.

He could hear the Russian orders and understood every word. He knew he had to be faster than the Soviet arseholes, but he'd overcome one Spetsnaz once, nine years ago, so he'd nail the rest of these fuckers. Aiming through a couple of bullet holes in the cloth, he crouched absolutely still, blood rushing in his ears, ready to open fire the moment they turned the corner and walked through the door. 'Vertical coffin' indeed.

The pained breathing of one of the downed men turned into a death rattle while more boots were heard outside, advancing, then slowing near the open door. A few shots were fired into the seemingly empty room before they advanced again. The first soldier became visible, then another, holding their fire. Heads turning, searching, Kalashnikovs at the ready, until they spotted the legs of a comrade sticking out of the bathroom. One of the men turned, probably to shout for the medic.

Dan bared his teeth. Apparently they either underestimated him, or they didn't expect a single man to put up that much resistance. The moment he saw the soldier open his mouth, he let go of the trigger, firing round after round into the advancing men, until the screams of the wounded and dying alerted the ones behind. No more than split seconds, stretched out in slow motion. That was it. He'd given himself a little time. They'd know now he wasn't that easy to kill.

He could hear the orders, knew a goddamned smoke grenade would be next, and short of suffocating, or dying, disorientated, he had to get out now. The room was a trap. The next wave of Spetsnaz were still a few yards away, he could hear their boots. An idea clicked into place. He upended the table, sprinting towards the bodies of the fallen, frantically searching their belts. There. Got one.

Pulling off the pin, Dan stood right in the centre of the room, waiting. One, two more breaths. He could hear them coming, but had to time it just right. Counted, lobbed the grenade through the door out into the corridor the moment the soldiers arrived. He dived behind the bed, and pulled the covers with him, curling up in a ball in the very corner, wedged between bed, night table and wall, protecting his body, and head from the explosion.

The noise was deafening, ringing in Dan's ears, as the world lost all sound and the grenade tore the men apart. Unable to hear anything, Dan threw the duvet aside. He was bruised, the rifles were heavy, but he wasn't going to let go of them, not yet. He had no idea what was still waiting for him. His body was in working

order, so he jumped out of the corner and ran towards the door. A wounded soldier was trying to run away. He aimed roughly with the AK, yelling towards the man's back, in Russian, "Go to hell," before opening fire and mowing him down.

He had to get out of there. The corridor was nothing but a long narrow tunnel leading towards the target: him. Sprinting along, he realised there was no one around. No staff, no customers. They must have taken over the whole hotel. Why the hell hadn't he and Vadim noticed?

He reached the staircase, looked around for a fire exit: no sign, only another corridor, breaking off in a T from the first. No time, they'd only be busy with the wounded for a short while. How many soldiers were still downstairs?

How many would they send after a single man? A part of him was sickeningly proud at the sheer number they'd already thrown at him, but the rest of him just wanted to stay alive.

Stairs? No, too dangerous. Elevator? Insane, wouldn't work anyway. Back stairs? No idea where the fuck they were and he bet they'd be waiting for him there anyway. Suddenly, he remembered something; the corridor that went off from the one he stood in—the street was in front of the room they'd stayed in, and there had been an extension to the left. He was sure he remembered a flat roof, one level below. No more time to speculate, he had to take the risk.

Dan ran around the corner into the second corridor. Turning sideways, he opened fire while running, covering his back. Swivelling the AK around when he reached the middle of the hallway, he smashed one of the doors in with its butt, throwing himself into the room. Empty, as expected, and the window directly opposite.

Each second was precious. He crossed the room by running over the top of the bed that stood right in the middle, against the wall, and tried to tear the window open. The flat roof lay directly beneath, no more than three yards away.

The damned window wouldn't budge. Locked, no key. He smashed the glass with the rifle, trying to make as big a gap as possible in the short time he had and jumped through the broken glass the moment three soldiers turned the corner of the corridor. "Shit." His leg caught on one of the remaining razor-sharp edges, tearing his jeans open, slicing into his thigh.

Landing on both feet, Dan rolled forwards with the impact. Checked weapons. Moved. Leg still functioned. Superficial cut only. Getting back up,

breathless, he set off across the roof-top. In full view, no cover, if he didn't make it in time, he was a sitting duck. Sprinting, he glanced backwards. Men at the window. He let his AK loose once more, firing roughly in their direction until the magazine ran out. He threw the weapon away, and yanked the second one off his shoulder.

Where to now? He spotted a sky light. Hopefully the extension was a utility room or something, anything that lead outside, just not the back door and the likely welcoming committee. He kicked the glass in with his boots, splintering the whole frame when the wood gave way, leaving a hole just big enough for him. Nothing moved below. "Who dares...?" he muttered.

He jumped, feet first, holding the AK over his head, landing on tiles in the middle of a steel-furnished kitchen.

Silence. Nothing but the sound of his harsh breathing and the aftershocks of the deafening blast in his ears. No windows. Only fluorescent lights and the skylight he'd just jumped through. Shit. No time to think. Only a few minutes had passed since they'd kicked in the door, but now he was stumped. Three exits. Which one?

Angle of light from ceiling. Direction he'd come from. Shape of room. Take a chance. Rifle in firing position, Dan sprinted through the doorway to his right along the dark passageway towards a steel door. Shit. It better be unlocked. He tried the handle, slamming his body weight against it, even kicking a couple of times with the heel of his boot. The damned thing would not budge.

"Fuck," Dan spat out, breathless and raging inside. If he didn't get out in the next few minutes he was fucked. It must be chaos upstairs. They'd be extracting the wounded and treating the casualties, but they must have seen him running across the roof. Had he killed any of the soldiers at the window? Had anyone seen him jump through the roof opening?

If he was going to shoot himself free, he'd make such a racket he'd be met by a platoon of Spetsnaz before he could say 'you're fucked'. No choice. Dan ran all the way back to the kitchen to try the next corridor.

"Looking for a way out?" The voice was calm and mocking, coming from somewhere between the surfaces of steel. English words. Whoever had spoken had very likely already selected his position—and would be keeping himself covered. "Maybe to tell the rest of the CIA that their agent is fucked?"

Shit. Dan threw himself behind a cluster of gas hobs, right in the middle of the kitchen. Cowering behind the steel wall, he strained to try and make out where the voice came from. CIA? Agent...fuck. It couldn't...No. The AK was unwieldy in this place, so he slung it onto his back and slipped one of the Russian pistols into his hand. On his knees, he peered around the corner. Whoever was there seemed to be playing a game. That meant the rest of the soldiers would be kept at bay for a while. One man, Dan wagered, at least for now.

"How did you figure I'd be here?" Keep the bastard talking.

"I can read a trail of blood. It's what wolves do, after all." A pause, and shifting, maybe the faint sound of military boots. "It will be a pleasure to...meet you." Unveiled threat. "We did not have the pleasure, not in all those years you've been using one of my own men against me. That, I take personally."

Blood. Fuck. Dan glanced at his leg. Of course, the smashed window. It was still bleeding. "What makes you think I used one of your men?" Playing dumb, while he shifted and slid backwards again. He leaned back against the steel wall, breathing heavily while trying to keep his voice level. Searching for anything he could use to his advantage. A mirrored surface, a reflection somewhere, anything to reveal the bastard's position.

"I know everything. I know you caught one of my men up there in the mountains and made him your spy. You turned one of my own officers against me, against the Soviet Army, and against the Soviet Union." A hint of anger crept into the voice.

"Really?" Fuckity. Fuck. Fuck. Dan's blood ran cold, despite his feigned surprise. Suddenly, he didn't feel at all like a well-honed machine bent on survival. On the contrary, he had to battle a sudden leaden weakness. Vadim...how long had they known or guessed? "What the fuck makes you think I have anything to do with the CIA?" Dan moved slowly until he sat on his heels, trying to reach the large, polished colander hanging above, to change its angle.

"Scots Highland accent...That makes you British, and you are in bed with the Americans. Interesting set-up. You don't have the looks for a honey trap."

Dan laughed, a short-sharp stab of a sound, while horror slammed into his guts. 'Honey-trap', how would that bastard know? "I just killed at least a dozen of your men. What makes you think I'm a honey trap, bastard?" He managed to touch the colander, moving it ever so slowly to try and get a glimpse of the man.

Movement, the creaking of combat boots, soles on the tiles. The other man kept moving. “Maybe the sexual acrobatics...honey traps better know their business. I do wonder how you worked Krasnorada out before we did...I guess that must have happened when you tortured him. A man can become very strange when he is tortured. I cut him some slack—his heroic escape. And he’s been meeting you ever since. What did you offer him? Money? Freedom? Or just sex?”

Dan shuddered, those words cut deep. They’d been careful, they’d vetted every place they’d ever stayed in, and they...shit. The bastard could only be guessing in hindsight. What the hell had they expected? To get away with nine years of secrets? Dan tried to concentrate, but inwardly he was losing it. Not for himself, for Vadim. The worst that could happen to him was to die. It was his occupational hazard, but the worst that could happen to Vadim was—what exactly?

“What the hell makes you think we even had sex?” Keep talking, just keep talking, and give me more information, as much as I can get. Who the fuck are you? Dan thought he’d caught a glimpse of movement, calculated the angle, when it suddenly hit him. Vadim had mentioned one man, several times, but always in passing. “What indeed, *Colonel*.”

“Clever boy. I dropped enough hints for you, then. To satisfy your curiosity...”

A faint shift in tone belied it was nothing about satisfying Dan, but merely to drive a point home. “I started putting the extraction together while you were swallowing his cock. This hotel is one of the places where certain parties have access to certain methods of surveillance. You shot a proper porn movie, complete with dialogue. I could offer you a copy, but dead men don’t watch porn, do they?”

The horror hit Dan with a punch and kick to the guts; he froze for a moment, unable to move when the full realisation hit him. They knew everything. They had proof. Wherever the camera had been hidden, they’d be extracting it right now. He couldn’t breathe, felt as if steel bands had laid themselves across his ribcage, constricting his throat with a collar of spikes and chains. The hotel. His fault. He should have never...and now they knew.

He tried to force himself to act, to do something, anything, move, get the survival instinct to kick in. Finally, one thought managed to tear him out of his frozen state. *Vadim*. It was up to Dan if he was going to have any chance at all. Now he’d found a handle on the Colonel. A possible way to crack him and make a

mistake. He was certain he'd seen a shadow move towards one corner of the room. He gently let go of the colander, sliding silently down and creeping towards the edge while talking. It took all of his willpower to force his voice into a semblance of carelessness. "I bet you enjoyed watching, didn't you?"

Soundlessly moving the rifle from across his shoulder, he placed it on the ground. He had to be fast and the weapon would be nothing but a hindrance.

"Makes me wonder, what went through your head? Wanting to jerk off, imagining you were the one being fucked or maybe the one who did the fucking?" Dan's hand slid to the knife in the small of his back, silently moved its position to the front with no more than a rustle, tucking it down carefully. "Tell me. Have you ever tasted a man's cum?"

Silence, rife with anger. "I think your 'friend' will get enough action where he's going."

Shifting, then pausing. Maybe the Colonel had seen a motion, too?

"But of course, you had what you wanted. Information. Now that the war is over, Krasnorada is nothing but collateral. He fed you information in return for...what? What made him a traitor? What makes a man forget his country?"

The movement, Dan had been right, it was over there in the corner. "Sex, Colonel. Lust." Dan was playing the game now, retaliation for being taunted. "What would you know anyway? Still pounding the shrivelled old wife? Somewhere in the Russian peasant belt? Prematurely aged with neglect and poverty, aye?" Another sound was his cue. Dan threw himself onto the tiled floor, sliding along on his belly, while firing the pistol towards the corner, until he hit the next food preparation island, metal sinks this time. Crouching behind them, closer to the exit. Closer to the bastard.

Movement again, shifting, cloth, leather. "You'll run out of bullets. I can't hear you reload." The Colonel's voice betrayed an amount of tension or pain. It wasn't fear. "Do you want to see me? Fight me? If only you could work out how...You destroyed a good soldier, and a decent enough officer. This whole sordid affair is a major disappointment for me."

Dan's eyes narrowed, listening carefully to every nuance, trying to get a picture of where his foe could be. He was pretty sure he'd hit him. Good. The man would make a mistake eventually, even though 'eventually' was what Dan couldn't

count on. He had no time; he'd have to act soon or more soldiers would be piling in, and then he'd really be fucked.

He quietly put the empty pistol down; he still had two more and a couple of clips. He checked the secure position of the knife again; he'd have to act soon, and he had a feeling it was going to be messy.

"Poor Colonel, you thought you had everything under control, and then one of your best men decides to fuck with a turkey." Dan slowed his breathing until it was steady, focussed. "Nine fucking years, right under your nose, and a Spetsnaz took it up the arse. What does it make you feel like? A loser, I guess. A failure as CO. It'll look shit in your file, won't it? Moscow will ask when you'd known and why you hadn't acted, and they will guess that's because you wanted to get fucked by a real man as well."

Sound, motion, finally. Something fell to the left, clattered, and covered what was going on. Dan had figured the Colonel's likely attack would be to shoot at him, or try to flank him from that direction, but in fact, when the Colonel appeared, lunging in a mad dash that betrayed his rage, he came from the right, emptying his pistol at Dan, forcing him to keep his head down.

Shit. He'd been wrong.

The man came down on him like a ton of bricks, snarling like an animal, slamming both of them into the unforgiving steel behind.

All Dan could do was protect his vital organs and absorb the force that knocked the wind out of him. Fucking bastard had got one up on him. As soon as he could grab a lungful of air, he fought like a tiger, deflecting the fists that kept punching his face, no holds barred. Eyebrow splitting, nose hurting, jaw bruised before he could regain his orientation. He managed to get one knee up and delivered a kick towards the Colonel's groin, followed by an elbow into his face and a fist for good measure. No more breath left to taunt, growling and spitting blood instead.

The Colonel held fast to Dan's shirt, pulling him down with him as he fell, the man's face distorted with pain, the left sleeve of his uniform wet and smelling of blood, but it could only be a graze because the bastard was still fucking strong. He forced Dan onto the ground. One hand finding his throat.

The Colonel snarled at him, almost too breathless to speak, struggling for air himself, but holding on with the determination of a bulldog that had its jaws

locked. “Speaking of...fucking, you...degenerate...piece...of shit, I’ll...drag everything out...of you. Every...last drop...of blood...in...Moscow...your death...will be...one...long...extended...nightmare.”

Dan’s right and strong hand closed around the wrist that was choking him, gripping so hard he could feel the bones inside twist and grate against each other. He squeezed until the grip on his throat weakened, and he could force the hand away. He gained enough leverage to lift his upper body to punch the Colonel’s left arm repeatedly. Hit in fast succession into the bullet wound, beating raw flesh, making the man scream with rage and pain and throwing him off balance.

“First...you got...” Hard to get the words out, fighting with all his strength, the bastard was his fucking match, “got to...get me. Wanker.” Dan hooked his good leg around the Colonel’s, throwing himself into the movement to roll them over, trying to get on top.

Clearly older, by five to ten years, the Colonel still fought like a man possessed; he went with the roll and tried to overbalance Dan, his hand again seeking Dan’s throat. “We have...your bitch...You’re...just an extra...bonus.” The bastard rolled and managed to force Dan’s head against the leg of one of the fridges, trying hard to break his balance in turn, not allowing Dan to settle in on top.

Sharp wood and metal dug into Dan’s face. He hissed in pain, blinded by the sheer adrenaline overload of fighting for his goddamned life. “Fuck you.” He lunged for the Colonel’s head, catching the throat between his teeth, biting deeply into the tissue below the jaw, making the man recoil in reflex, on instinct, screaming again. The surprise and the pain was enough to give Dan an opportunity to slam his elbow into the man’s ribs. Teeth letting go, scrabbling to get on top and smashing the side of his hand into the Colonel’s jugular.

The Colonel managed to deflect Dan’s elbow enough to knock the blow off course so it didn’t hit clean, protecting his throat and face. “You trained your bitch well...you see...where Krasnorada’s going, they’ll fuck him as often as they...like, and then cut his throat. Criminals don’t...like soldiers. And when they...hear he’s a cunt...hell, he only has to shower!...guess what they’ll do...to him? Thanks to your training, he’ll even enjoy it.”

Dan froze, eyes widening for one split second. Those words hit deeper than twenty years of soldiering and all of his SAS training had ever prepared him for.

No experience, no tricks, nothing had equipped him against the effect of those images that flashed across his mind.

Vadim. Raped. Vadim.

Moments stalled, mistakes that could cost a life. The Colonel took hold of his arm, leaning into it, twisting the wrist, elbow to break the hold before Dan could properly pin him. He was flexible for a man his age and strength, moving like a nest of pythons, powerful and skilled. The man flashed another grin—breathing between his teeth, chest heaving as he managed to roll them both over somehow, using Dan's arm as leverage. Taking a handful of hair to smash his face against the floor.

"I...had...plans...for him," snarled the Colonel, fingers tight in Dan's hair, not letting go, yelling at him, pulling his head up and bringing it down with full force.

Dan screamed, felt skin split and flesh burst, the blood stain growing with every repeated slam of his head onto the stone floor. Blood in his vision and blood on his tongue. He was breathing hard, gathering his wits and strength for one last stand, one final chance to fight the bastard.

"But I also...have plans for you." The Colonel released Dan only for a moment, and slipped something over his head, pulling it taut. Garrotte. His free hand patted Dan down, back, shoulders, arms, then further, the weight shifting. Found the gun stuck into Dan's belt in the small of his back, threw it to the side, beyond reach.

Dan's fingers scrabbled for the wire that was digging into his throat, cutting off air. His body struggled mindlessly, sounds of desperate gasping torn out of his restricted throat. Felt hands on him, and fought, fought like hell. Oxygen began to recede, his strength uncoordinated. This time for real, unlike all the times with Vadim. His mind focussed on only one thought. One. No more. Just one. Deadly.

"Moscow wants...you...but they...promised I can...have what's left of you. But then...all you'll...have to be able to do is...answer questions." The hand kept searching for weapons, the gloating voice betrayed the fact that the Colonel was already celebrating his victory, expecting Dan to be unconscious very soon. Smashing Dan's face into the floor again, The Colonel took him by the shoulder to turn him around.

Dan wasn't sure anymore where he was, or what, and who and wherever the fuck, except for pain and blood, running down his face, into his mouth, blinding his vision. Words, taunting, didn't matter, just clinging to the one thought. Victory? Not yet, fuck, not yet, had to live, promised to live. *I live for you*, and until the other soldiers came and he had no more chance, he would cling to the one last focus. Turned round, he felt like a puppet, but he needed to see, and the blood and pain made it harder than that night, nine years ago.

"You pathetic faggot," snarled the Colonel, patting down his front and sides, finding the magazine, which momentarily made him frown, as if that had been unexpected, and threw the second gun away. Checking the pockets. Down the legs and up again, ribs, shoulders, all the time pulling the garrote taut, while Dan's hand was scrabbling at the wire, making useless attempts at breathing.

"Who's the 'real man' now? You? Or me? Let's not talk about your 'girl'—he's going to get much more cock than even he could possibly want... What a death for a masochist... choking on the cum of half the prison and then some... you think he'll remember? He'll curse you with his last breath, you faggot. He'll curse you every time they bend him over and beat him to a pulp. Krasnorada has no allies. Nobody will help him. He was one of us, but now he is nothing. And that's the last thing you'll ever know about him."

Dan roared, no sound, no air, but utter, soul-destroying rage, as the horror of those words won over burning lungs and a body in agony. His hands moved away from his throat, sliding down to his middle, while arching his upper body up from the floor. Against the strength that held him down; against the force that had conquered him.

As the Colonel shouldered into him, trying to control him with his own upper body strength, Dan's fingers slipped beneath the waistband of his jeans. The knife came out of the sheath nestled beside his cock, and with an almighty effort, he plunged the blade into the bastard's guts, forcing it across, cutting the pig open.

The Colonel's scream turned almost immediately into a ghastly choke. His grip loosened. Both hands went to his belly, trying to hold the guts in, pure instinct as he tried to get away. Blood ran down the camo, glistening flesh appeared in the cut. Almost instantly, the sweating face turned white as paper, as the Colonel tried to stagger away, holding his guts in with his arm, reaching for the fridge to support his weight, trauma-shock denying him control of his body.

The moment he was free of the weight, Dan forced his body to comply, legs, arms, and most of all throat. Tearing the wire off his neck, he drew in desperate, frantic gulps of air, while rolling onto his belly, then his knees. Agony, coughing, but still alive and the bastard's blood running down the blade of his knife. "Fuck you, pig." His voice no more than a forced, raspy snarl, hardly able to do anything but breathe. "I was...right." Staggering from his knees onto his feet, wiping blood out of his eyes and swaying for a moment until he found his balance. "Homophobes...don't..." violently coughing before he could get draw in air to stumble forward, gaining his senses, "check...there."

Dan's left hand had just enough strength to force the dying man's shoulders against the fridge, almost pushing him off balance. His knee followed, pinning the Colonel between metal and his own blood-covered body. "I'll live, you swine." Dan coughed again, hefted his knife; he didn't want to kill the man that swiftly, wanted to watch him die slowly and in agony, but the soldiers wouldn't be far and he had to get out and to safety. Control of his own body was slipping away with every minute. "I'll live, and I'll get Vadim out."

The Colonel's bloodied hand made contact with Dan's lower arm, but lacked strength, nothing but a futile attempt at blocking and slapping away as he bled profusely, staining Dan's jeans with his blood, hot, gushing out of an obscenely large wound. He coughed. Blood ran out of the corner of his mouth, down the pale face. "Why?"

Dan's chest was heaving with every forced breath; every fibre was in agony when he lifted his arms. "Because I fucking *love* that man, you bastard." His hand came down, the knife slicing deep, blade embedded in the throat, tearing the jugular open, releasing a spray of bright red blood that gushed against his face and chest, while the Colonel's breath turned to a bone-chilling gurgle. "I *love* him, hear me? And I'll meet you in hell, one day, but before that, die, you fucking pig. Die knowing I *love* him, and I'll get him out."

The Colonel's pale eyes blinked, slowly; one hand reached up to find his throat, then strength left him, and he slumped.

Dan let go of the body as if it were hot, wiped his face. He was drenched with blood, his hair, face, clothes. His own body felt as if it had been slaughtered, too. His gaze flickered around the kitchen, saw his pistol that the Colonel had kicked away, reloaded the two clips with shaking fingers and painful breath. No

more glances at the dead man. No time to find the AK, anyway he simply didn't have the strength to carry the weapon. Too bad if they were waiting for him at the back door of the kitchen exit, he had to try. One more stab at living.

Dan staggered forward, stumbled, then managed to fall into a trot, forcing his body to comply as he made his way down the corridor he should have taken the first time. Another steel door, but this time unlocked when he tried the handle.

Kicking it open, he expected gun fire, but nothing happened, no one there, except for early morning light in a deserted city of death and dust. Dan started to run. The embassy, two streets and one corner away. He had to make it there.

Movement and shouting behind him, on the roof—alerting more soldiers that were placed to cut off any escape attempt. The men broke into a run, clearly trying to catch him alive. Your boss is dead you bastards; what are you going to do now? They scrambled around like ants in a burning nest—but some were behind him and running fast.

He could hardly coordinate his footing, but his instincts kicked in, the ones that distinguished a Special Forces soldier from an ordinary grunt. He half-turned while running, firing behind him while picking up speed. Had no idea where his body found the reserves, just the one thought, he needed to live, had to make it.

Never give up, never surrender. He who dares, wins, and fuck, he was daring right now.

As soon as he turned the first corner, he could see the gates of the compound. With its high walls, barbed wire and the manned gate, the embassy sat there like a fortress. The Soviet soldiers were getting closer despite Dan putting all he could into his effort. All he could do was fire once more, hoping the sound of gunfire would alert the guard.

He tried to yell when he was a mere hundred yards away, but his voice was no more than a croak. "Open the fucking gate."

They must want to take him alive. None of the shots were aimed at anything beyond incapacitating him. When he yelled again, he got the guard's attention. Wide eyes in a round face, the man was falling over his own feet attempting to open those damned gates as fast as he could.

Dan just made it through, another hundred yards and one of the soldiers would have reached him. He stumbled a few steps further, heard the gate lock into place with a metallic ring, while his body kept moving.

The Ambassador's car, the Baroness herself, about to step into the limousine. Blood running into his eyes again, mixed with sweat and tears of pain, his lungs burning when pulling in air. Dan broke down, lost all strength and fell onto his knees, swaying.

"Dan." The Baroness cried out, and he looked up, hardly able to see anything but a blurry shape. "Oh my God, Dan. What happened?" Her hand on his shoulder, face, head, and he thought for a moment, she shouldn't. All that blood. She'd spoil her fine suit, and her manicured hands, and...was jerked back to reality with an agonised gasp.

"They got him." Coughing blood and exhausted, the pistol dropped out of his hand. "The KGB got Vadim."

1989—1990 Chapter 20—Touché

1989—Moscow, 19th February

The bag over his face started to dry. Vadim could almost breathe normally again. 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 you can about them, their intentions and strategy.*

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

He didn’t know where he was. Or when. He had no way of tracking time, and they were guarded when they talked. 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.

Every now and then, they poured water over the bag, just to keep him on his toes. No real torture. They were just being unpleasant. Vadim focused his mind and senses on the present, on every movement, every word. They were obviously secret service—KGB or GRU, Interior Ministry.

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 focused on keeping his body running and not allowing panic to set in. 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 crystallised.

Downstairs, a door was opened; he was pushed inside. The door was closed. They kept him standing in that room.

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

Disorientation.

Dan.

Something dark and bitter crawled up from inside. Wasted opportunity. They hadn't made it, after all. The stolen time, the secret emotions, the vows and pledges...had changed nothing. He couldn't escape. He'd tried, and the decision had ended up hinging on some fat-assed bureaucrat who had probably dug out his visit to London and the suspicious killing he'd carried out. Not that it mattered, not that he'd assassinate anybody 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 the bureaucrats' search. Maybe he had acted suspiciously.

He should have just 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 with the fear he was wanted for murder or as a Soviet spy? There were 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. They'd recognise him and hunt him down. He didn't want to live like an insect scurrying under a rock every time something moved. Instead, he'd 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 he and Dan had made a mistake. 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 done stirred up interest and drawn the secret service'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 double-think 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 pull him in, secure and anchor him. The rope was severed, and he was hurtling into the void. Disoriented, aching in too many places.

The door opened again, and men entered.

The atmosphere changed at once. No word was spoken, but Vadim tensed and felt a punch just below the solar plexus, a vicious, painful hit. He doubled over, thankful the blow hadn't been to the groin, and was 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 predict where the next impact would come from. Vadim tensed 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 it might mislead them about his real state. He needed to keep his wits together, despite the raging pain. Fight a silent fight to preserve the core.

Eventually, the beating stopped, almost as if they'd lost interest.

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; hands grabbed him and forced him to stand. Vadim swayed, his feet needed to find a position where he wouldn't stumble, which took a while as his body's least concern was balance now. He coughed but every breath made his ribs hurt worse, and there was 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's 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, sprinkled with grey, 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 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 was listening. 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 last sentence hang in the air. Not when, not if. How. "This is meant to tell you that 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. His 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. He'd been younger, had something to lose. Of course he'd broken then, and he assumed he'd break again. But oddly, he wasn't scared. Now the pieces

were on the table, and decisions were made, all he really had to do was somehow get through it. It wasn't the terror of not knowing, nor 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 your crimes. 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. The 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. What was the man playing at? He had assumed he was just prodding and checking for something that would betray a weakness, a soft spot, to put a dagger in. Trying to open him up, gauge reactions. Nothing but probing. But *masochist*?

"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? 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. Instant death. He didn’t suffer. Unlike you.”

Sniper. If they’d been able to pick him up from the hotel, they were perfectly capable of placing 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 must be. 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 slid in 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

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

Dan 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, making it hard to think, while all he could think of anyway was the sight of Vadim being bundled into the car.

“Aye, Ma’am. 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, she leaned forwards. Her clear eyes narrowed. “Tell me everything 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 I will 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. “Don’t worry,” she added, “all you tell me now will remain between us. I give you my word I will help you.”

Dan had never seen her face so determined and fierce. “You were also targetted, Dan. No one is going to try to kill one of mine, 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 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 returned. Startled like a wild animal, Vadim didn’t resist as the guards grabbed his arms, forced him against the wall, tied his hands back, and put the sackcloth over his head. To stop him recognizing 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. 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. He didn’t know whether he woke up from

something outside disturbing him, or from the usual five o' clock routine. He 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. Not a word was spoken. Nobody ever uttered a single 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 just increase his suffering.

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 blindfolded 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. Therefore they were of no consequence.

They reached the room. Any room. Pushed 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. Everything hurt.

A hand touched his neck and he felt grateful for the touch, a moment of warmth, a moment of non-pain. The warmth of another body close. Vadim 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. 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 the gentle touch meant, only that he wanted the hand to stay. He knew this man had him brought here, and he'd been hoping it would be this man and not another beating. He wanted the man to talk to him, despite what he said, whatever insult, whatever cruelty. His 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 peered 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 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 steadied him, and walked him towards the desk. There was a thick file lying on top, and Vadim felt a distant echo of something good inside. His hands were freed, and he steadied himself against the solid surface, 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 why. 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. "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, he 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 tone was grave, and Dan felt a sucker punch to his guts at the seriousness.

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. I shall see you in my private study.”

Frozen to the spot, Dan watched her leave. He knew; didn’t want to know. The dread was settling into his bones as if flash-frozen. He forced 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, while they’d fought for Vadim’s release, with the Baroness doing most of the work. She’d proposed an exchange of political prisoners, proposed bribes—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.

The Baroness had given him information about the KGB treatment of prisoners in the Lubyanka, 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. He couldn't deal with 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, relocating to the embassy in Dubai, taking Dan and all of her core staff with her.

He'd been 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.

Almost a year, but in the end all efforts were reduced to the sick feeling in Dan's guts and the fear that this was it: the worst. The final. The end.

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

Once he had sat on the chair in front of her desk, she looked at him for a moment with that unwavering gaze. When she spoke, her voice was quiet. "I've 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. All she did now was verify what he'd 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 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, its end hanging limply over the desk. "Yes, my contact supplied a summary in English."

“Wh... what does it say?” The words tasted of death and ashes in Dan’s mouth.

She inhaled, no more than a minor pause, before inclining her head in a measured nod that told him she understood. 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. Her voice never wavered, but it was low and soft. “I am sorry, Dan.”

“That’s not true.” Dan’s own voice had lost all inflexion.

She leant forward and spoke gently, as if addressing a disturbed child, trying not to sound 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’s 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; fists that 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.” He moved closer until his thighs hit the edge of her desk, sending the fax tumbling to the floor.

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

“Do you believe me, Ma’am?”

“Yes.” She nodded once. “Yes, I do believe you, I have no doubt.” Her voice was firm, yet the warmth still lingered. “A confession under torture is not permissible in court.” She, too, stood, 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, 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 and the 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!” He shook 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 desk, 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 came out.

Shoulders sagging, he lowered his gaze and sighed. “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, sucking him dry of all his strength and energy, expended throughout the last year, fighting for Vadim’s survival.

“I know, Ma’am.”

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 and rested there for a moment. “Anything at all, Dan, please tell me.”

No, there was nothing. Nothing at all anymore, it was over. Nothing he could do or 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 didn’t query his request. “I will.”

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

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, sitting close by, 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."

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 aware of the interrogator standing close and leaning 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 afganets. They often bring...certain conditions with them when they return."

"But is he 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," prompted 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 him.” 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 couldn’t remain in the room. “I did...have sex with him. 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 as he realized, 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 expected it of him. The confession was long, exhaustive. Collaboration, sabotage, weapons trafficking to rebels, conspiracy, whatever. High treason, yes, that too, 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 took him back to the cell, not the hole. They didn’t wake him from his sleep, and the beatings stopped, too. There were voices in the corridor, but Vadim found it too hard to focus on any of the words. It wasn’t about him.

1990—Hungary, 27th January

Thankful for the small mercy that almost everyone seemed to speak at least some words of English, Dan paid the taxi driver and stepped out onto the cracked

pavement. He got by in a few major European languages, was fluent in Russian, Pashto and Arabic, but he'd never learned Hungarian, and he sure as hell had no incentive to do so.

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, and growing rapidly colder now the sun was setting.

He glanced at the 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. Keeping both hands in his jeans pockets, he pulled his shoulders up to his ears, not used to winter anymore. Dan lifted his head with a deep breath into the crisp air and stepped into the magnificent building with its fading beauty that served as the fencing salle. The entrance was deserted, whoever was meant to be manning the desk was nowhere to be seen, so 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 working with deadly intent and skilful precision.

The electronic system they were both connected to beeped, and a green light lit up on the box on the floor as the smaller figure's epee hit true. Both fencers straightened and took a step back. Taking off masks one-handed, they faced each other and lowered their blades, masks tucked under their arms. Then they shook hands with the bare hand.

Dan let out the breath he'd been holding. The small one was Katya. When the mask came off, recognition hit him immediately. He'd seen the photo: the wife, the children.

"Good one," she said to her opponent, rubbing the inside of her elbow where he had obviously scored a point.

Dan watched in silence near the entrance as she disconnected the electric system and put the epee down. That heavy white jacket must be hot; her face was glowing with sweat. She pulled her glove off and stuffed it into the mask before setting it down on the bench. Straightening, she pulled the zipper down to her chest to take the cable off.

It was only then that she noticed his presence. Her partner noticed her glance and turned as well, wiping his face with a towel.

Dan swallowed a gulp of fear, tension residing in his stomach. He was asking too much, but he had to try. 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. Hands still in his pockets, he crossed the room with measured steps.

“This is not open to the public,” Katya said in English. She must have thought he was a tourist. “But I am sure you can see the 18th century stucco if you find the caretaker and pay for his tea.”

The other man studied him as he stepped closer, weighing him up. Dan had learnt to recognize that look. The man was attracted to him, but he ignored the blatant invitation and concentrated on Katya.

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.

He pulled his right hand out of his pocket, but the left one remained. He’d found it best with civilians to hide the scarred hand for a while. Often the scar on his face was too much, causing at least morbid curiosity, but he didn’t expect this one to bother. Acknowledging the man with a glance, he came closer, stopped at a safe distance and looked at the woman again. Yes. No doubt. It was her.

His only chance.

“I believe you’re the person I’m looking for, Katya...” What surname did she use 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 stared at him for a few seconds, then glanced at her training partner. “Thanks for the play, Szandor.” In English again, her voice as cool as a bucket of ice water even after what had looked like a strenuous bout.

She waited till the Hungarian had left, and kept staring at him. “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?”

When he approached, she’d watched him closely, no doubt noticing the way he favoured his right leg, the one with the fucked knee courtesy of too many hard landings on unforgiving surfaces.

Dan shook his head. "You are correct, and I am neither. I came here..." he faltered, took another breath, wondering if that horror inside would quieten eventually, "I came here to ask you a favour."

He took a deep breath. "I am Dan McFadyen." He felt the lapis lazuli beads against the fingers of his left hand, while he used the other to brush a strand of hair out of his face. "I am your ex-husband's lover."

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

"You are the one they caught him with?" Her eyes narrowed. "The trap they set for him?" She reached for the epee again.

Dan watched warily; even blunt, the weapon was still a piece of steel. Vadim had told him of an instance when someone's blade had slipped past a mask and gone 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 of winning against him, 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 his pocket. "I am that man." What else could he say?

She stared at him; her face pale with anger, her eyes dark blue, blonde hair tied back for the fencing. "You can be proud then, to have destroyed a man I thought was indestructible." Teeth bared, she took 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 acted."

Dan flinched visibly. Her words were more deadly than the epee could have been. He felt like a dog, crouching in the dirt, head down, tail between the legs, enduring the kicking and beating. "I understand." He did and hated her for it. "But *you* don't. There's no CIA, no MI5, no ulterior motive."

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

"I have known Vadim since 1980." Dan realised the time frame made no difference, possibly worsened the situation, but the truth was not a whore and could not be bought.

"My ex-husband was deployed in Afghanistan in that year."

And the British weren't meant to be there? Dan snorted to himself. 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?"

"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 still hatred, but her expression had changed. "I'd tell you I was sorry if I were, but I'm not. Not for anything throughout the last ten years."

She pressed her lips together and didn't say any more. A hint of pain showed in her eyes. Then, voice cold: "He had a brilliant career in front of him. 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 warning to others." Her breast rose as she took a deep breath. "I am not stupid, and women talk. I know he had his 'bitches' in the army."

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. "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, didn't 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 doesn't know I'm alive. They had KGB killers...Spetsnaz set on me." Why would she care? Why indeed.

"What kind of favour?" Her jaw muscles tightened.

"To get a secret message to him. Via his father." Asking too much, but he had to try. His jaws worked while he stalled, touching the beads in his pocket. "To let him know before he dies that 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, the epee still in her hand. As if to mull over what he'd said.

"You believe I am still in touch with his father? After his son broke my arm?" She placed the epee down so it stood on the hilt, tip pointing upwards. Then she pulled the zipper of the jacket fully down, fiddled around with the d-strap that held the jacket, and removed it, revealing a white plastic chest protector on top of a white t-shirt. She took off the white piece of kit that protected her left shoulder and side, then the protector and wrapped everything into a thick roll.

"I do believe you are." Dan stood still but his eyes followed her every movement. "I believe you are capable of anything."

She slipped into a light sweater. "His father is heartbroken. His only son. The mother is dead. And Vadim...convicted of these things. I imagine the KGB talked to his father 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 wouldn't stop—was nothing but being about butches and bitches, was cutting deeper with every minute.

"In a manner of speaking." She pulled the sweater down, reached for loose dark 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 himself. 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, and 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." Her smile, measured. "I am not easily scared."

"You want to know what Vadim was like in Afghanistan?" Dan looked up. What an insane notion. What was he going to tell her? 'I met your ex-husband the night he raped me. I wasn't impressed.' Or, 'I saw him splatter children's brains over the dead bodies of their mothers.' Or perhaps, 'he begged for a soldier's death

after I tortured him, and he broke down. He begged, because of you, his wife, you and your children. His family.'

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

"No." Dan shook his head once more, his eyes narrowed for a moment. What a fucked-up situation. Perhaps he should just fuck off and never return and forget about the whole damn thing. Perhaps it was insane to tell Vadim he was alive, and he still loved him; had fought for him, would fight forever, 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.

"Your intentions, then?"

"*My* intentions? For him to know before he dies that I still 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 swallowed. "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. Nothing beyond duties. No life, just existing, but you wouldn't understand how empty I am inside.

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

Dan nodded. What else?

She led him outside, crossed the old-fashioned courtyard, and headed up narrow stairs. This part of the building was currently under repair, everything was 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 again. 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 narrow entrance was painted white, too many shoes, trainers for teenagers in a pile. She picked up a small pile 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 want tea or coffee?” She went into the kitchen stuffed her discarded fencing gear into a washing machine, added detergent, and started a programme.

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

Dan watched silently as she went through the motions—taking the coffee machine out of a cupboard, wiping it down quickly, adding 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, and as if in an afterthought took the letters with her. He heard the click as she locked the door, and a few moments later, the sound of water was audible.

Awkward, tense, Dan sat at the table. He 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.

She came out when the coffee machine was gurgling steam, her 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. “Milk? Sugar?” Her voice seemed much huskier now, as if she was distracted, the sharp focus had been drained.

“Sugar.” Dan watched her, studied every motion. “Three spoonfuls, if possible.”

Had she been crying in the privacy of the shower? Her eyes seemed puffy. She put her 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 click of the ceramic betraying her shaking hands. With her jaw clenched, she set the mugs down hard and stared into the open cupboard for a long moment. “The letter was from my gynaecologist. The insemination failed. I am not pregnant.” She unscrewed the lid of a simple glass jar containing sugar and measured out three spoonfuls. Her actions now forceful, precise, she poured the coffee and stirred it for him. As she set the mug down, she stared into his face. “That is the only thing I want. A child.”

Dan automatically reached for the mug, didn’t see it, just stared back at her, trying to make sense of her words, but failed. Nothing made sense, nothing except the time moving—unstoppable—towards the end.

“What does that have to do with me?”

Her face was nearly without expression, maybe a hint of derision. “You are a man. I believe children happen when a sperm fuses with an egg.” She stayed put, no closer and did not pull away. “You seem healthy enough, and being a homosexual does not make you infertile.” Her eyes held a challenge, and then 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 movements confident again. “Vadim is Anoushka’s father. I don’t think he ever wanted to be, 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 her mug in both hands and raised it. “Vadim needed all the protection he could get. 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.

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 everything—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 who 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," he 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 his father's heart."

"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 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." He 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. Now 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 grasp, spilling across the table. “You fucking bitch!”

She crossed the distance swiftly and backhanded him, her face a mask of seething 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, his immediate reaction as always to defend, attack and *kill*. He shook, brimming with rage, fists clenched, fighting his own instincts. 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 his pocket, shaking fingers gripping the beads in anguish. He 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, no trace of fear in her eyes. 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 violence.

“One more thing: Are you healthy?”

“What?” He couldn’t think of how to respond. Nothing but anger at her mockery. Impotent rage. “If you mean have I got the fucking ‘faggot disease’? No, I haven’t!”

“Good. That means we have a deal.”

He couldn’t do it. Had to.

Vadim.

“I fucking hate you.” His hand came back out of his pocket, clumsy with anger, and the string of prayer beads clattering onto the floor, scattering across the kitchen.

Her lips opened in clear surprise, and there was realisation in her eyes.

Her gaze flickered to the living room before staring back at him, a question in her eyes, some of the harshness drained. “He gave you those, too? I’m surprised. Vadim never thought much of tokens.”

Fuck, the beads. Dan balked at her reaction. Fuck the bitch. Too late, her accusations and mockery 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 picking them up, and stashed them in his inner jacket pocket this time. He couldn’t bear to have anything of Vadim’s anywhere near this...thing. This crime scene. That’s what it felt like.

Dan left his jacket draped over a chair in the kitchen and slowly followed her.

Heavy curtains were drawn across the window, 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 her 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.

He hated her more than 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. 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.

“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, her gaze glued to his chest, seeing 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. Every mark, every scar on his body linked him to Vadim. The neat, precise circle on top of his left shoulder where Vadim shot him instead of killing him. The ‘V’ cut into clear lines of scars on his left bicep – a companion piece to the one Vadim carried on his inner thigh. The dead, ragged flesh peeking out above the top of the waistband of his jeans courtesy of a car bomb. Vadim had crossed two countries to be at his side.

“A sample. Where. Your surgery?”

All emotion stripped from his face, yet inside raged hatred, pure, cold and focussed. He had to function. He refused to assess how much this was hurting him, how much terror this truly was. This. This *thing*. He’d come to beg for mercy, and was being used in return. What had he expected? Dan, you fool. “What if you *are* successful.”

She made room for him, keeping her eyes unfocused for a moment. “If this works, you will have no obligations, just like any donor. 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.”

You fucking bitch. Callous, cold, just like Vadim had been all those years ago. The man you had been married to. 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 his 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. He stood naked, knowing how the ugly mess of scars across his abdomen stood out 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.

“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.

Ironic. The last woman he’d fucked had been a pink-clad big-breasted giggling bimbo in London.

“You don’t have to. All I need is a physiological reaction.” She did look at him then. Did she remember the scars Vadim had carried when he came back to Moscow to heal up? Maybe wondering how he and Vadim looked together. How his dark skin matched Vadim’s near permanent sunburn? She disappeared into the bathroom, muttering something about preparing herself 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. He lay on the futon, on his back. No way could he close his eyes; his life had taught him that blindness equated to vulnerability. He stared at the ceiling instead.

He didn't want to sully his memories of Vadim, but he couldn't get his body to react the way she needed. Shit. This was business: a deal he should be easily able to fulfil. He'd had women before, dozens of them; had fucked himself through the first thirty-one years of his life.

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

She 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 thoughtful as she took his cock into her hand, pumped it just to slick it up as well. No discussion, no tenderness, hardly acknowledging the other person in her bed. It was not required. Lowering herself, legs strong enough for complete control, her eyes cast down as her body accepted him, jaw muscles tensing again, focus, concentration, pure brazeness to follow through with this. Tight, powerful in this position, then moving, curving her back and pushing against him, slow, intense, a practised rhythm with every motion firmly controlled.

He hated her. Fucking hated every fibre of her. Had wanted again to kill her when she took his cock out of his own hand, as if it belonged to her. Her tool. Dan refused to acknowledge that body on top of his, instead he stared at the ceiling again, grabbing handfuls of cotton sheeting, clenching the fabric in his fists. Jaw square, body tense. Used. Again. No. He 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. He glanced at her briefly.

She moved, hands on her thighs, not touching him either. 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. She was obviously cynical enough to do it, use a body like any other tool, holding him tight, giving him what friction she could. He doubted she'd come, it wasn't required.

For Dan, it *was* required. He had to climax or their bargain would be void. He tried. Stared blind-eyed again, focussed on his inner vision, but it was wrong, all of it, even the physical sensations. Not enough friction, no violence, the 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. She seemed a touch surprised, possibly had been just too confident in herself and how she thought things worked. Vadim obviously hadn't given her this kind of trouble.

"How?" she whispered, as if speaking aloud could do more harm.

"I got to do the fucking." And the make-believe. The aggression would topple him over the edge. He grimaced. "Mustn't see you. Just fuck a hole. I'll come."

Her face reddened, and then the blood drained from her features, red spots remaining on her cheeks. Incredulous, clearly shocked at the thought, eyes showing insecurity now, a flicker of resistance.

His fists twisted into the sheets, knuckles white, strained to the breaking point, but he could not break. "Kneel."

She looked as if she was a hair's breadth away from calling it all off; her lips close to uttering - let's forget about it, sorry, no way, haha, how embarrassing. Kneel like an animal? She left his body, jaw tense again, eyes like 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. She'd gone too far, and would not admit defeat.

Dan turned, knelt behind her, paid no attention to her resistance or facial expression. 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 would ever hold

him back. Not with this woman. He was fucking 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.

He 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. He fucked her body with mechanical precision, silent, except for sharp breaths.

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!"

Hands shaking, barely able to control his temper. He was her whore. She'd used him and his despair. He fucking hated her and would for the rest of his life.

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.

From the bed, she reached for the bathrobe and slipped into it while getting up, her legs visibly shaking from just staying upright while Dan rolled over onto his back the moment he was done.

She turned around to put her hair back together, avoiding his gaze.

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

"I'll put one on the basket near the shower." She moved farther away, still looking a bit spooked. "Do you want to eat? I can fix something quick." Playing the hostess now.

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

"No. I don't want anything from you." Dan rolled off the bed, and stood with surprising ease for a man with a surgery scar across one knee. "I need a hotel. I'll be back in the morning." He walked over to the pile of his clothes. "I'll leave you the text of the message I want to send. He'll understand." Unlike you. Fucking bitch.

"I will call you a taxi." Relieved to see him go no doubt, even if she wouldn't admit it. "And call the hotel. There's a four star hotel in inner Budapest, with a view onto the river, breakfast included." She went into the living room, picked up the phone and spoke Hungarian.

He waited till she left the room before looking for the bathroom and the promised towel. He couldn't bear the thought of getting 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. He was still damp when he emerged, towel wrapped around his waist.

With barely a glance at him she announced the taxi would arrive any moment.

He nodded, just went back into the bedroom that still smelled of sweat and sex, to get into his clothes. 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 the pain couldn't get any worse; she'd hammered the dagger home, finished him off. Nothing more than 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 collect his jacket, looking through the pockets for the message he'd prepared. "Here." He put it down onto the table. "It's typed. It's a 'fable'. Make sure it is told exactly in this way."

She pulled the paper closer, but didn't read it. No doubt she'd read it later. "I promise. I will call his father as soon as he is home." She avoided his gaze, staring at the table in front of her. What was she thinking about? He didn't have a fucking clue and didn't particularly care.

Dan nodded. He'd fulfilled the hardest part of the bargain. It was done. Tomorrow morning was a universe away. "I'll wait downstairs." He turned and left the flat, carrying the jacket over his shoulders.

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

Lapushka. Fucking 'little paw'.

* * *

His taxi pulled up at precisely 0700 hrs the next morning. Still dark. Dan glanced up at the building, then pushed the main door open. Taking the stairs, one at a time, 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 his jeans pocket again, he rang the door bell and waited.

Listening for sounds inside.

When the door opened, Dan was faced with a girl. Blonde, long hair 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 knew it, still experimenting with eye shadow, grey and blue mixed into something 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 that she must have practiced a lot, as it looked nearly natural.

Dan almost jumped backwards, managed to control himself with one sharp intake of breath. Fuck. 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. 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?

Vadim's daughter turned, and he followed her into the kitchen, where she sat 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 was to tear the paper out of her hand, but what did it matter? Vadim. His daughter. Anoushka. 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, obviously displeased. "Then why is that ending not there? That's not a proper story. Stories have beginning, and middles and ends." Looking at him accusingly.

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

She glanced towards the corridor with a conspirator’s movement, only so very obvious. “Are you a friend of...” Hesitation, and a whisper. “Dad?” as if the word was 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.

Anoushka kept one eye on the corridor. “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.

Too close, too similar, the resemblance too painful. “I don’t fucking care.” Dan 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 the 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, then busied herself with the yogurt, cutting up banana pieces.

When Katya emerged, she remained in the doorway, glancing from one to the other, her mouth twisted, seeming to consider whether to explain who the stranger was, or the daughter, or leave it. In the end, all she said was, “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. What about the son? Not Vadim’s. A collection of kids of killers, soldiers. Whatever.

Anoushka’s knuckles became pointy around the spoon, but she gave her mother a sickeningly sweet smile. “Yes, sir,” in Russian, and 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 curtsey, she left. No banging 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, 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 for long enough, and they can bring food with them. Half of that is taken by the guards, but I’m sure he can make it there. I am only concerned because Vadim’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 approached. He didn’t want to talk, just get it over with. “Solitary confinement. Beatings. Sleep deprivation.” His gaze never strayed away from the window, but he could see her out of the corner of his eye.

She leaned against the sink, arms crossed. “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 had never seen him in pain like that. You know his eyes? How they turn dark? He looked at me, and I knew he’d rather break his own bones. He said he broke mine because he wanted to keep me out of trouble. He was planning his escape from his job, because it had begun to hurt him. Frankly, I never thought it would happen. I didn’t recognize the truth at first, but that night, I finally understood.”

She shook her head, as if remembering Vadim, but refusing to link his actions to the man in front of her. “He knew about the consequences, and still acted the way he did. And I believe that is how he will die. He’ll see it, and he’ll still accept 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 way Vadim’s eyes turned the colour of the sea. Knew every little thing, each detail. Yes, Vadim would die, but he’d die broken. “He signed a confession,” he finally replied. “Admitted to something he’s never done.” 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. His eyes returned to the approaching dawn outside.

“Confession, yes. Regret? I don’t think so. I just can’t see him regret anything, or be guilty of anything. They will 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 see you don’t regret anything, either. That’s why you’re here.”

Dan shook his head. “I tried to help him. I fought. So did people in high places.” He paused again. “Nothing.” He had no more words. Empty. Except for something he’d hidden deep inside. His voice came out toneless, almost gentle. “I have no right to grieve.”

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

Dan held his hand out for the sample container. He didn’t want to see her as human, easier to just hate the bitch as an enemy.

“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 keep hurting me like you did last night, or your words will cut me open and leave me to bleed dry.

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

Dan went to the bathroom without another word, and remained behind the locked door for over half an hour, longer than he'd expected. He flushed the loo several times before he opened the door again. He left without acknowledgement, leaving no 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

After the trial, Vadim had a visitor. His father. He looked aged and worn, and his hands shook with agitation. Vadim sat there, studying that familiar face. After a long silence, his father told him news of 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. They did not speak about the execution. Vadim was too tired to tell his father to go home, instead he 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 are 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, and that 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.

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

“Yes, I did.” Vadim saw his father cry harder, felt old resentment well up. The fights they'd had, the disagreements about even the most basic things; 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.

He remembered, and there was relief. At least Dan 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 shot him. Not a disgrace, at least not that.

But like all other thoughts lately, this one didn't have enough 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. 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 relentless clock; the black hands moving ever forward. Hours, minutes. Second after second. Moving. Finality measured by the unyielding tick-tick-tick. No other sounds, the building was as silent as a tomb; staff tiptoeing across the hall and whispering in the corridors. The room's grave walls were closing in on him, and only one constant: the clock. The movement of its hands. Cruel and uncaring.

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

They would have taken Vadim out of his cell by now, 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 air-conditioner 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.

Sweat poured off Dan. 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 Vadim now. Pistol drawn, muzzle against the back of his neck. Blue eyes bound, blind.

Dan's unblinking stare fixed on the clock as its merciless hands kept moving. His own hands 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 think of him at the end?

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. 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 got to his feet at some stage, for when the sound of soft knocks on the door got through to his senses, Dan found himself standing in front of the drawn blinds. He glanced at the clock; an hour had gone by.

“Dan?” The voice behind the door belonged to the Baroness. Another knock. “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. He stared 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....” He was startled when she fumbled for words, hesitation was not her manner. “...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.” His voice flat, no inflexion. Uncomprehending, but then nothing made sense anymore.

“Yes. 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 sit. What I have to tell you might come as a shock.”

He waited for a reaction inside, for a sense of insane hilarity that anything could possibly be a ‘shock’ anymore, but nothing happened. He felt nothing. Yet he sat on the bed as she instructed. Following simple orders. He was thankful for that. “Yes, Ma’am?”

“My contact, the most reliable one I have,” she emphasised the point. “Called me about ten minutes ago. Dan....” Again the uncharacteristic hesitation. “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, a sham. The re-trial had been ordered some weeks ago, under pressure from the political and diplomatic channels we used, but most of all because of interior forces. We read the situation correctly, 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 gaining ground. My contacts indicate the Ministry will not let the KGB execute Vadim. It’s an old inter-Soviet power struggle. The pressure is great enough that 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’re lying.” Dan refused to believe her. The sense of hope that was trying to steal inside his mind was too cruel to ponder. “That’s bullshit.”

“No, Dan.” She shook her head. “You have to believe me. My contact’s informants are infallible.”

Dan’s hands clenched into fists. “Don’t fuck with me. Don’t do that to me. You’re lying. It’s all lies! Vadim is dead. Do you hear me? Vadim is dead! Don’t you fucking lie to me!” He’d forgotten his manners, just the numbness inside that was turning into unbearable pain. Not this, not hope, not the cruellest of all feelings.

She didn’t flinch. “Listen to me, Dan. It’s the truth. Vadim is not dead; my contact told me only a few minutes ago.”

“No!” Dan yelled. “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 as he spoke, his eyes dry and burning with pain-fuelled rage. “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 turned even calmer. "I will get you proof." 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 flinched when she shrank back from him, for the first time ever since they'd met. His rage had no boundaries. Neither did his pain, forgetting all but the knowledge everything was over, and Vadim was dead. The unbearable agony finally had time and space to settle and eat him alive.

"You're fucking lying; everyone's lying. You said you would help him, and nothing! 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 his fucking country. Just doing what we were told, and what thanks did we get? Nothing!" He took a breath and yelled 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 stood there shaking, completely out of his mind, dimly ashamed of his lack of control, while the Baroness retreated towards the exit. He didn't glance over when the door closed behind her. He had no notion of anything but the fury and pain inside. Turning, he slammed his fist into the nearest thing to him, 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. He kicked the television, again and again until the screen broke and a flame shot out of its back. Then he picked up the chair, banged 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 dreamed of. The memories, and now—the damned lies.

Dead! Dead! Dead!

Dan tore 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. At long last, he finally cried.

* * *

Dan sat with his head in hands, the room steeped in silence. Even the uncaring clock had succumbed to his violence.

The slow turning of the handle drew his attention. He watched as the Baroness de Vilde used force to push the door open as debris impeded its motion.

She stared around the trashed room for a while then at him. How pathetic he must look, curled up on the floor like a child.

Child? Dan snorted to himself, a rock band in a drug induced rage couldn't have done a better job if they tried. Broken furniture, smashed electronic equipment, shredded books, shards of glass littered the apartment.

She closed the door quietly behind her then carefully picked her way between the broken rubble until she could crouch beside him. "Dan?" Softly, accompanied by the rustling of paper. "I brought your evidence." Still he didn't move. She placed her hand on his shoulder. "I have a fax here. I'll leave it right beside you. Is that alright?"

For a moment he thought she would stroke his hair, but then she lowered her hand and placed the paper next to him.

She stood and smoothed her skirt, all the while staring 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.

* * *

Later, much later, he knocked on her study door and opened it carefully after she called out for him to enter. By name. As if she'd been expecting him. She gestured to the leather chair opposite hers.

"Do come in and sit down." She smiled slightly, while he closed the door. Feeling like a dog who'd eaten his owner's favourite slippers, he sat and kept his gaze lowered, studying the pattern on the Persian rug.

"Do you feel any better, Dan?"

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. So sorry. For everything."

"I know." Unspoken forgiveness.

"Please accept my apologies," Dan heard his voice echo around the room and then inside his head, colourless, cold, dead. "I don't know what came over me."

“Oh, but I do. Pain, Dan. Pain makes us do the most regrettable things.” He glanced up at her. She did know.

He stared down at his battered hands that held the folded fax sheet. “Can I pay by instalments for the damage? 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, and I certainly do not wish for you to leave my employment.”

She was still smiling. Shit. Suddenly Dan didn’t know what he should feel more thankful for. Her understanding or her forgiveness? “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. “Ma’am? What is this?” Dan looked down at the envelope she pushed towards him.

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

He raised his brows, 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?”

“No, of course not. I don’t want you out of here, but Dan, you have been working ceaselessly for a year. What happened yesterday is only proof that you need to get away from everything for a little while. Call it R&R.” She inclined her head and smiled. “On my expenses.”

He stared at the plane tickets inside. “But I just smashed my room, and I...behaved despicably.”

“Don’t be silly. I already told you I accept your apology, and the settlement of the damage. Do you believe I ever say anything without meaning it?”

Chastised, he broke eye contact and shook his head. He was still mentally exhausted, all he could do was murmur, “No, Ma’am, never.” He snorted and found a spark of his old self inside. He looked up and smirked. “Unless you’re doing small talk.”

“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.”

“I do believe New Zealand is just the place for you to be right now. Try to relax; no matter how impossible that may seem, and enjoy being on the other side of this big blue planet.”

“But, Ma’am, what if anything happens? What if you need me to do something? And Vadim. What if....?” He was unable to continue.

She leaned forward. “Dan, Dan, take a breath. If any developments take place, any at all, I will let you know immediately. 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 I will play it well.”

She smiled, and Dan knew she was right. He was way out of his league, just as he had been throughout the entire year. But this time it was less agonising, because he could leave the job to the experts. Professionals, just like him, but in a very different field.

“I guess, that’s it, then.” Dan tried a smile, and drew 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. Thank you.” He felt like a right idiot; he tried hard to be grateful, but he was still so empty and raw inside that he was unable to muster up any enthusiasm.

“You are very welcome, my friend.”

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

“Thank you for everything, Ma’am.”

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

His hand on the door knob, Dan turned his head to look at her. Her back was straight, her head held high. Her eyes shining with promise.

“Aye, Ma’am, we will.”

1990—1991 Chapter 21—Judgment Day

1990—Finland, 24th December

The phone call came 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, when the call had come from Dubai informing him she was on her way.

2100 hrs. Temperature far too many degrees minus, almost worse than the Afghan mountains. The moment the second vehicle arrived, Dan climbed out of the car. The Baroness remained inside.

Wrapped in thick clothing, Dan stood in the freezing cold a few steps away from a couple of agents, his body shivering in the cold; but he felt none of it.

Nothing mattered. His eyes strained to see in the darkness, and his gaze followed the moving shadow. They had warned him not to move away from the car until the prisoner had crossed the open space.

A man. One man. Only ever the one.

* * *

The car stopped. Outside, darkness—and the electric light of a gas station. A truck idled there. Vadim saw the driver’s breath mist. Pine forest all around. 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 like an extension of the cell. A place that was safe. Outside was only darkness. And light he didn’t know how to deal with.

“Get out,” huffed the driver. Vadim opened the door. He swung his feet into the ankle-deep snow, 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. He forced himself to walk towards it.

Fifty yards, maybe fifty-five. Open, unprotected space. A million places for snipers. Vadim expected to feel the impact of a bullet; every step took him deeper into a kill zone. He pulled his head deeper between his shoulders.

Into the beam of the other car’s headlights he walked, seeing almost nothing. Vadim moved on, step after step, listening to the too loud scrunch of snow, keeping his eyes lowered. 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 taken him through Leningrad, Vyborg, past Lake Ladoga. This was Finland. Winter War. A tactical disaster. Nothing of that mattered—echoes of something he’d known as a child.

Thirty yards. Vadim looked over his shoulder, but no car window was open, nothing pointed 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 moved to the driver’s side.

Six yards away. He stopped.

“Vadim?” Dan’s voice almost broke, unsure if it even carried through the freezing night. His hands clenched at his side, 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. Almost two years. Dan barely dared to try and picture Vadim’s face, as he moved back into the shadows.

Vadim glanced up, seeking for a moment, then saw the tall figure—looking back at him. Dan. Dan McFadyen, SAS, lover, enemy, everything. Remembered, but only with his mind, and faint, like aged photographs, emotions. He 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," Vadim 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 only repeat the name, finally able to move out of his frozen stance. It hadn't been the cold that 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 at last he could make out every line and angle in that face. Vadim's head was shaved, his skin stubbly, looking gaunt. Drawn, haggard, and far too thin, the weight-loss visible in the way the thick greatcoat hung loose.

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

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

Dan's voice finally broke, "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, 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 manoeuvred 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 it. After a glance at the agents hovering at the fringes, he moved the last step forward. "You are free." It wasn't enough, though, Dan had to say the name again, and again. As if that would make it all true, anchor everything in reality.

"Free, Vadim." He embraced him. "At last, Vadim, at last."

Vadim 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.

He suddenly felt too much, too close, far closer than anybody had been in a long while. His heart pounded at the hug. He closed his eyes, but that was worse, so he stared at the price sign on 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, he couldn't cope with that emotion anymore. Didn't know what to say. "All...all way from Kabul?"

Dan noted the stiffness of the unmovable body in his arms, but didn't understand why. No matter. It had all been too long, too much. 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've been in Dubai since the middle of last year."

"Dubai." Saudi Arabia. They'd have to fly there. Another long way, but at least not Kabul.

"We're staying at the embassy in Helsinki, only a short ride away." Dan went to kiss Vadim, but something stopped him at the very last moment. He couldn't explain why. Vadim seemed so fragile. Alive, but 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 words, it all rang hollow and unreal.

Dan clapped his gloved hands together. "Come into the car, it's fucking freezing." He was still smiling, couldn't stop.

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

Dan opened the door for him. He got in, could smell smoke in here. Dan was a smoker. "I'm just tired."

"It's okay. No problem, Vadim." *Vadim.* Dan couldn't get enough of the name.

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.

"Do you remember me? Baroness de Vilde." She smiled at him and held out her hand. "Major Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada," emphasising his rank as if they had never stripped it off him. "I am honoured to meet again the man Dan loves."

Now there was a reaction. A moment of fear flashed across Vadim's brain. Power. The kind of power that could destroy people. He remembered old fear, embarrassment, humiliation, and didn't understand why she offered her hand. He felt trapped, then his muscles relaxed. No power. No resistance. No struggle. He had no chance to fight. "I...am honoured, Ma'am." He took her hand like it was a thing of spikes and poison and forced himself to hold it, lowering his gaze.

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

The Baroness let go of his hand quickly. "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. The chains on the tyres gripped fresh snow as he turned the car around carefully.

"Not true," Dan interrupted. "Without the ambassador's help, anything I did would have ended up as nothing." He placed a hand onto Vadim's arm.

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.

"Are you hungry? Or thirsty? I'm sorry, Vadim, I keep forgetting the most basic things. I'm just so bloody overwhelmed. We have some food here, and a flask with tea and one with coffee. Oh, and some water." Dan couldn't take his eyes off Vadim, not even when he peeled his hands out of his gloves or pulled the hat off.

Tea. Coffee. Water. Three choices. Vadim didn't know whether he was actually thirsty. Tea. Snow outside and tea worked. "I..." Looking around, he saw their eyes on him like they expected him to do something, say something, eyes 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." He glanced at her first, as if she would give an order, then at Dan. Something was wrong. 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 as he tried to fill the cup. Why were his hands trembling? Why was his focus shot to shit? This is Vadim. Not some stranger. “There you go.”

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

Dan couldn’t take his eyes off Vadim. Couldn’t believe this was true. Vadim was alive and sat right there, next to him. “Can I touch you?” he suddenly murmured. Dan didn’t know why the hell he’d felt the need to ask and not just do it, but in some ways, Vadim did feel like a stranger.

Vadim looked up. Maybe that would break the spell. Maybe it wouldn’t. Too close. But not his decision. He owed that, had no right to resist because Dan had every right to. “Sure.”

Dan raised his hand. Using only his fingertips he gently touched Vadim’s face, stroking along the stubbly cheek and jaw. Vadim jerked momentarily even though he’d tried to do it as soft as possible. Maybe his fingers were too cold; he had only started to warm up. “You’ve 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.

“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 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 caressed the jaw, his hand coming to rest on Vadim’s shoulder. He noticed a minute twitch of Vadim’s eyes and felt something...something wrong. Something he refused to feel. “Aye, it’s been growing a bit.” His hand slid off the still broad shoulder, slowly, down the chest which stopped breathing until finally coming to rest on the once massive thigh. “You used to like it long and wild.” The nagging awareness refused to go away but he concentrated on only one sensation: of Vadim being back after almost two years. He still couldn’t believe it.

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

Again that feeling of wrongness, something not quite right. Of course Vadim was distant. Almost two years and the Lubyanka....Now it made sense. "Money, bribes, but mostly diplomatic bitch-fighting." Dan grinned when the Baroness in the front seat let out a small cough.

Vadim's eyes turned immediately to 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, trying to find words, and most of all thoughts, but his mind felt empty and desolate.

"It's quite simple." Dan's hand still rested on Vadim's thigh. "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 couldn't say that other word, 'torture'; it would make it too real. "So, we gathered the funds to..." He snorted. "Ach well, you could say we 'persuaded' 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." The Baroness and her contacts had had a field day.

"I'm cleared."

"Yes, you are."

That was good. They wouldn't hunt him anymore. He could rest. Cleared. Not guilty. Well, guilty, but pardoned. "How much?" What's the value of the rest of me? Vadim was 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 tried to make a joke of it.

"Pound?" Vadim's mind stumbled over that amount, couldn't understand how he could possibly be worth that much, how anybody could demand so much money.

Dan gripped Vadim's thigh briefly for a second. "You're worth all the money in the world to me, aye?"

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

“What do you mean?” Dan leaned forward, closing the 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 and leaned back in the seat. “Money means nothing. It’s what money can do that has meaning, and you’re here, alive, and free. That’s what matters” He stroked Vadim’s thigh, the niggling worry soothed by the limousine’s quiet purr as it navigated the winter landscape towards Helsinki.

Vadim 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; the calm landscape seemed like a good place to be, nothing but darkness and snow. No people. No expectations.

Dan moved closer until their thighs were touching, his hand still on skin-warmed cloth, and his shoulder against Vadim’s. He didn’t know what he wanted, whether he wanted a touch, kiss or taste, but he knew it was reassurance that kept him close. That, and the vast amount of emotions that were forcing their way to the surface. He was quiet for a long time, then 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 numbness covered everything in oppressive silence. He nodded, didn’t want to speak, unable to answer as expected or feel as expected.

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

“We are here.” The Baroness turned to look at them. “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.

The gates opened, and Vadim saw the flags and big cars. That was the embassy, then. 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 closer. “Come with me?” It felt odd to ask this as a question, but he felt somehow insecure around Vadim. *This* Vadim. The thin man with blond stubble on his face and shorn head, who smelled of mothballs and was dressed in a loose army coat and scuffed boots.

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

Vadim 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.

With his gaze lowered, Vadim followed Dan who led the way towards the ‘facilities’—the whole place reeked money, and class, and prestige, and status. He was lost, displaced, and felt another wave of nausea and fear. He was an impostor; he deserved nothing of this; he was 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 and 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 had changed into a suit and was waiting outside. He still didn’t like these things, but he’d become part of the machinery and accepted the material necessities. He looked at the Baroness when she came towards him. “What do you think, Ma’am?” Insecurity coiled in his guts, while his heart was about to overflow.

She looked up at him, as if considering, but smiled at the end and patted his arm. “Give him time. He has just suffered 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.”

“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.”

Dan stared at the floor. “I’ll do anything, but it’s as if he didn’t even recognise me. I feel like I’m treading on thin ice around a stranger, while the real Vadim is lurking somewhere inside.”

“I have arranged for a very good specialised psychiatrist to meet him. He has worked with the British Legion and PTSD sufferers. I hope he will be able to help with whatever psychological effects Major Krasnorada suffers from.” She patted Dan’s arm again. “In the meantime, the love won’t vanish suddenly, or will it?”

“No.” Dan shook his head. “It won’t. Not a chance. Not on my part. Not ever.”

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

She left him deep in thought, waiting for Vadim.

* * *

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

Outside, he 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 something, anything.

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 always at his shoulder, reaching out to touch his arm, his back. Touches 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 be 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 carried the bags to the taxi. The suite had been booked. Vadim only needed to sign the paper. Wrote his first name in Cyrillic, then paused, crossed the name out, then wrote it in Latin letters. They received the keys and went up to the suite. 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, escape into unconsciousness.

The suite offered every comfort—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 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, expecting it to open, expecting 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, 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 for. Emptiness. He knew in theory what to feel, but there was nothing. He couldn't even mourn it. Like he had used up all those emotions by just remembering them. He'd seen all that in Dan's eyes: the hope, the joy, and that was worse than being kicked in the teeth. Couldn't share it. Knew he should, but nothing moved. It 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 later. They had gone through so much, and those 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. 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 feel 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.

Instead, the night air crept in. He felt like bronze, metal, a statue. Empty. He began to walk, 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.

He kept going, trudging along another road, until, in the early morning, a truck moved closer. The driver stopped and 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.

He crossed the borders out in the forest, cold and desolate, snow blue in the moonlight, shadows darker blue. Found another truck for 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 the gas stations, followed a dirt road as he crossed it.

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

He 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.

Awaking scared.

He undressed only then, checked out the place. Made sure he could leave. The building was wood and lost heat faster than a cooling corpse. He found the gas stove, made tea, sat in somebody else's tiny kitchen, slumped on the bench, drank from somebody else's chipped mug. 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.”

Remembering her world knew manners, Dan added, “Please. I know ish Chrishmas, but ish important.”

A miracle, they seemed to get her. Perhaps his name still carried some weight. He finally heard the click of the phone.

“Ma’am?” Before she said anything.

“Yes? Dan, why do you call?” Her voice as pristine as ever, familiar 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 was too big a foe to conquer.

“Dan, why do you ask?”

He couldn't answer, just held the phone, and stared at the wall. He'd never felt so empty in all his life. Alone. Emptier than death.

“Dan?” Her voice became urgent. “Dan, speak to me. What is wrong?”

Clear vision returned in increments. Wall, to table, to floor, to bottle, to hand. “He’sh gone.”

“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. Then at last, at long last. 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 him to cross the thin surface, and he’d always accepted the challenge. But inside something had been wrong. Give him time they said. Time? He’d kept his distance just like she said.

“He’s gone.”

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

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

She knew who he meant.

“Aye, Ma’am.”

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

Lapushka.

Merry fucking Christmas, Dan.

Perhaps it was the vodka that made him cry.

1990—Helsinki, 25th December

The world didn’t look any better on Christmas morning. Dan woke curled up on the couch in one of the visitor rooms in the embassy. Someone had placed a blanket over him. A carafe with water and a glass stood on a tray on the table beside him, along with a packet of tablets that looked like Alka Seltzer. As ever high-class, expensive, thoughtful.

Dan 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. He peered at the tablets. He didn't give a damn what they were as long as they provided some relief.

Vadim was gone.

Those three words hammered through his mind, worse than the headache, more debilitating than any hangover. The concierge had reported seeing him walk out of the hotel. Alone.

Dan reached for water and pills, popped a handful, washed them down. He wiped his hand across his face, trying to brush away a moment of acute embarrassment, remembered tears, crying in front of her. He'd been unable to stop. Shit.

Vadim was gone.

He closed his eyes. The pounding in his head at least told him he was alive. Everything else felt empty, numb.

He thought he knew what pain was, but even Vadim's hour of execution and the bitch's blackmail paled in comparison. The pain from the hangover seemed tiny against the other pain that made him weak at the knees. Best to shut everything off, force it down, down where it could no longer hurt. Lock it away. Better to be dead inside.

Empty.

Dan sat with his head in his hands, blanket half thrown onto the floor. A knock on the door dragged him back to the present, away from memories, dreams. All gone now. Like Vadim. After a moment the door opened, he could hear heels clicking across the wooden floor towards him. They stopped right in front. He knew who it was without looking up.

"I believe you could do with a strong coffee." Nothing seemed to perturb the toff pronunciation of Baroness de Vilde.

Dan took the cup from her hands; the bloody thing was so delicate he could hardly hold it properly. He tried to smile his thanks and failed. Too empty.

"Thanks, Ma'am."

The coffee was black, strong and overly sweet, just as he liked it. Funny how this upper-class lady had turned into the closest thing to a friend he had ever had. Had Vadim been his friend? His lover certainly, even a comrade in arms, but more? He'd never had the chance to find out. At the reception he'd tried to shield him from the well-meaning guests, but every time he'd touched his back, Vadim

had flinched. He'd tried to talk to him, but people kept interrupting and what would they have talked about anyway? What they'd been doing lately?

Dan drank the first few sips while she pulled one of the lounge chairs close and sat, as elegant as ever.

Dan looked at her; his gaze transfixed by her hair, stiffly coiffed as always, wearing the grey helmet of superiority with typical style. The corner of his mouth twitched, but then he remembered seeing her once in disarray. He'd never found out what she'd been shouting the day he'd used his body to shield her from the car bomb. Unconsciousness had claimed him shortly afterward only to wake up in an Indian hospital and discover that Vadim had crossed two countries to find him. Now he had walked away. No words. No explanation. Why?

She met his gaze with unwavering calm. "Dan, are you still determined 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.

"I thought you would be." Her brief smile was tinged with an odd sadness. "I have never known you to waver once you have made a decision. However, I do feel I have to question the wisdom of that decision."

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

"Please explain."

"I can't stay here. I tried to explain last night, but I guess I was too drunk." Dan dropped his aching head into his hands and stared at the floor. "Ma'am." He lifted his head gingerly after a long silence, "I can't explain what's happening inside me. I don't know what I feel. Hurt? Pain? Fear? Anger."

She still just listened. Her intelligent gaze directed at him. Her expression gentle. Waiting patiently for him to continue.

"But in a way...there's 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 understood? "I can't go on. I haven't got the strength anymore," he murmured, never lifting his eyes. "Not right now."

She leaned forward to place her dainty manicured hand onto his own huge mitt that had been resting on his knee. Memories of the same hand resting on Vadim's leg returned. Had it only been yesterday? He turned his hand over and

simply took hers. Holding those elegant fingers in his calloused ones, taking strength from the touch.

“I could search for him,” she said very quietly after a long while, but he knew from her voice she knew his answer.

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

“I understand.” And he knew she did from her slight nod, her strangely sad smile, and the way she squeezed his hand before letting go. “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.”

Just away, away from there, even if it meant missing her friendship. Yet the prospect of active duty, of living on the edge once more, gave him something other than the abyss inside. Dan felt himself pulled towards a purpose that promised more than just booze and a sad excuse for an ex-soldier who had got fucked over by the world and resented its existence. A soldier who had dreamed and lived for one thing, one man, only to have that man walk away without even saying goodbye.

“Thank you, Ma’am. I knew I could count on you.”

“Loyalty brings forth loyalty in return.” She smiled, alluding to the day he’d saved her life almost three years ago.

“I was just doing my job, Ma’am,” Dan replied. They both knew, a wordless understanding.

He picked up the cup and emptied it, ignoring the churning in his bowels and the creeping sickness that accompanied his 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 over. “As soon as possible. I can’t bear to be here any longer.”

“Yes, I understand. 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’s where I need to be.”

Her expression was inscrutable as she turned, but she 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 a 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, 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 two men stood in his camp, looking around with obvious distaste. It was cold inside, cold enough for their breaths to mist in the room. Uniforms. Young, fresh faces.

One said something. He didn't understand; just looked at 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. 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.

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 car door and went back to half-sleep, not caring about anything. He just didn’t have the strength to wonder. He assumed they’d take him deeper into the forest and shoot him there.

The vehicle 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, as they 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. He didn’t care. They could just shoot him as far as he was concerned. 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 flustered. Tried a different language. Nothing. Vadim looked up, then dropped his gaze. It took too much concentration.

They marched him into a cell, and there was a flutter of panic as he took in the tiles and the bunk that was bolted to the wall and the floor. 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 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 leafed through it, trying out the sounds in there before speaking.

“You...Russian?” In Russian. Vadim looked up, saw the 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 so bored out of their skulls that they lingered around. This place did seem very peaceful.

“Good evening,” said the man, in Russian with 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. 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?” The man talked to the cops again. “Listen, Vadim Petrovich. 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.

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

The cop said something as Vadim pulled the jumper over his head and 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 the work. It remembered how to do this.

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 skin. 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. His heart pounded. A shadow of something large moved under the surface. Water. Heat.

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

The towel smelled fresh. He 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. 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 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?"

What did it matter? Vadim 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. He 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.

"They are getting in touch with the embassy. They should pick you up."

And all for nothing. He'd almost frozen to death, he was better off locked away somewhere. Anywhere. Whatever.

Vadim was tired, pulled his legs up on the bunk, reached for the folded blanket. Heavy wool. He 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 cop came in again. 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 and 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. Gun. Keys. 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. Vadim understood the basics. His Pashto and Dari had never progressed much 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've 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 of 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. "You wouldn't want to look like a deserter. No, you are ex-military. 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, like surprised to hear his voice. "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 raised his hands. "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.

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

Spetsnaz don't.

1990—Sweden, 31st December

The police station was deserted, apart from Manke. Nobody else in the cells. In this kind of place, they didn't keep drunks for long. They were admonished, fined, then the cops 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.

Manke was measuring coffee powder into a filter. Vadim preferred the smell to the taste, but coffee was always something one could warm the hands on.

A small pile of paperwork on Manke's desk, but nothing seemed to be connected to Vadim. 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.

"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?"

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

"Will do."

Manke prepped two mugs with tourist motifs and 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," Manke said 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 in 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 and 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 that held photocopies of what Manke had found. The whole sordid story 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 the Moscow Olympics. That's where you were born."

Vadim shook his head. "That was it. Last one."

Manke leaned back, regarding 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 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."

"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. He remembered the journalists' questions about his lieutenant rank. They must have assumed he wore that like some kind of honours degree. Krasnorada was too pretty to be evil.

"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? 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? Shit. That's nasty even by Soviet standards."

He had no strength to correct Manke. Close enough. All the other things made matters too complicated. Didn't have to tell him about the crimes, the cleansing, the despair of the last few years. 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 work legally. And how would you feed yourself? Begging?"

Vadim inhaled. "Just let me go."

Manke stood, came around his desk fast, much faster than he had moved before. Vadim's knuckles turned white as he tilted 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 and pulled back for a few steps, sat on the corner of his desk. "I'll contact 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."

Dan had climbed into the Herc like a child returning to the womb. 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 a large bergen and sports bag with additional necessities like the vitamin pills and extra nutrients he needed for his fucked-up guts was packed on pallets with rope netting stretched over it, at the back, near the rear doors of the plane. All he'd brought with him was the additional gear he'd purchased 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 everything safe, but he'd told her to bin the trash.

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, and the company of younger soldiers and hard-assed mercs hadn't helped to fight the never ending carousel of questions for which he had no answer. Round and round: the why? and the where? and the when? and back to the why?

He couldn't even throw himself into the next suicide mission. As much as doing so was against his natural survival instinct, right now it would beat the emptiness and numbing pain. Bloody clever bitch, that Baroness, she knew him

better than he did himself. He'd given his word. Wouldn't get himself killed, but hell, he'd get himself at least into trouble if he wanted 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.

The Herc touched down, vomiting its human load into the desert. British soldiers, some close security and a handful of insane fuckers like Dan, out to lose themselves in the danger in a country about to be invaded. He grabbed his bergen, strapped it onto his back and snatched the extra bag. Pushing the shades back over his eyes, he stepped into the glaring sun and snarled to himself, "Happy fucking New Year, Dan McFadyen."

1991—Sweden, March

Vadim couldn't do much at first; he tired out too fast, sweating in the forest, clearing out trees that would be dug up in spring, using chainsaw, axes, piling the wood up. He worked with a man and his two cousins, all young and very strong.

Manke must have told them his mind was broken; they were careful around him; nobody ever approached from behind or patted him on the shoulder. 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, 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 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 before when he had brought him clothes, probably after asking around for jumpers, trousers, boots and underwear.

“He told me you’re a good worker,” said Manke as he walked around the clearing, breath misting in front of his face, but Spring had made its advance known. The air smelled different. 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 doesn’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.”

“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. Those were options, but he didn’t want to disappoint the cop. He had considered joining one of the big tankers, 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. He might end up in the tropics, vanish, nameless like an animal, somewhere. Anywhere. Didn’t have the determination to follow through with that.

He had considered a bullet, but it was too good a feeling to lift logs and stand there in the forest, feeling breath flow freely. As long as he could feel that—as little as it was—he didn’t want to end his life. He 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 Wilde. She’s British ambassador. Ask

her...whether she would see me." She was the only person he could reach that knew where Dan was.

He had to tell him, sorry, but he still didn't feel: 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 22—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. He wasn't part of the gang, wasn't a member of the British Forces anymore. But he had special permissions and passes, making him the odd man out. Merc. Dog soldier, private military contractor, or just PMC, as they were starting to call the glory hounds. The weird one; the old one. Why was he here? Who was his employer? Dan never answered, just shrugged and cleaned his weapon. Truth was, he'd be buggered if he knew the answers himself, other than the fact Maggie wanted him in the Gulf and the British High Command for Operation Granby was fully aware of his presence.

He hung onto his water bottle like an alcoholic with his booze, smoking fags, and shoving mountains of chocolate and anything sweet down his throat, while waiting to get out and do something—anything, as long as it gave an adrenaline kick that could make him feel alive.

At forty-one he was ancient by infantry standards, but hell, he'd show them he was physically fit for two and easily insane enough. Scarred, reckless, without scruples or fears.

It all blew up in the early hours of January 17. They called him into HQ to be finally briefed by the British Commanding Officer. If the necessity arose, they'd use him and a few others for the most sensitive missions; the ones that were crucial and couldn't be carried out by official troops in the current political climate.

Dan had grinned and 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

Despite the murky light in the 'bar' as the Yanks called the makeshift pub in the compound, Dan was wearing polarised shades. He always wore them now, no matter when or where, day or night. The other guys had mocked him for the

first few days, but he took no notice, grinned, shrugged, or simply delivered a pulled punch, ending so close to their 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, or, as some had begun to call him, a mad dog. 'Mad Dog' Dan. He could live with that. Question was, for how long. He had promised the Baroness he'd stay out of suicide missions, but it was all a matter of definition.

He liked to think of them as challenges.

Dan walked up to the bar, nodded a 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 bottles. He turned to face the room and leaned against the bar, preferring to have a barrier at his back. Old habits died hard.

He watched the rag-tag of patrons, some of them battle-worn bastards, others fresh-faced soldiers. Apart from the PMCs who didn't wear anyone's flag, the others were a multi-national crowd of those lucky enough to get enough time off plus permission to score an alcoholic drink. They drenched their thirst with the measly excuse for booze that was available, since the place had special dispensation by the government.

Fresh out of Infantry, Para or Special Forces, the mercs, like him, were hooked on the adrenaline thrill. He wasn't sure who they worked for, probably someone like he did, but sure as hell he didn't give a fuck anyway.

With every passing day of Allied air strikes, he still hadn't had a chance to let off steam. Stuck on the ground while tension coiled in the pit of his stomach, and nothing interesting to do. He couldn't call the jobs they sent him on—missions—just tasks, some—mostly friendly—fire, but never enough to help him sleep or end the numbness. He needed action. Ground action, right there in the middle of things. The Americans had done the recce, but Operation Desert Sabre was still waiting in the wings.

Another gulp of the cold bear's piss labelled 'beer', before lighting another fag. He nodded to a guy he'd bunked with, exchanged a few words, 'mate' here and an 'aye' and 'fucking hot' there, before he settled back to smoking. The door opened, but Dan didn't bother looking up.

The newcomer marched up to the bar. Dan caught the motion from the corner of his eyes.

Yank. Standing right beside Dan, in his personal space, and demanding a large coke with a jarhead's unmistakable drawl. Dan could read the fucktard like an open book. The tension inside him increased a notch. The Yank's elbow almost touched his arm, but he didn't budge, just smoked his cig and took another swig.

"Hey, buddy, what the fuck are all those fucking faggots doing in here?" The guy's sneering voice cut through the general noise of the jam-packed place.

The bartender shrugged. "What faggots?" he said, wiping a glass. Dan's fingers tensed around the bottle.

"Brits," the Yank blurted out. "They're all faggots." He smirked, knocking back the coke, and demanded another.

The atmosphere in the place changed to sudden aggression as several of the British soldiers pushed their chairs away and stood.

Dan slowly raised his head and pushed his arm against the idiot's elbow. Too close, but exactly what he needed. Perfect. *Go on, arsewipe, 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 shit-stabbing fag." He didn't bother pushing the shades off his eyes. "Want me to spell it out for you, dickhead?" He put the bottle down and turned.

The whole place fell silent.

"You want to get your teeth kicked in, asshole?" The Yank's entire head had gone an interesting shade of purple. "I suggest you fuck off."

"What, sissy? Want me to sashay off? Frightened?" Dan's smirk showed teeth, each and every one of them. The other Brits stood waiting, ready, but fuck it, he didn't want their intervention.

He pulled off his shades, neatly folded them, still grinning while stepping closer. "Got a mouth bigger than your courage? Or dying to get that mouth stuffed with a juicy cock?" Stashing the shades in his shirt pocket, he wiggled his hips in a lewd gesture, licked his lips exaggeratedly and made some smacking, kissing noises.

The Yank's face grew redder. "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 poser's chest. "You want to mouth off, or are you worried the faggot could get your pretty hair out of order, or you might break a nail?"

He didn't get another push in. The Yank, so angry he was almost foaming at the mouth, finally got the message—the faggot really was a faggot—and threw the first punch. Dan dodged 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 this time, but Dan blocked the blow, delivered one of his own, but only clipped the bastard, who retaliated with two hits in rapid succession. Pain exploded behind Dan's eye, then on his jaw. *Fucking yes!* That was what he wanted, adrenaline, anger, pain, and a whole fucking lot more.

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

Dan grabbed his shirt, hauled him up close and head-butted him, smashing his nose. He grinned 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. The man started to crumple to the floor, but stopped in mid-motion when Dan took hold of his collar, kept the Yank's bleeding nose at crotch level, and thrust his hips once, twice, into the man's face, before finally dropping him like a sack of potatoes.

"Well, that was fun." He turned, wiped his hands, as if nothing had happened then searched 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 two bottles were shoved into his hands. Other hands clapped his shoulders, with laughter of "Well done, mate," and "You're fucking crazy."

Dan just grinned and shook his head. 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.

“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 bared his teeth. “Got a problem with that?”

Silence all around him. Despite the shades, he could read what was going on behind some of the faces. Disgust, anger, surprise, amusement, and most of all the fresh memory of the way he’d just turned the Yank into a simpering puppy with its proverbial between its legs.

“You got two options, guys.” Dan lifted his chin, both hands on the bar counter. “You can drink a beer with me and forget 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. Otherwise, get ready for a fight, because unless you show this ageing faggot you’re ten times more of a man than that Yank with the broken nose, you’ll find yourself being used as a mop I use to wipe the floor with.” A feral grin flashed across Dan’s face, “Aye, damn, I almost forgot the third option; you can just ignore everything and simply avoid the ageing faggot. Pretend I don’t exist. What’s it gonna be, mates?”

The silence continued until one of the guys started to laugh his head off, took a step forward and thumped Dan on the shoulder. “You’re priceless; haven’t laughed so hard since Saddam got his knickers in a twist. At least you’re a real Scotsman and that wanker’s got some dandruff in his teeth.” He called out to the barman in the broadest Glaswegian accent. “Get this man another beer!”

Dan joined in with the ensuing commotion of laughter and bottles clinking but noticed that some preferred to slink away. Others turned away with distorted faces of seething dislike. He snorted to himself. Later.

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 stood with his arms folded. No longer bound to standing at attention and catering to those god-damned, overblown egos. “I was in The Regiment, sir. Of course I did.”

High Altitude—Low Opening. He grinned, remembering amongst an endless string of normal ones, a dozen, fucking-crazy jumps with the maddening surge of adrenaline as his body half froze from the air rushing by until he’d almost lost consciousness.

“Good.” The officer sat and indicated a plastic chair in front of his desk. Dan took the invitation.

“We need a man with enough balls and experience to jump into Iran.” The officer’s expression soured. “And you seem to have the balls at least, judging by the way you’ve been brandishing them around camp.”

Dan merely grinned. “If you say so, sir, but why Iran and why HALO? Doesn’t make any sense.”

The officer glared, and Dan expected to get a proverbial second one ripped, but the man visibly bit down on his intense dislike. ‘Mercenary faggot’ apparently had been one of his kinder descriptions.

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

“No?” Dan shrugged. “Would have thought they’d welcome me with open arms. Surely they’ve had enough of Saddam and his cronies after years of being at war with Iraq.”

The officer’s frown deepened. “Mr. McFadyen, you’d be well advised to be serious. 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. “And what about 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’m* not a member of the British Forces anymore, thus hardly privy to all the ins and outs in camp.”

“Cut the crap, McFadyen!”

Dan just grinned, slouching in his chair while revelling in knowing the pissed off CO needed him—McFadyen—the ‘faggot’.

“You know damn well, McFadyen, certain operations require extraordinary sensitivity and should not be carried out by military personnel. You also, unfortunately, happen to be the only one here with the required experience. According to intelligence, we have no more than twenty-four hours. There is no time to get other trained personnel here before the window of opportunity closes.”

“Opportunity for what, sir?”

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

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

Dan peered at the photo. “Unless I’m mistaken, he’s the one linked to the Iraqi’s stupid-arsed stunt of flying their remaining aircraft 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 again while Dan continued, “and who has been pursued by the combined Allied Forces without success?” Dan flashed a brief smirk, “Is that the man, sir?”

The CO stiffened. “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 the air force exploit, unless he’s cleverer than we thought.”

The CO just nodded.

“And you need someone to go and extricate good old Ibn, preferably alive, while being unable to offer anything but covert military assistance from a distance.”

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

Dan was really starting to 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 ageing fag.”

“Goddammit, McFadyen! You had to rub it in again, didn’t you?” The CO’s fist slammed down on the desk.

“Apologies, sir.” It was bloody obvious Dan didn’t mean it. “But I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yes.” The CO glowered. “Feel free to gloat. Unfortunately, you’re the only one who can get away with going native who has even a vague chance of getting back out of the country alive.”

Dan crossed his arms. “I’m glad to hear it. I was getting cabin fever.” The plastic chair squeaked as he shifted. “The mission sounds like fun.”

The officer raised his eyebrows. “Fun?” He huffed, “If I had been your OC I’d have busted your arse out of the Army and into Collie.”

“Thankfully, sir, I am not under your jurisdiction and never have been.”

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 brass tracks, then.” Turning into fully-fledged professional within an instant. “Twenty-four hours, aye?”

“Yes, I want you out there before dawn.”

“And the equipment?”

“Is being put together as we speak.”

“We’ve talked about getting in; anything planned for getting out?”

“You’ll be on your own.” The CO’s gaze became intense, leaving the dislike aside for a moment. “Preferably with your target.”

“No problem, I drive anything.” Dan shrugged.

“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.”

Suicide 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.

* * *

At least a couple more hours before dawn. Dan had hardly managed to get any sleep at all. No time, and, if he were honest with himself, too many nerves. If all went well, it would be light shortly after he landed. A night jump was more dangerous, but the risk of detection was lower. Despite the cool of the early hours, he started to sweat; the multiple layers of thermal underwear beneath the jumping overall were roasting him like a foil-baked potato. Yet it would save his life, keeping his body from freezing to death in sub-zero temperatures, while plummeting to the earth.

Standing at the edge of the airfield, he frowned at the sky, wondering for a second if he was either fucking insane, or simply didn't care anymore about life. Maybe he just enjoyed this shit far too much and had missed danger more than he had thought during his stint with the Baroness.

He was already strapped into his harness and was carrying his helmet stuffed with goggles and gloves in one hand. He fiddled with the fixture on the strap across his chest that meant life or death, connecting his mask with his oxygen bottle and both of them to the aircraft oxygen console when he was onboard. Both of his knees were taped to keep his kneecaps in place. He moved his right leg, annoyed with the tightness of the strapping tape. Even his feet were boiling because of the specialist boots that would protect his ankles from the impact. He hoped so, anyway, but the worry was less oppressive than the weight of the parachute on his back. The rigging was carefully stashed, canopy perfectly folded. Hopefully he'd make it down in one piece. If any of his equipment failed, he'd be toast and Ibn would have a Happy Ever After.

Either way, when he landed he'd hurt like a motherfucker, yet he still couldn't wait to get up into the air.

"All right?" The voice behind him made him turn.

Dan nodded at the approaching pilot and co-pilot. "Aye, as ready as I'll ever be." He got a shoulder-slap by the co-pilot in return.

"Let's get you up there, mate."

Dan uttered a sharp "Aye!" and slung his backpack, which would later be strapped to his legs. He'd checked and re-checked the contents; native clothing,

inconspicuous bag, belt kit, a couple of 24 hour survival rations, map, as much water as was feasible to carry, personal radio and a selection of weapons.

As he trotted behind the crew, he checked his equipment once more, going over the webbing's fastening, and patting the bailout oxygen flask, strapped to his left thigh.

He boarded the Herc, got himself geared up, and dropped the bergen and helmet on the floor beside him.

He'd have to get through at least twenty minutes of pre-breathing prior to take-off. When the last safety check was finished, he hooked himself up to the plane's oxygen console. The jumpmaster inspected the breathing equipment before Dan sat down with the mask in front of his face. The 100% oxygen flooded into his lungs, creating unbidden memories of helplessness in a hospital in India until he forced those thoughts away. He needed to be sharp; needed all his senses and every ounce of strength, cunning and fitness that his body still possessed. Legs crossed, he sat on his bergen, while the oxygen flushed the nitrogen out of his blood.

Finally the Herc roared to life and soon they were steadily climbing towards the desired height of 30,000 feet. Only the red tactical lighting was on.

Dan checked his automatic opening device once more. It was his last defence should anything go wrong during the descent—a spin could cause him to blackout.

Not much longer and he'd be on his own again.

He huddled into himself, remembering the exhilaration of jumping from high altitude and the dangerous moments of 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.

The loadmaster waved a card in his face, giving the order to get ready. Dan immediately got up, strapped the heavy bergen onto the back of his legs, while he went through the safety checks one last time. The Herc was still climbing though, so Dan sat back down.

The tailgate was finally released, and with the ice cold stream of air the noise increased to deafening levels. Dan stared at the darkness outside, focussed, concentrated and waited for the green light. Despite his twenty years in the Forces, he couldn't help the sweat, adrenalin and the fear building up, but he figured he

wouldn't be alive if he hadn't respected danger. What distinguished a frightened coward from a frightened soldier was the courage to go in and just do it, despite and even because of the danger and fear.

At a signal from the jumpmaster, Dan disconnected his oxygen line from the main supply and switched over to his own oxygen bottle. It was bloody black and freezing outside, and he was about to jump into this hell. He grinned crookedly—he had to be fucking mad. He readjusted his goggles and helmet, smoothed the gloves firmly onto his hands. Finally! The red light went on, and he moved towards the rear of the tailgate. His goggles started misting up. He could hardly see what was in front of him. Two seconds, one, and... green on!

Without hesitation, Dan threw himself out of the plane.

His goggles froze up immediately, and he began spinning so violently he was rapidly getting dizzy. It felt as if ice water was being sprayed into his face. After another second of freefall, his protective gear was covered in sleet while his goggles were now completely covered in ice. He couldn't see a thing, and the bergen strapped to his legs dragged like a sack of potatoes.

Worried he'd be drifting too far off his target, Dan spread his legs, attempting to steady his fall, but not attempting to halt the spin. He couldn't read the altimeter but figured it went through zero once, then twice. Based on his rate of descent, his AOD should be opening just about now, somewhere around 3,500 feet.

He felt it pop off and the canopy deployed with the familiar pull. Soon he was gliding down through the dark sky, passing through warmer layers of air.

The ground came faster towards him than he'd hoped, and even though the landing wasn't too bad, Dan lost his balance at impact, rattling his knees. At least he had the presence of mind to let himself roll onto the other side of the bailout bottle. He lay there for a moment, just breathing, while the canopy fluttered to the ground, and then nothing. Stillness. No one except him and the sounds of the night.

He'd arrived. Iran. About to do something neither side would like.

He swiftly patted himself down, checking his body; every bone and joint seemed to be in working order. His goggles were still filmed with ice, and his jump suit covered with sleet. He groaned as he sat up.

"I'm getting too old for this shit," he murmured to himself. Gloves, helmet and goggles came off before he got onto his knees. He stood, got the webbing off

and undid the bergen's straps. When the heavy weight fell off, he heaved a sigh of relief.

Once he had the parachute gathered, he spread it out and dropped his jumping gear into the middle. After undoing the wrap around his neck and his boots, he stepped out of the military jumpsuit, and threw it onto the pile. The thick socks went next and the normal jumpsuit he'd worn underneath, then he wiggled out of the turtleneck sweater before reaching the last layer, the thermal underwear. Apart from the boots and socks, everything was thrown on top of the pile. Dan stood dressed only in his skivvies. Time for a change of identity. He'd be buggered if he couldn't fit as easily into an Iranian marketplace as he had in an Afghan one.

Quickly rummaging in his bergen, he pulled out the kit that would get him through this mission. First stepping into a pair of BDUs, rolling them up to knee height and securing the hem with a couple of safety pins, then t-shirt, flak vest and the long native gown thrown over the top.

He fixed the kit belt securely around his waist, strapping all his weapons to his body. After checking everything was effectively hidden, he slipped barefoot into the sandals, stuffing desert boots and socks into a heavy-duty shoulder bag. Finally he wound the shawl around his head. He'd done this often enough back in Afghanistan to know that his haphazard job looked convincingly native.

Dan checked over the personal radio. Luckily they hadn't provided him with the bog standard version: too heavy to carry on a mission like this, and the standard issue British kit would have been too dangerous should he be detected. The high-tech version for Special Forces was smaller and lighter, even though it still weighed more than the water bottles he was lugging around.

After bundling up his discarded gear in the canopy, he stuffed as much of the parachute into the camouflage bergen 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. He didn't need his parachute and jump gear any more, and if anyone ever found the bag, they'd be none the wiser. Only then did he switch on the radio and waited for the static to clear before making his announcement. "Calling HQ." Relief ghosted across his mind when he heard someone answer a moment later.

At least the technology worked—what a miracle, considering it was the usual British crap. "The eagle has landed. About to fly out of the nest." After

confirmation arrived, he nodded to himself and checked his watch that was hidden beneath the long sleeve of the gown. "Roger. Over and out."

He packed the radio, cable, headpiece and battery the size of two bloody heavy house bricks in the shoulder bag and slung the whole lot across his back before glancing at the sky that had begun to turn light. "Let's go get Ibn."

Travelling at a fast pace despite the sandals, Dan covered the terrain in under two hours, reaching the outskirts of the town in the cool of the morning, just as the muezzin called the faithful to fajr prayer.

He hid in a derelict shed. As an able-bodied man, he couldn't afford to get caught wandering around if he wanted to pass as a native.

While sheltered, Dan checked out the radio and contacted HQ again. Voice low, using a few chosen code words that let them know he was close to the town and about to go in.

When he emerged into bright sunlight, the town had come to life, bustling with activity. By the time he reached the central market place, the world was bursting with 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, probably a combination of rotten vegetables, open-air butcher stands, raw sewage, and burning waste. Despite the smell he felt more at home here than he did in the bloody camp compound.

Severed sheep heads to his right, laid out on a cart; baskets with fruit of every colour; crates and boxes overflowing with vegetables; animal carcasses attracting black flies that made an incessant noise; freshly-caught and gutted fish, in another corner. Casks and barrels of spices and dried herbs and powders, masked the stench the further he got towards the indoor part, which offered shelter from the blinding sun.

Dan sauntered around the market, eyes cast down, his gaze darting around as he checked out his surroundings. He knew he was in the right place, the Brits' informant had been adamant, and since he had nothing else to go on, all he had to do was wait for the target to arrive. When, however, within the next twelve hours, was anyone's guess. Insh'allah.

Meandering from stall to stall, Dan moved farther into the bowels of the bazaar, stopping at a cloth merchant who sold brightly coloured and intricately patterned clothing. Dan feigned interest in a particularly gaudy headscarf, fondling

the fiery red fabric to bide his time while communicating in monosyllabic replies with the stall owner.

Sudden motion erupted in the narrow passageway between the stalls. Next moment a group of native men came through, 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. *Damn*. He hadn't expected so many bodyguards.

The stall holder took the frown as a complaint about the price of the headscarf, and lurched into a lament of falling prices, hungry children, demanding wife, scolding mother-in-law and would the customer hurry up and make up his mind; he'd even be willing to haggle the price. Dan shook his head while keeping track of the target's progress out of the corner of his eye.

He left the stall the moment Ibn's entourage nearly disappeared from sight. Angry shouts from the merchant erupted, but he paid no heed, instead following his target at a safe distance until they passed through the rug-hung curtains that closed off the back part of a carpet stall.

Dan stopped close by, glanced around and found to his relief a tea stall, conveniently nestled in a nook no more than a few feet away. Soon he was 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. Nothing he could do except continue observation and try to appear as relaxed as someone who had nothing to do except drink tea in the market.

He sat there, soaking up the views of the crowd, letting them distract him from thinking about things he was trying to forget. After his third cuppa he surreptitiously checked his watch. Nearly two hours had passed. Had he overlooked a secret back entrance and missed Al-Jazaal's exit? He breathed a sigh of relief when his target reappeared. Only problem... he was still protected by those bloody bodyguards.

Without hurrying, Dan emptied his tea glass, threw some money onto the table and followed at a distance.

After leaving the bustling market and turning a couple of corners, Dan came to an abrupt halt at the end of a narrow street. All seven of Ibn's men stood in groups around three cars, debating something. Dan spotted one head through the window in the middle car: his target.

He slunk back into the shadows of the next alley. Only snippets of the conversation carried to him, but from what he could make out they were deciding who should take the front and rear vehicles. He'd bet those guys were ex-Republican guards, Saddam's own elite soldiers. They seemed to be on their way 'home' whatever that meant, but that matched their plans according to the CO's briefing. Twenty-four hour window, and someone, somewhere, was going to pick Ibn up, probably around dawn tomorrow. Dan needed to find a way to grab him before that. Preferably without getting riddled with bullets in the process.

Damn, they were getting into the vehicles. If he didn't get himself some transport, in something like two minutes tops, he'd lose the target for good. He had no more than twelve hours for a chance to grab Ibn, but 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. He needed wheels. Any kind of transport that was faster than a donkey cart. The tell-tale puttering of a motorbike came closer. Just in time. Keeping one eye on the cars that had started their engines and his ears peeled to the advancing sound, Dan slunk farther back into the shadows.

The motorbike came into view, two men on board, one dressed native, riding piston, the other in western clothing, laughing and chatting while turning his head backwards towards his passenger. The vehicle trundled along at barely more than a swift walking speed. Two. Damn. He had to be quick or his target would be gone.

When they drew 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. Before the second man could react, he had a fist flying towards his head, hitting the spot on the temple which knocked him out cold.

The engine was still running and the machine bucked, but Dan held it in a vice grip. "Get off!" he hissed beneath his breath and delivered a kick to the unconscious driver, finally dislodging him.

The cars were moving. No more time. Hitching up the native dress until the BDUs almost showed, he swung one leg over the bike, praying he hadn't forgotten how to ride one. Old bike. Ancient. When he glanced down, he almost laughed: an old British classic make, so old it would be a rare catch back in Blighty. It felt a

lifetime ago since he'd last had a bike between his legs. Letting go of the clutch, Dan revved up the asthmatic engine and managed to keep his balance as he sped away as fast as the old lady allowed.

He pushed the ancient contraption as much as possible, opening the throttle fully once his skills came flooding back from his earlier years in the Forces. 'Just like riding a bike'. He grinned.

The road wound through a landscape of dried out semi-desert. The bike did its best to keep up with the cars, while Dan carefully kept his distance to avoid detection. The flat plateau that stretched all around him didn't offer much cover, but without the lowland terrain, he'd probably have lost his target by now.

The cars suddenly decreased speed and turned right into an area that was less open. Slowing down and keeping a low profile, Dan got as close as possible. The cars had pulled into a compound consisting of a white-washed one-storey building surrounded by several small shabby outhouses and what appeared to be stables, now deserted and in a state of disrepair.

Dan switched off the engine as soon as the cars stopped, wheeled the bike behind an outcrop of rocks and lowered it to the ground. He could barely make out the individual men, but if he was going to get any closer, he had to do it on foot... bloody carefully.

After setting up the radio in the relative safety of his hiding place, he contacted HQ; quietly reporting his whereabouts. In return, he learnt the latest news from their informant which emphasised he had to strike before the morning otherwise Al-Jazaal would be taken to a safe place. Dan acknowledged the message and settled behind the rocks.

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.

Settling into observation mode, eating and drinking when needed, Dan used the small binoculars to keep the house under surveillance. Nothing noteworthy happened, except for the random visits of men to one of the small wooden outhouses, where they remained inside for a minute or two before reappearing. No doubt that was their loo. Dan whistled under his breath when the target himself came out of the main building, accompanied by two of his bodyguards. Al-Jazaal

shouted at them, waving his arms to shoo them away. The next moment he got into the hut on his own, while the two men slunk back inside.

After a while, the target made his way back into the house. Dan watched and wondered.

The long hours of the day passed. Too much time to think. Every time Dan's thoughts drifted into forbidden territory, he steered them remorselessly back to his current mission.

It was getting towards dusk when he checked in again with HQ. "Eagle going in. Target in cross-hair. Extraction imminent before zero." He didn't have a fucking clue how he was going to get Al-Jazaal out, but he'd go in before dawn even if he had to pretend to be the local pizza delivery man.

When the sun began to set, Dan pulled down his BDU's, getting rid of the safety pins. He couldn't wait to get his feet back into socks and army boots. Weapons, kit, clothing were all too obvious, but he'd have to be quick and rely on his wits. Sandals and gown would just get in his way.

Darkness advanced rapidly. When it arrived, Dan made his way closer towards the compound. Moving behind cover, 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 inside. He threw 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 went to one of the cars, and it took an eternity before he vanished into the outhouse, presumably to take a piss, and finally returned to the main building. Only then did Dan dare to belly-crawl closer towards the dilapidated barn. Better than nothing.

The later it got, the colder it became, but Dan had survived freezing winters in the Afghan mountains; he wasn't going to be thwarted by a measly February on the Iranian plains. It was obvious the guards had no intention of letting up on their watch and going to sleep, but what about Al-Jazaal himself? Dan hadn't seen him for at least two hours and the night was moving on.

Apart from the usual comings and goings, nothing eventful happened until 1 a.m. when the door of the main building opened, and none other than his target stepped out, carrying something under his arm. A couple of his bodyguards followed.

From his vantage point Dan could see and hear them arguing, deciphering some of the heated interchange that came down to one thing: Al-Jazaal was not going to be escorted to the outhouse loo but was going to have his privacy. The guards should not be so annoying or they'd find themselves back in Iraq and in the hands of the American swine.

Dan grinned. Whatever Ibn had rolled under his arm, it looked remarkably like reading material. So the guy was up to spending some time in solitude on the shitter. The two guys vanished back into the building. Ibn was alone.

That was Dan's cue. Once the target had locked the door behind him, he moved silently out of the ruined shed and crawled over to the cars. He probably had no more than five minutes—max.

Dan prayed the guards had done their job properly and left all of them filled nicely with fuel. After looking around to ensure no one was listening or watching, he checked the handles and boots—unlocked. Bloody stupid bastards were far too smug.

The largest vehicle would be best; the one Al-Jazaal had been riding in. It had a big boot and seemed the perfect get-away-vehicle. Dan crawled over to the others to meticulously slash the tyres. He would have preferred disabling them by cutting the wires off the alternator or slitting them off the spark plugs, but he didn't have time. Most of all, he couldn't chance making any noise by opening the bonnet.

Satisfied he'd done as much as he could, he checked around again and crawled back; this time all the way to the shit-house. Adrenaline surged through his system. His heart hammered just like in the old days when he was out on his own and fighting to survive in the midst of Russian gun fire or between warring Afghan tribal lords. Or like back in the seventies, in Northern Ireland, Belize or any other shitty place Britain had ever sent him to. Once again, he felt alive.

Silently he stood tall and approached the loo. If any of the guards stepped out of the building, he'd be toast, but this was his only chance, and he'd bloody well use it. He peered at the lock, and without a sound his favourite knife was in his hand. The latch was nothing but wood and the crack in the door large enough to slip the blade through.

He had one try, and if he fucked it up there was no escape. Taking a deep steadyng breath, using his left hand, Dan slid the blade into the crack of the door, lifted it upwards and pushed the latch out of the way. With his right hand, he

yanked the door fully open and at the same moment—the knife now reversed in his palm—his left fist connected hard with the target’s temple. Al-Jazaal, mouth open, looked up in shocked surprise, but never managed to make a sound.

Dan blocked the door with his body, steadyng the man’s descent with his knife-holding left hand, and delivered an upper-cut under the chin with his right for good measure. Wouldn’t do if the bastard woke up too early.

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 man clear of the building and hoisted the dead weight over his shoulder in a fireman’s lift. Suppressing a groan as his knees threatened to buckle under the strain, he hurried over to the car.

Once there, he let the body slide down to the ground and pulled cable ties from his belt kit. It was bloody dark; the only light came from the moon and stars so it was more by feel than anything that he managed to bind Al-Jazaal’s wrists tightly behind his back and lash his ankles together. Using his now abandoned headscarf, he gagged the man, leaving him enough air to breathe. He didn’t want to kill the fucker. He checked his human bundle then his watch.

No more than a couple of minutes had passed since he’d opened the shitter and knocked the target out cold. If he was lucky the main building would stay quiet until the men inside heard the noise of the engine.

The boot opened with barely a sound, and proved to be as large as he’d hoped, and nicely empty. Dan wrestled the trussed-up body into the car as quickly as possible. He was racing against time. Any moment the guards could come out to look for their boss, and he hadn’t even started the damned vehicle.

Once the boot was safely locked, he slid behind the wheel and placed the radio on the seat beside him. Now to see if his boast to the CO that he could start any vehicle without a key was correct. He dragged out his all-tool, a handyman’s sturdy version of the Swiss army knife. After a quick fumble to locate the plastic panel covering the ignition switch, he levered it off with the screwdriver, sweating despite the cold and wincing at the noise he made. Feeling around, he located two screws and undid them quickly, cursing under his breath when he slipped twice. After pulling out the tumbler, he stuck the flat-headed screwdriver inside.

Now came the hard bit, using the handle of the knife as leverage and all his strength, he finally managed to prise out the ignition which fell to the floor with a

soft thud. Dan turned the screwdriver in the tumbler, and with a triumphant, “fuck, yes!” the engine started.

Now he had no more than split seconds to get out of their range. Revving the engine, Dan turned in a screech of tyres and a cloud of dust. In the glare of the headlights he saw the door open and men come piling out. Their shouts were barely audible over the roar of the car. They raised their weapons.

Dan kicked the accelerator down to the floor, the pedal almost going to the metal. The car shot off, racing along the narrow dirt track away from the compound. When the bullets came flying, Dan kept his head as low as he could. Some hit the car, possibly entering the boot. He’d done his job, extracted the target alive, if the fucker got injured by ‘friendly fire’ well ‘too bad’. He had to get to the rendezvous point on the coast of the Persian Gulf, where he’d get picked up by chopper.

As soon as he reached the main road, Dan started driving like a madman. He wasn’t 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.

He wasn’t followed, and even if the guards did manage to get their hands on a working car, it was unlikely they’d catch up any time soon.

Fiddling with one hand, Dan activated the radio, his eyes always peeled on the blackness in front of him or constantly checking the rear-view mirror. He called HQ, told them 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 earpiece 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.

Dan still couldn’t quite believe his luck, but nothing happened. Nothing except for every mile racing by, until he finally saw the coast.

As agreed, he alerted HQ. He’d hardly stopped the car when he heard the ‘chop chop’ of rotor blades coming closer. Dan got out and opened the boot to find a bound and gagged man twisted in the confined space, still with his trousers around his ankles and the shirt ridden up. Ibn glared at him while making noises into the cloth in his mouth. Pointing to the helicopter above, Dan laughed. “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. He waved into the search light of the chopper, and the equipment was lowered. He secured the trussed-up bundle in the straps and signalled he was ready.

As soon as the target was hoisted inside, the bird lowered further; one of the marines held out his hand, and Dan grabbed it. He was pulled inside as the helicopter lifted off again.

“Welcome on board, Mad Dog.” The marine grinned and helped Dan scramble to a crouch on the metal floor.

“Aye, kind of glad to see you lot.” Dan laughed, searched for his shades, and slipped them on despite the darkness.

After glancing over to where they were dealing with Al-Jazaal, he scooted back to sit against the wall, while the bird made its way back through the night. Jesus fucking Christ, he needed a fag.

* * *

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. They finally let him off with three days paid extra leave, which he planned to spend sleeping, working out and sleeping some more. Oh, and drinking in the bar.

The story of his crazy stunt spread like wildfire. Next morning Dan could hardly get by without shoulder slapping from well-meaning lads—mercs and soldiers alike—with cries of “well done, Mad Dog,” or “good one, mate” and “you fucking lucky bastard!” The ones who hated his guts kept quiet.

At last, Dan managed to get through the crowd and into the shower. There they left him alone, and afterwards he managed to sleep well into the afternoon without so much as waking once.

In the bar later that afternoon, he had a hard time not to get too pissed with all the free rounds. He called it a night, early, wondering if he was getting too old, too tired, to get rat-arsed after just one measly mission.

He was on his way back into camp for another round of sleep when he heard the voice.

“Hey, buddy?”

Dan turned, raised his brows above the shades and looked at the man. Another Yank. Jarhead. Typical stupid buzz cut. Buff. Young. No older than twenty... one or two. Good looking if he were into kids. “What the fuck do you want. A broken nose?”

The guy raised his hands. “Hell, no. Just thought I’d... you know... catch you... I was in the bar... Saw you.”

Dan’s brows rose higher. “So, you wanted a chat with the ageing fag, eh?”

He didn’t expect the Yank’s answer nor the broad grin. “Yeah, buddy, that’s exactly why.”

“Aye?” Dan didn’t try to hide the surprise, and even gave the kid the honour of pushing the shades off his eyes into his hair. “Guess you best tell me why.”

The kid looked left, then right. “Can we go, like, somewhere else to talk?”

Dan mimicked the Yank’s furtive glances. “You worried to be seen with me, is that it? Think I’m contagious?”

“No. Definitely not.” The kid 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 behind a couple of generators.

“Sure. I’m Dan, but I guess you know that.”

The Yank grinned, glancing sideways at Dan. “Sure thing. You’re Mad Dog. I 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?”

The young man—he’d forgotten his name already—slipped into the narrow space between Dan and the next generator, bodies almost touching. “No. Wanted to talk to you about...” He paused, “... about, you know, what you are.”

“What, gay?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?” All of a sudden, Dan knew.

“Cause....” Silence, then a loud gulp. Seemed the Yank was desperate enough to continue. “Cause I am, too. Just can’t come out, or I’m thrown out of the Marines, okay?”

“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?”

“And?” Dan was enjoying himself entirely too much. Surely the spread of cards was laid out to give only one reading: the kid gagging for it. “Want me to jump your bones, kid?”

More audible breathing in the dimness, then finally a flash of teeth and a slightly unsure grin. “Yeah. You game?”

“Depends.” Dan smirked. Out of the blue, bloody unexpected and all the better for it. The kid was fairly tall, definitely just as broad as he was young, and if the other Yanks he’d seen were anything to go by, he’d 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 and watch straight porn with the other guys, bored to death of damned pussies. How fucking desperate do you think I am?”

“Very.” Dan pushed forward and pinned the kid against the generator, grinding his hips into the other’s groin. Seemed he got lucky. First the mission meant he’d gone twenty four hours without once thinking of Vadim and here was another opportunity to get him out of his system. He’d won the jackpot.

The young man groaned, grabbed hold of Dan’s hips, and pulled him hard into him.

Dan was somewhat surprised at the reaction, but sure as fuck didn’t complain or resist. “So, seems you do want to get off.” He chuckled, relishing the sense of control, while the kid was losing it. It had been a long time since he’d been on top of that age-old game of bodies against bodies. “How much? Enough to risk it here?”

“Yeah...” The kid breathed, huskily. He pushed against Dan, fumbling for his belt, all the while trying to kiss him.

“I do, kid, I do...” Dan turned his face away from the searching mouth. *Not that.* His shades slipped off and fell with a faint clatter into the dust, as he found

and conquered the bare exposed neck. He was shoving against the kid's groin, crushing their cocks. He'd done it many times before, yet it was all different now. Not thinking, just pressing against a muscular body. Alive, strong and wanting him.

He felt as if he was 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. He winced when teeth bit into sleeve and biceps, but at least the groans were muffled.

It was too fucking easy. 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; he was too bloody desperate to last long. Dan enjoyed that knowledge. It felt good. With Vadim everything had always been so bloody intense. This was 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 rack the jarhead's body; he forced the young man's 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.

When he had himself back under control, he kept the head pressed against his chest and listened to the kid's panting. Murmuring, his lips touching the shaved skull, "Better, kid?"

"Yeah." The Yank made no attempt to move. "I'm not a kid."

Dan chuckled quietly, letting go of his head. "Sure you are. I could be your daddy."

"Want me to call you Sugar Daddy, not Mad Dog?" The young man smirked at him, and 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."

The Yank sniggered. "Guess I just did. 'Cocky', that is." He pointedly looked down between them, and 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. He stepped backwards and into the other metal box.

"Bastard." The kid was wiping at his trousers.

“Yep, that’s me.” Dan tucked himself in and closed his belt. He’d deal with the trousers later. “I resemble that remark.”

“Yeah...” The sound of metal and rustling of fabric as the Yank put himself back into order. “Guess they’re right, you know, calling you, Mad Dog.”

Dan stooped down, searching for the shades he’d lost. “Guess they are.” He 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 took the 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.”

The young man laughed, just as quietly as Dan had, then stopped, his hand suddenly on Dan’s shoulder. “Seriously?”

“Seriously... what?” Dan queried, marvelling 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. “What did you say your name was again?”

“Matt.”

It had been easy, painless, the most light-hearted 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 against his own. “Sure.”

“When? Where?”

“I know where to find you.” Grinning, Dan stood back up. “In the nursery.”

“Fucker,” Matt retorted, but Dan was already leaving to catch more sleep.

* * *

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 and getting a fresh drink from the bartender.

Walking over, he nodded to the jarhead, then indicated with his chin towards a corner, to have a word. No one noticed. Dan had been talking to most of the guys at some stage or another. Mad Dog had got friendlier, but he’d never lost his bite.

"Still desperate?" Dan murmured when Matt was close enough.

Nursing a bottle of coke, Matt nodded and scratched the back of his neck.

"Fuck, yeah."

"Okay. 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. "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." And one I'd like to forget as quickly as possible, thank you very much. "I gather you're off duty tomorrow morning?"

"How do you... Course you'd know." He nodded. "Where?"

Dan turned away, pretending to get bored having a half-arsed conversation with a fresh-faced Yank kid. "Here." He 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 that hadn't roused suspicion.

Dan raised the middle finger of his scarred left hand, then walked back to his customary place at the bar. He finished his Bud then headed back to his bunk to get some shut-eye for the night.

* * *

1003 hrs and Dan heard a light rap on the door. The brick building he'd found was in a slightly more up-market category than the ones he'd used in Kabul. It housed a fully grown bed instead of a rolled-out bergan and even had extra space that was used as a loo complete with a sink. Positively luxurious, compared to the past. But no, he wasn't going there. He refused to think of the past in any more broader terms than 'back then'.

"You're late." Dan opened the door and watched the Yank slip in.

"Bang," he said casually, a finger posing as a gun. "You got a lot to learn about healthy paranoia."

"Fuck you." Matt retorted, and sat on the bed.

"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?"

Dan walked over, pulled the only chair in the room close until he sat opposite the Yank, watching him undress. "No plans. Just things I do and others I don't do."

"Such as?" Matt glanced up. "In case you're wondering, I'm negative. Can show you my latest test."

"Aye, that's okay. Same here." Dan was amused at the speed at which the kid shed his tunic and t-shirt, then sat bare-chested on the bed while reaching for his boots to unlace them. And what a chest it was. Fuck, so young. 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 stretched out his legs and crossed both arms over his clothed chest. He saw the boots come off, then the socks, the camo trousers remaining, or 'pants' as the Yank would call them.

"Aren't you going to undress?" Matt stood, hands on his belt, looking down at him. "Show me the goods. Is only fair, buddy."

Dan laughed, shoved the shades off and chucked them on top of a rickety table behind him. "That do?"

Matt rolled his eyes. "Dunno why you cover them up," he muttered to himself while stripping out of the trousers and standing in his briefs.

Dan said nothing, then he started to take off his own boots and socks. "Afraid it's damaged goods, kid."

"Yeah, yeah, sure, old man." Matt grinned, his fingers beneath the waistband of his briefs. 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. He bent down to undo his belt and slip off his trousers, while the jarhead leaned over the bed, fumbling with the pile of his clothes. Firm arse. Smooth, perfect. Dan almost forgot to step out of the trousers that pooled around his ankles. He didn't quite know where they made those kids so buffed-up fresh-faced flawless, but he wasn't going to complain.

He slumped naked once more on the chair, and watched Matt turn. He was 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 body. “Holy Christ, you got a fucking impressive collection.” He pointed 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. “Let’s start on the top. Face?” His index finger ran 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 remember when last he’d laughed like that. “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. The way the kid was throwing his head back and laughing at his explanation was infectious. He didn’t point out the collection of thin knife scars on his upper back and on top of his shoulders, even though he’d always remember that young German soldier’s face when he caught a glimpse of the white lines on his skin. Not going there either.

“Fucking ironic.” Matt sniggered.

“Guess so...” Now that Matt pointed out the obvious, Dan felt a wave of hilarity roll up from deep inside. 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 raid on a house and a chance to get out alive.

Vadim.

“How?” Matt stepped between Dan’s legs.

Maybe if he concentrated on grabbing the smooth and muscular arse before him with both hands, he’d be able to block out the memories.

“Never mind, long story.” Dan squeezed the buttocks, eliciting a squirm that made him chuckle. The Yank’s growing interest was undeniable and right there in front of his face.

“Fair enough.” Matt moved until his cock brushed Dan’s lips. “I’ve seen that one before.” His fingertips bumped 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. ‘V’ For Vadim. Despite the memory, he grinned and forced himself to focus on marvelling at the lack of foreskin. “Not for victory, but it’s an even longer story.” Snatching a taste. “Let’s just say I’m a kinky motherfucker.”

“Okay.” Matt 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.”

A hospital in India. Darkness, fear and pain, and then a promise that couldn’t be kept.

Vadim.

He tore himself back to listen to the almost reverent tone in the young man’s voice. “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. “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 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.

Dan could feel the vibration of Matt’s laughter before the Yank turned to the other side to try and find more scars.

“Nuh-huh.” I need to forget, not be reminded. Dan steadied Matt’s hips with both hands. “Enough foreplay. Time for business.”

Matt didn’t manage to answer anything resembling speech as Dan closed his lips around his young cock. Blocking out all thoughts, all memories, instead he concentrated on the young man’s face.

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 Dan.

Dan hadn't enjoyed himself that much since... since he didn't want to remember. He sucked that fresh-faced buff jarhead with the same enthusiasm he had tasted the Russian's cock. Used the tricks he'd acquired in all those years, giving him the blowjob of his young life.

Dan grinned and wiped his lips, watching the Yank collapse on the bed behind him after a spectacular orgasm. 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.

Matt waved a hand at Dan, then scrambled into a semblance of sitting. "Guess so." He grinned as stupidly as only a young guy could. "You're kinda good at that. You wanna fuck me now?" Matt's lingering breathlessness gave his voice an interesting shade of husky.

"No."

"Why?" Matt's disbelief made Dan chuckle and shrug. "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. "Why are you laughing?"

"Because you're buying into that sugar daddy shit a bit too much."

"Hm," Matt huffed, putting the water safely out of reach. "Then what? I'm pretty easy."

Dan laughed. "I got that. The 'easy' bit."

"Should I be, like, offended now?" Matt grinned, baring his teeth, leaning forward to get hold of Dan's hand. He pulled him out of the chair and over to the bed, where Dan let himself fall onto his side. Torso on the bed, legs partly on the floor.

"Your choice, kid, but if it were me, I wouldn't be offended." Dan wanted a fag; he glanced over at the bergen, but it was so far away he couldn't be arsed.

Matt's hand wandered across Dan's chest, then up, and down again, ending on the scars. Suddenly grinning, he leaned forward. His lips touched Dan's for a split second, before Dan turned his head away.

"Hey, what's up?" Matt tried again and 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. 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. Dan felt like an idiot for the sudden embarrassed squirm that set in before he could stop it. "Well... "

"Yeah?" Matt sniggered. "Twenty? Fifty or even a hundred? You're old enough to have fucked yourself through a whole regiment."

"Aye..." If his face was flushing now, Dan could kill that kid. Seriously. "Guess I could have."

"And did you?" Matt poked Dan's chest when he didn't get an answer. "Did you? Did you?"

"Not... quite." Dan sighed.

"Oh fuckin' hell, man, you gonna tell me how many or not?"

"One."

Silence. Open-mouthed disbelief.

Dan sighed, scratched his groin. "Aye, you heard right."

"Uh...why? You're, what, forty-something?"

"One. Forty-one, mate."

Matt shook his head. "You really are fucking mad. But whatever has rocked your boat, bit too late now, buddy." He pointed at Dan's face. "You tell me why we shouldn't make out."

Why. Why the fuck shouldn't he? "Guess there's no reason, really."

He had just about spoken the last word when he was grabbed and drawn into a full-blown snog. Assaulted by lips, tongue and teeth, Dan barely managed to catch a breath here and there. Damn, the kid was a good kisser. The cure was working. He allowed himself to just enjoy the ride, which eventually involved using those condoms after all and shagging the delicious arse of his baby... Yank.

1991 Chapter 23—Longitude

April 1991, Helsinki

Heavy oak panelled doors opened silently into the Ambassador's office. In the large room, the Baroness sat behind the desk, a barrier of dark, gleaming wood and brass, the epitome of authority and understated class. She continued to write with a lacquered fountain pen, until her aide left and the doors closed behind Vadim.

There had been days when Vadim had entered a room and everybody had looked at him. Now unacknowledged, he could feel his heart sink deeper. It was useless. He shouldn't have come.

Baroness de Vilde glanced up to acknowledge him at last, face devoid of any expression. The cool features contrasted with the friendly purple and yellow of a bouquet of flowers in the vase beside her. She studied him in silence. She had not changed at all since Vadim had last seen her.

The place made him feel even smaller, and he needed a lot of strength to keep his shoulders square. It took a conscious decision to stay upright. He found it hard to look around much. He was no longer used to it. As if there was nothing left to see. He did not meet her eyes, but knew she was looking at him. He should be looking up, but found it near impossible.

"Please take a seat, Mr. Krasnorada." She indicated the chair in front of her desk with an economic gesture, as polite but curt as the deliberate use of 'Mr.' She'd called him 'Major' three months ago.

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. He wanted to leave, already drained of the strength that he had gathered.

He sat down. An order. It was easy to follow orders. 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 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 before cutting straight to the point. "Why are you here to see me, Mr. Krasnorada?"

"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 Dan McFadyen. I need to speak to him." And give him a proper goodbye. Can't disgrace him, too, of all people. Not like that. The thought cut deep, surprised at the amount of pain that caused. Surprised he could feel that kind of pain.

"I was hoping you would request this." She screwed the cap back onto her fountain pen and placed it onto the marbled surface of the desk, folding her hands on top of it. "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 pain raged 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?"

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 peoples 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 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 his 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, walked around the desk. Standing close, in front of the chair, a slight figure of an elderly lady. She was smaller than he had thought. The moment she got up, he had wanted to stand. It would be more natural to stand. "Do you understand, Mr. Krasnorada? A deal for both parties."

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 sceptical 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’.

“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-specified 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 fulfil the tasks that might be given you. Thus, you will be sent to see if you can get through the SAS selection process, where it will be ensured you will be stretched 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 instil 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.”

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. Work for the Brits, in a military capacity. Impossible. That was the closest he had ever got to treason.

You are no longer Vympel. Spetsnaz. One gigantic waste of time and money and effort now. His jaw muscles tensed as he clamped 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.

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."

Soldier. Return to being a soldier. Who 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. "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 anything that can be construed as 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 as much as 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."

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 bastard, what, in his mid-forties? Back when he had been captain, and later major. Long ago. Compete. The word made his face twitch.

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."

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? He 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. 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 could trust his body to get back into shape, enough so he would have a fighting chance. 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 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 the only option at the time, 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 grew 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.

There was a long pause, a silence fit for a barrage of words, but she did nothing of that ilk. "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.

His chest burnt 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. He wanted to run and had no strength left to do it. He'd made a decision; he'd follow through with it.

Dan. You deserve more. The feeling of obligation was bad, a bad thing to carry around. Nothing gave him strength. Maybe he could tell Dan why, at least that. What Moscow had achieved that 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, "there are two gentlemen to escort you."

Two men in uniform, and green berets. Royal Marines.

She had to have known he was going to accept the deal. She had to have had faith in him.

* * *

Few words exchanged, no necessity to indulge in pleasantries. The two Marines took 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 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 were 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 comrades getting ready to cut lines of support, take out convoys of the enemy in the wilderness. Remembered 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. It seemed paradox, and he had dropped out of philosophy classes because he found it hard to battle problems that had no solution.

The plane eventually landed near Lympstone, South Devon, a place like any other to Vadim.

He was made to wait while papers were sorted in the guard room, an armed soldier standing beside him. It took a suspiciously short while, as if they had known he was going to arrive. Then a different man appeared, 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.

Vadim 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 the data, mulling it through and storing it away.

His name sounded strange spoken in English, he kept thinking that. He'd always feel strange, never at home. Never again at home. Dan was 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 who were passing, marching in a straight line, getting drilled into perfect tin soldiers. Tin boys. Tin caskets, bringing afganets home to their families.

The soldier took him to a bungalow towards the east of the camp, a plaque announced 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 left the room, to return a moment later with the announcement the medical officer was ready to see the newcomer, and that he requested to see him alone.

The soldier raised his brows but refrained from questioning the superior's decision. He gestured for Vadim to step into the examination room. "You will be given your clothes later."

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 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, he had 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.

"I am Dr. Williams. Please sit down."

Vadim sat, 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 surprised they even considered that. Speak slowly. A strange notion.

“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 and told the short story: military and athletic career, two ways to serve. 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 enemy knew its own lines or as if those were actually lines and not a jumble of improvised nonsense. 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. 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 with his long list of achievements. 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.

As he spoke, Dr. Williams would sometimes tick an item off on the file, then turn a page; occasionally he made notes in the margins.

“Well, Major Krasnorada, you have had a most distinguished military career. As you can see, we have a substantial file on you. Our agencies have been busy and understandably so.” He spoke distinctly, words 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. 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.

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.” He turned another page in the file.

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 belonged. Led. Had had something to work for. His family. Dan. Home. The rush to fight, to kill, to survive. 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 heard 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’s 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-74, 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 rimless glasses. “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. One of the few responses he had left. 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... mind games. 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 which had become fists. “Humiliation, they

tried to break my pride.” And they did. “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. 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 and empty. 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. The trial was complicated.”

He was fairly sure he hadn’t collaborated, but had had a carnal relationship with a man called Dan. 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 got so much worse, things happened in Moscow, bad things, inflation, nobody knew what was happening, 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. 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. 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 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.

“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.”

He hadn’t been able to follow most of the re-trial’s proceedings. 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 during his service when he’d

wondered whether he could leave and be something else. But the Russian people, 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. He had long ago stopped doing things for orders and superiors. Knew the only good thing about Russia was 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, his military career wiped out, no rank. He knew the real criminals in prison would like that a lot.

They drove a long time, first by car, then train to St Petersburg, then car again. 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 didn't interrupt him even once. "I have information about the re-trial in the confidential file." 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 wondered whether Manke knew, whether they had called him. And the Russian teacher. And everybody else he had spoken to. Good, swift, clean work.

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. As far as the medical examinations go, consider yourself a new recruit." He gestured to an adjacent door. "Go and take a shower. Leave your clothing and return."

Recruit. That meant physical examination. Well. Yes. Vadim didn't look forward to it, but he'd been there before. Nothing in the man's face or eyes or posture spoke of disgust. Or compassion. Vadim wasn't sure which would have been worse.

The doctor pointed to a glass vessel. “Make sure to hand in a urine sample before the shower.” The officer stood up to gather the instruments to be ready when he returned.

It had been a while since Vadim had pissed into a glass vial. He paused for a moment, wondering about the stuff that had been injected into his body: all the nice cocktails, from the ‘vitamins’ during his first career to 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, plenty of hot water. He couldn’t quite relax or enjoy this, but kept the thoughts away. As he towelled himself down, he was aware of the scars on his back that would stand out in white against the reddened skin. Did the man speak Russian? Did it matter?

He found a razor and shaved. His hair was too long, he felt dishevelled, 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. He stepped into a pair of flip-flops, and left everything on a pile. The clothes he’d worn in Sweden, the towel. He left the shower, 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 him. He caught himself, gestured for Vadim to come closer to the examination table and sit on it. “You’re certainly efficient.” He remarked dryly.

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.

“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.” 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 that were kept together by two crowns. HIV. That AIDS thing. He’d never much thought about it, he knew Dan had, but that stuff happened to other people. Dan was clean, mostly for lack of

opportunity and maybe brazen balls to take what he wanted from anybody else. Or did he? He had 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.”

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 sun burns and scarred him more subtly. Afghanistan had hated him, and that feeling was entirely mutual.

The officer was making notes on a clip board while he checked 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. The man started to check out his back, 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 word on his back.

“I am not too happy with several of these. The tissue has hardened and cracked in places, I can see they are quite old and 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, he added, “I appreciate some places are difficult to reach, perhaps you will find someone to assist.”

Vadim found 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 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 has 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. He would be 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. Beef jerky. Some people swore by it. Nuts.

Placing the cool metal disk 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 straight ahead.” Working through an examination of eyes, nose, ears and throat.

“Time for the blood tests.”

Vadim offered his left arm. “That vein likes rolling.” A nightmare with a nervous nurse. One of the *afganka* nurses had nearly suffered a nervous breakdown after five attempts to pin that vein.

He watched his blood fill the colour coded plastic tubes, thought it looked fairly dark. What a stark red in this place. His hand was a loose fist, kept alternating pressing and releasing it. He looked into the doctor’s face, wondered about his emotions, maybe conclusions, found himself wondering about somebody again. Shouldn’t. That file held enough information to 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 pretty. He 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.

Then reaction tests, the small hammer came down every time on the perfect point. “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?"

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 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."

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 led to any injuries there—but they had to know that about him, the fact he had sex with men. Had had.

The officer was as thorough in checking the genitals as with anything else. "Good." Examination done, another note. "Turn around and bend over. Try to relax." No inflection 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?

Movements economical but smooth, the intrusion efficient. Checking inside him, causing a small jolt somewhere, then paused for a moment while pushing the other hand onto the abdomen. "I need a tissue sample."

Vadim had his eyes closed, but he still relaxed. He could do that, that was easy. Could feel both hands move and press, the man was strong. 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. “There will be a short pain, try not to get startled.” Cool steel took 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. Another second and the instrument slid out as well.

“Done.”

That was that. 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 for a chance for the heat in his face to dissipate. He didn’t want to show it had affected him like this. He got dressed in the sports kit that lay there, neatly folded, and 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 of him was left. How much of a special forces soldier remained.

Vadim felt his scalp crawl but refrained from scratching or rubbing it. He forced himself to focus, be awake and responsive.

“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 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 volatile from him. 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 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." His 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." The doctor nodded, "As I am sure you will."

Vadim inhaled again, kept the breath inside his chest. 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 by 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 that 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 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 him 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 paedophile, the lowest 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, subterfuge and manipulation, and the thing he'd had with Dan was 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 an hallucination. He blinked and looked at the doctor. “I...didn't plan to...engage in any kind of...that behaviour.”

Surprised, the officer looked up. “I don't understand?” He placed 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 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 all of Afghanistan. Unlike every day and night in the damned 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 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. He could feel sweat under his arms, hoped he hadn’t appeared like a nervous wreck. He only hoped he could forget the interrogations one day. The pit of darkness in his soul, and that of Konstantinov. “Thank you, sir.”

The nurse took him to the dentist, who did checkups and some work on a few cavities, proof of the neglect. Then the barber, shaving the hair in a No 2 all over, down to a few millimetres.

Vadim felt already tired, exhausted after all the examinations. He did exactly what was asked, took the protein, the pills, eager to comply to the rules that made life simple again, turned everything into stark lines without shading. Falling into a routine was the way out, the way to salvation.

Located in transit accommodation, his room was small and narrow, but luxury compared to a cell. A window at the far end, a bed along the right wall, 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, and a couple of towels stacked beside the basin. A can of shaving foam, a pack of razors, toothbrush and paste, a bar of soap and a bottle of shower gel.

When it was time for lunch, Vadim queued up to get his food, which looked much better than standard fare in the Soviet Army and positively delicious compared 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, concentrated on eating slowly, thoroughly, getting calories down.

Several people were glancing at him while talking, but none addressed him directly. It seemed he was a non-entity as long as he hadn't proven himself yet in something.

Not much later, he met the PT instructor. The man who walked up to him 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 just to Vadim's shoulder. "Right," the PT instructor said. "I'm Smudge and I'll beast your Russian arse."

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. He swallowed that moment of bitterness. 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 to his full height, kept his face even. No smile, no scowl, nothing. He wouldn't admit he believed the man could make him throw up all that food before dark. He fumbled around to find the bravado he had stored away somewhere in his mind. "You are welcome to try." He didn't feel it, didn't believe it, but he knew this species of soldier came without much empathy.

"I will try. Trust me, mate." The small man appeared to be constantly on the move, without even moving, which made Vadim restless. Next to him, he felt—and probably looked—like a plodding juggernaut.

Smudge pointed to the long track bottoms. "Did they give you shorts? If not, happy to go for a gentle jog in those?"

Vadim checked the laces on his shoes, and the laces that kept the track bottoms in place, then nodded. "Perfectly happy, sir."

Five miles for a starter. Setting himself into motion again, Vadim found a steady pace alongside his instructor, 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. 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 even felt good. It emptied his mind. 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 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, steel canisters filled to the brim with baked beans, grilled tomatoes, heaps of mushrooms and hash browns. Porridge to go with it and several kinds of cereals, coffee, tea, milk in abundance.

The nurse was waiting at the medical centre to apply the medication to his scars. The medical officer glanced in, briefly. By 0745 hrs Vadim was back in the gym where Smudge was waiting, boxing a few rounds on one of the sand bags. He was pushed to complete the one and a half mile run in under eleven minutes, then swimming, something Smudge did not indulge in.

At 0900 hrs it was time to dry up and get dressed, ready for general PT. A couple of hours of stretching, weight machines, free weights, jumping and circuit training. 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. His sports kit had been chosen well: black and unobtrusive with good trainers. Seemed the MoD, or MIS, or...whoever else was responsible for this had planned well.

Sixty minutes of calm and rest, before it all started again at 1400 hrs, with several rounds of boxing sand bags and sparring in the ring. Afterwards, another hour of stretching exercises that built up to another go at the weights. At 1600 hrs it was time for the run. Smudge started without additional load, five miles at first, then built the next day to a fuller b ergan and ending the week with thirty pounds of gear in his b ergan and on a ten mile speed march.

* * *

At the end of the week Vadim woke up suddenly. He must have been screaming because his throat felt raw. That had to have been what woke him up. He wanted to curl up and die, a desire more wretched than throwing up in training. Not quite there, but PT was a constant, accumulating pain. He didn't have that stamina anymore. He was desperate to succeed, but it hurt like a bitch.

The room was suffocating him; he got rid of the blanket, wet and heavy 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, lowered his feet and rubbed his face. His mind raced around, frantic, his breath tried to catch up, heart pounding like a wolverine trapped in a trashcan. He stood and stared into the darkness. He could move in here. Nobody would beat him.

Liar, his mind whispered. You can never know when that door will open, and they will come for you. You can never know whether you are dreaming or awake. You can never know when you are safe. You are never safe.

Paranoia. Mind out of control, the fear out of control. He knew it and it still affected him, still scared him. Light. The room was under control. The room inside wasn't. Fuck you, Vadim, sober up. Don't freak. You are fine. You haven't been better in two years.

As long as they allow you to.

He got dressed, fiddled with the sports kit. He'd do some running. Just get out of here.

I am responsible for your health. You can talk to me.

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. Knocking on the man's door, he realised it was four in the morning. But he needed help.

"One moment, please." A sleep-roughened voice, then a few moments passed. When the door opened, the doctor stood there in a dark blue terry cloth dressing gown, rimless spectacles on his nose. If he was surprised to see Vadim, he did not show it. "Good morning."

Vadim returned the friendly, sleepy 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 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 be.

"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 doctor cocked his head, 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'll get the keys for the surgery." He left the door open, allowing a glimpse into a big room with bed, table, chairs, television, desk and a small fridge, 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 dry 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 walked along the corridor and towards the back exit. "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 were as precise and economic as they were during examinations. “How are you getting on with PT?”

“I think I am getting back into it,” Vadim murmured.

“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? He should be more careful, try harder. “That is good to hear. I am glad.” 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. 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. 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 brought over milk and sugar, then the cups of tea. 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. Just two men and two cups of tea.

Dr. Williams took a sip. “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.” He looked at his tea then back up at Vadim. “In the short term, however, they will ensure you function throughout the night.”

Function. Function like a machine, because that way lay redemption. No, wrong word. Peace. Vadim 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.

“I have been working with men who experienced solitary confinement.”

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 am alone." 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 not a medical term, but I would agree with you. Solitary confinement for prolonged periods 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 strong surgeon's hands were resting on the desk. "You are not alone in what you are experiencing. Solitary confinement causes the mind to turn inwards, 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, I can't break down and cry like a four year old. He raised his head and smoothed his features, forcing 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. The man 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. "You do remember what I told you. Whatever happens here, between you and me and whatever you tell me, remains confidential. This might be difficult for you to believe, but it is true." 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 didn’t stand a chance.”

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 out of here.

“No. I am afraid it won’t be that easy” Quietly, the doctor added, “I understand what you are saying, but getting through this will not exorcise the demons. But it would give you a chance to find a way to live with those demons side by side.” No miracle cure, no promise. “I am here to help you get that chance.”

And why? Because it was his job? Possibly. That might be enough. It could hardly be the hope of wrangling maybe 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. “Thank you for this.”

Doctor Williams nodded, opened a drawer in the desk and took out a key. He stood 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 a small smile. “I have insomnia. I might be quite glad for an interruption at night.”

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 or mistaken.” He dismissed Vadim back into the night with the most polite manner.

* * *

The pills 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—the Brits didn’t acknowledge him much, and it was just as well. The only men that mattered were the ones giving orders and putting him through training. He worked hard, 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 that reminded him of Dan. These men were primitives, by any Russian standard, brutes. Most were men that had had no chance in life but to become soldiers and learn how to fight and kill. The common British soldier was a creature of foul language and crude humour. 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. He 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. Once, words he read on the page had echoed in his mind; he had felt rhythm and flow like breath, had seen things in his mind. He’d been able to feel words.

Now, they remained marks on white paper. He understood them, but they never once sunk into him. Sparked nothing. He stared at a page, and read, and then realized he had no idea what he was reading. It wasn’t exhaustion. He tried again and again, but his mind couldn’t hold onto text. Words did nothing now, like his mind had become blind.

The numbness crept even into that place inside he’d never thought anybody could touch. Just like his mind didn’t stir, nothing happened in his body, a most disconcerting observation. 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.

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, 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 enjoyed the company, too.

He made an effort to not be glum all the time, felt he shouldn't pour it over that man's feet like vomit. Still, sometimes he did talk, laid himself bare, and the next day he was appalled he had exposed himself that much, but there was never punishment, like the doctor could be trusted, and his English tact forbade to take advantage of what he knew. Vadim could forget those embarrassing things the man knew and share the company. In this place, the greatest gift.

Smudge prepared him so meticulously for the PT test that the test, when it came, felt like nothing worse than Smudge had demanded on a non-generous day. Vadim pushed himself and 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. 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 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 returned to his nose before he held 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. 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.

The doctor chuckled quietly as he shook Vadim's hand before busying himself with making tea. 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 say, but he didn't feel the lightness. Some questions didn't need answers, and Brits especially reacted strangely when taken literally.

"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. It's turned into arthritis and, as it happens, it did keep me awake last night."

"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. I wasn't always sitting in a nice office and I wasn't always commissioned. I started out 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 that Dr. Williams believed he did know. "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."

"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. I am supposed to give you a final medical examination, but I believe in having a civilised cup of tea first."

“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 ever 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.

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 studied 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. I am a medical doctor, but many years ago, in fact at the time when I was off 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 didn’t.

The doctor 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. “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.”

“Wasn’t it a German who said even altruistic deeds are selfish? It makes us feel better to do good.” Vadim shook his head.

“Nietzsche?” the officer queried. “It usually is.”

“Yes. Nietzsche.” Smiling, Vadim looked at all the books on a shelf behind the desk. Medical reviews. 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?”

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, create 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.”

“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.” The doctor 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?”

The doctor's 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 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 Vadim directly. "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. He 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.

* * *

Hereford was a sleepy town that seemed the most unlikely place to house the SAS regiment. The only indication, once the transport turned into a small side lane leading into the countryside, was 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 them: '22nd Special Air Service Regiment'.

The guard didn't ask Vadim for ID; after a few words with the driver, they were waved through to the shabby looking compound. A far call from what Vadim knew about 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 the arguably top special forces in the world. 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. Only a few people were in uniform, and none of them were 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 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? But the ranks in SAS were low, and Dan had never got beyond staff sergeant.

A little later he was billeted in one of the rooms and had been issued with his kit. SAS bergen, 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 remote for now. Most of them seemed very young, very eager, aglow with the mystique of SAS.

The Welsh mountains were not far away and would have to be tackled for the first leg of selection. The landscape looked picturesque from a distance, but over the years it had claimed many lives, military and civilian. Vadim listened to the stories, how once, in the seventies, an experienced officer had died from exposure, and others barely managed to come back alive. A little piece of wilderness in a small, small country that bred men like Dan.

Vadim checked through his kit. The mountains had to be the reason why his bergen held a 24hr ration. These guys didn’t take any chances, even if the Brecon Beacons were far less imposing than the parched moonscape of Afghanistan.

He sat on his bunk, bergen at his side, while the young guys milled around. There seemed to be a few men in their mid-thirties, hardened, wiry, paras, Vadim reckoned. Two were especially boisterous, and a couple of the young guys clearly had seen too many bad action films, bragging, but their voices shook 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.

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 the loudest, or 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.

Accom consisted of wooden huts without the chance for any privacy, arranged in spider style around an ablutions block. Soon they had to get sheets and blankets for the bedding. Vadim stuck to the drill from the Soviet Army. There was nothing to do until 0700 hrs, apart from a large meal in the cookhouse. Nobody went out of his way to make contact, and that was exactly how he wanted it. Vadim was still conscious of his accent. The less he spoke the better. Staying apart, watching for those watching him, and just eating and breathing.

After chow, many of the guys went into town for a couple of pints and 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 run once the food was halfway digested, then had a shower, late enough that nobody bothered him. 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 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.

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 them, he stressed that 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. If they were given instructions regarding timing, they were going to meet them. All men were to be equal, no matter which rank they held in their units. Each day they were going to put details on the training wing notice board, and it was the men's responsibility to read them. Any serious misconduct would result in the perpetrator being RTU'd. 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 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 thought. This created people that thought, planned, and had initiative. And a basic level of commitment. Vadim knew he stood out, and tried to become even greyer. He ranked among the tallest, 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 staff came to the front, carrying a clipboard. He instructed them they were going to run the BFT, the Army's Basic Fitness Test, which was a one and a half mile run to be finished in under eleven minutes.

Vadim figured only a cripple, a drunk, or a junkie wouldn't make it. When the race began, he joined the leading group, but didn't make his way to the front. Stayed grey, and completed with hardly breaking a sweat. 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 medical lectures on first aid and how to look after oneself in a hostile environment, particularly in the mountains. Vadim was amazed SAS started from zero and allowed that much time to put together the new guys. 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. 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 never really had full intentions of making it through, but were there merely to boast to their mates they'd given it a go. Vadim was listening, above all, to their version of English, and their terms, turns of phrases, about 'birds', and 'bints', and whatever else 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, but that gutter trash English that would mask him, and make him another shade greyer.

That Sunday, the trainees paraded outside the training wing with their bergans, belt kit and packed lunch, then boarded the trucks 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 the drill sergeant setting a fast pace. 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.

Having found a comfortable pace, Vadim brought up the rear as the last in the top group, his feet and legs and most of all hamstrings remembering mountains. The terrain made it near impossible to keep in sight of 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. Another test run, another prod at resolve, 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 noticed 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.

The next day the real test took place. 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 bergen 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, 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 on the descent, but since each group had to do each end at some stage, it did not matter where they began.

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 a bitch: traps for hands and feet, mostly. And injury meant RTU, return to unit, 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. 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.

Vadim watched how the DS negotiated the territory, and took his clues from him, 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; 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 it behind him, and kept mostly upright.

Eventually, they reached the top. Figures were moving in the mist, running at full pace towards them, following their own DS. No room to pass. Vadim realized they'd try and make his group get off the path. Up or down? Both would cost strength. When they reached Vadim, he just 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. Vadim resumed running, recovering his former 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 discs between his vertebrae, and his knees started to hurt from the strain, too.

He gave his details to the DS at the turning point, needing to think for a second, too rushed to remember things 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 moving figures ahead. 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.

After completion, he dropped the bergen and laughed, breathlessly. "Stupid fucking mountains."

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. 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.

Vadim stretched, 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 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'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. He wasn't their officer and 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.

The next two weeks, the pressure increased. 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 was far worse than being left in the dark.

The only information they received was what kit to bring for the next day. It would always be the bergen with 40lb weight plus one extra item: a drill rifle, which added 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. 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. 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.

Despite being April, it rained, and the weather was miserable and cold every morning. 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 would sit in the cold on the benches, shivering throughout the ride, while their strength and determination got sapped 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. The rush of cold air, saturated with water, attacked every part of their bodies 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 find 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 bergen.

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 what condition they were. Vadim strangely enjoyed stretching himself like that. He could still deal with this, still had a heart left, still more spirit. *Winning* wasn't the goal, it was not losing.

The faster a trainee was on each day's run, the better their chances of getting onto the first truck into camp. If the vehicle filled up fast, there was a chance to get into one of the few bath tubs by piling straight in, dropping bergen and kit beside the tub and soaking luxuriously in the hot water to ease the pain. Vadim rushed faster just for that comfort, while part of him mocked himself for that primal response, but after being wet and half-frozen, there was nothing 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. The DS on duty went from room to room, telling the occupants if they were still in, getting a warning or were being 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 his name to come up. He was doing alright. Unless he got injured, he'd be fine. 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. 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 pushed the thought away. He'd get there, even if he had to 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 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 making 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 worry him. He'd prefer to be on his own, do his part, but still keep a low profile.

Progress, of course, was 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 which were already covered in blisters, Vadim could see the bloody socks clinging to their feet. He'd managed to keep his own dry, wearing 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, taking 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 ball-buster of a day and night tab, this time over snow covered bogs and across the mountain ridges, that resulted in several more men dropping out before test week started.

Few of the hopefuls could imagine there was possibly anything worse, but test week started on Monday: 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. While every man was on their own they were also still against the clock.

This was when Vadim felt he was finally getting back into it. 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. Like everything, once he 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.

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.

The last march was the final breaking point for several of the hopefuls. In the end, out of the initial almost 200 men there were only 35 left who had made it through the first stage. Vadim among them.

* * *

The next part of the course was continuation training: a build-up period that lasted four weeks before they were taken to Belize and into the jungle phase, which took another four weeks.

Training focused on weapons handling and lessons on tactics, basic living and survival in the jungle. They 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. 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 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 only get harder. The staff seemed harsh, but generally fair. 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 held. No wonder Dan was such an irreverent bastard.

The patrols carried out live firing drills on patrolling ranges that had been cut out of woodland. Targets popped up at different distances, which they had to hit by firing two rounds, then getting down to cover. When the DS shouted ‘stop’ or ‘change’, another man would become lead man of the four-man patrol.

Contact drills were a part of the routine as well; that meant, within each patrol, every man had to get to know the others enough to rely completely on each other. They had to make sure everyone in the patrol was proficient, and most importantly safe.

The classroom sessions concentrated on 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 were 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 who did well in languages but seemed to be 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, they were flown to Belize for the jungle phase. Each patrol of four was to live, sleep, eat, exercise and survive together, with one DS attached, who would always be somewhere, observing, but never where the men might expect him.

A helicopter took them deeper inland before they were let out to march the rest of the way to the camp in the middle 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, and he just followed, half-dazed, through the thick vegetation.

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 keenly felt, as

the patrol had had to stop every fifteen minutes to drink. Vadim's pulse had transformed into a pounding headache that quickly made him miserable. 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. No matter how much he drank, sweat just kept pouring out of him, trickling down his neck, his temple, his throat. All he could do was wait for it to be over.

According to the briefing, it would take them a week to get used to the territory and the climate, and then there were another three weeks to go. They learnt how to survive the hostile environment, how to put up pole beds that kept them off the ground and away from dangerous wildlife, and were introduced to a wide variety of insects, snakes and other animals, learning to tell the edible from the poisonous.

Throughout all of this, they had to remain tactical with the only allowed mode of communication whispers; weapons and webbing had 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, zipping them up in a plastic bag and putting the damp and cold kit from the day before back on. The kit was packed away in silence, before each man had to move to a certain point, standing at attention, guarding the jungle, face out, until daylight approached. It wasn't all that different from patrol in Afghanistan, even if in a worse environment, that's 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 the group.

One of the men had obvious leadership experience, just the kind people looked to for decision-making. 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, too, being the oldest of the lot. But Vadim fell back into the ranks, never questioned, even when he was sure the guy was improvising. He sometimes offered a piece of advice, which seemed to be taken as a challenge, but Vadim remained completely non-aggressive. At some point, the guy started to listen to him and would look at him when giving

what passed for orders. 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 then expected of him. Once that was settled, the patrol got on perfectly. A smooth, small machine that worked without a hitch. Vadim began to enjoy himself, staying close when any of the guys were struggling with something, always ready to lend a hand. Leadership by example, without becoming the actual leader.

The stress was as constant as the pouring sweat. Exhaustion taxed them heavily; heat and humidity made every movement anguish. On patrol, they always had to keep off the track, pretending there'd be enemy ambushes or booby traps, so they moved through primary jungle whenever they had to get to a certain location. It could take up to six hours to move five hundred meters.

When the heat, humidity, living and feeding like an animal, only speaking in whispers, got too bad, Vadim paused, breathed, and thought of times when he had broken down. How he'd broken under Dan, and how 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 suddenly felt a shift. The guy's name was Chris or something. Christopher, Vadim reckoned. The man's dirty, sweat-streaked face distorted, and Vadim could feel he was approaching his limits. A quick glance around, then Vadim crawled over, swiftly, touched Chris' shoulder, and felt the man vibrate under the strain, like a steel cable close to tearing and whipping around. The man's breath was fast and becoming irregular, shallow, quick, hyperventilating. If he freaked, that would be bad—Vadim couldn't tell whether the DS was watching or not, but he assumed he was.

He caught a glance from the leader, then looked into wide stress-dilated pupils. The man was about to scream and bolt. Vadim grabbed him by the shoulder, and spoke to him in whispers: calming him, reminding him how far he'd come,

told him to breathe, 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 the incessant noise of the jungle, and eat like a human again, with concerns beyond staying fit and watered. Vadim suddenly felt the man's hands on him, around him, and he was pulled into the desperate embrace of a man who'd come too fucking close to breakdown. Despite the fact he didn't want to be touched, he understood this as different: comradeship, and he let the man draw strength from him.

If you knew what I've done to the likes of you, Vadim thought and patted the man's back, trying to calm him down. Chris was about to break into tears, but Vadim kept whispering, told him to keep breathing. They were comrades, and all would be good, just a little while longer.

Eventually, the man pulled himself together. Vadim gave him space, but stayed close. 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 were no set of rules to cling to. 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.

Vadim kept watching him—and the others—for any sign of mounting stress, for any indication of imminent break-down. All the time performing his tasks, working as hard, if not harder than anyone else, feeling strangely responsible for these young men. Like he'd felt for Platon, but without the embarrassing, vicious, destructive needs. He had no needs now. For all intents and purposes, his body had stopped to desire and was just a machine. Under control although it wasn't necessary. He didn't see anything attractive in any of them, not the way he used to. He could work with them, and touch them, and be touched, and it was nothing: held 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 turned into weeks, and the pace of the course increased as did the pressure. None of the patrols were aware of how the other patrols were faring.

They never met each other again until the very last day, during the breaking up of camp which saw a squadron sized 'attack' by an 'enemy' camp, which came as a shock and a relief, as the pressure mounted and then exploded.

Vadim fell 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. Vadim found it impossible to relax at first, still expecting an ambush, but nothing happened on the way back to the army base.

The men in his team exchanged stories with the others. Vadim listened, having nothing to tell, keeping his own counsel. People drifted away, giving him space, as if he belonged and yet didn't. They must have caught his accent, he thought, refusing to speak more than a few words at any given time, and knew the others noticed how unnatural that was.

Once back in Britain and in camp, all 32 men gathered in a lecture room of the training wing. Few of them had managed to sleep; they were too desperate to know—whereas Vadim had slept like a stone, knowing he'd given all and hadn't frayed under pressure. The only thing they could hold against him was his refusal to take command and control. The old pride in his former unit and rank was still there, and he had to hide it among these children who had never been drilled the Soviet way.

On Wednesday morning, the officer in command read out the list of failures, telling the men to hand in their kit. After he finished, out of the 32 men who had gone into the jungle phase, only 11 remained. Vadim's patrol lost Chris—the soldier who had almost had a nervous breakdown—and the leader. Vadim couldn't guess why.

But he had made it.

Along with the remaining 10 men he was to report for the start of the combat survival phase at 0800 hrs sharp the following Monday.

Vadim was stunned to see those two eliminated men, joking, but clearly shattered about their failure. A sudden barrier went straight through the group, creating two factions. 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 eerie. Vadim forced the two 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 them. They were gone now, history.

He paid a visit to the doctor, where he got some antiseptic tincture 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 discovered 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, which took forever, and reminded him suddenly of Dan. In his half-apathetic state, he could imagine Dan standing behind him, steadyng the blade, maybe mocking him for his weakness, in a tender way. Vadim stared into the mirror; he could almost see Dan, almost feel that body's heat close, those strong fingers on his wrist. His vision blurred, and he put the razor down, setting 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 or why. Dan deserved the truth. He had repeated that in his mind, over and over and over again. Dan deserved the truth.

His eyes burned. Vadim drew a deep, shaky breath, knew he needed to calm down; 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 wiped over his face. Chris suddenly appeared. Bergan over his shoulder, looking at him. Vadim stared back. What could he say? 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, mate. 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 a different goal. "Yes."

"Good." Chris grinned, but the expression in his eyes didn't match. He lifted the bergan back up on his shoulder, stepped back and waved, then headed out.

It was silent in the barracks during the next few 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 anything that wasn't brackish

water and some hapless wildlife a delicacy. And that included the British ruined tea and the heavy, fat-dripping fare that kept them together.

Monday morning saw not only the 11 remaining men from selection, but 39 others start the combat survival course, because the programme was open to all branches of the Armed Forces. They were split up into groups of four men per patrol to learn over the next month how to live off the land, trapping and hunting game, and using pieces of wood and found material to construct makeshift shelters for themselves.

This phase took three weeks, a steep learning curve for those who never had to survive in the wild before, with Vadim the one proficient exception. Compared to what spetsnaz did, this was a walk in the park. Vadim was glad of the chance to heal and recover—put some of his weight back on and supplement all this with running, isometrics and stretching.

During the fourth and last week, the patrols were let loose to survive off the land for five days while being chased by a force that consisted of paratroopers aided by tracking dogs. Fugitives who did not get caught during the five days of evasion and survival were to surrender and be taken away for a 36-hour interrogation phase.

Just before that test started, they were stripped naked, which made Vadim queasy, but it was worse when they checked every orifice. He had to remind himself that nobody here 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.

He allowed them to check his body and shut everything else down, fear, shame, doubt. It was about finding any goodies that would make the five days easier.

Each man was issued with 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.

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 the 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. There was no glue to keep them together. 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 as much ground as humanly possible, using all the tricks Vadim knew. 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. The vowels were different—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. Vadim still felt restless, staring up at the stars through the branches of the tree; suddenly Andy’s teeth gleamed at him.

“What?”

“What are you planning?” Andy pulled a little closer to whisper. “You’re thinking. I can tell.”

“Sorry.” Vadim grinned back. “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’re paratroopers. Paratroopers are arrogant bitches. I have an idea where they are going, and I’m planning to teach one a lesson.”

“You know we’re still supposed to hand ourselves in?”

“Yes. 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 to flank them, with an unwavering Andy near him, giving support. It was madness; a sound beating would surely follow, but at the same time, he could feel his mind starting to fray under the stress of being hunted, not finding much rest if any at all. He needed to win the initiative. Andy helped by laying a trail for the dog. They cornered them in a thicket, grabbing man and dog and carrying both off, tying up the snarling dog, and administering a sound

beating to the struggling, panicking para, just for the fun and the hell of it, the best form of stress relief. They vanished before the guy's comrades found them.

Then it was an altogether different game, with the hunters now concentrating on Vadim and Andy. Vadim told the Welsh guy he should break away and cover his own ass, but Andy would have nothing of that, telling him he was hanging around to learn some more tricks.

The hunt was elating, especially as they managed to repeat the stunt. Pure energy, blood pounding with fierce joy at how reckless they were. Vadim found himself staring at the man, his 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 get him alive again. And the fact this man shared the danger, the stress, formed a bond he had not expected.

Time ran out and they still hadn't been captured. 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. Andy seemed light-hearted, whereas Vadim felt the impending dread. But that wasn't prison, just another test. The final test, he hoped.

"You're a queer bird," said Andy.

"I know." Vadim glanced sideways at him; this man had grown close over the last five days, felt like a comrade, trusted him on some level, and wanted him, which neutralised the trust. He didn't want to touch him, and yet at the same time he did. He didn't want to wonder about him, but did. "I can't tell you why."

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 separated. For a moment he feared for Andy, which distracted him from fearing for himself, but that strange closeness ran deeper.

He was stripped again, and there was again dread; the blindfold made him feel so fucking vulnerable. Worse, it brought him right back into prison and he started to panic. They made him wear some kind of loose pyjamas. 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 his legs bent and arms pulled behind his head. The position hurt, but gave him pain to focus on. It was cold, and seemed to grow colder every minute, and the white noise made it hard to concentrate, a steady pressure on his nerves.

Vadim fought hard against the panic when it was time to change into another position. He knew they couldn't actually harm him, couldn't actually torture him, but the fear stayed, gnawing on him, whittling away his resolve.

They'd been briefed about what they could and couldn't do. Absolutely no 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 Vadim didn't have a number. He didn't, technically, have a rank, either, and giving his name meant they could find that out. Vadim Petrovich Krasnorada wasn't exactly the most British name around.

Maybe he could make up an identity, but he had no idea what methods of checking they had. He didn't even know how many digits the number was supposed to have, and he didn't feel ready to face any jibes about his nationality—or the lack of it. It was too fucking obvious what he was. Any more clues and it would scream in their faces.

That left him with the second option—go hard-assed all the way. 'I can't answer that question'. That was important. He kept repeating that sentence in his brain, in English, 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 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. Behind a table in an otherwise completely bare room sat a tall, skinny man who was glaring at him 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 he writing? Probably a shopping list. This was designed to show who 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.”

Brilliant. 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 bastard, and I know you are a paratrooper, because your mate has told me.”

Only that no mate knew anything about him. Vadim had never let anything slip, not even to Andy, who, hopefully, was smart enough not to step into any similar trap. Strictly speaking, he had no mates. 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’ll only make it harder on yourself; you pathetic piece of shit.”

Vadim’s jaw muscles tensed as he looked the man square 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 was this the full extent of it.

The pen slammed down onto the table as the man stood up, glaring at Vadim; a glower that was returned in equal measure. “Don’t try playing games with me; we know everything already. That mate of yours, he sang like a bird and

you..." A spindly finger was 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 back-handed challenge.

With surprising speed, the man came towards Vadim, and proceeded 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.

The man never asked a question.

The insults seemed to take forever, eventually the interrogator got the guards to take 'the piece of scum' away.

Vadim was again blindfolded. Hoped they didn't notice his reaction. That scared him more than the interrogation. Then they brought him back into the ice-cold room with the white noise and put into another stress position; this time kneeling with his arms behind his head and shoulders pulled back as far as possible. If his arms dropped down even for a moment 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 then, much better than he was now; yet, he was thinner and less muscled now, which worked to his advantage, at least he kept telling himself that.

His back knotted up, pain radiating out into every limb. He lost all concept of time. It was a cold, miserable place, and his mind started to respond to the white noise—more than discomfort—real, true pain, and the guards weren't exactly gentle when they pulled his arms up again, almost as if they were trying to dislocate his shoulders. His weak shoulder hurt; the one that had actually been dislocated. Mountain. Dan. Heat. Stumbling through rocks with his legs tied. That had been worse, but he'd been thirty then, and not used up, not broken.

He shifted again, but every movement was agony with the tensed up muscles. Suddenly he remembered what had given him respite once. Hopefully this wasn't forbidden. "I need to piss."

He was yanked up again 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 he didn't actually care. Vadim took his time—every tiny thing counted, every moment lessened the stress. These guys wouldn't take it far. They couldn't. They adhered to a rulebook, and that was their weakness.

Then back again. Waiting took a long time, with no food or 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 interrogation wasn't the hard part. Firstly, that room was warm, and secondly, his body could recover, but most importantly, they didn't leave him alone, wondering, doubting himself, but gave him an enemy to concentrate on.

When they took him out again and removed the blindfold, Vadim saw a small round man with a red complexion and a stern-faced, middle aged nurse in starched uniform, with a large syringe in her hand that seemed more designed for a horse than a man. They wouldn't put that into him and even if they did—needles? He'd been plucking rubbery leeches off his skin for weeks. Syringes at least were hygienic and didn't wriggle.

“Your name!” The man had a stethoscope around his neck, his hands sheathed in rubber gloves. Nice touch. The gloves alone promised another body cavity search. 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. 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 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 was probably acting on some film featuring evil Nazi doctors and assumed that would faze him.

“I can’t answer that question.”

“Speak up!” the man barked. “Why are you here? Louder!”

“I can’t answer that question.” 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 clipboard in her hand, pen poised. “Take off all your clothes.”

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 close to his balls. Fuck. He should never have allowed himself to be marked like that. While Dr. Williams had been 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. He straightened and stood there naked, forcing himself to stare straight ahead.

The nurse was making notes throughout, her pen scratching over the paper as she slowly walked around Vadim. He felt his shoulder blades moving closer together. His body was tense, muscles taut, and he suddenly found it hard to breathe. This stopped being funny.

The nurse hadn’t said a word.

The man sat down on his desk, as he took over the clipboard. The nurse stepped behind Vadim, and he had to stop himself from glancing over his shoulder. His resistance took more effort than he could mask.

“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. He felt like jumping and staying completely still at the same time. No comment on the scars. The letters 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 ask what the fuck he thought he was doing, another part of him wanted to crawl back as deeply into his skin as possible. Those conflicting urges gave way to a sentence he’d written in red letters all over his mind.

“I can’t...” bear this, “answer that question.” Vadim tensed even more, expecting to be kicked or hit now.

“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, the man’s face close to Vadim’s. He felt 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?”

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 clawing inside.

Rubber-gloved hands, much smaller than the interrogator’s, were suddenly on Vadim’s bared arse, roughly manipulating muscles and flesh. Even if they didn’t go any further, Vadim’s whole body tensed into immovability. He closed his eyes; the tension suddenly 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. Hatred and fear raged 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!*” he shouted on the last two words, brought too close, anger and outrage replacing the fear. 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. Suddenly the door flew open, and two guards came marching in without a word. The presence in Vadim’s back vanished, and before he knew what was happening, they slipped the blindfold over his eyes. It was tied and his arms were grabbed and pulled into his back as the guards pushed him away. Not a single sound was uttered by anyone until the ‘doctor’s’ voice yelled after him, “you’ll wish you had answered my question, you sorry excuse for a man!”

Vadim struggled for a moment, wanting to turn and go for the fat bastard’s throat, but the guard held him. Anyway 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 back into the darkness and freezing cold. They untied him and threw pyjamas at him. Burning with shame and fear, Vadim dressed, expecting to be kicked and beaten up. Those injuries would get him RTUD, which meant exactly nothing, because there was no unit, no life. He would have crawled into a small space or into himself, 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 an 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 whenever he threatened to sag.

During that hour, the fear became a dull dread, and the adrenaline burned out, leaving him exhausted. He wondered why the guards had come in. Did the ‘doctor’ have any way of alerting them? Did they think he’d flip?

The position was agony; exhaustion turned into a 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 walked into yet another room. If it could be called walking. He could hardly feel his body; hardly felt anything at all in his body or mind, just moved where he was dragged.

The room was so hot, the heat descended like a suffocating blanket. When they took the blindfold off, he struggled to straighten up and stand to attention. He was presented with a distinguished looking man, with grey hair at his temples and dressed in a fine suit. “Please, at ease, man.”

Vadim slumped, grateful for that small kindness, but at the same time his hackles rose at the man’s appearance. He didn’t like this 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. Vadim had no strength left to be grey, didn’t have the strength left to resist.

“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. Even if it killed him.

“I see.” The man leaned back in his chair. “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. Especially as 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.

Vadim 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 machine gun fire. 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 out. 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, to trip him up and confuse his weakened mind until his resolve broke down. Vadim struggled against it, kept to the one sentence that was just as monotonous, but was still 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, endlessly.

Finally, the man stood. 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. “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, 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. He shook his head, once.

“What?” The man’s pronunciation was just like the Ambassador’s. “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 dignity away. Never again.

“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.

Treating him like an imbecile. Vadim dropped the pen and 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, 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 back over his eyes. He hadn’t noticed anybody else in the room, and this came as a shock, but he didn’t struggle for long.

The same routine, same room, noise, cold and pain which went on for several 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, 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 wasn’t sure he could take even one more interrogation 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 broken him, he wouldn’t have stood a chance of coming out on the other side of this one.

Just when Vadim thought he couldn’t take any more, and when his body threatened to collapse under the strain, he was hauled back up onto his feet.

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. 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. "Would you like to sit down?"

"I can't answer that question." Saying that didn't make any sense, but it had become a reflex. Staring at her and the way she sat there, he realised probably every man out there had to find her irresistible. 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." 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 thought they were nicely toned, she must be a runner, or maybe a dancer.

"Do you find me attractive?" She smiled 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. He glanced at the door, wondered when the guards would collect him and take 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 in, 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. 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. Cajoling and smiling, asking and touching, but all she ever got in the end, was—"I can't answer that question"—until her tone suddenly turned 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, he glanced warily at the guards, then at the prostitute, then suddenly realised they didn't know he wasn't interested in women. He gave her a smile at that thought, wondered how many of the others had responded to her. He was immune, and they didn't know the first thing about his weaknesses.

She continued to insult him, 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 came back and he was marched out of the room.

Faggot. That was about right, but he'd been called that so often, and he was too tired to care. 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.

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.

His mind washed out, merely holding on, muscles tight, as if shortened, and weak, beginning to tighten up, 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.

Barely half an hour later they took him again, and he was guided through one of the many corridors, when suddenly his blindfold was taken off. 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." They took him to a wide open door with warmth and light coming out of it.

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 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. 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, his voice calm and patient. “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...” he repeated, just to make sure he didn’t fail on the last leg. He realised he was staring into that man’s face like a wild-eyed savage dragged from the forest, but couldn’t help it. 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 great. 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.

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 their way into the warmth of the room that had nothing in common with any of the interrogation rooms. It was simply an office.

“Over,” repeated Vadim, not quite grasping it. No more stress positions. Black armbands. They weren’t, like, dark blue to fuck him up, they were black, the real thing. They’d told him that meant 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?” Bleary-eyed and dog-tired. “Sir?”

“You did it.” The OC smiled. “Well done, Krasnorada. Good man.”

Done. Over. The last test, selection done. “Thank...thank you, sir.” Still bewildered, Vadim 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. He could have patted a wall for all the reaction Vadim gave. "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."

"Yes, sir." Vadim wasn't sure what else was expected, but following that order seemed like the right 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.

"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. He finished the coffee, which made him aware just how 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. He 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 afterwards.

* * *

Three days later, 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 was a stark contrast to the thousand ways 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 piss-up, even though Vadim wasn't SAS and would never be, since he lacked the criteria to be part of the Regiment. He wasn't born in Britain and wasn't 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 about the paras ‘getting it’.

Still, he had to leave, 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 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.

“Mr Krasnorada, I am glad to see you again.” Perhaps she was, perhaps she wasn’t. No way to tell from the carefully guarded face.

He bowed. “Ma’am. I’m glad to be here.” Honest truth.

“I would hope so.” She gestured 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.

“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. “It was...insightful.” Trying to find a way to explain what he felt when all the thoughts still hadn’t properly settled.

“I have here the documents required for your passport, which will be ready as soon as your photograph has been taken.” She 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.”

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. "That is settled, then." Standing up, she held out her hand. "Welcome to the United Kingdom, Mr. Krasnorada."

He stood and took her hand, 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 raised her head, looking straight into his eyes. "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."

"Are you still willing to meet Dan McFadyen again?"

"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.

She 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 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."

"I am afraid I have to leave you now, but you shall not lack anything while you are my guest." She walked towards a smaller set of doors on the other side of the room, but 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 24—Collateral Damage

July 1991, Persian Gulf

The heat outside was nothing compared to the furnace inside the armoured vehicle. Dan's body armour was soaked and the shirt underneath dark from dampness. Sweat ran in rivulets beneath the helmet and his hands kept slipping off the rifle. Ironic he was looking forward to stepping into the blinding light of Iraq's desert.

Dan left the vehicle, head down, rifle in his right hand, the left fiddling with the helmet strap. The relief of taking it off was unlike anything, except for the joy, perhaps, of eventually getting sweaty feet out of heavy boots. He lifted his head, slicked wet hair off his face, and looked around the open space in front of the huts. One of which had become his 'home'.

Squinting against the sun, he spied an unfamiliar figure. 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 in sweat.

The straps finally parted and he groaned in something akin to ecstasy when the plates fell open across his chest. He studied the silhouette of the man out of the corner of his eye. The guy was still standing there, staring right at him across the open space. Dan could feel the gaze in his guts and between his eyes. He sighed. Alright, he could play alpha male games blindfolded and he'd never lost one. Not here, not in this camp of insane fuckers. Dan lifted one hand to shield his eyes, using the helmet for shade and froze.

Tall. Broad. Short-shaved blond hair. Arms crossed on a massive chest.
Legs braced.

Fuck.

Dan knew how pale those eyes were; remembered the taste of skin and flesh, had touched every single inch of that body. Knew pain and fear; remembered utter desolation and feeling so empty and lost, that he'd needed danger and bloodied fists to anaesthetise himself.

He dropped his hands, rifle in one, helmet in another, body armour gaping open and began to walk in a straight line towards the man who stood like a statue. His dusty boots disturbed red clouds with every step, until he stopped in front of

the man he hadn't seen for nearly half a year. The man who had vanished without a word.

He stopped one step away.

"You fucking *cunt*!"

Dan's voice cut through the entire camp, carrying danger.

You fucking cunt.

Vadim was too surprised to even recoil. They had told him McFadyen's patrol was due any minute, while he was waiting for his team leader, who was due any moment. He had passed the time by working out what he wanted to say. He'd wanted to offer friendship, ask for forgiveness, explain himself. It was not much different from back in Afghanistan, where they had often met up after months apart. Surely 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, but he 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, his jaw tightened, and fists formed. He locked his body in place to not give quarter.

It was really him. Dan. Covered in red dust, bristling with anger. Surprise, and a familiarity, a feeling of recognizing, of knowing the Brit 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. Instinctive response was a show of fighting spirit, like he had always defaulted to when challenged.

He had to stand his ground or everybody would walk all over him. *Cunt.* No man could take that word without being laughed at. He met Dan's glare, felt his breath on his face, facing off a tiger. Somehow he had lost all momentum and couldn't build it up now for a counter attack. Why the attack? This was Dan.

Other soldiers drew close, drawn like flies to sweat. Vadim did what he could: stared right into those dark eyes with dirt ingrained in the lines around them, and refused 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 bared his teeth in a snarl. "How dare you." He raised his arm. Rifle moving, shifting, lifting, without bothering to aim.

Vadim 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. He hadn't been issued his weapons yet.

The safety was off. Dan re-gripped the weapon. Some of the guys who were starting to gather round him belonged to his team. One of them walked up to him, uttering a few quiet words and not only took Dan's helmet but prised 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. Within one second, it all came back.

"How fucking dare you!" Dan snarled, his empty hands now tight fists.

Vadim snarled right back. "What? This your private party? You walked into my war, now I walk into yours."

"Wrong. 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 spat out the next words, "you fucking cowardly cunt!" Dan had never felt so much rage, not even in the aftermath of the rape. A lifetime ago. He had survived more intact then than now.

Underneath the anger, Vadim was stunned and found it near impossible to keep his stoic façade together. He moved forward, chest to chest. To invite those punches, so Dan could vent that anger. Have a fight, and maybe then talk? Later when Dan was too tired to be this angry and more rational? Strong hands grabbed his arms from behind, and a voice said, "Don't. He's not worth it. Don't want to spend your first days here in the brig, do you?"

"Not worth it?" Dan's roar alerted a couple of his team mates who rushed forward, one on each side of him. "Eleven fucking years not fucking worth it? I'm going to fucking kill you, legionnaire, when I'm done with that Russian cunt!" Dan tried to throw himself against Vadim, but the two guys grabbed his arms. They had to struggle to hold him back.

"Get Mad Dog out of the way. Guy needs a shower. Cold."

Vadim was pulled back, too. When he looked over his shoulder, he caught a glimpse of blue eyes like water. Too stunned to do much, he noticed the guy wore camo, and then felt him release his arms.

“Stay put.” The blue eyes glared at him.

“Watch your back, Vadim, I’ll cut your chest open, dig your heart out and let it dry in the fucking desert! That’s if I can find the bloody thing.” Dan was being dragged away, all but fighting the guys who were restraining him. “Keep you from breaking anymore promises, won’t it, *cunt*?”

The stranger stepped between the two of them, placing his left hand against Vadim’s chest. Vadim felt a shudder rise in his body, knew Dan meant it, meant every word, and found himself lacking the strength to resist.

He could no more win this fight than fend off lightning. Promises. His honour. What did his word mean anyway? He had prided himself once on things like that, but truth was, that had been one of his many delusions. “Okay, do it. Let’s be done with it,” he called across to Dan.

Dan struggled against his captors. “I’ll get my chance, bastard. And when I do, you’ll wish you’d never set foot in Kabul.” There were too many people around right now, but he’d do it, meant it, couldn’t wait to tear the Russkie apart. Payback for the pain drowning him right now. Payback for the desolation that had never left. Two years. Then six fucking months ago, on Christmas Eve.

“Bonne chance,” said the guy between them, dark blond, broad, Slavic features, an open face. “Trust me, the brig is even hotter than accom.”

“Stay out of this shit, legionnaire,” Dan growled, but the worst spike of hatred was off, now it was just fucking pain and memories. “Besides, he’s one of your countrymen.” Dan pointed at Vadim. “The worst kind.”

The legionnaire huffed. “Finished biting, Mad Dog? That all?” His tone was jesting, but Dan could tell he was also ready to fight. “Grab some chow, you’re not getting paid for this shit.”

“Be careful, legionnaire, the bastard can’t be trusted.” Dan turned, shaking off his teammates who still flanked him. The others stepped out of his way quickly. They could tell he was ready to punch anyone who didn’t get out of his way as he stormed off towards the gym.

The legionnaire looked at Dan's mates, visibly refrained from commenting, then looked at Vadim. "It's no use fighting him. He took on a bunch of jarheads a couple of weeks ago. You know. Jarheads. US Marines."

Vadim blinked, then met the blue eyes. Odd. Something odd about the language...? Russian. He felt like the bitch who had changed hands, that's what it had to look like for everybody. He had taken the insults lying down and then had to be protected by another man. Shit. Russian. Countryman. He moved away a few steps, glad when the touch broke, didn't want to be touched, only felt guilty and pained. His shoulders slumped. All the strength his training had built, the hard-won pride. Why had he even bothered? All this, only to be nearly shot down for his trouble?

Make him see.

"Welcome to the Gulf, anyway." The legionnaire began to walk towards one of the bigger tents. Vadim followed. "You must be Vadim. They told me you'd arrive today. I'm your team leader, Jean-Pierre Leclerc, but people call me Jean."

"Yeah, right."

"I can show you my papers. It's all official. Belgian by birth, French by service."

"I'd say, central Moscow. You sound like you lived near the same metro station as me."

"Ah. Hobby linguist." Jean grinned. "It's been ages since I heard Russian."

Shit. Vadim had responded in Russian without even thinking. Too familiar, he just automatically switched back into his native language. He 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 some chow. Not much different from Britain, same kind of food, same kind of company, only more ragtag. Jean gave him a quick life story, as if trying to build rapport, assuming Vadim wanted to know 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, he had moved on, spent time in various places in Africa, then had been hired as a security contractor. He used afgantsy lingo, the occasional expression. Telling Vadim without telling him he'd been in that hellhole. Brotherhood of Afghanistan.

* * *

Jean showed up again after Vadim had set up his kit and his bunk in one of the tin huts that he had all to himself. Jean brought a ‘welcome gift’, a small bottle of vodka that wasn’t nearly cold enough, but the taste was clean and crisp. The one Russian thing Vadim welcomed. According to Jean, alcohol was strictly banned while on duty, but Jean had the rest of the day and the next day off, and would spend that to show him the ropes.

Vadim tilted his head back, taking the last swallow from the bottle, felt it burn and calm him. Fuck Dan. Or ‘Mad Dog’ as they’d called him. Mad Dog alright. Unless Dan came to his senses, next time he threatened to attack, Vadim would stand and fight. 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 Dan.

“Okay, Vadya, I shouldn’t be saying this.”

Vadim blinked at the affectionate name. “Then don’t.” Despite Jean speaking Russian, he pointedly kept to English.

The legionnaire grinned and obliged him, also speaking English. “First: get that Soviet shit out your head. Second: keep the knife where it belongs. Otherwise you’ll be in trouble here in camp. And I’ll tell you why. Mad Dog started that fight with the Americans when he told everybody he prefers cock and ass. And judging by 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 now the man proposed to take him under his wing and show him around camp, tomorrow, for everybody to see. Fantastic.

“Now. I can’t say I like him. I don’t actually care one way or the other. 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 the bastard’s balls or hate his guts. Got me?”

“I was special forces.” It just slipped out. Vadim frowned.

“The camp’s full of special forces.” Jean paused, as if expecting a protest. “Just make sure you control that knife.”

Vadim stared at the empty bottle. Half a bottle and it already made him talk. And think. That was worse. Dan had provided enough information for the other mercs to put two and two together and end up with a twisted version of the truth. Bitch. Suka. 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 roiled. Smelling Dan's breath had been almost too much. Seeing him, even in that state. Dan. He just didn't know what to feel.

"Shit. Spetsnaz."

"Still means fuck-all." The legionnaire smirked. "You could even be Vympel. Those peasants couldn't tell the difference. Lots of them spent their lives hating the Soviets. They'd love a cocksucking commie, ex or not."

Vadim groaned and leaned his head against the sheet of metal which doubled as their cover and couch. "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. You got that?"

He just wasn't used to that anymore. 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 still ached from the final tests and lack of sleep. He wasn't thirty anymore. Now the conversation was going into territory that was completely unknown and uncharted. Very likely it was about comradeship for this man. About being afganets. Fabled brotherhood of a sold-out, betrayed and fucked-up generation, in a camp full of enemies. And Dan. He could use a 'friend', as long as he could get across he didn't want to speak Russian and wouldn't talk about his past.

"I need to crash."

“You don’t have to walk me to the door.”

“No.” Vadim didn’t really feel like smiling. He couldn’t read this Jean, but the man was not a threat. Everybody else was, thanks to Dan. Vadim had some issues; he knew that, but it took a lot to make him actually flip. He was not a raving lunatic. He had passed all the tests. Then why did he feel so brittle? He’d fought unjust wars, done nasty shit in his life. Why did he feel so disoriented?

Because the KGB had cracked him open and peeled him alive. Screaming in the night? Waking shit-scared, sobbing into the pillow? Sex drive next to nil? Only feeling he had 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, but it was as if those feelings 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. How naïve to believe Dan would listen.

He had wanted to say a proper goodbye. Convince him to let go. Maybe try and make him understand he had been fucked up and was a different man now. Then later, he had dared to hope at least for friendship. No, fuck that, had hoped to return to what they’d shared once. Love. Despite the Baroness’ warnings, nothing had prepared him for Dan’s rage. He deserved it. Shouldn’t have come. The bit about cutting his heart out? That was no 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, whatever they said or did.

He headed to his bunk, but found it hard to sleep.

Awoke screaming. No surprise there.

* * *

After the encounter, Dan had gone straight to the gym, not even bothering to clean up. Grimey with sweat rolling through the dust on his body he lifted more weights than he’d ever done before. Tortured himself into utmost exhaustion, until his knees nearly made him scream and every bone and muscle in his body protested in pain. At least the physical pain numbed the agony he was in. God he

hadn't expected this. The onslaught of everything he thought he'd buried deep down. The suicidal emptiness, the bottomless grief.

Dan took a long, hot shower, closing his eyes under the spray. Wished he could find peace of mind. Fat fucking chance. He needed to make a phone call. Now. Before he committed a murder.

Once he was dressed, Dan pushed into HQ and demanded an urgent phone line to Britain. He waited impatiently to be put through to Baroness Margaret de Vilde. He didn't bother with introductions. She knew who was on the line. Her aide would have told her.

"Ma'am? There is no way I will work with him. With Vadim Krasnorada." Dan gripped the phone so tightly the scars on his left hand stretched taut. "No way, Ma'am, absolutely no way!"

"Dan, I thought you were a professional." Her voice sounded stern over the crackling line.

"Ma'am, I could say the same for you. Why did you send Krasnorada here?" Dan bristled. "I asked you, before you sent me here, not to look for him!"

"Are you suggesting there was an ulterior motive for my decision?"

"Aye." Dan kept to his guns. "With all due respect, Ma'am, but 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. Secondly, he has proven he is still in perfect shape. He is simply the best for the job. That is why I have sent him to the Gulf." She paused. "Is this your last word? You will not work with him?"

Dan couldn't work out what was behind her words. 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." Dan knew exactly what he'd just implied, but wouldn't take it back. He couldn't guarantee the bastard's safety. Not when he wanted to rip the fucking Russian apart. As much as he had been torn to shreds, six months ago and never been mended back together.

"I understand," she conceded. I will inform the officer in charge. You will not work in a team with Vadim Krasnorada, but right now we need his expertise, and I am not willing to send him somewhere else."

Dan frowned. He knew that tone of voice. There was no way he could sway her decision, not yet anyway. "Thank you, Ma'am."

Curtly, Dan replaced the receiver and stared at the phone for a while. He didn't know what to think. Had she done this on purpose? There was no other explanation. For one moment he fucking hated her as well for what she had done.

Time to see if the Yank was off duty. Nothing like a freshfaced jarhead to ease the tension.

* * *

"Hey! Shut the fuck up!" Loud banging on Vadim's door. "Some of us need to grab some sleep."

Vadim lay shuddering, sweat pooled on his chest. No idea what the dream had been, but his heart tried to jump through his throat. "Fuck you!" he shouted back. What had the doctor said? In times of stress. Emotional stress. Seeing Dan obviously counted.

"Ah, fuck me," he groaned, listening to his voice reverberate in the tiny place that was his quarters: field bed, a couple boxes, that was pretty much it. He wiped the sweat off his chest with the blanket. Checked the time. Two. Three more hours before he would wake up again, unless the exhaustion claimed him and then he'd wake from the commotion the others caused. Staring into the darkness, he forced himself to count his breaths, twenty at a time, then started again until he finally fell asleep.

He awoke from the chatter outside, grabbed his kit and headed for the showers. On the way he 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 garrote for speed and elegance. Fighting in the shower. Now, that would indeed be a throwback.

None of the glances were friendly. The chatter turned hostile. No specific words, just a general sneer in the air, grins that seemed inappropriate. Too many eyes on him.

Vadim stepped under the spray. The guys each side moved one shower further away. This early in the morning, there was plenty of space. Vadim kept his features in a studied mask, knew he was being assessed, knew they read the scars.

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.

He ran a soapy hand once over his scalp. Soap in his eyes wouldn't do. Stance broad, balanced, as secure in his footing as the Hindu Kush. He was fully there and aware. He could 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 at his back. He weighed a few snide comments, but didn't want to be the one who started 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 sense the others draw closer. Maybe he should get out without running away too obviously. Fighting retreat, SAS tactics.

"Hear me, Russkie?" The bastard was already wearing sports kit, dancing around like he was a boxer. 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?"

Oh, my hero. One of the lads.

"Scars," said Vadim.

"I can see that, dickhead." Grinning, the Cockney stepped closer, 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.

More people drew closer. Six, seven. Pack mentality. They'd be cowards enough to go for it. Shit situation. He'd get hurt, unless he defused it. If he defused it, he'd prove he had no balls. Fighting naked. Wonderful way to get back into the rhythm of war. There was silence for a few heartbeats, then somebody slapped Vadim's ass. "Bitch was screaming last night."

The London squaddie was back in his depth again and leered. "I can make you scream alright." He moved closer and made a stupid kissy-face. Being slapped

meant the ones behind him 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’. His reward was 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, hoping it was the bitch who had slapped him.

After that, it deteriorated into a nasty punch-up. No points for style, just plain old dirty hand-to-hand, and he was outnumbered. Vadim 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.

He 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 his 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 and stagger to the side. Too many attacks. Disoriented. Somebody grabbed his wrist, pulled it away and punched him straight in the face. Numbing, disorienting pain. Steadying himself against the wall, he tasted 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. But he stayed out of reach.

“You fucking coward,” hissed Vadim.

The bastard didn’t move closer, instead he 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 yanked it up hard, shoulder charged him, dropping his weight on top. The man didn’t have enough breath to make more of a sound than that of his skull colliding with the floor. Vadim found his pulse under the jaw and squeezed, hard, pressing 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. He freed himself and staggered off, hearing coughing behind him. 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. He was working close security, so there'd been no chance for illicit booze to help him sleep. Nothing to stop the thoughts, memories surfacing unhindered. He'd all but given up trying, stewing in rage instead, until he'd finally dropped off towards morning only to be woken by his alarm half an hour earlier than usual.

He hit the showers before anyone else, eager to avoid the Russian during the morning ablutions, then off to the washing block, having his first shave of the day, and, finally, frequenting the row of loos.

Despite his early morning routine he'd been held up by the Quartermaster, trying to exchange his body armour that had got 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.

Waiting in line for breakfast, he was now pissed off even more. Tray in hand, eyes hidden beneath the shades, Dan stood behind Mick, one of his team mates, and in front of Dave, an Ex-RA gunner, who for once refrained from making an arse-groping oh-so-funny comment.

Dan heard snide comments. Could tell the mood without having to understand the words. Made the mistake of looking up. Fuck. Averting his eyes before he had to take a proper look at the Russian.

Vadim hadn't gone for a jog, figuring the fight had been enough exercise. His lips tingled, swollen and raw. His back ached from the vicious hit to the neck. The camo covered most bruises, but his face was difficult to hide. He walked stiffly, too, which had provoked comments. The bitch had got it. Haha. Great fun.

Vadim kept his jaw muscles clenched, barely restraining himself from grinding his teeth. Queuing for the food, he held the tray and remembered how to hit and strike with it. He was dying to bring it full force into somebody's throat.

The main thing was to avoid being tripped or having the tray kicked or punched from his hands.

He collected an assortment of greasy English breakfast, surprisingly good, if his cardiovascular system could forgive him, then found a safe route around the benches, never within touching, punching or tripping distance. When he reached the empty table without incident, he knew it would be harder on the way back. It always was.

Dan got double helpings of sugar-laden cereal and the usual full fry up with stacks of fried bread on the side of his overflowing plate. He found a seat amongst his team mates. Sod's law. When he looked up from ladling the food down his throat, he was confronted smack bang with the man he was trying to avoid.

Even through the dark shades, seeing Vadim was a shock to the system. Dan grunted something vile into his food, shovelled more cereal down, before being forced to look up again as he drank his coffee. He almost choked on the brew, spilling some of it when he caught sight of the bruised face.

Fuck.

What the fuck had happened?

No. Don't care.

He chomped and chewed on the next spoonful of crunchy sugary stuff. 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 a shit. Couldn't possibly feel that sudden sharp sense of red-raging anger, wanting to cut into thin strips whoever was responsible for beating up the Russkie. Vadim was his. His to touch, his to hurt. His.

His cunt.

No.

Dan scraped the last of the cereal out of the bowl before tearing into the sausages and bacon. He didn't care. No. Couldn't afford to feel or think.

Vadim's skin was taut. He could sense how the place turned against him: the comments, the sudden change in topics. Cocksucking. Ass. Bitch. What bitches wanted and what they deserved. He ate, keeping his gaze straight ahead, peripheral vision wide open. 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 rather walk

home to the Lubyanka and ask to be taken back. He felt a touch on his shoulder, firm. A tray moved into his vision, slow and 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. He spotted tousled dark hair and sunglasses two rows up front. Too close, even with five or six men between them. Too close.

"Aye."

"What happened?"

"Fell off horse." Vadim sipped his tea. He didn't want to speak about it, not in Russian, not in the perfectly conversational tone Jean had used. He stubbornly stuck to English, whether Dan could hear it or not. "I broke my wrists in '72, falling off a stupid horse."

"Both?"

"Aye."

Dan's head lowered closer to the food. He didn't want to see, didn't want to know. Of course, the legionnaire. They'd 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.

He tried to ignore the Russkies' conversation, started to chat with Mick, discussing the plans for the day and the route their armoured vehicle should take. Talking, just to drown out the words that came wafting over.

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 grate.

The ex-legionnaire ate a pile of toast and thick gelatine-covered pieces of spam for breakfast, and drank coffee. Clearly less enthused about the English approach to a coronary.

"And?" Vadim replied in English.

"According to the rumour mill, you slept around and Mad Dog caught you." Jean laughed again. "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.”

“And the other story?”

“Not much of a story, just planning the next attack. Fucking faggots need to get their teeth bashed in. It’s open season.”

“And?”

“When you turn your back, Vadya.” Jean actually looked a little worried. “Figured I should tell you. Being your team leader and all that.”

“Yeah.”

Jean finished his last slice of toast. “I liked what you did with your elbow. Good work.” He stood and took his tray away, seemingly unconcerned about the attention on him.

The bastard had seen the fight in the showers and not interfered. Vadim glared after him.

Despite his best intentions, Dan raised his head to watch the legionnaire leave. 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, waving.

Midge. Fuck. Ringleader. He’d broken that guy’s nose already and, during the first two weeks, had received more bruises from the bastard’s gang in return than he’d received throughout most of his army career.

“Hey, Mad Dog!” The ginger-headed 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. Placing a palm each side of his tray, he pushed himself off the bench and stood, ignoring the Russkie’s table.

“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 his usual banter. Normally he responded to 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 got up. “If 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. He had to stand 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 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 and un-amused. “No fighting in the mess. You know the rules, Forces or not. Get the fuck out. Now.”

“Not fighting. 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, but he 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.

He turned his attention to the RSM. No point in messing with the Sergeant Major. 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. The man pointed first at him and then to the exit. Dan shrugged to his mate. Mouthing ‘later, vehicle park’, before grabbing the remains of his breakfast in one hand to weave his way through the rows of tables and benches.

Allowing Dan to move first, making sure he couldn’t get attacked in the back the moment he stepped outside. Vadim walked close enough as he passed Midge 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. He put the tray away. Snarling at Midge on his way past. “That wriggle...good one. You might have talent as a faggot.”

Dan dropped his shades back over his eyes before he stepped outside. “Don’t be stupid.” In Russian, to Vadim, without looking at the cunt, instead keeping his eyes on Midge.

Dan turned and left both men behind. 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 while smirking at Vadim. "I'll get you, when you least expect it, and you'll squeal like a little girl."

"You mean like your mother when her dog fucks her?" Vadim turned to face the merc, pose deceptively relaxed.

Midge sneered. "Good thing me mother's dead, innit, bitch?" He glanced over to where Dan had been. "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 off in the same direction Dan had gone.

"She must have died of embarrassment at seeing you after shitting you in the toilet," said Vadim. A bit weak, but hitting the same spot made sense when the other flinched. He headed towards the armoury. Time to pick up kit, get fitted with body armour. Oh yes, and sunscreen. Protection factor 50 or more.

Jean introduced him to the rest of the team. His style of leadership was exactly what Vadim had seen from him so far: laid back, friendly, open, 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.

* * *

On the next day, out in the field, Vadim confirmed 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. Security duty was 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 normal.

* * *

Sparring with Jean didn't reduce the pressure for Vadim. Fighting with gloves and protection just didn't satisfy. Running, punching and kicking bags, lifting weights, 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 and eventually sleep.

Vadim never closed his eyes amongst others, never turned his back. He was only safe when Jean was around. The legionnaire had his own gang, comprising his team and friends, presumably people he had worked with before or shared history with. As easy-going as he was, he was also surprisingly sane. Jean stayed around to play chess (which he would have been better at if he'd bothered to think beyond the third or fourth move), to chill out and lift weights.

Vadim was itching for a fight. Worse than itching. It was as dark and cruel a desire as he'd ever felt, much worse than a wound in his flesh, no less painful than Dan's knife carving his back. 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 warnings, and didn't carry any weapons when the bitches came for him.

It was nearly a ritual. They were waiting for a mistake, for him to be alone and unprepared, or Vadim sought them out himself to take the pressure down. The pain in return keeping the darkness away. He got the reputation for picking a fight for nothing but a sneer, or after a crude gesture.

And sneering there was aplenty. He was Mad Dog's bitch, after all. It felt like he'd have to fight the whole camp, 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. He detested 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. It could have been Vadim's room, apart from the photos blue-tacked to the metal wall near the bed.

Vadim leaned in for a closer view. They looked like cut-outs from a fashion magazine, even though he was halfway sure not even fashion magazines showed their models bent over like in the first picture. Her skirt rode up awfully high to reveal a glimpse of black panties. Or was it just shadow?

Jean glanced at him. "C'mon, not like you could do anything with those."

Vadim looked at the bed, realized this was the place where Jean jerked off, staring at the darkness between those legs. 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 clearly a wig, a sleek chin-length cut, face 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 maybe sixteen, seventeen. Long fingers in white silk gloves, splayed on her lower back, like an invitation. She wouldn't dream of pulling the nothing of black leather skirt down.

"Whoa."

"Yeah. Sex on legs," said Jean.

"Who's she?"

"My girl."

"You're 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 and clinging to his body, showing off pecs and his six-pack. "What do you mean?"

"She doesn't really seem to wear much."

Jean gave a short laugh, pulled his shirt off and tossed it on the ground. The six-pack was exactly as Vadim 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, neatly arranged under each other. 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 knew he should let it go, accept the half-lie, but it intrigued him. He imagined that body, Jean straining against that ass, his cock taking her from behind, rough, fucking her raw. Probably the exact same thing Jean imagined when lying there. The whole purpose of that photo.

“Guess you’re one lucky bastard.”

“You can say that again.” Jean grinned, almost mocking him. The grin that Vadim had got so sick of in the last week. Something snapped, a pressure valve exploded. It might have been the image of Jean fucking that girl, too much naked skin, or truly that grin. Hard to assemble and align cause and effect. Vadim shouldered into him, tackling the lighter man, and hooked the legs out from under him. He barely felt the reflex punch and came crashing down on Jean. His weight driving the air from Jean’s lungs.

The element of surprise didn’t last. Jean fought back, and Vadim needed his whole weight to keep him down. No way could he turn him around. Jean’s hand went for the combat knife, so Vadim grabbed his elbow, lifted it and slammed it down so hard on the ground Jean would have screamed with pain if Vadim’s hand hadn’t covered his mouth.

“No knife,” hissed Vadim and pushed the useless arm away.

Now Jean only had his left hand to fight with, but he still had his legs and torso. Vadim could smell the stress. He shifted his weight to force the legs apart. Jean’s eyes grew wide and he began to breathe hard through his nose, clearly fear, on top of that pain.

“I am nobody’s bitch, tovarich. That includes Dan’s. You hear me?”

Jean, staring at him with wide blue eyes, sweat beading on his forehead, nodded against his hand.

“It was me who had him. I fucked him, in Kabul. And he loves cock. Can’t get enough of it.” Vadim forced his knees between Jean’s legs, came groin to groin with him. Felt the man shudder, felt his abs sweat. “Like I could take you right now.” Just breathing into Jean’s ear, grinding against him, slow, deliberate, enjoying this more than he should. He could come like this, easily. Enjoyed too much having Jean under his control; the only thing he had under control. Nothing the other man could do. Scream for help? Unlikely.

Jean's eyes closed; the tension in his legs subsided, and it seemed now he was moving against Vadim, trying to get him off faster, maybe to appease him. Jean's cock was hard and thrust against him with determination, Vadim's hand moved between them, released the belt buckle, nearly tore the fly open, snarling with aggression. He freed the other and pushed against him. Jean's cock found skin where Vadim's shirt was pulled up from the fight... hot, strong, sweaty, exactly what Vadim needed, needed worse than killing. Jean's eyes were still closed. Whatever he imagined, it probably wasn't Vadim. Vadim wanted to punch him to make him acknowledge his presence, his identity, but he came too soon.

Lying on top, still keeping the other man 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 under the touch, his eyes still closed, his 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 swallowed the cock, but didn't try to finish him off quickly, taking his time, stealing the last bit of power Jean's body could give him. He was probably thinking of that girl of his. Vadim didn't mind, didn't remind him, not now, just took him deeper and harder, eventually making him twitch and push and come.

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 turned to face the legionnaire, who got up and stepped away, just out of reach, still breathing hard. "What?"

"You jumped me when I wasn't looking." Jean leaned down to pick up his knife and slid it back into its sheath with his left hand. "I should cut you open like a pig. But finishing you off would be a 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 yet you came, bitch."

“You make my skin crawl, Krasnorada. You got what you wanted, now fuck off to nurse your pathetic self-pity and get yourself killed for some shit. Count your blessings I have more fucking honour in my little finger than you have in your whole miserable body. Get the fuck out of here.”

Some part of Vadim wanted to protest, but Jean turned around and continued to change, as if he had already left. Why had he fought him? Fucked him? He didn’t hate him, annoying as he was.

But why had the man insisted on being his friend just on the basis they’d been born in the same city and were deserters of some description.

I understand why he hates you.

That turned the buzz into acid. He hadn’t meant it to happen, if anything, he’d have taken it slow, or not at all, but somehow, his body had wanted this man. Had wanted to punch him and have him, fuck him slow or hard, but have him in some way. It felt damn good to once again feel someone 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 afganets. 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 that had spoilt the developing ‘friendship’ with the man who called himself Jean. All gone. Wasted. The only man that had attempted to respect him.

Nothing was how he had imagined it to be when he had contemplated meeting Dan again.

Dan wouldn’t even look at him let alone talk; Dan just went on living his life. What had he expected? He had been the one to walk away after all. He shouldn’t have expected Dan to wait for him. It was over. He’d screwed up and been defeated in everything that mattered.

* * *

Dan was hauled in front of the officer in charge. He was uncomfortably reminded of his days in the British Forces when he was barely more than a raw

recruit. The sense of doom came rushing back, even though they had no jurisdiction over him. He hadn't misbehaved in any way. Not even partaking in one of the many low-level brawls and secret punch-ups.

Standing in front of the bigwig's desk, he felt even more out of place. The CO wasn't acknowledging his presence. Dan didn't need to give a shit anymore, but he pushed the shades off his eyes and perched them onto his forehead. The one sign of respect to the man in charge. Legs braced, hands clasped behind his back.

Dan waited another moment, but the condescending twat still didn't bother acknowledging him, which was oddly amusing. The CO's dislike for him couldn't have been more obvious if he had spelt it out in neon letters.

"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?"

"You know very well, McFadyen. The situation in camp is unbearable, the atmosphere nothing but vicious."

Dan frowned. 'McFadyen', again. Fuck that, the arrogant arsehole should be addressing him with 'Mr', but he let it drop.

"Which situation, sir?"

The CO stared at Dan. "You know damn well what I mean; do not try to play games with me. There has been more violence since your stand-off with Krasnorada than ever before. The men haven't stopped talking about that shouting match."

"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. "McFadyen, I do not feel like laughing at all. Drop your infantile behaviour. It is 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 dick.

"*Which situation?*" The officer shouted, his face beetroot red. "There are constant fights. The men are on edge. There is aggression and violence spilling into the mess and the cookhouse!"

Dan's lips tensed 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 after 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 the twat right in 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 or could possibly be influenced by 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. I am not committing any crime against the fucking rules, and have never actively pursued my sexuality in camp." 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 had both hands on the desk now, 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 eyes narrowing, jaws working before he answered.

"It doesn't. There is no present."

The CO stared at him, long and hard, but seemed to realise he wasn't getting anywhere.

"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.

"Dismissed."

The officer waved a hand. Dan turned without another word. He was burning with anger, needing to fuck or destroy, couldn't have either and started to run instead. He didn't give a shit he was in combat and boots, just pushed the shades back over his eyes and headed towards the exit. All that he felt was the heat in his lungs and the pain in his knees and running until his body broke down.

Fucking cunt! Dan wasn't sure which one he was referring to.

* * *

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 everything. There were genetic traces, and somebody had clearly fucked up Jean'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 hadn't asked. He'd just taken him. Not like he had fucked his ass. Not a proper rape. Had even sucked his cock. Just the pleasure of being able to want, desiring again. 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. This time it had been a superior, technically, and the only ally he had had in this place.

Mad Dog. It hurt to see Dan. 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.

Remembering 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 teenage-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 was queuing in line for breakfast, customary shades over his eyes, refusing to look around nor acknowledge anyone except when he absolutely had to. 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 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. Behind him. The legionnaire. Stupid wannabe Frenchman. Nothing more than another sick-fuck Russian. Something was wrong.

Shit. The guy hadn't had his arm in a sling the day before, and as far as Dan knew he hadn't even been on duty. How...? Dan realised he had been staring for too long when he caught the legionnaire's attention. Great. He'd rather chew off his own hand.

Jean's gaze met Dan's as he moved into the queue, gathering his breakfast, giving Dan a nod of acknowledgement.

"Sorry, won't be securing your flank today. Knowing my luck, this will be the day when something interesting happens."

Dan's brows rose above the shades. "What the fuck happened?"

"Sprained my elbow. Guess I'll be cleaning rifles for a while."

"Too bad." Dan made his way towards one of the empty tables. Scanning the room, as he searched for the Russian. He had to avoid Vadim.

He sat on the bench and the Belgian-French-Russian-whateverthefuck sat opposite 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?”

“Was working on my pecs. Too many press-ups, then a bad move during sparring.” Dan smirked to himself as the legionnaire struggled to open a sachet of sugar with his teeth and left hand. “Seems we’re all training too hard.”

“Sure. And since when do you talk to me?” Dan took two of the fried pieces of bread and bit into them simultaneously. “I figured you didn’t think I worth it.”

“We got off to 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.” His tone was light, but his gaze didn’t meet Dan’s eyes, apart from during 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.

“Aye.” He squirted ketchup all over his large portion of bacon. “A lot of shit going on.” Dan shoved half a sausage into his mouth, munching, then swallowed. “Got a bollocking from the CO yesterday.”

“Yeah, Pascal heard him shout.” Jean made a rude gesture. “Overpaid bitch.” He flashed a grin. “Bitch in the bastard sense.” Jean reached for the coffee and had to turn the mug around to be able to grab the handle. “What about?”

Dan shook his head. “The usual. Thinks it’s all my fault. ‘I’m at the root of all evil’ he said, or some crap.” He shrugged, stuffed his face with a fork-full of scrambled eggs and 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.

“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. “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. “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 mug. “By rights it should be Krasnorada the CO has it in for.”

“At least he hasn’t been walking round telling everyone he was a fucking poof.” 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.

“Speak of the devil.” Jean nodded towards the queue, where Vadim had appeared, moving like he had been in another fight.

Damn. Dan deliberately didn’t look. Every glance cut to the bone and it wasn’t getting any better. It just fucking hurt, In some ways it got worse 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 a twisted grin, then drank more coffee. “If he uses a knife he gets done for murder, spetsnaz or not.” The legionnaire sounded angry and Dan noticed his eyes followed the other Russian, as Vadim made his way, being careful to avoid being tripped or jostled. Not that he was easily jostled.

Then he sat down alone, even though Jean’s team invited him.

“Very hard to predict the man.”

“Not hard at all. Expect the worst; expect him to betray you.” Dan shoved another piece of bread into his mouth and chewed angrily. No, not anger. Worse. Rage and hatred and goddamned hurt.

Vadim looked up, his eyes narrowed as he saw them together.

Jean reached across the table and touched Dan’s arm. “Just to make sure. Poof, whatever, I don’t care who or what you fuck. Got me?”

Dan stopped eating. The legionnaire had been singing an entirely different tune only yesterday. Instant dislike for each other, that’s what they’d shared. “I don’t know what the fuck happened to you, mate, but I hear you.”

Jean pulled his hand away. “Good.”

Dan remembered to swallow. “Just don’t expect me to trust you either.” He grinned. “You are Russian, after all.”

“Mother Russia sent me to Afghanistan when I was eighteen. I came as a conscript, then decided to not finish my term.” Jean shrugged. “You’re as much afganets as I am.”

“Aye,” Dan smirked, “seems you’re as much Russian as I am English.” He focused 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.

“Nah, I’m more of an afganets than you are.” Dan wiped the last of the grease, egg yolk and ketchup off his plate with a couple of pieces of toast. “Spent seven years in the mountains, then left the Forces and did another two years in Kabul, close security.”

Jean grinned. “Yeah, a turkey.” He glanced at his plate, like considering whether he should eat and didn’t really seem to want to start. “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’m not asking you for a date, Mad Dog. You’re a bit too broad in the shoulders for my taste.”

Dan laughed. It felt good. Hadn’t done that for a while. “You’re not my type anyway. Too straight.”

“Damn right.”

Wiping his lips with the napkin, Dan caught a spot of grease on his chin. “I prefer my shags to be willing.”

He stood, and avoided looking again at the tall, blond man several tables along. “Have to be off, might take you up on the offer.” Taking his tray, Dan turned. “Later.” Walking off to do his day’s duty in sweltering heat.

* * *

Dan showered longer than usual, the heat had been the worst since...almost forever. He couldn’t help the occasional thought about how much the Russian cunt must be suffering. Why the fuck did he have to keep thinking about Vadim at every damned inopportune moment?

Thankfully his duties had been re-scheduled, leaving him the opportunity to sleep in tomorrow as he wasn’t on duty until early evening.

He managed to illegally acquire a couple of bottles of port from the mess, thanks to a mate he’d made amongst the NCOs.

Wearing the shades and dressed in flip-flops, cut-off camo shorts and t-shirt, he decided to 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.

He knocked on the door and called out, "Hey, cripple, fancy some booze?"

"Come on in. It's not locked."

Jean grinned and motioned when Dan stepped in. "Welcome to the oven I live in. Sorry, 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 and kicked the door shut behind him. "Think mine's any better?" He sat on the makeshift chair and shoved the shades onto his forehead. "Guess I'm just lucky I got used to the heat years ago." He handed one of the bottles to the legionnaire.

"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 so it wasn't shining in Dan's face. "Hm. Glasses. Nope."

"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 start drinking 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. "How the fuck you managed to convince anyone you're Belgian is beyond me. You look like too many of the Russkies I encountered in good old Afghanistan." He raised the open bottle in a salute and took a swig of the port.

"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. 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 other these days." He looked at the bottle, then took a

swig, blinking. “Nice...sweet. Ah. Slainte, was it?” He swiped sweat off his side and rubbed his hand clean on his camo trousers. “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 and 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 glanced at the legionnaire questioningly.

Jean nodded. “Go ahead. Ah, fuck, give me one. It’s not like...somebody would smell it.”

Dan lit one of the cigarettes and handed it over. “Still, I guess I can’t claim you’re not my type, eh?” His grin threatened to falter, but he forced it back.

Jean took a drag, slowly as if just restarting a former habit. “Blond? 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, I used to fuck women.”

“You did?” Jean smirked, but it wasn’t malicious. “Ah, none of my business.” The tip glowed brighter as he took another, deeper drag.

Dan laughed, a cynical, dry sound. “Aye, just one of those things.” A Russian cunt who raped...no. No hatred, no love. No memories. Not now. He had to distract his thoughts...looking around the room, his gaze was drawn to the wall over the bed. “Holy fuck.” After another swig from the bottle, he stood and moved towards the pictures. “You mind me taking a look?”

Jean leaned to the side to allow Dan access to the photos on the wall. “Go ahead.”

Dan studied several of them, some more ‘exotic’ than the others. Many were of the same lady, long black hair, dark eyes, an unmistakable North African air about her. “She’s beautiful. Is she a model?”

“Yeah, she sometimes...” Jean paused. “Wears clothes for money, and I assure you, that’s hard work.”

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 stood beside the bed and studied the photo closely.

"There are more over there." Jean 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 surprised a gay guy would say anything like that.

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. He squinted, then looked up at Jean from under his lashes.

"Don't mind me saying this, but your 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, his ease gone. "You're the first one ever to... spot that. Oh fuck. Listen, I didn't know when I met her. It's...a complicated story, okay? Shit. She's more...no, just as..." Jean stood. "I didn't know."

"Hey, mate. What's the problem?" Dan handed the photo back to the legionnaire, felt somehow it didn't belong in his hands.

Jean took the photo and slowly put it away. When he turned back he seemed more composed.

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, but fucking hell, she was hot. Damn shame I was a gay bashing, poof hating bastard back then." He shrugged. "I added some lovely bruises to her/his pretty face when I accidentally took 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 nodded. "I actually had my knife out when I...worked it out. I was just so freaked. She looked better than the real thing." He rubbed his face with the left hand, then looked at Dan.

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?” He shrugged.

“Operations should be finished when I...go on R&R next. She promised photos as soon as she’s properly healed.” Jean stared at the wall, obviously devoted and in love.

Dan couldn’t help but smile. 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 and winked at Jean. “That wasn’t an invitation to tell me exactly *how* you keep her happy. Not my cuppa.”

“Just don’t tell anyone, 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 those.” He groaned. “I sound like a fucking expert. Serious, she’s never been anything but a woman for me.” He reached for his bottle and drank, taking several deep swallows.

“Why the fuck should I tell anyone?” Dan frowned. “Don’t insult me, okay? 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 in the open, 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, reached out with his right. “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. 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.” He clinked the bottle against Jean’s before taking another swig. He was already half-way through the bottle and

starting to enjoy himself. “I took an instant dislike to you. Must have been the blue-eyed blond hair.”

Jean huffed. “I look nothing like Krasnorada. I have more than one facial expression, for one.”

“You wanna know why I was running round telling every arse who didn’t want to hear it I was gay? I was itching for a fight to get rid of a whole load of crap inside.” Dan shrugged. “Worked quite well, until recently.”

“Now the jarheads are too fucking scared to drink in the same bar as you do? Loved that. 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 have got himself killed the next day on duty. “They’re just so young and bloody naïve, it’s almost painful.”

“Yeah, I guess. 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.

“I guess I shouldn’t be saying this...” Jean waited for a moment. “Or asking. You know. Don’t want to spoil the evening. There’s a story going round camp. Midge and his retards believe Krasnorada was your bitch, and he cheated on you, and you found out. That’s why you hate his guts.”

Dan froze. “What? What the *fuck* do they think?” The darkness came welling up inside, tickling Dan’s throat. “Holy fuck.” Couldn’t say anymore before the hysterical laughter broke out.

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, but when nothing 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’s he doing here in the Gulf? I mean, it’s none of my business, really, so 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 it’s affecting everyone.” Putting the bottle to his lips Dan tipped back more than a quarter in one go. 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 I spent in Afghanistan, but after knee surgery, they didn’t want to send me back. I left the army and went back anyway, because of him.” Dan’s wry grin burned like acid in his face. “Probably sounds fucking impossible, eh? 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 so dark and nasty and brutal, 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, gave me a reason not to walk into the next bullet because I’d been too weary to duck it...” He had to stop, inhaled harshly, this was getting too painful. Dan shuddered, but still he ploughed on. “That man crossed Pakistan and India to get to a hospital where I was lying, dying. That man sat sobbing, holding my hand, professing a fucked-up love that I believed in.”

Exhausted, Dan paused, 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. The KGB set him up and charged him with treason. I fought tooth and nail to try and save his life. He wasn’t executed; the KGB wasn’t all that stupid, and the West had too many offers they wanted to take advantage of.”

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. 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. Just walked away. No word. Nothing. Left me fucking shattered.” Tapping another fag

out of the package, he lit it and inhaled the smoke. “Now I hate the fucking bastard.”

Jean returned Dan’s stare, not saying anything for a while. “That’s why he screams his head off at night,” he murmured. “Fuck. Eleven years. I was a kid back then. And I thought my shit was complicated.” He gave a small laugh, shaking his head. “Whoa.” He stood and walked over to Dan, holding out his bottle that still held a third of liquid.

“He screams?” Dan snatched the offered bottle.

Jean nodded, his hand dropping onto Dan’s shoulder, firmly settling around the round part, clasping. “There have been complaints. Happens, what, three nights out of seven? I tried to work him hard in the gym, but it doesn’t seem to have any effect. And he’s not talking about it, either.”

Dan stared straight into Jean’s face. The hand on his shoulder felt good. A Yank. A Belgian-Russkie. Several Brits as mates. He wasn’t doing too bad after all. His thoughts raced; one catching the tail of the other, until he shrugged, holding the bottle tighter. “Not my business. Not anymore.” Tipping his head back, Dan gulped down several large swallows.

“You know what? You could visit us in Paris on R&R, and we’ll make sure you get nicely distracted from this shit. Paris remains top of the list for nightlife and quality entertainment. And I mean *quality*.” Jean patted his shoulder.

“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.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” The hand moved to Dan’s sweaty neck. “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 against his neck. Was alright, un-sexual, the touch of a mate. He couldn’t remember when he’d last felt anything like that. “How did you manage not to freak? You said there was a knife involved.”

“Yeah. Montmartre...better have a knife.” Jean paused. “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, starts screaming, and she freaks, too. Out comes the knife. I was really close to cutting that bastard’s throat. So she starts crying and begging for her life, swearing to God and Allah that all she wanted was to suck me off. No reason to kill someone.”

Jean took a deep breath. “She was crying and clinging to my hand. 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. The friend had run off to get the police. Well, good luck finding an honest flic in Montmartre. I made sure she got home alright. She was so flustered she kept losing her 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 damn, it was good to hear about someone else’s fucked up life for a change.

“Yeah. She told me she toyed with the idea of letting me sleep on her couch, but was afraid I’d change my mind and kill her, so she locked and bolted the door and swore never to pick up horny soldiers again.” Jean laughed. “Next morning, I remembered what happened, and checked to see whether she was alright. She was still scared, but kinda worked out I might not kill her, so we went for a walk and she told me she had a thing for soldiers and I was 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 changing, you

could just see her becoming a woman in front of your eyes, right under your hands. While you fuck her. She'd been doing some modelling, but wanted the operation badly, so yeah, I...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."

"Hope you have a 'happily-ever-after' to that story and not some crazy shit." Dan rubbed his eyes. Hell, he was booze-mellow and tired from a hard day in the heat. "If you ever need a best man, tell me. I'll slap that ring on."

Jean smiled. "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 Dan's neck again. "Shit, this evening sure beats the hell out of yesterday."

"Deal. Even though I'm afraid as beautiful as your lady is, I'm really not interested. Now, if she'd left that cock on, then we'd be talking." Dan laughed, keeping his head where it was, enjoying the physical contact. He just didn't get enough of that.

"Yeah, right."

"What happened last night?" Dan asked.

Jean paused. "I was talking to Krasnorada. He just gave me the creeps. Ranted about being nobody's bitch. 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."

"Sounds like him, I guess." Dan 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, before leaving.

* * *

Dan slept undisturbed and deeper than he had 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 the opening as a makeshift curtain. Once the sun was up, it got as hot as a cooking pot in these small metal rooms. 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 fair 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 on early morning duty were making, and when he finally woke up, it was baking in the hut, but he didn't particularly care. Gagging 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 than he had for a while. A little over a week, to be precise. Finding his shades first of all before scrambling up from bunk and blankets, he wrapped the pale blue towel low around his hips, then dangled the olive soap bag filled with shower gel, tooth brush and paste, razor and shaving foam from one finger. He'd lived his life with those five items, perhaps a tube of lube on top, the latter not strictly counting as 'beauty supplies'.

Lifting the camo-net, he stepped through the door, blinking into the glaring sun. July was scorching in this place. Dan braced his legs and took a deep breath. "Ah, nothing like a dose of flaming sand and dust in the morning," he muttered to himself, mocking the classic line.

He walked over to where Jean was surrounded by a gaggle of freshly-showered mercs. He listened with a wry grin as Jean told them a story of how he had fucked up his elbow—which included being taken prisoner by a coven of nymphomaniac ninja witches who 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. He turned and saw Dan.

Dan grinned and his right hand 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. "Ran out. Was about to get a packet after brekkie."

"You off duty today? Or just late?"

"Both." Dan handed the remaining half of the coffee back. "Am on after lunch, it's the evening shift. You think I would have drunk all that booze last night otherwise?"

"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. He glanced down. "Advertising your wares, huh?"

Dan laughed, hitching the towel back up that had threatened to slip 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.

Dan shook his head and dropped his hand for a quick grope of Jean's gonads. Squeezed hard and sudden, letting go immediately.

"Yep, I can feel it, still full. Poor boy."

Jean laughed. Shit like that was perfectly normal, like ass-slapping, no 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 to leave but stopped as if stunned then glanced back at Dan. "Watch your back out there," he murmured.

Dan's gaze followed Jean's glance, hitting a pair of eyes so cold they made the desert suddenly feel frosty. He returned the ice cold glare with a full-on stare of his own. Vadim. Arms crossed, kitted out, waiting for pick-up not too far away. Must have been standing in the shade. Dan could have sworn he hadn't been there a minute ago.

Dan broke eye contact and glanced back at Jean. "Trust me. I'm the goddamned king of back-watching." He saw Jean's body tense as Vadim continued to stare at them. Then the legionnaire laughed suddenly. "If you want a piece of me, Mad Dog, you'll have to battle your way through nymphomaniac ninja witches 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 back, refusing to acknowledge the glowering presence. Fucking bastard. How dare he stand there and behave as if he gave the slightest shit about Dan and who he was with?

"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 quick glance, hard to read, and went on his way back to his quarters.

Dan shook his head, laughing. "In your dreams, legionnaire!"

Jean turned while he was walking, murmuring, "bring booze," in Russian. He smirked at Vadim as he walked past.

That silenced Dan. Had he just been propositioned by a straight guy? He 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.

* * *

Remembering the weird offer-request from the legionnaire, Dan pulled in favours. He got lucky. One of the ex-Seals desperately wanted to swap his shift. Friday night, when everyone was already knackered and the Muslim world normally went 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 managed to blag some booze out of the guy.

Good 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.

He'd done his shift, stuffed his face at tea, studiously ignoring the glowering, brooding presence in one of the corners, and headed towards Jean's room as soon as he was ready. Back in flip-flops, shorts and t-shirt, he didn't bother to knock this time, just called out once he reached the door. "Oy, princess, need rescuing?"

"Yeah, come in."

Jean stopped scratching under the bandage with the blunt end of a pencil and turned the French world news down. He was only wearing shorts, and had a wet towel draped around his shoulders and head.

"'Princess'? Who's the faggot?'"

Grinning, Dan kicked the door shut behind him. "I already told the CO I wasn't a fairy with a magic wand." He put the 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 cock, are you?"

Dan placed a couple of tin mugs down beside the bottle. "You have to thank the Yanks for tonight's treat," he added, "and my considerable charms."

"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, unless you want to piss me off don't call this shit here whisky. This is bourbon, never whisky. Don't insult my Scottish heritage with this firewater." He grinned. "Or I'll have to call you a Brussels sprout."

"Bourbon. Not 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? France weeps over fried Mars bars."

"See who's talking. Borscht and chow. You're a Frenchman by choice but you were still brought up on blinis and vodka." Dan leaned over the table and poured the black market booze into the mugs. "How's your lady? Been thinking

about you and her. You said she'd be sorted in a couple of weeks, I assume she's been under the knife or is going to? She alright?"

"Just came out of surgery. Talked to her on the phone a couple of 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." He 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. "We went many times with up to nine months in between, and there wasn't even a way of communication. Let alone knowing if the other was still alive. It worked." He shrugged and tapped his mug to Jean's.

Jean grinned, spilled a little whisky, laughed while staring at his left hand. "I'm no surgeon material." Hand shaking just enough to be noticeable.

"I propose a toast, then. To your lady's speedy recovery, to time flying fast, to miraculously resolved paperwork, and that I get to be the Best Man for once in my life."

"Slainte." Jean took a big mouthful of the bourbon.

Dan took a gulp of the burning stuff, shuddered, and added while grinning, "and I'll attend without a scrap of camo, I promise."

"Fully dressed, please, too. Those scars could curdle milk."

"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 tipping another mouthful back.

Jean answered the glance, then chuckled, turning away to put the mug down. "Not sure everybody does. 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, relishing the chance to take the weight off his knee, and cradled the mug in his hand. He grinned. Seemed the legionnaire had him pegged pretty well.

“Can’t help but wonder. 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 walk around announcing to everyone I’m gay. That, and the jobs I do, but even those are nothing special. There are folks, twenty years younger, who’d piss themselves laughing at the granddad who forces his knackered body to pull stunts they’d do without even losing breath.” He fished for his fags and offered Jean the packet before taking one for himself.

“I wouldn’t call myself that... granddad.” Jean gave him a long look, almost a warning to not use the Red Army lingo for oldtimers. “I hated the bitches. Still do. Krasnorada is that, you’re not.”

Dan shook his head. “Not that kind of granddad. The one with a pipe and slippers.” His grin faltered slightly. He 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.

“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 here my guts have the same opinion about.”

“Well, mate, I can’t tell you why you fell haplessly for my charms, but seems you did.” Dan grinned and 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.”

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. More like ‘and then I screwed a Russian who taught me all about human interaction’.” Dan bared his teeth in a feral grin. “Told you it sounded insane.”

Jean glanced towards the door. "Not *that* Russian." He blinked, then stubbed the cigarette out. "That guy is as suitable for human interaction as a T-55 for heart surgery."

"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." He exhaled, huffed dryly. "Corrected. He didn't use to be such an arsehole. Don't know what the fuck happened to him in prison, and don't actually want to know. Not anymore." He almost believed himself. "All I say is, he saved my life several times over, and every time he told me he loved me, I actually fucking believed him." Dan stared at the escaping smoke.

Something lit up in Jean's eyes at the word 'prison', like a piece of the puzzle suddenly completed, part of a pattern.

"Ach well, fuck that," Dan tore himself out of reminiscing. "Let's talk about friends and mates and what the hell is 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 you share a cigarette with. Friends...They are like best men. You go wind surfing with them in Australia and don't talk about ambushes and killing all the time."

Dan slowly exhaled the smoke. "I haven't got any friends in that case. Never had. No time, no opportunities. Mates, aye, friends, no."

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. His hand was now on Dan's neck. "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. “I always used to run and climb, but the knees are knackered. Had surgery on the right one.” Keeping up the conversation while twisting his neck like a man trying to get rid of some tension.

“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 left trapezoid muscle, firm pressure, against the muscle to relax it. “I’d think your leg won’t be much of a problem. It’s all about balance, anyway.”

Dan stretched 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 to come and look 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 twisted around to glance up, grinning crookedly. “I’ll just have a wank later. Usually sends me to sleep.”

Jean paused, met that glance, his hand moving up the side of Dan’s neck, patting it. “Won’t help your neck though.”

“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 and 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. “Didn’t expect I’d be back on the treadmill after the cushy security job... Guess I’m just a war junkie.”

“Did you get fired?”

“From the security job? No. 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 him, 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 at the unexpected closeness, but he felt himself relax against the near-touch quickly. “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.”

Dan was strangely relieved that he hadn’t caught the hidden meaning. He shouldn’t feel as if the close contact was anything other than some weird-assed buddy-stuff, but the vibes he was getting? 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.”

No, it didn’t. He was filling his own accounts back up, cushioning them just nicely after depleting them for Vadim’s release. “Want another shot?” Dan glanced backwards, but kept the separation between them.

“Yeah, mug’s over there. Not that I can reach it from here.”

“Sure.” Dan grabbed the second mug as well and filled it. “Or are you already sweating too much like a pig?” He smirked, handing the mug to Jean. “You Slavic lightweights, and you hardly wear anything at all.” Dan winced. Great. You had to point out you had noticed, right? Of course you had. Stupid poof.

“I’m sweating anyway. Dressed, undressed, sober, drunk.” Jean’s hand slid down Dan’s back, following the spine. “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 boots and camo trousers. That gets her going.”

Dan spilled a little alcohol when the hand started wandering again. “Aye, the uniform kink. I always pulled the chicks better when I let it be known I was a

soldier and Special Forces on top of that.” He chuckled, took a big swig from his refilled mug, then drew in a deep breath, twisting his neck to look at the man behind him. “Dressed down for which occasion?”

Jean was looking at him over the rim of the mug as he drank. He 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 studied the body on display with a smirk. “Want me to get my cock out as proof? Or will a snorted ‘Duh!’ do? You’ve got a good body. Bound to have an effect, mate.”

Jean smirked, flattered. “Me being your type and all. Don’t forget that.”

Dan drained the entire contents of his mug in three, four gulps. Holy shit, that stuff would be killing him, but he needed the boozy crutch.

“You see...” Dan wiped his lips and 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. 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. 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.

“Okay...” Dan drew out the vowels and waited a moment, figuring out what he felt about the even closer proximity. Comfortably boozed up, check. Even more comfortably aroused and wondering whether he’d want to bother doing anything about that, check. Bloody comfortable in this almost-touching closeness with the other man? Double check. “Right, mate. Since that’s clear, I got to ask the question again. You trying to seduce me? Cos if you were, I’d tell you I’d be a fucking idiot if I wasn’t game. 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 to himself. "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 man's chest with his back. Nice. Would be nicer if his shirt wasn't in between.

Jean's good hand came to rest on Dan's thigh, the bandaged elbow between them, preventing 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 and 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. "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 okay with being a substitute. But let's be clear about this." He raised one brow in a crooked grin. "In case I'm reading that peacock-feather preening of yours right. I'm not a charity. I don't dish out charitable acts of human cocksucking kindness without expecting something in return."

"Ah, but you did say the magic word, just now." Jean grinned a suggestive, dirty grin. 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 enough to make his hair brush against skin and skin press against lips. "It doesn't usually work like this, but I'll indulge you."

"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 lowered his head, just so he could move his neck against the other's face.

"Well spotted."

Dan came back up, glanced backwards, the motion making his already stubbled 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 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. I've never seduced a bloke before." He twisted once more, but couldn't get anywhere. "Neither is it going to happen while I sit like this."

Jean grinned and gave Dan's cock a squeeze.

"Fucking tease," Dan muttered while Jean stood, moving backwards, turned and went to padlock the door.

Dan poured himself another measure of booze and had a few more mouthfuls. "Good thinking, but if you don't change that awful radio shit, I'm not sure if I'm going to feel frisky." He glanced at Jean who rested his hand against the door for a moment, then shook his head.

"You change it. I think it will pick up some British stations, too." Jean checked the lock again and turned. "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 placed the mug onto the table, and fiddled with the radio, glad to find BBC World and some decent music. He pulled the t-shirt over his head and dropped it onto the crate. "There's something about skin, you know." He trailed his calloused fingers down Jean's sweaty chest, tracing a path across smooth, damp planes of muscles.

Jean inhaled sharply, stomach muscles tensing, his right hand twitching inside the end of the sling. His good hand touched Dan's chest, fingers splayed, then stroked down Dan's side. "Some straight part of me is just freaking about how fucking strong you must be."

Dan chuckled, "That's exactly what I like. The equality." Leaning forward, Dan replaced his hand with lips and tongue, lapping up sweat, leaving a wet trail with teeth and stubble, right to the pec, where he lingered at the nipple. His lips

moved over the bud of flesh while murmuring. “Can’t break a bloke who’s as strong as yourself.”

Jean’s hand came up to touch Dan’s head, fingers running through his hair. “Never seduced a bloke? Everything I know about gays just jumped out the window.”

“Never needed to.” Teeth and tongue working on that nipple, sucking in the flesh, before returning to more gentle laving. “With a bloke.” He moved 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. He was enjoying himself too much.

“Guess it’s a case of ‘hey, mate’.” Dan slipped his hand into the waistband of Jean’s shorts and squeezed the muscled arse, making Jean draw in another deep breath. “...and then wanking, sucking or fucking without further ado.”

“Not wasting any time?” Jean’s chest moved as he swallowed. “Less complicated, huh?”

“Much less complicated.” Dan worked his way up to the throat and neck, leaving lapping, biting, friction and damp smoothness in his 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. Jean shivered and leaned 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, making Jean tense again and groan “...what I wanted.”

“Not a charity. Yes, remember. Got you.” Jean 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 and on to his arse.

Dan stepped closer, pressing his groin into the other man’s. Unmistakable hardness. He was a man, would remain a man, fucking loved being a man, and left no doubt about it.

Jean pressed in, too. Hardness against hardness, cursing his fucked arm under his breath. “Not sure I can give head or anything,” Jean murmured. “But I won’t leave you hanging.” He laughed. “Or standing.”

Dan pushed Jean’s shorts down under his balls, grinning at the erection that sprang into his hand. “Will be happy with a hand-job.” A twist of his hips ground his cock harder into the other’s.

"Ah...I...I can do that...."

Dan glanced up. Jean's eyes were firmly closed.

"Figured...fair's fair... Fuck. You're... strong." Jean ran his hand to Dan's neck, pressing his head back against his neck. "But I don't...have to...."

"Remember, I'm the cocksucker." Dan lifted his head from Jean's neck pulled the shorts further down, far enough to give access and push the other's legs apart before getting down on his knees.

Jean's body tensed as if he didn't quite understand what was going on.

"You're really going to...?"

"Yeah..." Dan drew out the sound. Looking up, he grinned at the expression on Jean's face. Eyes still firmly closed, lips parted slightly.

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, for a change. Dan chuckled, using the vibrations as yet another stimulation. Nice cock, and bigger than any of the ones currently 'involved' with him.

Jean's breathing grew ragged. He placed his hand on Dan's shoulder.

The legionnaire reacted to whatever Dan gave him, shuddering, tensing, relaxing, tensing again harder, getting closer, just as Dan intended.

"Need to...don't want...to get loud..."

Dan drew his head back and glanced up. Jean's wide-eyed expression was of a man thoroughly fucked. Out of it. Dan grinned and pointed to the bed. "Over there." Time was too precious to elaborate on bedside manners.

Dazed, Jean nodded and staggered over, managing to sit on the bed without falling.

Dan didn't bother to get up, just shuffled over on his knees. Pushing Jean's legs further apart, he moved between them, then shoved his chest none too gently. "Get a fucking pillow into your mouth, or bite your fist." His grin turned feral, before he got back to his task.

Jean reached blindly around and obeyed.

Pushing himself further down, ignoring the instinct to choke, Dan sucked one finger until it was well coated with spit and precum. He could feel Jean getting close. He stroked behind the dam, finding the tight muscle. At the same moment he sucked down strongly, he pushed his slick finger deep into the legionnaire's arse.

Lucky Jean had that pillow in his mouth. Otherwise that sound would have been a shout when he came, his body helplessly tensing and twitching.

Dan drew his finger out carefully. One thing to push into a bloke when he's about to come, another to slide out afterwards, when he's overly sensitive. He grinned wiped his finger down his pants and his lips with the back of his other hand. Jean lay on the bed, eyes half-closed, mouth open, pillow beside him, sweat running over his body. "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 opened his eyes fully and smiled weakly.

"I guess...my turn. Come here."

Dan grinned and stood up. Damn, he needed to come. He 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 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." Jean wrapped his hand around Dan's cock, twisting his arm a bit, using his legs to manoeuvre himself onto his side. Stroking him, but not 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?"

"It's alright..." Dan 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 took hold of the other man's wrist while shaking his head. "It's okay. I'll 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 be moved away. Dan started to stroke himself, slow at first, but soon increasing to almost a vicious pace.

Dan stared at Jean's face, the slightly widened eye, the parted lips. He leaned closer then stopped. Fuck. The urge was there. All that Yank kid's fault, but he couldn't just... "Mind if I kiss you?"

Jean's lips cracked into a smile. "Do you think it would hurt much?"

"Only if I haven't shaved for a day." Dan grinned, but hell, he was getting desperate here. His free hand came up to rest at the back of Jean's neck. He closed his eyes for a moment when his cock twitched, precum glistening on the tip, and he swiftly slicked up his hand.

The bed moved as Jean drew closer and kissed him, lips open, then tongue fucking Dan's mouth, probably much like he would kiss his girl, Breaking away only for a heartbeat to whisper, "Like that?"

"A touch...would be good...too..." Fuck, Dan was getting breathless and concentration was difficult.

Jean's hand moved to Dan's balls, squeezing them, while his tongue returned to Dan's mouth. Kisses and touch fierce. No reservation now. No shyness.

Dan's response was violent. Stroking himself fast, reckless, bordering on pain. It only took one harder grip on his balls to topple him over. His groan was swallowed by Jean's mouth, as he came onto his own chest, cum running down his hand. He stared blindly ahead as 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 must be goddamned sexy."

Dan hadn't quite got his breath back. He closed his eyes and dropped 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. "Been a while." He'd been trying to forget Katya. One and a half years ago.

"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 dropped it in Dan's lap, while kissing his throat and chest.

Reaching blindly for the still moist towel, Dan wiped haphazardly at himself and Jean; the kissing was far too good to stop for the cleaning. He grinned, felt sweaty, finally hot, and incredibly relaxed.

“Oy, legionnaire.” Dan chuckled, towel in his lap. “You’re awfully good at this shit for a strictly straight guy.”

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 leaned back, grinning, one shoulder against the wall. “Wonder if I should kick you out or keep you here for the night.”

“Nah.” Dan yawned again, stretching down to the toes. “I’ll be off. I prefer to sleep on my own.”

“Fair enough.” Jean grinned. “This is not exactly a king size bed.” He ran his hand through Dan’s hair. “We could play chess again. Some kind of team building. Get the team leaders to know each other better, eh?”

Sitting up, Dan stretched his upper body before fishing for the shorts that had ended up somewhere between ankles and the bed. The flip flops couldn’t be too far away either. “Good thing I always look dishevelled. 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 been watching porn and wanking. Not that this wasn’t nicer.”

Dan laughed as he got off the bed and looked for his t-shirt. “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’m off for a week, at least. No strain on the arm. And nowhere else to go, really, apart from, of course, desert-watching.”

Dan reached out to grab Jean’s neck and planted a swift surprise-attack with tongue and teeth onto his 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 walked towards the door, snatching the nearly empty bottle of bourbon on the way.

* * *

Oh, he had a bad feeling about this. The difference was subtle, but Vadim could see the change in Dan. Mad Dog 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, groping and touching, the banter. One big, happy family. The legionnaire held court, and Dan was the guest of honour.

The others might buy it. Jean was over the top, slightly overplayed his role as if to drive home the point they had suddenly 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 Jean. It might just be a pat on the back to announce it was him at breakfast. The way Jean called him '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, had seen how Jean had closed his eyes and thought of something else, and wondered whether he'd grown a taste for that.

The next day, at breakfast, he 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.

A loud sound made conversation stop, and some people glance his way. 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 put the tray away, watched by more eyes than he wanted. He rolled through the mess like a tank, the injured hand forming 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 his callouses had taken the worst. He had the wound disinfected and bandaged for protection. Some of the stuff in the dust was just searching for access to a fresh wound. Had his jabs renewed, and deemed fit for service.

He knew it was difficult to catch the man alone these days. Patience. He had an idea where Jean might be seeking privacy. He headed over to the phones.

Jean was just hanging the receiver up, he turned and stared at Vadim.

“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. 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, noticed that a guy from Dan’s team had moved within earshot. The camp would be yakking about it unless he cut it right now.

“Having fun, huh?”

Jean grinned. “You bet. Fuck off, Krasnorada. There must be some desert out there you can liberate.”

1991 Chapter 25—Friendly Fire

July/August 1991, the Persian Gulf

In a tin room full of shadows, the desert at night held eleven years like Pandora's box. When the world quietened and the adrenaline died down, the images were coming back. Memories, touches, and most of all the promises. Dan tried not to think about the Russian, but failed miserably. Better to avoid being alone.

After yet another uneventful day at work, he went through his usual routine: signing the weapons back into the store, airing his body armour and dealing with the laundry of his sweat-drenched kit. Finally, he was able to relish the best moment of the day: washing the sweat, red sand and dust off his skin.

Later, in the mess tent, he sat for a while with his team mates, until it was time to get another helping of sticky toffee pudding. Taking a seat amongst Jean's team, he laughed and joked while wolfing down his dessert, then, glancing at Jean with a grin, he made a rude gesture and an entirely inappropriate comment. The guys broke out into roaring laughter. Sure, Mad Dog, the self-professed fag, and Jean, the uber-stud. It made everyone piss themselves.

Dusk was settling in as Dan chatted to Jean on their way towards Jean's hut. Both of them were smoking and carrying a two litre water bottle. Jean paused at the entrance, twisting the cigarette in his hand. He turned halfway as if to see who was close, then nodded for Dan to go in, flicked the cigarette away, followed and padlocked the door.

As soon as he was inside, Jean pulled his shirt off and grinned at Dan. "I think the pieces are all set." Idly adjusting himself in the camo trousers, left hand against his groin, pressing in a little, glancing at him with a friendly challenge. "I could use a cocksucker," he murmured. "Or just a hand. Flexible here..."

"Funny you should say that." Dan grinned back. "I was thinking to myself today...." He removed his shirt and tossed it onto the bed. "while securing that particularly deserted piece of land...." He popped the button of his shorts and pulled the zipper down. "... and guarding this annoying piece shit...." He dropped the shorts, stepped out of them, kicking them towards the bed as well. "... that I could do with a body."

He pushed hard against Jean's chest, making him stumble backwards and against the wall. Full-on-contact, part wrestling, not that he wanted to fight, a vague, but nagging lust turning into heated desire at the touch.

Jean pushed against Dan's groin, fumbling with belt and buttons to get his trousers down, growing breathless. "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...."

"Sure, any body." Dan smirked, moved his head, away from the lips on his neck and towards the other's face. 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.

"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 harsh and demanding kiss. Tongues wrestling, no fight, not at all, a weird sense of rhythm and harmony.

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. His violent jerk head-butted Jean's chin.

Jean glared at him, face gleaming with a sheen of sweat. "Pascal," he mouthed.

"Fuck!" Dan muttered, reluctant to step away from the heat of their cocks. An insane bubble of hilarity welled up inside, despite his heart racing in the sudden adrenaline rush.

"What's up?" Jean bit his fist to stop himself from laughing, eyes brimming with humour.

"You got a moment?"

"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 was grinning like a devil as he took Dan's hand and made him stroke him again. "Yeah, baby, just like...that."

Stunned silence. Then: “You’re hitting the fucking bong again.”

That was too much, too fucking hilarious. Dan lifted his head, shouting: “Sure thing, mate, coz Jean got it all wrong. Must be fucking delusional. 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 gave a groan, against Dan’s shoulder. “Finish me off,” he breathed, in Russian, probably so Pascal had no chance to get what he was saying. Teeth locked in Dan’s shoulder, body tensing up with the onslaught. As Dan obliged, Jean gave another groan.

“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 your cherry.” Dan laughed, but only for a brief moment, then he had to bite hard into Jean’s shoulder to stop himself from groaning. Convulsing and grinding into Jean, he came barely a second later, right after the legionnaire, 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. He rapped against the door as a goodbye.

“Fucking brilliant voice-acting.” Jean laughed, breathless, helpless, just didn’t seem able to stop. Hand running through Dan’s hair, he took a handful to force his head into a kiss. “Reckless fucking sexy bastard....”

“And you’re a kinky motherfucker.” Dan let himself be drawn into the kiss, bodies still grinding against each other. Contact too good to leave yet. He liked kissing the guy. Jean was good, different to Matt, somehow deeper, more intense. But still entirely unlike the only other man he’d ever kissed, whose kisses had reached into the depth of his soul and had....

No. Dan broke away, breathlessly chuckling, covering up his thoughts with a smirk. “Want to get stuck to me?”

Jean glanced down between them and gave another laugh. “I guess we could make the most of it.” He reached 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 think you would. You’re not an idiot.” While alcohol on duty warranted a severe warning, drugs meant getting chucked out, no matter what. Dan wiped himself down, then handed the shirt back.

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. I want some of your after-sex speciality.”

Jean sat on the bed, leaned against the wall. adjusted the sling, then raised his hands. “Docking permission granted, sir. Welcome aboard.” He laughed as Dan joined him on the bed. “I would have loved to see Pascal’s face. Holy shit.”

Dan settled between Jean’s thighs, grinning upwards. “He’d have upchucked his supper, but who knows, he might have joined in.”

“I doubt there’s enough space for three in your hand...” Jean slowly traced Dan’s hairline with his fingers, then ran them into the depths of his hair. “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’s fingers went down the temple to his jaw-line, touch almost minimal, just the fingertips, it was still too warm.

“No. He’s too much part of the rumour mill. Good long legs though. He did a lot of marching and running.”

Dan 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?”

“I was unlucky enough to turn eighteen in the Soviet Union. Got drafted, of course. A couple of months later I was sitting in a mountain fortress, scared shitless and homesick. Didn’t help I caught typhoid fever from polluted water.”

Jean inhaled while Dan listened attentively, with closed eyes.

“That’s what I remember of Afghanistan. Being hot. Being cold, being hungry, and finally, being sick.” Jean paused, as if waiting for Dan to tell him to stop.

But Dan didn’t. He just opened his eyes and nodded.

“The medic in our unit—the only man I ever respected in that army—he’d get his helmet, kit up like the fucking special forces and raid the trucks with us for

medical supplies. Most of the stuff vanished in the deep dark pockets of the officers, especially bandages, syringes, and morphine. So, the medic goes out, comes back laden like a mule, takes off his helmet, washes his faces and hands, and while everybody else is still squirreling away the booty, he starts operating.”

Dan glanced up when Jean shifted to reach for a packet of cigarettes, pulled one out with his teeth and let it hang between his lips. “Anyway. I caught the fever. No drugs to treat the shit. I got isolated, and that was that. They were just waiting for me to die. Medic could do nothing. Officer didn’t care. That almost killed me, so I decided to leave. I don’t remember much after that. By all rights, I should have died. I ended up with some villagers who tended more towards hospitality than revenge. There were Europeans there, too. Could have been CIA, reporters, or anybody, really. Their drugs kept me going until I could cross the border to Pakistan, where I recovered in a small hospital near Peshawar. But before they could put me on a plane to Moscow, I managed to start walking again, and I was on my way. Went West, did some crazy shit.” He laughed.

Dan grinned and murmured, “I bet.”

“Ended up in East Africa. 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 Castelnau in France; learnt French, and did the whole tour.”

Dan 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. But I heard how much private security people make. 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.”

“I watched the news 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 bitches like Krasnorada. The officers could do whatever they liked. I’ve seen men being beaten to death for stealing food. I don’t

believe the numbers of dead and wounded. I stopped being Russian in Afghanistan. France has treated me like a human being. Not always, but most of the time.”

Dan smoked and stared blindly up at the ceiling of the tin hut. “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. They all are. Family dads, husbands, sons, and shit like that.” He 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 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 them again. No. No, he didn’t care; he couldn’t care, or it would kill him. Again. “Whatever.” He craned his neck. “I sleep and never dream. My only guilt is that I have none.” Taking another drag, Dan inhaled quicker this time and switched back to the piss-taking, fun-loving Mad Dog everyone knew. “At least this here pays damn well. Enough to keep your lady happy and make me stacks of dosh; enough to turn my farm in New Zealand into the fucking Crystal Palace.”

Jean grinned. “And as many needy guys in camo as you can wish for. You’re 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. “It’s not like we get forced to do what we are doing. We’re helping the good guys, and that makes us heroes.”

Dan started to laugh, leaning back 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, 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. “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, Jean 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.”

“Maybe.” Dan winked, stood up to find his shorts and t-shirt, even the flip-flops had to be somewhere. “Maybe I won’t tell—maybe I will.”

He was still laughing when he kicked the door shut behind him.

* * *

Vadim couldn’t bear it. Just couldn’t. It was a grinding pain in his guts; like somebody had shoved a hand into his innards, grabbed a handful and pulled. Every night going to bed, thinking about how Dan looked, how he moved, how he spoke, but mainly it was how he laughed with Jean. Too often when he’d seen him, it was with the legionnaire. It was so damned obvious. He could imagine them together, entwined, sweating, cursing, fucking each other’s hands. Did Dan fuck Jean? He couldn’t imagine it the other way round. Dan probably still didn’t like being fucked, 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 the boot to fall, but it didn’t happen. Jean kept shut. Good. Bad. Now he knew there was only one way to end this. 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 each night he was alone in his room, alone with the darkness. Knowing Dan was less than a hundred yards away. Probably sucking the legionnaire. The thought always made Vadim hard, but in the most desperate, wretched way. He knew too well what that felt like, what Dan looked like on his knees. The sounds he made. Vadim rolled over, restless. Didn’t want to think; didn’t want to remember, but couldn’t help it.

Fuck SAS, fuck everybody who had put him back together. He was unable to deal with it, one ambush, one pounding, one artillery strike after another. He clutched at memories, and they broke when he touched them. What amazingly bad idea to come here, walk into Dan’s war, thinking the other would accept him as an equal. Dan had found a man who wasn’t broken for fun and laughter, and that was that.

Why drink salt water when you could have something entirely more healthy? Something that quenched the thirst. That easy laughter.

Vadim groaned, turned again, anger and pain mingled like pus and blood. Just couldn’t stop worrying that wound. But one question was answered. What he

felt for Dan. 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 returning. Dan. He knew what Dan did, and where, and with whom. 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. And the knife. Reached for the moonshine, emptied the bottle. Felt the alcohol kick. Again.

Making his way through the dust, he noticed people but didn't greet them. They didn't greet him, either.

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 man who knocked people out in hand-to-hand. The hard-ass who stood his ground. 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.

He watched Dan head for the showers.

* * *

Dan was 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. 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 both dry out.

Shirt and trousers discarded, boots drying as well, he changed into 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.

The place was deserted, everyone else had hit them either first thing or it was long past their bedtime. Dan hit the light switch, sorted his soap bag, doffed his shorts and dropped the towel over a hook. He turned towards the first set of showers, almost asleep on his feet.

Vadim glanced around to see if anyone was watching and followed like the hunter. Tiles. Blood. Water. The room in the Lubyanka. Tiled. Buckets of water that turned the blood pink and brought him back around, staring at the swirl of colour in the water running from his head.

He followed Dan inside, saw sudden tension between his shoulder blades, saw him turn around.

Dan stared at Vadim. He was fucking defenceless. Naked. All his senses switched to high alert. He glanced around. No one here but him and no way out. Fuck.

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's razor was too far away. He couldn't even reach his towel. He had nothing. Just his fists and his senses. Nowhere to go, except forward. Adrenaline kicked in.

"Get a weapon," Vadim said in English. "Let's finish it. You or me. Think you can ignore me?" He moved closer, teeth bared.

"Fuck you, Russkie," Dan snarled in Russian. Vadim was unhinged, lethal. If he said he was going to finish it, he would. "You want to use a weapon in camp?"

Vadim didn't plan to win. He'd lost ages ago. The battle, the war, and everything else. "Fucking camp mattress. Russian and blond. That's enough for you. 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 strangle your bitches with your guts. Don't doubt me for a heartbeat, because I will."

"You fucking cunt!" Dan hissed. Red-hot anger blinding him for a second. "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. Suck

it and see!” Dan’s heart thudded like an out of control freight train. His naked body in the best fighting stance possible. He’d 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 went 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, a pressure wave. He couldn’t say he had been broken. Couldn’t admit the weakness. Didn’t want pity. Didn’t want any more ridicule. He 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 nicely, the bitch part, huh? Almost as tall, almost as strong. And he’s so funny. 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 fucking stopped caring and tore 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 feeling he’d ever had. Words. Torture and death. Words. Hatred and accusations. Words. Guilt and....

“No.” Dan snarled. Stunned and debilitated with a pain like the one back in Finland. Like the day he had been listening to the tick-tock of the clock, counting towards his lover’s death. “No, Vadim. You won’t make me into who you are.” He kicked out, smashing his heel against the wrist to disarm the Russian.

The knife sped away, clattering 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 fell 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 destroyed me, cunt. Six months ago. You can't destroy me twice." His fists were useless now, trembling too hard. "But touch my friends, and I'll fucking take you apart and 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 walked away. No more strength. He didn't scream that night, but he wished he could.

Dan watched him leave. No sound. No gesture. No reaction. Turned on the water. Stepped under the shower. 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.

* * *

Dan was using 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.

"Don't pull up that shoulder," said Jean, mug of coffee in one hand.

"Huh?" Dan let his arms move back slowly, wrists resting on the padded bars. His muscles trembled with over-exertion. He would hurt like shit tomorrow, 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. “How was the shift?
Alright?”

Dan shrugged. “Aye.” He gestured with his chin to the towel out of reach.
“Got to tell you something. I’m being re-deployed.”

Jean picked up the towel, stepped closer and handed it to Dan. 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’m requesting a transfer.”

“Let me guess.” Jean looked straight into Dan’s face. “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?”

“I had a visit last night, aye. Not going to put up with that shit anymore.
Too much history.” Dan walked towards the exit. He needed a shower 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. “Something I should know as his team leader?” He
glanced to the side as they left the room.

Dan shook his head. “No. It’s up close and personal.” What else. It could
never be anything else.

“You know, I have some shit on him. I’d rather not bring it up, but he’s on
probation, and he’s been acting like a loose gun.”

Dan stopped dead in his tracks. “What the fuck did the cunt do?”

“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.
There was only one kind of damage he truly remembered. Bastard. “Vadim has
nowhere to be returned to.” At least Dan 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 quickly, but then he paused once more. Why the fuck did he keep defending that Russian cunt? Why? "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. "I have to leave. Go somewhere where I can't be traced."

"Yeah, I guess it's an option," murmured Jean. "I'd prefer it the other way round, though." He allowed Dan to step into the showers first. The place was empty. "You're an asset, he's not."

Dan turned on the water. Shit he'd forgotten his soap bag. Water alone would have to do, at least the sweat was fresh. "You never know, he might become an asset." Hell would probably freeze over before that happened.

"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. "You know the old motto 'know as little as you absolutely need to know, and you're less of a target'."

"Good motto. 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."

Dan shook his head and gave 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 meet him and explain. 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. Dan 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, Dan requested an international phone line and waited for the Baroness' aide to let him through to her. It took several minutes.

“Dan?”

Her voice gave no clue as to what she might be feeling. It probably didn’t matter. He trusted her, like he had trusted another, once. Fat good that had done.

“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. Dan sighed quietly, but said nothing.

“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. “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.”

Dan wondered if she would ever reply, before she finally spoke again.

“I’m sorry, Dan.” Had that been emotion in her reply?. A rare occurrence. “I made a mistake. As you so rightly said, I interfered, believing what I was doing was for the best. For your own good.” A slight hesitation, “I realise now I was wrong and I apologise. I consider you a friend, Dan; as close to a friend as I will ever have, and I am devastated I have hurt you.”

Dan couldn’t answer at first, had to swallow, then cleared his throat. “No need to apologise, Ma’am, but I thank you nevertheless.”

“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?”

She hadn’t argued or 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. Guess there are enough war zones in the world where I might be needed.”

“Too true, Dan. Sad, but too true, and it’s our business to deal with truth.”

He drew formless shapes against the wall with his fingertip. “Guess I’m good at something, even though that’s war.”

“You’re good for a lot more.” Her response 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, this time 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 whomeverthefuck the war had brought into the Gulf. Finally he made it to the safe house, let himself in after some lengthy fumbling with the lock. Matt wasn't there yet. Dan grunted as he flopped onto the bed, reaching for one of the unopened water bottles. Luke warm, but didn't matter jack shit, might stop the carousel in his head and the pain in his chest. Maybe. Possibly. If he was goddamned lucky. He lay down.

"Hey, buddy! You wasted?"

With several snorts and grunts, Dan gradually came 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 in your message. 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, without success. 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 his knee. 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. “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. 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 he could admit it to himself, “I can’t. Can’t hate him, even though you hate what you love, aye?” He gave 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?” Matt reached for one of the water bottles.

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, until he felt them flow. "I never knew anything could hurt so much."

Matt stared at Dan for a while then slid onto the bed to sit beside him. "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 Dan 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.

* * *

Vadim watched as Dan left the safe house after a couple of hours, still unsteady on his feet.

A little later, the other man 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 the young American'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 safe-house. 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. He weaved the boy's legs back under the chair, flex-cuffed them to the legs, hands bent back enough to put pressure on the hips and back, flex-cuffed 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.

The soldier was still out cold. Vadim waited a little, then thought he could start with the psychological part of this. Unbuttoned the tunic, pulled it down over the overstretched shoulders, pulled up the shirt underneath. Nice six-pack. Good definition. Fitness freak. The skin was soft, vulnerable. Vadim felt his face twitch. Fuck you. Fuck you, Dan.

He tore open the other's belt, bared the briefs, reached inside and pulled out that cock. 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.

The kid's breathing quickened, and he tried to move. He groaned, and tried to cough. Couldn't. He began to panic in that state of utter disorientation.

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."

The kid's breathing was sharp and noisy. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He nodded. Just nodded.

Vadim moved to the side, allowed the kid to see the glint of the blade. Turned the knife so it definitely caught the light, then brought it up to the 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.

Once he could, the kid breathed desperately, in large gulps, then he coughed and moistened his lips. He twisted in his bonds and tried to catch a glimpse of Vadim, sweat running down his face.

Vadim stepped close to 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?" The kid's voice was raspy.

"Stuff the bravado, Yank. You will cooperate. You met a man who is called Mad Dog. You're fuck-buddies."

The kid's eyes widened, he tensed, nostrils flaring with every breath. "No."

"Wrong answer." Vadim moved closer, placed his hand around the kid's throat, allowing him to feel the strength in his hand. Enough strength to squash the voice-box. "I have seen you. I know. Try again."

The Yank finally managed to get a good look at him. His expression changed as he caught his breath. Dan must have mentioned him. Told him stories. The fear in his eyes increased. "No!"

Vadim smiled at the reaction. The muscles did everything to make it a smile, at least.

"What do you want?" Desperate, trying 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."

Vadim glanced at the kid's name tag. "Donahue. I know you're fucking 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.

Donahue shuddered, his gaze trying to follow the blade, but he couldn't lower his head enough.

"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."

The Yank shook his head. "No. No I can't!"

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... Fuck off."

Vadim paused, stared into the kid's eyes. What inspired him to keep quiet? 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."

The Yank felt that. His eyes shut tight, holding in the pain.

Vadim inhaled sharply, turned the knife in his hand and brought the blade around to the kid's balls. "Not very dignified, bleeding to death with your cock in your throat," he murmured, toneless. "Guess it can't be helped."

Donahue'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.”

Donahue shook his head to stop the sweat running into his eyes. “Why me. I don’t understand.” The kid didn’t beg, not yet. “Mad Dog’s just my buddy.”

Understanding didn’t 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!” The kid 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 to see whether the kid would be able to topple the chair. Donahue was breathing hard against the hand, 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. He 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 it.

The kid’s breath came in frantic, sharp gusts.

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 Donahue jumped within his bonds, half-muffled yelling against his 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. 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.

The kid's eyes grew wider with every word. He almost whimpered.

"Believe it or not, but one of us will die. I know you are hoping right now it's me. You might 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 the kid 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."

The kid was swallowing on the fabric, sweaty, uniform stained, whatever of it was still on his body. He stank of fear and loathing. Vadim stepped back, took off his watch, slipped it into his pocket and 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 his 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 as close to love as 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. 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. Trapped like this, minutes were hours.

Donahue struggled against his bonds, his eyes widening.

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. The Yank jerked and whimpered, trying to see what was happening. Fought and failed to hold back tears.

Hardly more than cutting into the dermis, but the kid had no fucking clue. Would heal without a scar, and look like a scratch. "Ah. I guess I'm already drawing blood," said Vadim, and smiled. Not enough to bead, or even run, but it did have an effect, he could see that in the Yank's eyes.

He brought the knife lower, and the kid 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 the kid 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. 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 Donahue's eyes finally filling with water. "Actually, I think I prefer you not talking." Vadim looked up into the kid's face to judge his reaction. Still not done. Well. The Yank just didn't have enough imagination.

Vadim took hold of his 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 the kid 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."

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, depending on how strong he was in that area. Hard to judge. And he didn't actually care whether the Yank healed from this or not. Life was tough, and unpleasant. Never fair.

The flesh was fully hard now. Vadim looked down at it, kept it in his left hand, while reaching for the knife. Regarded the bare tip of the cock with a smile. "I'd feel so vulnerable," he murmured. Why on earth the Americans chopped away the foreskin was a mystery to him.

The kid cried now, pleading.

Vadim took the knife and laid it flat against the tip of his 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, he 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, gingerly placed the steel tip into the slit and turned the blade for just the hint of friction.

The kid broke. Sobbing with panic and absolute terror. Attempted to shout against the gag, didn't have enough breath. Shook his head, body tense as a rock.

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."

The kid coughed, curled forward, relief for a split-second, before he came back up, head high. Still sobbing. "You fucked-up bastard!" He spat out the words with a dry voice. "You don't need to destroy Mad Dog anymore, you've already done it. Fuck you. Fuck you!" He was shouting and sobbing at the same time. "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're disgusting, you make me sick." He tried to wipe his face on his shoulder. Trembling with emotion. Probably rage and terror, but from the look on his face, 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 with a fuck buddy. 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, 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. The kid's cock soft now, wilting against the steel.

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."

Donahue was shouting 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. You 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. Congratulations, asshole, you fucked him up. 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 began 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. How futile. 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.

Donahue's voice grew louder, his fear fading. "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, all because of his asshole of a fucking ex!" No tears anymore, just rage. He was tearing at the restraints again.

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 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 die, fucker." Donahue 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 it, 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!" The kid 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!"

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 he glared up, 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.

The kid sat still, just as tense as before, the anger still burning, but something else there, and it wasn't relief. Sat wary. Silent now while breathing

hard. Likely 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 swollen, raw, but nothing that wouldn't heal in a day or two. He stepped back, the knife ready, expecting Donahue to attack him. He'd die if he did, simple. Vadim's patience was worn thin. 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.

Vadim stood, looked down at the kid. Dan wouldn't take him back, love or not. No way. Dan would never admit to loving him. Vadim had crossed the line; all he had to do was finish walking the distance. Get Dan to kill him, finish him off. He might do that now. 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.

* * *

That night in bed, Vadim stared into the darkness, shifting 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, felt the blood leave him, the last shreds of his life for Dan. Felt how he got numb, bled out with the sweat. Cried with relief. Dan would still have him, didn't care he also killed him. Woke up horny and with gunk covering his eyes and lashes, breathing hard.

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.

How much his body liked the thought. He finished himself off, 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. He probably had put it down to survivor's guilt. 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.

He had worked to prove he wasn't broken so he could 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 seeing Dan again there was not a single thought that reached beyond that. He'd worked towards it like towards winning a war. Victory was supposed to be sweet, the end of all strife. Victory resolved everything. Had relied

on Dan's 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.

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.

It was the only thing 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.

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 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. Sounded like a good deal.

Nobody required him; he'd be 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 some were good ones. Not all were bad, there was some good stuff before he had ruined it. Hoped his death might counter some of the worst, but he'd be in no state to care. He cared right now, but that would pass.

He got out of bed, cleaned up. Sorted his locker, shined the spare pair of boots, put everything in top shape. Field bed, pillows, everything like he was still

in the army. 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 Anya, and one to Nikolai, to be sent via Szandor. How grateful he was. Just in case anything happens to me, grow up to be honourable people. 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.

Last letter—he'd written this five or six times and cried too hard the last two times. To Dan. 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. His love didn't make a difference. Not now, not with Donahue and Jean. Donahue had told him there was still love. 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 and what other 'personal effects' he had. It 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. But it didn't matter. It would end. Better than how it was going. Much better. Dan would lose control, and he was probably the only man who would manage to do it. One last favour.

Vadim went to shower, then 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 decent impression. At least leave like a soldier. With a modicum of dignity.

Then, he 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. But Jean was. The legionnaire would do. He'd be a tool for a tool.

Jean's crew glanced up when he approached, 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 almost worried at that and stared at him 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'."

Pascal laughed, like it was some insider joke.

Jean looked uncomfortable, but just for a moment. "Will do. Now piss off."

Vadim drank his orange juice, then cleaned away the tray. He stepped outside. In the middle of camp. Dan would see him; 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.

He gazed 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 crossed the open space in front of the tin huts and groaned as he rubbed his temples, fighting off a hangover induced headache, thankful for the shades that kept the worst of the morning sun away. His stance changed immediately when he set eyes on Vadim. He glared 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.

Getting his tray laden with double helpings of everything, he spotted Jean and Pascal at a table and headed straight towards them. "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 switched to Russian. "Do you know anybody called this?" He opened his hand and showed him a name tag.

Dan 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 cursed.

“The Russian. He said it was a trophy.”

Dan stared at the name tag, picked 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 took off his shades, handed them to Jean. “Hold onto them for me.” Right fist clenched around the name tag, he stood up. “Stay here.” He said nothing more, just turned and walked out of the mess. One target. Shouting in Russian once he had stepped out of the tent, “Where are you, you fucking cunt!”

Vadim glanced over his shoulder. Like clockwork. Strings to pull, reflexes to trigger. Life could be simple. He turned, raised his hands, waved Dan towards him in a mocking gesture. Come to Daddy. He broke into a run to get to the racing track. Out of sight, a good place for a fight or murder. Running felt good, last good thing he’d feel. He was still faster than Dan and his fucked knees.

Vadim stopped on the wide open ground, a slight sheen of sweat, heart pumping, waiting for the other man. Thirty yards. Twenty-five.

At 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, no more.

Dan stopped, opened his fist. “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.” The darkness rolled and coiled, the poisonous blood. Predator. “He didn’t give me enough of a fight, but give he did.” A cruel, rough laugh. “Nowhere near as fierce a fight as it was taking you down. I didn’t even need Vanya to help me take him prisoner.” Stoke the fire, prod the tiger. Hate me. Hate me like you did that night. Let’s start at the beginning, and end it right here, annihilate everything. Annihilate me.

“No!” A roar of rage tore out of Dan before his body slammed into Vadim. “I’ll fucking kill you!” Shoulder first, square into the chest where he was the most vulnerable, hitting the solar plexus straight on.

Vadim’s half-hearted block did nothing to take the force out of the charge. What an excellent way to start. 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, chest too tight to breathe. Saw people running towards them. Body curled up, automatically, felt his breath come back like yet another painful impact.

“Fuck you!” Dan snarled. Dozens of fist fights since he’d joined the camp. The fag. The poof. The fucking faggot. He’d learned from every one of them. 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. 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 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. Dan’s punches opened his defence. 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. A blow came in true, the pain almost blacked him out. Don’t cling to anything. No feelings, no memories, no names. He had said his goodbyes long ago.

Jean came in at a full run, lunged at Dan, both arms around him before any of his vicious blows could kill. “Dan! Don’t! Fucking don’t!” He knocked Dan off Vadim.

Jean resisted Dan’s struggling, 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 as if he were still fighting Vadim, but Jean had the better position and kept the upper hand. “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, could see nothing but a red haze and blurry vision.

“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.” He jerked in the human restraint, then stilled. “Fuck!”

“Believe me, I’m already sorry...” Jean glanced up to Pascal. “What the fuck did he do?” he muttered.

Dan was breathing hard, the come-down harsh, like cold turkey with the dirty needle still stuck in his vein. Shaking his head. No. 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.

“Damn right,” murmured Jean, releasing some of the pressure. He patted Dan’s face. “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 brig after an ass-chewing.”

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 tried to hold him back, but Dan was faster and had covered the few steps before either could stop him, 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 him and Vadim, the good hand on his upper arm, the other cradled against his chest. “I need to check with the medic. Arm fucking hurts.”

Vadim was 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. "Sorry, mate. You hurt your elbow again." To Jean, glanced at Pascal. Neither would talk.

"Whatever, don't worry about it." Jean looked at Pascal. "Make sure a medic checks up on him." He turned back towards camp, picking 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 back to where Vadim still lay curled up, face bloodied, before forcing himself to take his eyes away.

"We can always arrange an accident," said Jean on the way to the medic's tent. "But not here. He must have planned this. He wanted you to attack him. That's the single best reason not to do it. Because he wanted you to."

Dan stopped as if frozen on the spot. "What?"

Jean glanced around. "Do you see anybody out here? Witnesses? And then, for him to come up 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." He indicated back to Vadim and Pascal. "You nearly killed him, 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. He felt the ache now, where knuckles had connected with skin, muscle and bone. How satisfying it had been. "Fucking arsehole planned it." He 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."

"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. Whoa, 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. Shit, he couldn't even get a single clear thought himself anymore.

Jean continued, "I want him in the brig."

"No! You can't do that." Dan suddenly stopped, "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. I swear, if he has done what he wanted me to believe he has done, I will kill him, but you can't lock him up. He's fucked up alright. He needs help. But if you lock him up, like in the Lubyanka, it'd be better to kill him. Not that I care." Lie, Dan? Still a lie.

Jean groaned with frustration. "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."

"Just drop the bit with the baby rabbits." Dan 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.

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 flexed 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." He 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 a fire under some arses. Better sooner than later."

Jean nodded and pulled the shades from his breast pocket. Looked like they had survived the short 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.

* * *

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 so much 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-talking 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 buddies with a lot of the kids who came popping down to the bar whenever they were allowed to, and was able to pry Matt away for a few words in privacy, without anyone suspecting more than a quick exchange of banter between mates.

Matt was furious, but Dan had expected worse. Had prepared himself for blame and spite, instead met anger, hurt and a chilling edge that hadn't been there before. It sobered Dan, worried him, but he clung to 'that which doesn't kill us makes us stronger' code. He handed the name tag back and started asking questions.

Matt clearly couldn't understand why Dan kept asking if he'd been raped and refused to admit to it, eventually losing his temper in a spectacular 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 the goddamned knife play that had gotten to him.

Matt apologised, over and over again, for having told everything Dan had spilled, but Dan reassured him it didn't 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. Matt seemed to be anything but interested in sex right now. Understandable. Faced with Vadim at his worst, Dan had a fair idea how much the kid was fucked up. He wished him good luck with his boyfriend and a bloody good military career.

When Matt started drilling him for an answer why he'd been asking about rape, Dan just 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.

Back in the British camp, he found scran, then solitude and silence in his overheated room, sitting naked on his bunk, guzzling lukewarm water, staring at the metal walls and thinking.

It was already evening when he pulled the shorts on, threw a t-shirt over his head and found the battered flip-flops.

Dan made his way 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, just hammered once with his fist against the door before walking inside. He needed answers. Simple ones this time.

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. No food. No water.

Dan 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. The Russian was lying on the field bed, wearing the British camo he'd worn since arriving in the camp.

The only two concessions to the temperature, Dan noticed, were his shirt was unbuttoned and his recently shined boots were off. Dark sweat patches stained the undershirt, the old burn mark under the throat was barely visible in the gloom. One hand held 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, that 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 as if his body was panicking at the thought of potential pain, the brute force of a potential killer.

Dan did nothing, thought nothing either. Silent, still, until Vadim gave him 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 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 confirmation.

"No. I fucked his mind, but that's all."

"You lied to me, implying you *did* do to the kid what you had done to *me*."

"Yes."

"You manipulated me into killing you, 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." Dan stood still, not a muscle twitched, only a few strands of his hair moved, lifted by a stray breeze from the fan.

"No. Not murder. Grievous assault. 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 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 distasteful. Not a homeland. No army, just a job now. Dan hadn't wanted Vadim's 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?"

“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 me? “Don’t play dumb.” Dan frowned. “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 felt better than the other one. He shifted the cooling towel to cover it again.

“Two years, fucker, two years I’d been hoping and working towards that one moment 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. 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. 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." 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 being human.

Dan shook his head again, pulled his shoulders up before letting them drop. Resigned. "I don't claim I understand, Vadim, but whatever it is that fucked you up, you got to get help. And that help can't be me." 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. 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. "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. Vadim looked at 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 fired, nothing more, no weakness, no link, no guilt. No desire, no touch. Dan was free now, untouchable.

Again that slow, resigned nod. Dan's 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. He still wore Matterhorns, different model, more advanced. 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 any difference. I'll be gone in a

few days. Don't bother asking anyone where I am. They won't know. No one will." And fuck, I don't even know 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 finished walking to the door, defeated on a level where only one man was able to touch him—and had touched him. Too many times. He stopped in the doorway, 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, stifling the sounds against his fist.

* * *

Pascal, of all people, kept an eye on him. Vadim found himself sneering at the thought. If he planned to blow his brains out, Pascal sure as hell would react too late.

Work was the only reason 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. Not easy to do anything.

He felt detached, too far away, things were around him but never sunk in, unless it was potential danger. There was no fear. The next two days, he volunteered 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 finally achieved it. 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. Finally some kind of equilibrium, only two days after being suicidal. A tool, content in being a tool. It kept the muzzle pointing in the right direction.

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 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 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. His feelings had made him weak, had fucked up his life. Good that they were gone now. For the moment, he existed. Focused on taking every moment by itself and surviving. One breath at a time.

1991 Chapter 26—Local Hero

August 1991, the Persian Gulf

Two days later, at the break of dawn and after a night of pool, beer and goodbyes, Dan stood in front of the tin-clad shithole that had been his home for the last few months. Shades over his eyes, heavy bergen strapped to his back, sports bag standing at his side, wearing khaki t-shirt, desert coloured cross-draw vest, combat trousers, webbed belt, and his boots—British Forces desert issue, no longer the Lowa ones. No armour, no weapon, except for the trusty assault knife he always carried on his body.

Dan felt naked without the protective combat attire, but fuck, he was nothing but a civvie now, being taken to his next place of deployment by a US Air Force medical supply patrol.

His gaze ran slowly across the tin huts, stalling at one, then another, finally resting on the mess tent. Too early for breakfast, lucky he had a stack of sandwiches in his bag, a bottle of water on his webbing, and a two litre plastic one in the bergen.

That was it, then; the Gulf was done and over with. He picked up his bag and slung the PLCE webbing across one shoulder. At least the 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. His boots threw up small clouds of red dust as he made his way towards the exit, while padding down his trouser pockets, feeling for the official papers that allowed him into the Yank camp and onto a patrol ride.

New start in old boots, and the memories forever a part of his luggage.

* * *

The US crew and their passenger were shaken when a mighty impact hit the chopper, cracking the tail boom of the Huey in an explosion. “Shit!” Dan was half-thrown off his makeshift seat of metal drugs boxes. He stared at the loadmaster and winchman sitting opposite.

“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 a RPG. The pilot was shouting to his co-pilot, helped by the intercom, but impossible to understand 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 clung to the open door and looked at the winchman. They were in deep shit, and from the expression on the Yank's face, he wasn't the only one who realised how much.

"Fuck!" Dan muttered, gritting his teeth and cursing the civvie clothing that left him with no protection. Both 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 scrambled off the boxes and threw himself spread-eagled into the narrow space on the floor, just about fitting his legs between the two crew members' seats, his head too fucking close to the metal boxes.

The chopper started to spin so violently he barely managed to get hold of his bergen and stuff it into the space between the boxes and himself, to act as a shield and keep his head from being ripped off.

That would be another damn messy way to go. He wasn't ready for that one either. He'd survived the goddamned Afghan mountains; he wanted at least a fighting chance now.

Sweat poured off him, and his heart raced. What a fucking pathetic way to die after all the shit he'd been through. The spin accelerated. Dan couldn't make out what the loadmaster was shouting at him over the noise of rushing air and blood pounding in his ears. He managed to grab hold of a metal bar behind the pilot's seat just as the accelerated spin slammed his legs and hip against the frame

of the open door and wrenched his left wrist, sending a jolt of pain through his body.

Dan cursed before locking his jaws, grabbing the bar with his other hand as well, hanging on for dear life with his legs half-dangling out the side door. This was it. He'd already used up a few lives in Afghanistan, this must be the last one. If he could remember how, and if he believed in anything, he'd pray, but all he had were thoughts of regret, loss, love, hate and over all, love again, but mostly a burning greed to live!

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 in as few pieces as possible. 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 in such a steep angle the copter smashed head-first into the ground.

Dan screamed in agony when his body was thrown towards the left, his side crashing against metal bars, wall, interior and door frame. His left wrist was wrenched ten times harder than before. Amidst the thunderous noise when the chopper hit heat-baked sand he felt the sickening crunch of bones breaking.

The Huey had just enough velocity to start flipping over onto its back in agonising slow motion. Accompanied by terrifying screeching sounds of distorting metal, the main rotors snapped off and went flying. Part of the debris crashed through the warped roof, some of it entering through the open doorway. The flip reversed and the nose of the helicopter bore into the ground again, pilot and co-pilot coping the worst of the impact. There were screams, but Dan couldn't make out anymore what was human and what was the steel shrieking. The bird veered towards the left, destroying part of the cockpit—front and side and came to a shuddering halt, mostly upright.

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. Agony from his left wrist, nearly as bad along his leg and hip, his ribs,

but he could breathe. The goddamned pain told him he was alive. He tried to move his fingers, toes, hands; knew, then, the left wrist was fractured.

Moans, a muffled cry from across the seats, stifled screams and more groans, mixed with sounds that didn't seem to make sense.

"Hey!" Dan called out, "everyone okay?" He managed to move, thank fuck, only his left wrist was useless, hand hanging at a freaky angle. Grunting against the pain, with teeth clenched, he lifted his head and started to scramble to his feet, fighting back a sudden jolt of nausea.

They had to get out of the chopper, fast.

"Need a little help here, guys. Scott got it I think." Sounded like the pilot, in a lot of pain.

On his knees, cradling his wrist, Dan looked around. Fuck. Carnage. The loadmaster slumped seemingly lifeless on his seat which was half-torn off the chopper wall, and the winchman...shit. Dan's eyes widened. "Holy fuck," he 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.

Dan raised his good hand. "Hang on, don't move." As if. Fuck again.

He shuffled around, still on his knees, wanting to scream at the agony all along his side, but forced his battered body to comply. Stop whining, Mad Dog, and shut the fuck up. He felt the neck of the loadmaster. Pulse there but weak.

"Give me a sec," Dan called out to the pilot. "One man unconscious back here, the other injured. I'm alright." He peered over the front seats. "You alright, Jackson?" He could see the co-pilot's helmet before he managed to get up. The unnatural angle of the guy's head told Dan all he needed to know. Jackson had been right, his co-pilot was dead.

"Not really," Jackson answered, voice strained. "Got to get the comm link up; the thing's fucked."

"Got it." Dan stood at last, swayed, got himself under control and checked the co-pilot. "Afraid you're right." Glanced at the name tag, "Campbell's dead." He glanced at the two guys in the back. "The kid's not looking good. What about you?" He could see blood in the pilot's lap, seeping through the fabric of the flight overalls.

"My leg." Jackson spoke through gritted teeth, nevertheless working on the comm. "Broken. Hurts like fuck, but I'm alive."

Broken? Messy. Dirty. A miracle he wasn't unconscious.

"Deal with the others, I'll be alright."

"Whatever arsehole fired the RPG, they've seen us going down and they'll come for us." Dan felt an adrenaline rush at his own words. Even though no more than a couple of minutes had passed since the chopper came down, they had to get out and away as quickly as possible or they'd be even more fucked. "Hurry up with that comm, mate."

Jackson reached to his side, and Dan could see sweat patches forming on the uniform. Full marks for the Yank. That guy was tough.

The loadmaster moved. At least that one wasn't dead, even though he was bleeding from the neck. Dan would deal with him later. It was the young bumfuck he was worried about.

"Hang on, kid." Dan inspected his shoulder where the razor sharp edge of the rotor blade shrapnel had penetrated. "I have to strap up my wrist first, alright?"

The big glassy eyes focussed on him. Pain written all across the pale and sweating face, though he was probably still in too much shock to feel the full brunt of it. Shit, even Matt was a grown-up compared to this guy. Eighteen, he'd heard Johnson tell the loadmaster earlier, and on his first deployment.

Dan ripped the first aid box from the wall. What irony. He'd been sitting on boxes with antibiotics which were bloody useless. Using right hand and teeth, he managed to prise open the lid and fish out the sturdiest bandage he could find, cursing 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." Keep the kid's focus. He was starting to fade out of consciousness. Shit, that wouldn't do. Dan remembered that much from his Battlefield First Aid training a lifetime ago. "I'm Dan, but they call me Mad Dog."

"Johnson."

Strained but audible. Good, perhaps that little bumfuck would turn out to be a fighter. Dan was digging his teeth into one end of the bandage, when he heard the voice again.

"Chris Johnson. I..." the kid trailed off, his fist clenching, while the face beneath the helmet was drenched in sweat, pale with dilated 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 nodded. 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. He barely twitched.

Taking the bandage from his teeth, Dan murmured, “You’ll feel better soon. Trust me, kid.” Johnson’s baby-blue eyes lost focus almost immediately. Good. He wouldn’t scream too much.

Another voice, sounding disoriented. “Need help?”

Dan looked up, saw the loadmaster wiping blood off his neck then testing limb after limb. Dan grinned with relief. “Aye, soon, but need to strap up before I’m useful. You alright? Any fractures?”

The loadmaster’s eyes were dark in the shadow of his helmet, and so were his blood-smeared features. Dan could just about make out the name tag. Martinez.

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, took the bandage and a flexi-tube, strapping both as tightly as possible around the fractured wrist without cutting off the blood supply.

Dan gritted his teeth at the pain, hitting his thigh with the good fist once or twice, but the Yank was fast.

“Think I got concussion.” Martinez finished his task. “What the fuck happened?”

“RPG.” Jackson shouted from the front, still working frantically despite his injury. “Martinez, it got Campbell.”

The loadmaster frowned. “Fuck.”

Dan fished a sterile bandage out of the box and handed it over.

“Get your neck taped up. I’ll deal with Johnson, but I’ll need your help in a minute.”

Martinez nodded, slowly, and did as he was told. Maybe that was the secret. The situation was only going to get worse. Rapidly. Get them to obey his orders. He was the most seasoned soldier of the lot. Ex-SAS. Twenty years behind enemy lines. It was up to him.

"Can you move, kid?" Dan asked Chris, but the Yank was barely conscious. "Okay, seems that dammed rotor went right through you and into the chopper. We have to get out of here ASAP, you understand? Afraid you'll have to grit your teeth."

Johnson's tongue darted out, moistening his lips, but he clearly wasn't with it. Hopefully the guy would feel nothing at all.

Dan glanced at Martinez. "You into First Aid?" The loadmaster tried to shake his head. "Campbell was."

Shit.

"Okay, Chris." Dan chose the first name, never got that business of addressing a comrade with their surname. "Listen, kid, we have to leave the copter's 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."

"Alright, Gary, my wrist's fucked; I need you to take over most of the work. I'll steady this end of the rotor blade and you pull Chris and it away from the wall."

Martinez got into position. Clearly, getting told what to do was doing the trick. Jackson let 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 and years of experience in the field. "God help us," he murmured to himself, and he wasn't even a believer.

Dan steadied the sharp metal with his right hand, planted himself on the ground, legs braced, ignoring the pain along his battered left side. "On three."

Johnson whimpered when Martinez grabbed hold of him, and another cry escaped, despite the morphine.

"One, two..." Dan took a deep breath, "three!"

Martinez pulled hard, Johnson screamed in agony, and then he fell silent the moment the rotor was pulled free. The kid's unconscious torso fell forward, nearly knocking Dan off 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 size of the wound at the back. “We have to get a medevac.” The kid had no 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 before he regains consciousness.”

Martinez started working without delay. Morphine or not, Johnson would be in a shitload of pain far too soon.

Jackson called out from the front. “Got it! Probably only a few minutes though. The power is fucked.” The comm seemed to come to life with a faint hum. “I’ll give them our position.”

Dan was hit by a realisation much worse than the fucking grenade itself. They had crashed about ten minutes ago. Maybe fifteen. Difficult to keep track of time in fucked-up situations like this. “No.” He crouched to avoid a twisted metal beam and headed for the cockpit. “You can’t do that.”

Jackson stared at him as if he’d lost his mind.

“Whoever the fuck blew us out of the sky isn’t regular Iraqi Army. Those guys are done and dusted; they’re history. Probably some renegade bastards who haven’t cottoned on they’re supposed to have surrendered. They’re itching to find the chopper and butcher anyone still alive. Make an example and all that shit.”

Jackson still didn’t seem convinced. “We need a medevac, like, now. My leg’s fucked, Johnson sounded bad, and we have to get out of here.”

“Aye, we do. But we can’t give 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 narrowed. “They’ll be listening, I bet my eight inches of Prime Scots Beef on that. We need to get away within the next ten minutes, and we need to keep moving. Make it harder for those bastards to find us.”

Jackson handed the microphone over when Dan held out his good hand.

“Trust me. I’ll get us out.” Dan leaned against the shoulder of the co-pilot’s corpse to move it out of the way and reached for the mic. “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 Vadim got up and went to work like every other day.

Dan had gone. People looked at him as if they expected him to go berserk.

Jean seemed on the verge of leaving him behind when they went on duty, then seemed to decide work was a good distraction. Vadim didn't give a shit. Life without Dan continued, like it had every time Dan had vanished into the mountains. It wasn't different. Some part of him still waited for his 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.

When they returned to camp, Vadim could feel the change in the air. He stood near the jeep, drinking water. One of the guys came running towards 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. 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 occupied.

They were talking about chances for casualties; how big the crew was, and what the best way was to bring a Huey down once it had been hit. Whether it could crash 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". Vadim just didn't believe it, even though he had seen too many men die to disbelieve in death.

But if Dan had died, what had his last thought been? His last word? Vadim felt his stomach churn and reached for a new bottle of water one of the guys offered him. Alive. Dying?

He knew one thing: Fucking Americans would have to act swiftly. They'd try to recover the bodies and possibly blow up the wreck. 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, either.

Jean headed towards the command tent. That was the place where the news would be coming in. It was 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 calmed his mind, making plans. 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. Dan knew he only had a few minutes. One eye watched Martinez work on 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, then repeated the message again and again until he finally got a reply. Seemed they’d been waiting for news, 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—was impossible. He had 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, hadn’t been quick enough to catch the information.

“Get on with it.” Dan gestured 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, any fucking thing. “You understand? Shot down, as Jackson said. Enemy territory.” No secrets there. “No more information. Unsecured line. Get 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’s plea 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, 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.

* * *

Somebody hammered against the tin shack. Vadim closed the bergan, stood and opened the door abruptly.

“You Russian? Merc?” asked the soldier, and Vadim noticed what was odd about him. He wore British camo. Not a merc, this one. The guy stared up into his face as he nodded, like confronted with some fairy tale monster. “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 jeep, too. Seemed they had rounded up everyone that fitted the ‘Russian’ and ‘merc’ bill.

The kid drove them over into the Brit camp proper, then ran them towards the HQ tent. Inside, 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 its normal fifty beats to two hundred.

He 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. "No names. No details." 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.

Vadim strained to hear more, as if he could deduce more from any sensory input. Breaths, moans, pain. Dan didn't sound wounded, 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 the language, 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 recall. "Need medevac, urgently. Status of crew, one, young, probably like India."

India. Dan in the white bed, the white room, yellow and thin. Vadim put 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 who could understand what he was revealing.

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 got 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 bergen, but pilot's is open."

Damn it, six years already. Vadim 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 bodies. 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 okay. Like you before the Olympics, your dislike of horses, but only left.” Dan didn’t mention the badly bruised left side. He’d live. If they just got out of there.

Vadim grinned at that one, If Dan said he was okay, he believed him. Relief. Fucking relief. ‘Dan: okay, left wrist broken. Functional.’ Vadim tore the sheet off and let one of the officers have it.

“Do you copy?” Dan was praying Vadim understood his codes. Years of history, lost in the Afghan mountains. Would memories be enough to save them?

“I copy. Copy, tiger.” Vadim couldn’t speak the name, reached for the fairy tale, hoped it would communicate what he couldn’t. About being wild and free, and about being equal. Courage and commitment. All those things in that story. Things that paled in the light of the Iraqi desert.

Dan’s right hand clutched the mic. Tiger. Fuck, tiger. A trip to Hungary, sadness and pain and 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?

“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. “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 wounded thigh. The loadmaster fetched the map. Dan noticed 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 had already placed a map near the pad. Bastard was 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 compass direction from the camp as we were from Kabul."

"Copy." Vadim traced a line from the camp position to the North West. Saw dried out wadis there. They would get some cover and protection.

"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 checked first with Jackson as he must have read the controls on their way down. The line was silent while Dan made his calculations.

Vadim heard officers around him say "medevac," and "RPGs," and "insurgents". One even said "Delta operators." People talked 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 again. "Lion, the estimated distance from camp is the same as from Kabul to 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."

Jean burst into laughter and turned away. 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. Bastard. He noted down 'two hundred miles'.

"The second direction is the same 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.

West. They wouldn't be able to get far with all the casualties. It had only been a very short distance back then. 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 drew a line on the map in the right direction, worked out distance and circled a likely area. He wasn't able to speak.

Dan saw Martinez wipe his brow beneath the helmet before bending down slowly to work on a makeshift splinter bandage for Jackson's leg. Chris was 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. "I remember everything."

"Good." Dan looked down, trying to ignore the other survivors, and 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, one mile. If anything goes wrong, the red ones after that."

If they were heading west towards the wadi, that meant they only had to cover a couple of miles before they could hide. 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, blue and green behind his usual seat, then the corner, followed by red and yellow, the second set ending in a wall that was to the right of the green leafed entrance. Back in that tea house life had been simple. Just about seduction, fucking and getting fucked, danger, unknown territory in the middle of enemy terrain. So if anything went wrong, they would head around the corner, to the red, left, south.

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, helpless, more towelheads, more grenades. Dan smelling of sour blood in the heat, staring wild-eyed at him.

The fear that leg wound was infected, and Dan would rot away under his hands.

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. He wrote for those watching: ‘Will disable beacon’. And sent: “Copy, Tiger.”

With one ear, Vadim heard the Yanks starting to put together a medevac. He wanted nothing more than to be there and help, but he understood the copter might not have enough space for doctors for the fucked crew and guys to secure the perimeter. “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 an overwhelming urge to continue talking. To keep the line open, hold onto the voice, the memories, the lost life, this something—anything that was still burning brightly inside him.

The love.

“Got to take the cubs across the mosaic.” Dan paused, looking from the pale bumfuck with his closed eyes, bandaged up like a mummy, except for where a piece of steel protruded from his chest, over to Martinez who wasn’t quite steady on his feet, and finally towards the pilot, his face distorted in pain, holding his leg while valiantly struggling to stand. “Further communication impossible. No personal radios.”

Vadim’s hand clenched around the pen, chest tight. Meant the radio was in the copter. Now scrap metal.

“If anything goes wrong...” Dan’s Russian was slipping. “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 point 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 happened that night. 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. Hoped to transfer what he could. Optimism. Soothing. Reassurance.

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’re planning, whatever they’re doing, I’ll get him out. “Lion has his claws already sharpened and is ready to go.” Truth. He was burning, itching to start. “No disqualification for cheating this time.” Nothing, nobody, will stop me from getting the prize.

“You’ll deserve a medal if you do.” Dan looked at the mic in his hand, smiled briefly. “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-handedly, he asked, “Gary, will you be able to carry Ken?” 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, I’ll get some supplies and carry Chris. They’re 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 bergen and bag. Difficult with one hand, but he managed to throw out what wasn’t necessary, just left wallet, ID and his knife. Then he filled the bergen back up with the two litre water bottle, the extra bag of sandwiches, 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 and a blanket.

“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.

“I’ll take Campbell’s pistol.” Dan called to the others, then slung the bergen onto his back. He groaned, but ignored the pain and secured the straps.

Searching the co-pilot's corpse, Dan took a moment to look at the dead man's face. "Rest well," he murmured. He'd seen many dead and dying, enough of them by his own hand. It had rarely been personal. This, now, was somehow different. Perhaps he could make good what he'd once failed in. Years ago, in another country. Another young man, another kid soldier. This time it was a Yank, not a German.

Dan pocketed the pistol and saw the two pieces of metal around Campbell's neck. He lifted off one of the tags, let the other nestle back beneath the uniform before patting the dead man's shoulder. One for the dead, the other for the living. Proof of a life lost on duty. "See you in hell, mate. They say it's a fun place."

Dan glanced 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. Carrying the weight of another man would be hard for the concussed soldier, but tough shit. For both of them.

"Alright, let's go." 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. Every year of his forty-two protested in agony, but he'd be buggered if his fucked-up body wasn't going to comply.

He managed to get the kid across his back in a fireman's lift and on top of the cushioned bergen, making sure he didn't drive the rotor blade any deeper. Shifting carefully, he rested the kid's weight on the injured and useless lung.

Dan staggered under the load but found his balance, then slung the rifle across his shoulder. 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 west towards the wadi.

* * *

"The Americans are already putting the medevac together," said one of the officers. "They'll be home in a few hours."

Vadim looked at Jean, who met his gaze. They both wanted to get Dan out of there. “I request to join the medevac team. I’ve found downed pilots before. I can operate in the territory.”

The officers talked to the Americans about it, but they always sent their own medevac and didn’t plan to take a merc onboard, thankyouverymuch. Vadim was sent out of the tent.

Vadim growled with frustration, worked on stupid plans, most of them involved doing things at gunpoint, commandeering a jeep. Listening to the muttering and planning inside. They weren’t making any progress; too many ifs and whens. 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 with relevant experience, loaded with supplies. 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 team leader. 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 be waiting for Vadim to move, 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 go.

* * *

The heat was merciless, easily a killer to the inexperienced, but they had almost reached the relative shelter of the dry river bed. It had taken them far too long for those two miles.

Dan stopped, planted his feet apart, bracing himself to blink into the sky through his shades. The sound of a chopper, no mistaking that noise. He grinned as Jackson let out a “Hooray!” from Martinez’ back.

“Should all be a bad dream in a few minutes.” The pilot patted his loadmaster’s flank.

“Damn right.” Martinez answered. “Johnson’s pretty bad, and I feel like shit myself. Gonna upchuck in a mo, no offence, Jackson.”

Dan chuckled, then turned and walked on. As long as the guys were bantering, their spirits were up. He’d never understood the American way 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, he figured they regarded the Brits as a force held together with just shoestring and spit. Neither was far off the mark.

“Hey, keep going,” he called to Martinez, “we’ve almost reached the wadi. We can rest there until they find us. More shade.”

The loadmaster trudged on. A few minutes later they reached the relative shelter of the wadi, and climbed down into the river bed. Martinez lowered Jackson to the ground. The sound of the chopper was getting closer.

Gritting his teeth, Dan bent down to carefully place the kid on the ground. Dan helped him settle on his side. Jackson stirred and moaned, eyes half open.

The chopper was a dark speck on the horizon that kept coming closer. Gary was waving. Dan let him. Seemed whoever the fuck had shot them down was now well out of the game. Probably. Possibly. He was 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 and watched the chopper. Good, they were coming straight towards them. Vadim had understood his cryptic clues, not that he’d ever imagined anything else.

Dan was turning his head towards the kid, meaning to feed him water when he suddenly saw a smoke trail. “Fuck!” His shout caught the others’ attention, all of them staring at the disaster before their eyes.

Another RPG. The grenade flew towards the medevac, and then...shit, impact.

“Shit, fuck them. Bastards! Fucking shit!” Martinez was going wild.

The tail boom of the chopper was hit, but not as badly as their own had been. The Blackhawk started veering from left to right, 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. 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 came up to Vadim and said, “They’ve located the wreck and are pretty sure they located the crew, but the area is swarming with insurgents. The copter they sent got hit by a RPG, made it back on half a leg. They don’t want to lose another one. Apparently, the Yanks are now sitting on their hands waiting for Delta.”

“Delta? They have Delta in that camp?”

“No. They’re in a different camp and will get flown in. They expect them here and ready in the morning.”

Delta. Tomorrow. “Fuck. I want to go now.”

“I thought you might say that. I might just see if I can get clearance to take a Landrover and try and locate them on the ground. I’ll see if I can borrow one and get some kit from the QM too.”

* * *

Dan sat down to feed the moaning kid some water, sensing the desperation around him. “They’ll get us out on the ground.”

His voice was firm. *The tiger might need the lion to get him out.* Would Vadim come? Wouldn't do to let doubts creep to the surface. "Your lot will be here soon, if not 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 away from the Saudi Arabian or Kuwaiti borders, but their only chance was to head further south. 'The red mosaics', to the left, the south, towards the border with Saudi Arabia.

"We can't make it on foot." 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."

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. Very much like Matt. He'd be able to keep going for a while longer.

"Gary, you okay for a little jog?"

Martinez nodded carefully. "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 along the wadi. Lucky it's heading in the right direction. At least it gives some shelter. Best keep on the move and hole in if we have to, waiting for sundown." Dan glanced at Johnson. "We should get going; improves our chances that we'll hit the border before they hit us. If they are not completely stupid they'll realise we're heading in that direction."

A collective "Hoo-rah" was his answer, and he grinned. "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.

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. Walking on, step after step, boot in front of boot, for what seemed like forever, but when Dan glanced up at the sun, he realised it had been no more than an hour.

“You okay?” Dan glanced at Martinez whose step had just faltered, stumbling out of his trance-like slog. The younger man’s face was swimming with sweat. The guy was losing too much liquid and salt. Dan frowned.

“I’m okay, sir.”

Dan grinned and felt the dust-caked skin around his eyes crinkle as he did. “Forget about the ‘sir’, mate. I’m just an old war hound, stubborn enough to get us out of this shithole.” He managed to get a miniature smile from the young guy. “How’s your neck?”

“Hurts like fuck.” Martinez grimaced.

“It would, seems you got whiplash and concussion. I bet you’re nauseous. And kinda dizzy.”

“Yeah...” Martinez struggled to walk in a straight line. “You could say that, but I’m okay.”

“Sure you are.” Dan stopped. “You’re a damn fine soldier, Gary Martinez. I wouldn’t know how the fuck to get out of here without you.”

That got a grin. When the loadmaster came slowly to a halt, he swayed a moment but held firmly onto Jackson who had been very quiet the last hour. “Just hope they get us out soon. You think they’ll send Delta?”

“Possibly, 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, the Russian was already coming. 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. Like India, achieving the impossible.

Let’s have some water and keep going.” Each of them had a mouthful, carefully rationing the precious liquid. Dan gave some to Jackson and Martinez and poured water into Johnson.

Side by side they trudged on for another hour, the weight of the two bodies pulling them down in the murderous heat.

* * *

"We're kicking up lots of dirt," muttered Jean, glancing behind, his two hands firmly clasped on the driving wheel. "Let's hope it's prayer-time, or something."

Vadim checked his watch. "No such luck and according to my estimates we've still got a fair distance to go." It had taken Jean a couple of hours to convince the CO that they shouldn't just wait around for the Delta crew to arrive in the morning. Once it became dark, driving would be risky over the desert, but at least there would be less people around to see them.

Vadim was worried, restless, itching, nervous, worse than in the days in Afghanistan. Sweat building under his armoured vest. Seemed he couldn't take not knowing anymore. 'The tiger might need the lion to get him out.' Dan would be waiting for him. Expecting him.

"It's none of my business, really," said Jean, lighting another cigarette. "But I guess it's better to talk about this later than never." He ran his tongue over his lips, looking thoughtful. An eyebrow raised in a silent query.

"Yes, I want him back."

Jean shot him an ironic glance. "You know, you've tried everything else and now even the heroic method; I'm not sure if you realize one thing."

"What?"

"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. 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 hand-job. 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. "Is he."

"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. 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 to his own ears.

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. 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, but you were there in that room, like a ghost. If I’d 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. Don’t think many of us would have cried at your grave. But I didn’t.”

It drives me insane, the thought of you and him together. “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. Whatever else, but that, definitely. Won’t leave him to rot just because you’re snarling at me. 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.”

* * *

Towards late afternoon the sun started to lose its fierceness. Jackson suddenly hit his hand against Martinez' leg. "Over there. Dust!"

Dan turned slowly to keep his balance, peering at the horizon where their helicopter had come down. 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.

"Over there?" Martinez pointed at a sharp bend and what seemed like darker shadows.

"Well spotted. Come on Gary, let's leg it." Dan fell into a trot. He didn't manage to run; the body on his back was too heavy, and he was just too bloody knackered. Martinez overtook him. Fuck those twenty-something kids. Dan gritted his teeth and forced his body onwards while Johnson cried 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.

The dust cloud was getting a lot closer, Dan still hadn't made it to the recess in the embankment on one side of the dry river bed. Fuck, they only had a minute or two left.

"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. He managed to put Johnson down without hitting the rotor in his chest, and pushed the body into what was almost a miniature cave formed by erosion. Johnson, scrambled with his hands, trying to help. Thankfully Jackson had enough strength left to pull himself deeper inside, despite the broken leg.

Dan threw the rifle down and the bergen off his back, and shouted orders at Martinez. "Backpack, get the blanket."

Martinez pulled out the dust-coloured covering. Their best chance for survival was to camouflage themselves. Dan took the top and dropped the blanket over the mouth of the recess, holding it down with his left elbow, he piled stones onto the top edge to keep the blanket up. Shit, he could already hear the engine of the vehicle, and he wasn't naïve enough to trust it was the rescue team.

“Fuck.” No more time left. Their disguise had to do or they’d die. He slipped into the hole and landed on the mass of bruises on his left side, but was lucid enough to pull closed the corner of the blanket behind him.

Lying on his belly, beside Martinez, with the two injured men behind them, he whispered, “Good luck to us.” Dan unslung the rifle and flicked off the safety. He’d be a crap aim with just one good hand, but he’d do what he could. He saw Martinez 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 peered out from underneath the blanket-shield, muzzles aimed into the wadi.

They were there. Voices, engine, dust and shouts. Checking the wadi. Dan saw Martinez’ lips moving and knew the guy was praying.

Two vehicles with open topped roofs, men clinging to the sides. One was a battered Landrover, the other a pickup truck. Of course, what else. Paint was peeling from the first, which appeared to have once been a military vehicle, the truck a rusted ramshackle red.

Dan was sweating, fully concentrating. They were so close he could hear every word, understood most of it, and none of it was pleasant, especially what those bastards were planning to do should they catch them alive. Dan ground his teeth when he heard what they had done to Campbell’s corpse. No, no way he’d let the Yanks know what happened to their comrade. The dog tag was in Dan’s pocket, that would have to do.

Minutes seemed like endless hours while the men slowly drove towards them along the dried river bed, weapons at the ready. Dan only hoped their disguise was good enough. The Landrover came closer and closer.

Dan’s heartbeat stopped. Martinez’ breath had become barely audible. There was absolute silence. Jackson had to be covering Johnson’s mouth to keep the kid’s moans from escaping.

Now the guy in the passenger seat of the Landrover was almost directly opposite them, looking around, to the left and then to the right. They were close enough to smell him. Kill him. One heartbeat, another. Silence, still no sound from any of them.

One breath, and perhaps never another if that bastard just looked down, then...he turned to the driver and waved his hand, as if indicating they should search further along the wadi.

Dan almost sighed with relief. He'd never heard a sweeter sound than the engines of the vehicles revving up and moving away. Thank fuck for the army's scratchy blankets, and the colour of sand and dust in this godforsaken place.

"Shit, 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 and nodded. The rag around his head was sweat soaked and he hurt like fuck. He had a fair idea what the others felt like, and the lack of movement in the kid meant he was getting rapidly worse. "You're right. Our best bet right now is to hole up. They might be back, and it'll get fucking cold in a couple of hours." Dan pulled the blanket slightly to the side, letting 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 in a valiant attempt to keep the guys' spirits up. "Water, dry sarnies and bikkies, anyone?"

"Bikkies?" Jackson commented weakly from the back of the cave. He was keeping up remarkably well despite the bandages around his leg being soaked with dried blood. "You Brits and your weird language."

Dan laughed. "It'll be sandwiches and cookies for you, then, or nothing." Pulling the bergen close, he rummaged one-handed in the bag, pulled out the parka, then water and food together with a few packs of bandages.

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. Johnson slipped in and out of consciousness, until the sounds of his pain became louder. Dan checked him over, figuring out how many hours it had been since he'd had the morphine.

Martinez offered his own syrette when Chris started to whimper loudly. Dan delivered the shot before another bandage was fastened across the kid's chest.

They all rested, nursing their injuries, with Dan frowning at his thickly swollen wrist and Martinez prodding gingerly at his neck, before holding his head

in his hands. Jackson lay still, fighting the pain, and Johnson was knocked out by the morphine.

The sun was sinking rapidly. "Okay, 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."

He raised his brows when Martinez dared to question his decision and got out the bigger calibre ammo. "Sure you've heard about Mad Dog's speciality? Faggots like me don't need sleep. You guys cuddle up to keep warm, and this poof here will guard your beauty sleep." He bared his teeth in an exaggerated grin. That 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 and simply doing what he 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 them rearrange themselves as the sun went 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 a barrier to the cold night air.

"Mad Dog?"

Dan turned his head at Martinez' quiet voice.

"We'll make it, won't we?"

All he could see of the young Yank was the white of his eyes and teeth.

"We might just live."

Dan settled in for the long haul. It didn't matter if he was in pain or tired. Didn't matter a shit; in fact, it came in rather useful. It would keep him awake despite the weariness and exhaustion. Cradling the rifle in his lap, the useless left hand wrapped inside the parka, Dan tried to ignore the throbbing in the broken bones and peered at the silent desert night through a small gap at the blanket's corner.

He didn't mind keeping watch in the silence and the overpowering darkness. It was something he 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.

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, still loved and always would. 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. Why couldn't he just accept the fact they were fucked to hell and back, and could never be apart. Only through death, and even that had failed, hadn't it?

Dan stared up into the sky while listening to the breathing of the men behind him. His charges. How funny that a man like him, who'd been operating on his own most of his life, was now trying to save those three. The Cold War was over, and suddenly they had all become allies. Him, those kids, and the one he'd asked to come and rescue them.

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. But he regretted nothing. Nothing at all, except, perhaps, the inability to feel sorry.

Dan fished for a cigarette. Now he had rested for a bit, he was craving the nicotine. He managed to light it one-handed, 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.

The hours dragged by slowly while weighing heavy on his weary mind. 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.

* * *

Jean's skill was impressive, navigating with no light, trusting his human senses, manoeuvring the jeep with an uncanny instinct for the treacherous bitch that the Iraqi desert was. Finding his way like an ocelot in the dark, a small, nocturnal predator that could somehow pierce the darkness. Vadim 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. He forced that thought down.

He stared out over the barren landscape barely visible under the light of a half moon. 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.

"The downed copter should be somewhere around here. Best not get too close in case they're watching it. Start heading towards ten o'clock; we're trying to get to that big wadi over there. We'll head south and see if we can pick up their tracks. They'd try to get as far away from the crash site as possible to avoid being found."

"You want to do the driving on the way back?"

"Can do. Could also man the gun. Should be cosy back there."

Jean grinned. "Spetsnaz can do just about anything that makes an enemy miserable."

While the country was still completely empty, there were a few scraggly dusty barren trees standing around near what had to be the dried river bed. The terrain turned rougher, too; the ride got bumpy. "Make no mistake," Vadim said 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."

"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 with Dan can't have been all kicking and screaming. I disbelieve."

* * *

Dawn was breaking at last. Dan was still awake and freezing. Curled up into a ball to keep body heat in, his head resting against the earthen wall, he had listened to the moans of pain throughout the night, glancing now and again towards the interior of the miniature cave. Martinez had been snoring; he'd no doubt have a concussion-induced headache from hell when he woke. Dan dreaded to think what Jackson felt like. Chris was thankfully mostly out of it.

The sky was turning a dark turquoise in the east. 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 because of the tiredness he'd be unable to think straight 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 these guys, perhaps because he was simply so much older than they were. Even the pilot was no older than his late twenties.

Wiggling his toes, Dan accidentally moved his left hand, wincing as he did. The wrist was stiff now, but the pain had turned into a constant, dull throb only just bearable. At least it had kept him awake. The pain and his thoughts. Rummaging in his bergen, Dan produced more food, cut it up into portions before checking the water. Enough for all of them to get by for a few hours more. 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.

The Yanks weren't particularly liked by those insurgents, too similar to the Mujas' hatred for the Soviets. He snorted softly, being a Brit wasn't much better. He had a funny feeling he'd be considered as nothing better than Big Daddy America's spit-licking lapdog. No more bullterrier, let alone Empire, but Dan just couldn't give a shit.

He was about to wake Martinez when he noticed the faint sound of a vehicle in the distance. Were the bastards coming back? Or was there a chance for rescue?

* * *

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.

“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.

“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 makeshift cave, Dan crouched, rifle at the ready. He had alerted Martinez; Jackson was awake as well, despite the pain and blood loss; only the kid continued to hover in semi unconsciousness.

“I have no idea who the fuck they are,” Dan murmured to Gary, whose sweaty face 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, 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 along here, but I can’t see anything.”

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 he called out quietly, “Dan?” He 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. There, suddenly, he was sure he’d heard a voice. 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. Trusting his senses, Dan took a small stone and threw it out into the wadi. Waited, then threw another. A third one in his hand.

Clack. Vadim paused, frowning, wondered if he’d kicked a stone loose. He 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.” Vadim kept staring ahead, a strange feeling in his guts. Like he was being watched. 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 hunches, 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, was familiar, and he nodded to Martinez before he threw another stone, this time closer. Deep inside, he knew who was moving out there, 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 this time, his name, and he’d recognise the voice amongst a thousand.

Placing his hand on Martinez to reassure him, before he called out quietly, “Here. Over here, Vadim.” Dan didn’t quite know what he felt in such an intense mix of jumbled emotion. The biggest one was 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. Vadim shouldered his weapon and moved towards Dan’s voice. He knew it was him and couldn’t help feeling elated, 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. Vadim didn’t know what to say, so instead he took the canteen off his PLCE and offered it, arm stretched out. “We brought you kit,” he stated, looking at Dan all the time, 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 wasn’t sure what to do with the canteen. Noticed a drop of water on Dan’s lips. Shit. He still noticed those details.

“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.”

Martinez came crawling out, swaying as he stood, despite his efforts to find his balance.

Vadim forced himself to look over at the American, while standing in front of Dan, reluctant and unable to fall into the easy camaraderie soldiers shared. He wasn’t a soldier anymore. 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. “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 quick look, not interested in them at all. For all he cared, they were walking—or crawling—meat. It was Dan, always Dan. He just stood there, not feeling worthless—first time in ages.

“And I...” Dan shrugged. “Just a little more worse for wear than usual.” And awake and on adrenaline for more hours than he cared to remember.

“Krasnorada. Part of cavalry,” Vadim murmured and stepped towards Martinez, offering him the canteen. Martinez took it with a “thanks”, and had a good drink before he crawled back inside the cave to share the water out amongst the others.

Vadim turned his attention back to Dan. “Okay. We’ll get you ready to go. Should use time while they are still praying and facing Mecca.”

Dan saw the second man returning, and knew the moment he saw him that it was Jean. How damned fitting. He shook his head in wry amusement. 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.”

He would have killed 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 need to get Chris and Ken checked over, possibly re-bandaged. Water now, breakfast will have to wait.”

Jean nodded. “You relax and have a bite; Vadim and I check on your team there.” He handed Dan a bottle and a couple of energy bars. “Vadya, help me with the guys.”

Dan sat down, trusting the Russkies to deal with the mess, while Jean handed out more water and food to the Yanks, then checked on the wounds, getting the worst casualty ready to be transported to the jeep.

Vadim helped, every now and then looking over at Dan. Jean murmured under his breath in Russian: “See? It’s a good start.”

“Fuck you,” said Vadim, almost silently. He went back to the Lannie to get a blanket so they could carry the kid who looked more dead than alive but was still

clinging on, 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. He 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, his head on his knees. Fast asleep.

Jean crouched and touched Dan's shoulder. "Hey. Home express leaves now." Vadim checked on the men in the Landrover again, swallowing the bitter taste that crept up. The familiarity. That trust. He fished for another bottle and drank, concentrating on what he had to do. He'd rip Jean's throat out later in camp.

"Uh..." Dan mumbled. "Fuck." 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. "Got water?"

"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 should Dan falter again. Vadim gritted his teeth.

They made their way to the long wheel base Landrover, with the kid lying stretched out in the back, the pilot lying on one bench and Gary sitting on the opposite one. "Front or back for me?" Dan said. 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 it made Dan laugh.

"Copy." Dan was still grinning when he clambered into the passenger seat, arranging himself and the weapons, rifle right there. He found the two litre water bottle wedged between seat and door and had at least half of it.

"Been some time." Vadim climbed into the driver's seat, started the machine and turned back into the wadi, which was their best bet. Providing good solid ground and a little cover. Of course, it was also a likely place for a trap.

"Any idea how long it will take us to get out of enemy territory?" Dan was 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.

“Six hours,” Vadim said, going for speed above stealth—he wanted to cover as many miles as possible while the towelheads were still busy with prayer and breakfast.

“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 was talking in Russian, he didn’t want the Yanks to hear. Jean was a different matter.

Vadim cast him a sideways glance. “Yes. We’ll grow an escort when we are on safer ground for the others to operate. 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.

“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. He 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 and scanned the horizon before he traced their route on the map, trying to find the safest way. He had to give up in the end. “Nothing but open terrain. 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.”

Dan didn’t need to say anything, and even Jean kept shut for once.

They covered ground fast, Vadim risking the jeep’s axles at several points when he just barged through rough patches that Jean would have evaded on the way in—but back then they’d 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 survived. Unlike another young soldier, back in the Afghan mountains.

Vadim's whole body was 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 onto open terrain.

The bend turned sharply, making it impossible to see ahead. All of the men fell silent. Concentrating on every little sign, scanning the area, brightly lit by the merciless 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. Bang. A sudden flash and almighty noise shook the vehicle.

Dan was thrown out of the passenger seat, slamming his head against the roof. A grenade must have exploded right near the left front wheel.

“Fuck!” he yelled, by instinct grabbing hold of the open window sill, but his left hand was useless. He lost orientation as the Landrover began to topple. “Get hold of the wounded!” was all he could shout, falling out of the seat and sliding towards the driver when the Lannie tipped over onto its right side.

Vadim got his bearings before the car tipped over. He managed to kick the door open and throw himself clear, before crawling through a tunnel of limbs and blood. He grabbed hold of an assault rifle on the way. Jean had managed to free himself as well, scrambling behind the Landrover and out of the way.

Dan had been knocked out momentarily when his head hit the steering wheel. He regained consciousness the next second, dizzy, yet already trying to get out of the car. Luckily, the Landrover presented the underside of its carriage to the enemy, and the heavy metal stopped the bullets that were being fired in almost incessant volleys from across the wadi. If they hit the tank he'd be a goner, fried to a crisp.

Vadim wiped his face, noticed blood on his hand, but he didn't feel the sting of sweat in a fresh wound, so he supposed it wasn't his.

“We’re fucked!” Vadim shouted to Jean. Jean bared his teeth in an exasperated grin. Vadim risked a glance. Dan was still in the 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.

“Jean, get the fucking rifle!”

Jean was dragging out the worst casualty. The Yank with the concussion only needed to be turned into the right direction and yelled at to get his ass going and collect the other man.

Vadim cursed, grabbed the assault rifle, reached for the pocket with mags. He had plenty of ammo, plus hand grenades. Jean was still dragging the pilot out, pulling and tearing despite the moans of pain. At least the 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. Just 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, hoping the dirt and dust covered him enough so he could flank. Suicide on all counts.

Dan had managed to turn around enough so he could 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 wreck, but his leg was stuck between passenger seat, gear stick, driver’s seat and steering wheel. “Fuck!” he hissed between his teeth. No way he’d give up. He 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 it was. “Fuck, no! Vadim!”

Redoubled strength came to him, as he frantically pushed, pulled and rattled at anything that was likely to give to get him out of the fucking wreck.

“Keep your head down, Dan!” Jean pulled a knife and hammered it into the soft top.

Dan was glad the Landrover had come to lie on its side, one lucky thing in a string of “fuck yous” from fate.

Slicing the heavy cloth open, Jean worked frantically. “I should be returning fire to give Vadim cover. We don’t know how many insurgents there are.” He leaned inside to help free the leg. “We need another shooter. You can rest later.”

“Get me out; get me the fuck out!” Dan wasn’t in the mood for jokes, all he could see was Vadim running, firing, and throwing himself into the lion’s den.

With combined effort they finally got Dan’s leg free, skinning it in the process, but he couldn’t give a shit. Jean pulled Dan behind the vehicle for cover.

“My hand’s fucked. Aim’s not as good it should be. I’ll cover those bastards broad-range; 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 put, while Dan snatched the rifle that was still in the cab and 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 random, protecting the lunatic, making it impossible for the insurgents to lift their heads above their position.

Jean lined up shot after careful shot, shooting at anything that moved.

Suddenly, screams, and somebody jumped out of cover to run, keeping his head covered. Dan saw Jean take aim before shooting him in the chest, twice, making the man crumple. And another explosion. Hand grenade.

“Holy fuck, yes!” Dan yelled, while he sprayed the insurgent’s area with bullets. The explosion tore across the desert. When the dust settled, Dan saw bodies, limbs, torn flesh. He stopped firing for a moment to listen. Nothing. He shouted at Jean to 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, smothered in red dirt. Looking tired, but grinning a shit-eating grin that indicated adrenaline was in overdrive, and every cell in his body celebrating the fact it was alive. He made the ‘all clear’ sign

towards them, then walked across to where the explosion had happened. There were shots. Two. Again, two shots. Vadim finishing 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. "He's still a lethal cunt." He smirked at Jean. "Fucking bastard did it." Pure pride shone through those words, before he turned his attention to the three Yanks.

"Yeah," Jean murmured. "That's something he *can* do."

Johnson was unconscious again, 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 weak.

Jackson was staring at Dan, pain written all across his dirt-encrusted face, holding a leg that was drenched in fresh blood, still trying to grin, giving a thumbs-up. Dan patted him on the shoulder. "You okay, mate?"

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. Dan grinned. "Bet you think we're all lunatics, eh?"

Gary grimaced, "No, buddy, but that Russian. He's fucking crazy."

Dan laughed with relief at 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. "They have a pickup truck. Plus MG on tripod."

Dan watched silently as he wiped his face. It was caked in red dirt and dried red blood, but no visible wounds anywhere.

Vadim returned the rag to his pocket. "We just grab the Yanks and get them across the river. But we need to go now. They had a radio, means they're in touch with others."

Dan nodded. "You two get Chris on a blanket, Gary and I will help Ken, alright?" The Yank crew greeted this order with exhausted stares and tired nods. That wasn't good enough. Dan used the same trick he'd used before. "I said, *alright, guys?*" in a sharp voice that left no room for questioning. He earned himself some "hoo-rah," which made him grin.

“Right, then, let’s get going.” Dan was so knackered he could hardly move, but there was no alternative; no need to let anyone realise he was worn down to the bare bones. With the help of Martinez, he managed to get Jackson into the truck. Vadim and Jean carried Chris across the wadi then Jean ran back to collect all their essentials out of the wrecked Landrover.

Once they were all in the vehicle: Dan in the passenger seat, Vadim at the wheel and the others in the rear, Dan rested his head back and closed his eyes, murmuring, “just get us the fuck out of here.” Adding in Russian without looking at Vadim, “Please.”

Vadim started the vehicle; hands still slightly unsteady from the stress. He looked across 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. Pain welled up, and with it, tenderness.

He headed straight towards the base, kicking up a massive flag of dust behind them, driving like a man possessed, but at least the desert was smoother ground. He followed Dan’s directions, Jean held onto the MG on the back and Martinez made sure the casualties didn’t get too badly jostled.

Jean had brought a radio from the Landrover. He sent a message back to base, saying they had commandeered a truck. Eventually, helicopters appeared above them. Americans. Jean waved at them. “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 and relaxed back into the seat, staring straight ahead while a slow smile crept across his features. “We made it,” He murmured, then louder again, when the compound came into view, “we fucking made it.”

They raced towards the gates and the first soldiers and medical teams came running towards them. Dan shouted, glancing backwards at the crew in the truck, “we goddamned motherfucking made it!” He laughed despite the pain, the exhaustion, the dust and noise and the fact it was all more than just half insane. Snatched from the teeth of death to live and fight another day.

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.

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 around for Vadim; couldn't see him, not in the crowd that came running up with stretchers and equipment.

He called out Vadim's name, shouted for Jean, but had to concede defeat at the hands of a crowd of British uniforms plus a whole team of medics who insisted on putting him on 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 an examination table. Before he could say "poof", 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 to the surgeon who checked the wrist, injecting local anaesthetics to prepare him for the x-rays. But all was forgotten. Too much effort. He was vaguely aware he was slipping rapidly and without resistance into an utterly exhausted sleep while they were still working on him. No doubt there would be x-rays and general anaesthetic to operate and reset the broken bones.

* * *

When Dan woke, none of the other beds in the tent were occupied and there was silence except for the hum of the air con. It took him a moment to orientate himself. The deep throb in his wrist reminded him what had happened. Well, he was alive. How about the others? He pulled the thin sheet away and glanced down to find he was no longer dirty except for a brownish yellow iodine covered leg and was dressed in a pair of shorts that were clearly not his own.

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, which he wolfed down while his hand was checked over yet again. He got the most important information first of all: as far as the Brits knew, all three of the American crew were alive. Eventually he would be summoned to a debriefing. He bided his time, listening half-heartedly to a lecture about the painkillers he was to take, and how he was to deal with his bruises. A sudden

commotion in the doorway interrupted the nurse's explanation. Seemed the briefing had come to him as 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. By the time they were satisfied, it had gone pitch black outside. Dan wanted to get away from medical supervision; he needed some time on his own, he argued, and he had some personal things to do. 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 knows what. And, of course, the strict order not to drink any alcohol for at least a couple of weeks.

Dan muttered to himself when he stood outside at last, dressed in a brand new pair of shorts, t-shirt and flip-flops. All his gear was still in the downed helicopter and the bigwigs weren't going to make a special trip just for those. At least he still had his shades. He pushed them back over his eyes. 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 put on his parka to ward against the chilly night air and stood there. Dithering. Wondering. Where had the hatred gone? Just dissipated? And where was the pain?

* * *

The doctor had checked Vadim over only briefly. He was low priority, wasn't wounded, had only caught a bit too much sun, and that was it. A shower, then he dressed to be debriefed, felt he was probably only confirming Dan's and Jean's story. Eventually he was allowed to go.

He stripped again and went to bed, but sleep refused to come. For a long time he just lay there, restless. 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. Why had he offered to flank instead of letting Jean do it? Putting his own life on the line. He'd abandoned Dan, hadn't made an effort to get him out and instead went off alone. It had been the right thing to do, tactically, but what would Dan think about his willingness to leave him like that?

But then, Dan spent time with Jean, and not with him, so the priorities were different. Vadim groaned and shook his head at the thought. Dan and Jean—that image alone 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 now he doubted everything.

He got out of bed and dressed again. He didn't want to be caught without his gear and knife, then he stepped outside to breathe the 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'd been standing in the dark, unwilling to knock on anyone's hut, unable to bear company in the Mess, but not wanting to be on his own.

"Hey, Russkie," he called out quietly.

Vadim turned and saw Dan standing not far away, 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 didn't feel like being cooped up. Do you..." he stalled, didn't know what to say or even what he wanted. "Do you know a place to booze in peace?"

Vadim nodded upwards. "Up on the roof there. Good view and no patrol comes looking. Too lazy." He paused. Thought, against his will, Jean was probably right. Be nice. Talk. Flirt. Well, maybe start with the second part of that. He'd already 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 then." Vadim extracted the bag from Dan's hand. A silent offer to help.

Dan favoured the right side while walking, every bone in his body ached and every muscle was 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'd have elevators for scruffy old veterans."

“Strictly speaking we’re not supposed to be up 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. “Dan...one thing. I made a tactical decision today. It was...about tactics, nothing else.”

Dan groaned as he shuffled to sit in a position that was at least half-way comfortable. Vadim had been right—it was a good view, and a peaceful place. Was this somewhere he came when he wanted to get away from people? “What do you mean?”

“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?”

“Yes.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that. 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, that I would have risked your life. “Anything else.”

Dan tilted his head, studying Vadim while clamping the whisky bottle between his knees to open it one-handed. “In fact, I’ve only ever seen you operate in the field 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. I wasn’t very professional about it in Afghanistan.” That seemed the wrong thing to say, and Vadim ploughed on. “I did a lot of bad things. Not much I’m proud of.”

“Aye, but two things. First off, anyone in our job has done a lot of shit and secondly, that’s in the past.” Dan handed the vodka bottle to Vadim before taking a long draught from his cheap whisky. He coughed at the harsh burn. “There were very few things to be proud of, back then.”

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. He opened the

vodka and took several deep, deep swallows, savouring the burn all the way down the 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, 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 stared at the blue-wrapped plaster cast on his left wrist, before taking the shades off his eyes and putting them on the roof beside him. Now he could look at Vadim without any barrier. “The last two and a half years, or the shit you pulled last week?”

“Both.” Vadim 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 to you in prison, or what happened when you went into madman mode?” Dan felt as if he needed to drag each word out of Vadim, just like extracting a splinter from a puss-filled wound. “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 inside...make no sense to me. Or anybody else, I guess.” Vadim pressed his lips together, fought the despair, the darkness that threatened to well up and blind and deafen him to the world. “You, I recognize. Different, but still you. You seem...happier? You were more relaxed during the last...months. Like 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.” He took another mouthful, the whisky doing its job of dulling the senses. “It’s like having been taken apart and put back together again.” He petered off, once again looking out into the distance, before starting 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 struggle. 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 sense of strangeness, like nothing was real. Nothing left to feel, nothing left to remember, all used up by the simple necessity to stay 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 death sentence. 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." He 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 I'd last seen in Kabul." His fingers moved up and down the bottle, stalled at its neck. "Maggie tried to warn me, gave me articles, reports, all sorts of stuff from Amnesty International, trying to get me to understand what the KGB probably did 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 the one who's 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.

Dan didn't despise him for being a coward. For being so weak he had 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 away anything, 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.

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 his thoughts, and luring them out of 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. "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. Nothing."

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.

Gone. Past Tense. Past Perfect. It was over. But at the same time, Dan was sitting there, right here 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 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 would be back at 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 too 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. Too many brittle truths. “Russkie, if I said I didn’t love you, I’d be lying, as much as if I said I didn’t want you. I’m not a liar, so I won’t tell you that 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. 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 so much. Bad enough that Dan could feel that hurting himself more could bring relief.

Vadim’s jaw muscles twitched, and he looked out into the night of a country he had no idea about and would never understand, just like he had never really understood Afghanistan.

The beauty of destruction, the basics of life. You suffer, you bleed, you die. He 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, but couldn’t. Dan was the one that was bleeding. Driving the knife home with the things he held inside, gutting him even more would be 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. Vadim had been reduced to wanting, accepting the feelings were gone. Accepting that the little boy soldier, the fucking stupid Yank who sounded like

he'd just finished harvesting corn in Iowa last summer, was what Dan wanted. Easier, younger, and not a coward. Vadim had 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 Dan in Kabul had been easy, well, easier than this. Just show him how good sex could feel, let him come to his own conclusions. This time, Dan had known what making love felt like, and decided against it. But was it a decision or a reaction?

Mr Krasnorada, he heard the British doctor, you must be aware that since your torture, 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 simple. But easy? That one was difficult. "No, it's not easy anymore."

"No, it isn't," 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 the pain again. The bottle went to Dan's mouth. He shut his eyes and gulped down a quarter of it, wiping his lips afterward, catching a drop that had spilled down his chin.

Shifting position he opened his eyes and looked at Vadim. Really looked. His voice lower but still carrying all the intensity it ever could. "If I touch you now, would you never leave me again?" There was so much hope in his voice, 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, he reached to his side and opened the pistol holster. British issue, the exact same kind Dan carried. Merc now even by choice of tools.

He took out the mag, extracted 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 sideways at Dan; 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 injured 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 they said what he wanted to say. "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.

Dan looked at his palm, the bullet, but didn't close his hand. "Do you ever hate me, Vadim?" His voice carefully devoid of emotion. "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 me." He paused. "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. It was only that he had used Dan up, had needed to feed off the memories, use them to stay alive, 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 once. Not like you hated me." Vadim 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 supposed to 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. Nobody raised a voice." 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 so long. 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 good hand onto Vadim's thigh. Firm warmth beneath the cloth, as familiar as the bullet in his other hand.

"Two fucked up men." Dan murmured, "I haven't given up on them, yet."

Shoot me now, Vadim thought, amazed at how sane that thought felt. It wasn't. Death scared him. He didn't understand why he wanted Dan to be the one to kill him, if he had to die. Maybe that would make it less random, give his death some meaning, but the thought was so utterly wrong it gave him goose-bumps. Why? All he ever wanted. Dan was death and life, 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 giving up.

"No, you haven't given up. Not all that 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 man beside him. 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 complete it had rearranged every molecule.

"Did you believe them?" Dan murmured, his dark eyes almost black in the dim light.

The motion nearly made Vadim jump. There was always a promise in that touch, it was always close enough to grab his attention. The thigh 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 didn't smile. He'd paid a high price, but now he knew it had been worth every painful second. "I was worried that my message might make things worse, but I had to try. 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 his neck, swallowing hard. Throat too tight to swallow, fuck it. He leaned 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 the reality hurt, but maybe Dan would allow this.

Dan's hand came up, instantly, onto the back of Vadim's neck. Stayed there, a steady, warm, calloused presence. Dan tilted his head a fraction, until his cheek touched Vadim's hair. Waiting. Patiently.

Vadim wrestled with his thoughts, everything racing, things he wanted to say but would never find the words for. I took you with me, but I used you all up. I fed on the memories, and they kept me alive.

"Some point, only I was left."

Just happened. At some point, he 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, worse than the vomit and excrement. You were gone, devoured. "Like a dog eating its own legs. Twisted dark mirror." I was alone, and I looked at myself, and I hated what I saw, thought Vadim with utter clarity.

Dan's voice sounded near his ear, a rumbling, low ghost. "You said once that you are not a good man, but that you got by. I understood what you meant then, and I still do now." Tiny movements of Dan's head, minute friction, while his hand remained a stable presence against Vadim's neck. "It doesn't matter what you did, when you broke, nor why. The things you wanted, the greed—that's been and gone. Done and buried. You're here now. You've paid the highest price. Yourself."

Dan wasn't fully certain what the words meant, just that they somehow made sense. Craning his neck, his lips touched the shaved head.

A strange sound came from Vadim's throat at that touch. He pressed his eyes shut to not start crying with relief and truth and gratitude. The gratitude was

the worst; thankfulness that Dan was kissing him like a brother maybe, like family, like he cared and meant it. Maybe he wasn't forgiven. He didn't think Dan ever could or would, but Dan accepted it. Him.

Vadim fought the tears; he couldn't break down now. He should want and need, too. Want to screw their brains out, make amends, show what he felt. The thoughts that he had harboured the last weeks of making Dan pay, just gone, wiped away, petty ego nonsense. He forced himself to breathe steady, force the screaming and crying down, he wouldn't give in. Just wouldn't.

I wanted to be strong for you and for myself, and I wasn't.

He swallowed hard, throat still too tight. He fought the tears again. His head and chest felt like they were filled with acid.

Vadim finally managed to get his breath back, somehow managed to breathe that choking tightness away, then felt his body relax, because it couldn't hold the tension anymore.

"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 to fake strength: that impassive, stoic face that came naturally. He 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. He 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's a promise. Real and final. Dan's hand slowly slid 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. Plead. Comrades. Comrades who had exchanged a bullet.

I know what it says.

What was that? Vadim had no answer, and thinking about it hurt too much. The longing and tenderness and the darkness that was like acid on his brain.

Dan smiled. "We have a choice 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 took his hand off Vadim's shoulder, and grabbed 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 with several gulps of the cheap liquid. "Help me down, aye?" Dan dropped the nearly empty bottle. The pain in his body no more than a dull ache, thanks to the booze. He'd be dealing with whatever he felt in his heart...later.

"A...yes." Too easy to say "aye" when around Dan. Infectious, a stupid little linguistic habit that would be embarrassing and wrong now, like he was trying too hard to conform, to endear himself. Vadim couldn't go any 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.

Vadim helped Dan cross to the ladder; he was still favouring his right side, then went first. At the bottom he guided him along, holding Dan like he was a casualty, still coping 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 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 and hoped Dan, who was starting to grin at him like a boozed-up loony, was too drunk to notice. "Good night."

When Dan disappeared inside, Vadim went back to his own hut and finished the vodka, which helped him sleep.

1991 Chapter 27—Deliverance

August 1991, the Persian Gulf

Vadim woke with a blazing headache, not much different from when he'd fallen asleep. 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.

Vadim stood, swaying, feeling his stomach tight and empty, weak still, but, he thought with a vague irony, he'd live. He found 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.

He 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. Vadim stood in the entrance to his tin can and thought, whatever he did: go out, stay in, both were bad.

He still needed food. He headed towards the mess tent; there was always a bite, somewhere.

"Hey, Krasnorada."

And fuck *him*, too. Jean must have been lying in wait, only to jump him when he felt like shit. Vadim paused, not turning. Let Jean run around him like the barking dog he was. "Yes?"

"Payslip." Jean had a bundle of them in his hand. Vadim had thought he'd get it from somebody else. Hadn't even enquired about it.

He took the envelope, ripped it open, cast a glance. Numbers didn't compute. That much money. *Actually* in his account? As in, real money, real, black numbers? "Shit."

"Seems you are worth something after all," said Jean. 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 before. Exchanging it for roubles. The sum made even less sense.

"I'd blow my first proper pay," said Jean. "Heard it's custom."

"Not sure I can drink that much."

Jean grinned. "You'll be 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. He hadn't booked anything, felt almost nauseous at the prospect he could just walk out of 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. Something welled up—it was fear. "I guess."

Jean looked at him, far too inquisitive for Vadim's taste. Was he trying to be friendly, or just friendlier than the rest of the camp? And why? Why would he care?

"Dan's off for R&R, too." Pause. Waiting. 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 couldn't care. It remained on the outside, like everything else. The headache was worse than that.

"Guess you deserved it, didn't you," Jean added.

"If you say so, comrade team leader." Vadim gave him a nod. 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 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. Amazingly, he held credit; 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 debriefings, 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. 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.

He made his way to the mess bar; at least they provided 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 lay splayed across the table, trying to reach the white ball that was in an awkward position, only a might-be shot for a left-hander. Three of the guys were having a drink, and Jean stood close by, idly playing with his cue, holding it in the middle and letting it whirr around his hands like in a stupid action movie. He looked up when Dan stepped in, grinned and 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. "Take no notice, Pascal." Trotting over to the pool table, Dan raised his brows and rolled his eyes. "The bastard just got 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 about having Dan near, always trying to keep a friendly distance. Jean, of course, was a different matter; he swaggered right over to Dan and handed

him his own alcohol free beer, condensation 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 the hug. His ribs were giving him hell, but he sure as fuck didn't complain. He just grinned as an answer, then downed half 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. "Ah, shit, I'll get it." Giving Jean a dark glance, he put down the cue and left.

"Holy fuck, Pascal," Dan called after him, "you're not even my fucking type!" Jean huffed laughter. "Guess you got some sleep in alright after the briefings, eh, mate?"

"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." Dan grimaced. "Managed to get some shut-eye, just woke up, hungry, thirsty, bored. The usual shit." Dan gave Jean a quick wink.

Jean grinned as an answer.

"Seems the Russkie's asleep," Dan continued, "or at least ensconced in his hut. He didn't say anything, just looked funny at me when I saw him heading for the telephones. Wonder what he's planning?"

"I have a couple of guesses. After all, we spent some quality time together on the mission."

"Ain't you lucky." Dan drawled in a fake American accent. "And what would they be?"

Jean walked over to the vending machine, 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, trying to hide his interest, especially when Jean bent down to gather the can.

"My guess? He'll try something new."

“What, being ‘nice’ for a change?” Dan laughed, but it all went far too deep. Despite the humour, he didn’t want to pursue the subject. He still felt raw inside; every word spoken on the roof remained etched into his memory, and the bullet was stashed safely in his wallet.

Jean whistled. “You never know.” He opened the can, drank it seemingly without swallowing, then tossed the can into the trash. Wiping his lips to almost 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 whining on about old age, creaking bones, and war weary blisters?”

Pascal returned with a full plate of food and a bottle of water, and offered them to Dan, who pushed the empty beer bottle into Jean’s hands.

“There. Didn’t know what you wanted. Hope that does it.” Pascal 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, and nodded to Dan. “Let’s go outside.” He grinned at Pascal. “Rematch tomorrow?”

“Sure thing,” said Pascal.

“Right, then.” Dan walked out of the mess, waiting for Jean to hold the door open. “Since I haven’t got a fucking clue what happened today, thanks to the lovely CO and all of his cronies who debriefed me non-stop, 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. I assume you got your debriefing straight away?”

“Yeah. Basically in the running jeep.” Jean made the red spot flare up in the dark. “Well, I told my story, and Vadim told his. 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. His left was a kaleidoscope of reds, blues, greens, yellows and purples. "Did you see him today?"

"Yeah, I did." Jean sat on the bed, reached for a water bottle and had another drink. "He's different. Nicer. Like he's making some effort for once, to get people to not hate him. 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 I'm supposed 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, but they want to send me off to R&R. Wouldn't be surprised if I wasn't the only one."

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 isn't worth shit."

"No need." Dan grinned, chewing. "I speak some French, and I bet after a week or two I'd be fine." Shaking his head. "Thanks for the offer, mate, but you should go and visit your lady on your own. I'll see what I can do with my time; maybe fly back to New Zealand. I bought a farm there, bloody dilapidated and cheap as dirt, but fantastic views and an old orchard. Fancy it as the place I'll retire 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 suntan 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?” Trying to peel himself out of the parka, was awkward for Dan with the bruised left side. Jean reached out to help.

“You’ve got your lady. We’re just fooling around. Mates.” Dan stopped, looked at Jean. “Aren’t we?” He dropped 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 pillowng his head. “Vadim...that’s an entirely different kettle of fish. He knows I love him, always have. Last night I tried to explain why he can’t just walk back into my life.”

“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 placed slick hands on Dan’s back, touch firm, but far lighter on the bruises, just working to moisturize the dry skin. Lazy, gentle strokes, up to the shoulders, working with thumbs and fingertips, not palms.

Dan shrugged. “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.”

“What do you mean he won’t touch anybody?” Jean’s voice was level. “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.”

“Ah, yes. That. Poor bastard.”

Jean slid down to Dan’s lower back, using more force, but still mainly caring for the skin and less about the muscle. “Life’s short. You’d be fucking stupid if you didn’t make the most of it.”

“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. Would you stop seeing the other person?”

Jean arrived at the shorts. “Lift your ass.” He grabbed hold of the waistband and pulled them off, discarding them to the side. “Well.” Placing his slicked up hands on Dan’s ass, massaging it as well. “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, 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 whichever Jarhead doesn’t climb the tree fast enough.”

“Well, yeah, that’s right we aren’t, but even if we were....” Dan couldn’t help but grin at the mental image of shagging himself through several countries’ worth of regiments.

Jean took some more lotion and rubbed it into Dan’s lower legs and feet. “Well, might be selfishness talking here.” He continued up Dan’s thighs, including the insides. Rubbing the lotion in, he stopped at the crack, didn’t touch the dam or his balls.

“Hmmmm.” Dan almost purred. “Does that mean you’re 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 it. 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?”

Dan spread the fingers of his right hand underneath his face, lying comfortably, eyes falling further shut, the longer Jean was touching him. No tension, nothing but his aching body, relaxing under the skilled hands. Dan sighed with the comfort of it all, smiled, his legs opening even further to accommodate those clever fingers. This wasn't a matter of life and death, not even of gut-wrenching desire and heartfelt love and lust. This was Jean, his mate.

"Turn over so I can 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 he needed after the shit of the past weeks.

"You got a glorious ass there, Dan." Jean's fingers moved upwards. Thumbs slipping into the crack, hands massaging both cheeks. "Hope you don't mind if I wake you up in a few minutes...."

"Mmmmm..." Dan mumbled, "depends on why you'd want to wake me." 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.

"Hm?" Dan mumbled, couldn't be bothered to open his eyes when Jean got up and locked the door. "Whassup?"

"Nothing. Relax." Jean switched on the radio.

Taking a slow, deep breath, Dan cracked one eye open. "Hey, Frenchie..." he murmured while grinning lazily, "what's taking you so long?"

"Nothing much." Jean returned, now wearing a lot less, and straddled Dan's thighs, squirting more lotion into his hands and then returned 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'." Dan's body shifted back and forth, in 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.

"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?"

"Just checking whether you like the same stuff." Jean eased up, pulling his thumb out, and circling the hole again. More lotion, 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. 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 himself again. "Yeah..." Long drawn out moan, his body spoke his consent, didn't need any words.

Dan concentrated on the fingers inside him, fucking himself in slow, smooth motions, and moaning. Up on his knees now, with his left hand useless, he couldn't stroke his cock and support himself at the same time. Hard and weeping, almost flat against his stomach. Lost in the drawn-out lust, he didn't want to come yet.

Jean removed the fingers, causing Dan to protest. "Hey...."

Two hands pulled Dan's body closer, as Jean started 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. "I've got a condom on." He frowned. "You okay? Don't you 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-hearted permission, curiosity even. A lie, yet none. He knew, yet didn't.

"'s okay." Jean grinned at him. What a weird situation, the condom hanging off his cock. He 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, forcing his body to relax. "It's just that I don't let myself get fucked." Adding, "usually."

"What do I know about gay stuff anyway," muttered Jean.

"Pretty much, actually...." Dan breathed out. "For a straight guy."

Concentrating with that hand on his cock turned out to be difficult.

"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.

"I should think so." Jean laughed quietly. "Can I try?"

"What do you think my body is telling you." Dan 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..." he groaned, "is a cock..." drawing in a shuddering breath, Dan's cock jumped at the mental image, "to suck."

"Oh fuck," Jean 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...about being in the same...room...with me."

Jean pulled his fingers back. Shifting, then his cock entering Dan slowly, gently, at the proper angle, allowing Dan to move back against him, groaning deeply.

Dan fell easily into Jean's rhythm, able to accept the intrusion. He could feel his body accommodating the cock, the muscle yielding with barely any pain. "Not...bad," he exhaled.

"Yeah...not...bad." Moving slowly, tilting his hips, Jean hit Dan just right, teasing him with minute movements that made him sweat.

"Ah...yeah...shit..." 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 now, but pushing back and urging the other body to increase the pace.

Twisting his hips, going faster when Dan demanded it, and slower when they were getting there too fast. "Easy does it," Jean murmured. Taking his hand away to run it across Dan's sweaty, scarred stomach.

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 until then 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's movements became more erratic, simultaneously more forceful. 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 over the edge.

Jean cursed, thrusting deep and with force, but instead of collapsing on top of Dan he pulled back and out. Dan crashed down, head to one side, lying flat on his stomach and watched blearily as Jean shakily plucked the used condom off without spilling the stuff all over the place, and tossed it into an empty Styrofoam cup near the bed.

Jean stretched out, half lying on top of Dan. "What a nice way to...say...thank God 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 back, running his hand down Dan's flank. "Yeah. Here I was: unsuspecting straight guy, and 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 it had been damn good.

Jean laughed and yawned. "Fuck, I made it through the Legion straight, and then along comes Mad Dog." He reached out to turn the radio down.

"Why? Didn't you have any opportunities in the Legion?" Leering, Dan ever so carefully started to move. He had to change position and get his limbs functioning again. Sooner or later he needed to leave Jean's hut anyway.

Jean shifted, rolling over on his side. "Of course not. Everyone's straight, so 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, each arse more muscular than the next." Flashing a toothy grin, Dan finally managed to sit upright. He 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 sat up, legs dangling over the edge of the bed, and kissed and stroked Dan's face and chest, suppressing a grin every now and then. "Sure, Mate."

* * *

Lunchtime the next day, after his latest debriefing, Dan ambled across to the gates of the US base compound. He grinned, in high spirits despite the boring meeting. His bruised ribs were freshly strapped, left arm dangling, grubby-white plaster cast scrawled all over with signatures and silly doodles, right hand in his trouser pockets, his sore leg and side reminding him of his age, but the strangely pleasant ache in his arse reminding him of something else entirely. Customary shades over his eyes, he whistled to himself slightly off-key.

Seemed he'd turned into something of a celebrity amongst the Yanks. He nodded and grinned good natured acknowledgements to guys he'd never seen

before. Saving comrades' lives seemed to have a mellowing effect; no-one 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 him. 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 or so years ago.

"You're the one who jumped into Iran," the Yank drawled.

Dan nodded, shrugged.

"You're the one who 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 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 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 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 dot, Dan sauntered through the gates of the American camp. Once again whistling to himself, this time in 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.

Dan nodded to a couple of Jarheads, and dodged their 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.

When he'd checked in with an officer in the admin block earlier that day, he'd been informed Chris Johnson had been flown back home, 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 hurried to the vehicle park, 1605 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. The flash of polarised shades in the sun, then a movement, right where a row of armoured personnel carriers was parked.

Near the second to last one, furthest away from the hustle of the camp, Dan just managed to dodge a fist coming straight at him.

"You're good," the Delta drawled, chewing gum while peeling out of the shadow. "And late."

Dan didn't attempt to defend himself. "Aye. Old but good." His gaze 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.

The door slammed shut behind him, and he found himself in the gloom. The other man sat on the metal floor in front of the jump seat. Dan glanced around and sat on one of the five seats along the side, facing Hooch. Making himself comfortable, legs braced apart, desert boots firmly planted.

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. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I do, too.”

“Good, but 69’s out. Whole left side’s knackered.” Dan gave a short laugh.

Lying on his side, kneeling, or in any other strenuous position trying to give head one-handed? Wasn’t worth it. Far too acrobatic, anyway.

Hooch shifted the gum from one side to the other. “Okay.” 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, letting the shorts drop down to his ankles. He couldn’t stand up straight in the troop carrier, 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. He hooked a finger beneath his shades to push them on top of his forehead. His eyes almost as dark as Dan’s.

“Shrapnel?”

“Aye,” Dan grinned, amused at both the lack of reaction and the acute perception. “Suicide bomb, Afghanistan.”

Hooch shuffled closer until he knelt between Dan’s legs. His callused hand briefly cupped heavy flesh in a strong grip, weighing the goods then taking his hand away. “Shaved nuts. Convenient.” He let Dan pluck the shades off his forehead and place them safely to the side, where they were soon joined by Dan’s own. The Delta studied Dan’s cock without touching it.

Dan stared intently down at the head of his cock as it hardened and grew. The situation 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 glanced up at the demand, his intent dark gaze meeting Dan’s in the gloom. He silently nodded and spat out the gum before sucking in Dan’s cock almost to the hilt.

Pulling in his breath with a hiss, Dan let his head drop forward as he watched 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 the man’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 with the emphasis on professional.

“Aye.” Dan looked at the man, faces at the same height.

Hooch drew up, straightened, and sat on his heels.

“Want to fuck my throat?”

Hooch raised one brow and one corner of his lips.

“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 under the low ceiling.

Dan’s one-handed fumbling effort with the Delta’s fatigue trousers, was 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. Dan grinned. “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, just twisted his neck, flexed his shoulders for a second 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 glanced up to indicate he was ready and perfectly prepared to take that cock like a good soldier. And take it he did.

With his hand guiding the man’s buttocks, Dan encouraged Hooch to use the strength of his hips, to let loose and fuck his throat, while he concentrated on relaxing and adding suction and tightness as much as possible.

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 restrained 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, taking 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 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 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 limit. 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 another 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 picked up his shades and slipped them on, moving towards the exit hatch which Hooch pushed open. He looked around outside, 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 whistled all the way back into camp.

* * *

Vadim rapped his knuckles on Dan’s metal door. Scrubbed up, shaved, clean clothes, not too obvious, yet he was fucked because Dan would still notice he’d made an effort. Had struggled with what to wear, whether he should just cancel the thing and go alone. He felt stupid with the manila envelope in his hand. Jean might be inside; he’d interrupt them. Nauseous fear stabbed him at the thought. Not Jean. Not him. Anyone else, but not fucking Jean.

Dan looked up, surprised, he wasn’t expecting anyone, not at that time, barely 1800 hours. The guys would still be at work. He was naked, just about to head off for the showers, the plastic bag for his plaster on the chair.

“Aye?”

He 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, warring between relishing the voice and a strange sensation of dread.

Vadim.

"Just a sec!" He 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 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 and biting or tail wagging and tongue lapping, depending on what his Russkie wanted him to feel?

"Haven't seen you since the night we came back."

Making way for Vadim to enter, 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 a scratch.

"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, scanning Vadim from head to toe. Looking, truly looking without hatred and without emotions threatening to drown or suffocate him. Just seeing a man he hardly knew. His voice softened. "I'm fine, really am. Apart from the broken wrist, just bruises and stuff." He shrugged lopsidedly. "You wanted to talk to me?" Indicating the bed and the chair, the only places 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 there anyway. 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 stared uncomprehendingly at Vadim, expecting further explanations. When none came forth, he sat on the bed. Indicating the chair when Vadim remained standing. “Just push the plastic bag to the side; it’s for the plaster.”

Vadim sat 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 now, whatever the feeling, whatever the history.

We can try to 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?” he murmured under his breath, staring at the brochures in disbelief. One word jumped out at him. Thailand.

“Oh, my....” Breathing out, he began to smile, somewhat bewildered.

Vadim noticed his own tension, shoulders and chest stiff, stomach a knot of tightness. So far it was looking good, but he was waiting for the ‘no thanks’.

Dan leafed through the official letters of confirmation, then flicked through the colourful pages. ‘R&R’ was not the proper term for this, luxury would be better: 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 thought of frequenting a beauty farm. Yet memories came back in a flash: the way Vadim liked to be shaved smooth, and how he loved the water. Back in the hamam, water and steam, the laughter, the tenderness, the...*Lapushka*.

Dan felt a long drawn-out pain throb through 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'd had to check a dictionary when they asked.

"Did you also tell them I always have two desserts, minimum?" Dan grinned, joking, yet unable to shake off one thought: Vadim, I don't know you anymore. The man sitting there felt like a stranger. But hell, he was going to get to know him. Nothing would stop him now. 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 looks 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. 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 up the brochures and put them in a pile on the bed beside him. The towel slipped as he stood up, but he caught it, just at the line of dark hairs. Pulling it back up, he said quietly, "Thank you, Vadim."

Vadim's gaze had darted there. He knew the body so well, and right now wanted it so much. The smell. The taste. Even the cock down his throat. He glanced up. Using his name meant something. Dan had done it deliberately, keeping things formal, just by mentioning his name. "You're welcome." Vadim looked away again, avoiding 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’ve never seen you swim.” 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’m looking forward to it.” Dan smiled as he nodded. “Guess I have to buy swimming trunks there, eh? No chance of finding them around here.” Since losing some of his gear in the helicopter crash, his wardrobe consisted of t-shirts, shorts, jumpers, parka, BDUs, flip-flops and combat boots. Nothing else.

“Kuwait’s fully stocked. There are shops at the resort or you 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 seemed wrong somehow. Let alone the fact Vadim had been 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, the Frenchman without past or allegiance, he’d relish that. Just another of his small victories. Bastard.

Vadim glanced 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. Vadim glanced at his 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, a bundle of elastics close by.

Vadim took the bag. Standing close, he could feel the warmth emanating from Dan’s body. Could smell him, 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. Wanted to stay and talk, but he was keeping Dan from his shower, and from meeting one of his friends. Wanted to pat Dan’s shoulder, but 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 searched 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?”

“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.

“If you want to, I’ll teach you when I’ve got both my hands back and my ribs stop giving me grief.” Dan smiled at him.

Vadim nodded. “I’ll give it a try.”

“Okay, 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 turned wistful. “Doing...hand to hand with some guys who want to pick up 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 to do 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 polite 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. “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 sat on the sole chair in his tin hut. Feet propped up on the bed, slouched and as comfortable as he could be, at least for a while. Smoking leisurely with his eyes half closed. Relishing the heat and burn of the nicotine as it travelled deep into his lungs. Exhaling slowly, he watched the smoke curl towards the ceiling. Sunbeams 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 all and sundry. But not everyone. Not by himself, for sure. Dan pulled his lips back from his teeth in a self-mocking grin. Time off to relax and heal, too much time. 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.

“Fuck it!” Dan murmured and jerked upright, wincing at the movement. Those goddamned bruises. He ground the fag into the floor until it was just 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 Vadim's hut and not take no for an answer. But for once he couldn't ignore his mind, nor those thoughts, which seemed determined to interfere with his basic needs.

No more the man he had once been. No longer the reckless squaddie, driven by testosterone.

Dan shook his head and groaned as he stood up. 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 his mouth in a few hours. Shame when he came back he probably wouldn't see that particular Yank again A real waste of man material, unless...

Dan's grin turned into a fully fledged smirk. 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 his flip flops, couldn't be arsed with the one-handed struggle of tying 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.

With his pass acting as a magic wand, Dan was almost waved through. After answering a few questions, he exchanged friendly words with the guard, before gaining entrance. Sauntering over to the work area, he kept an eye out for Matt.

The kid had to be somewhere, just a question of prying him away from whatever he was doing. Couldn't be seen talking too long with any one guy, or the 'faggot' rumours would spread, 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. Fifteen minutes before he was due to meet the Delta. Perfect.

The young Jarheads greeted Dan 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.

It was Matt who managed to find an excuse after a few exchanges of shoulder slapping pleasantries, steering Dan away 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 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, taking a moment to process the information. "You'll be on R&R by then." He 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 waggled his brows above the shades, smirking in a face-splitting grin. "Don't tempt me."

Matt simply laughed again, glancing backwards when he heard some call out his name.

"Got to be off, Mad Dog, but whatever it is you're planning, you sure I'll like it?"

“Damn sure. Think of it as a gift.” Dan grinned. “Just trust me, and...trust yourself. Aye?”

Matt didn’t look convinced. “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 wandered over to the vehicle park.

Hooch was waiting at the same M113, at exactly the agreed time. Not that Dan would have expected anything else. The encounter was 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. In the comedown of the aftermath, when Dan struggled not to reach for a fag to avoid the suspicious smell in the carrier, Hooch readjusted his shades.

“Can you get off base in two days, at 1400 hours?” Dan asked while one-handedly closing his shorts.

Hooch’s brows shot above his shades.

“I got a safe house, outside.”

The Yank’s brows steeped.

“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.

“Okay.” Hooch shrugged, pushing the rear door open. “You there?”

“Afraid not, mate. I’m off to a Thai beach.” Dan waved his plastered hand about. “But here’s the map.” Pushing a piece of paper into the Delta’s hand.

Hooch hesitated, but merely shrugged in the end and let Dan lower himself out of the vehicle.

“You be there?” Dan looked up.

“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 his way through the vehicle park and towards the exit.

1991 Chapter 28—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 t-shirt. He'd get anything else he needed when they arrived.

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 occasional stares from other mercenaries who'd never seen him in anything but camo, naked, or a towel. Krasnorada has a life, is what that look 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. He didn't expect much, didn't expect anything to grow back, apart, maybe, but 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 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 his right hand resided in his shorts pocket. Grinning as he came closer, ignoring everybody 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. The story about them had made the rounds so often, the novelty had to wear off at some point.

Dan threw the bergen, only lightly packed as he'd lost most of his gear in the helicopter crash into the back of Landrover and climbed in. Opening the door to hang out at the last minute, he shouted across the camp, "See you in two weeks, girls, keep your balls blue for me. I'll miss your pretty arses!" Laughing his head off, he slammed the door shut, getting the driver to speed off with screeching tyres.

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 jarheads. Well. Screwing with one of them likely did that. He shook his head, tried to not think of Donahue, or how pretty the kid was. He stretched out his legs, but couldn't keep his eyes from searching the landscape. 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 Vadim'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 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.

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. 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 made 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.

Phuket airport, and then a 50 minute commute in air-conditioned buses to Mukhdara Beach Resort. Secluded bungalows, two of which Vadim had reserved. 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 bergen right there and then, looking around the huge airy room of his bungalow. Over-sized bed which was 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."

"Okay, yes." Dan was too distracted to answer coherently. Everything was too big, too grand, and almost 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 in with 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 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 brought 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. As long as he had his shades on he could ignore any ill-disguised stares at his scarred stomach.

He pondered about 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 resort. Apparently, everything was provided, and what wasn't would be if they wanted it. He opened the doors to the veranda, and glanced over to Dan's bungalow. Neatly arranged so he couldn't actually see what was going on.

He frowned thoughtfully, then headed back to Dan's place, walking across the white sand and rapping 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’ll 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 him, as if checking out 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 from the deep-seated understanding that he didn’t like the nicotine smell. “Maybe not if it fitted, but this one makes you look like you’re 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’ve 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. “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 inhale. He remembered. Remembered everything, no matter how hard he 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 turn to 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 here—he knew the stories from Jean’s crew—youths, children, even both genders, and a couple very odd combinations if he trusted the reports that floated around camp. Finding something to blow steam with was easy, and if Dan 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 returned to base, and Dan would go back to Donahue and Jean the bastard, or 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, with the tightness about his features, the unblinking, impassive gaze, like a soldier on parade.

Dan stood 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 him approach, tried a smile, but the light-hearted fun was becoming harder. “I tried to close the shirt, but the damned buttons are a nightmare. Either you 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 said nothing; the lump in his throat made talking difficult.

The shops were still open. Vadim couldn’t see any closing times posted outside the small wooden huts with reed roofs. Inside stacks of goods 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.

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 supermarkets 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 again.

“Of course. If you would follow me, gentlemen.” Assuming, unspoken, that Vadim and Dan belonged together, she led them deeper into the shop. While it looked small and picturesque from the outside, it was a clever design with a number of small huts interconnected and the actual shopping space filling several of them. Here were actual clothes, leisure things, mainly. Shirts, shorts, swimming trunks and bathing suits, security belts and neck pillows. The storekeeper stood there, smiling, ever so willingly helpful.

Vadim decided finding trousers was the main issue, and spotted some light ones 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. His size 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.

“Okay.” Feeling 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 later, wearing the sand coloured pair of trousers, that fitted perfectly, the grey ones over his arm. He looked around for Vadim, who came back with more garments, which made Dan roll his eyes.

Vadim had found jeans—dark blue and indigo. Those colours worked well for Dan, too. Checking the prices, all seemed fairly affordable. 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. His pose seemed to say: Look at my scars, or maybe: I’m sure you’re willing to suck me off now. Lacking, as usual, underwear, the trail of dark hair was visible.

“Okay? 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 all the others the same size? If they are, 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. Wife-beaters belonged on the legionnaire; he’d stick to t-shirts, picking the same colours as the trousers, with the addition of charcoal, arguing with himself it wasn’t really grey. Several blue t-shirts caught his eye. He held one out to Vadim to add to the pile. “Here, this 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 searched through for 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.

The new ones gave him a rather sophisticated air, which Vadim relished.

The shop assistant folded everything and explained there was laundry service available and lovely tailors who would tailor suits in linen, wool, cashmere, whatever they wanted, and they were happy to come to the resort. Vadim pulled out his wallet and flicked it open. It was a new thing; the credit card still stuck to the black leather. “I’m paying this.”

“What?” Dan came to the checkout, wearing the sand coloured trousers and a khaki shirt, the new shades over his eyes. “I was going to pay. I wouldn’t have chosen such a fucking great pile if I’d known you were. Besides, where would 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 them.” 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 purchases tomorrow morning, before breakfast.” Feeling oddly happy about how easily some problems could be solved, and about Dan’s new look. And the fact he could pay him back—if just a little.

Scanning over the pile, Dan sighed. “You know what’s missing? The swimming trunks. And shoes.” God, he bloody hated shopping.

Vadim grinned while the shop assistant finished wrapping 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 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 that area of the 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 footwear.

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 out 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 own shopping without Dan. More time, less tension, 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, liking 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 checking out their

cocktail and dessert menu.” He grinned while walking beside Vadim; couldn’t help but look across 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 Vadim another glance. “Walking like this....”

Vadim peered at him for a couple of seconds. “In broad daylight... No one around to threaten either of us.” He could get used to this, if only...if only he had 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 was driving 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, expecting sudden movements, and checking passer-bys for concealed weapons. He saw access routes, fire corridors, escape routes, and noticed and evaluated cover.

“Any...” Vadim paused, and the question ‘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 full 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. “Let’s grab something to eat, and then get wasted.”

Dan 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, heaping a helping of each of the delicacies onto his plate as if there were no tomorrow.

They sat at 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 his shades off, and watched Vadim lick some lobster juice off his fingers. “Another first.” He smiled, busying 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 licked some chocolate running down his hand, threatening to make its way into the cuff of his brand new shirt, lapping up 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 posture 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 were 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’re 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. Shook 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,” muttering under his breath, while Dan looked at him, alarmed. Yet Vadim’s thoughts went straight to his 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 opened and closed, needing to feel the polished wood to gather his thoughts. Damned cocktails, they made everything so much brighter, yet muddled the words at the same time. “It doesn’t work like that.” He hardly noticed the waiter 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. Vadim couldn’t think clearly, not with all the contradictions, not with Dan being there, yet not being there. The past, the 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—wished 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 to me,” he said, tonelessly, felt like he was being choked, and noticed he’d dropped the article.

Dan looked down at 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’s your fault. I realise there is too much I don’t understand. That’s why I need to get to know you again. 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, but no hotel room was big enough to stop him feeling trapped. One thing he could do. Go swimming. Escape into the ocean. He was drunk, but not too bad. 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 to say. He’d verbalised his thoughts as best he could, but even his thoughts were confused. What he did know for certain was how hard it was to sit that close and not touch,

while all he wanted was to 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, as well as himself.

He headed out onto the beach, keeping 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. He dove under the waves, the moon bright enough to find his way and tell land from sea.

* * *

Dan watched Vadim retreat until he couldn't see him anymore, then emptied his glass in one go, then he started 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 with his shades back on, looking out over the beach and the ocean, listening to the 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 one stage, a lady came up to his table. A tourist like him, smiling and asking if he minded company. 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, or even Jean. They all had either someone or

no one, black or white, 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 the light from his windows, but he 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, ignoring the itching beneath the plaster cast, and the one feeling that had been increasing steadily since they'd boarded the plane: desire.

* * *

Dan slept long into the next morning, surprised to find he hadn't been woken by sunshine streaming into the vast room, nor by the delivery of the clothes Vadim had bought the day before. Even the birds outside, chirping as if there was no tomorrow hadn't made him stir, neither had hunger, thirst or heat. Booze was a great tranquilizer and he'd done his best to kill himself off.

Half-awake after a shower, when Dan finally emerged on the veranda, smoking a cigarette, he blinked in the bright sunlight despite the shades. He had on the new swimming shorts from the pile that had waited in front of his door, and a t-shirt over the top to avoid curdling milk and blinding innocent children. Feet in brand new flip flops, the old ones reluctantly discarded at last, he debated whether to search for brunch, ask for room service, go down to the beach and soak in the sun doing nothing, or see if Vadim was around. He groaned when, predictably, he went for the latter and before he could stop himself was calling out Vadim's name from the veranda.

Vadim was still in bed. Dan calling his name woke him instantly. He had managed to sleep through the five o' clock threshold for once. Doors and windows were open; a gentle breeze making palm leaves rustle outside, drifted into the bungalow.

He cursed himself for not following his original plan to go shopping before Dan would, most likely, appear. Then again—no schedule, no fixed times, no deadlines.

“Come on in.” Vadim 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. Showing Dan what lying semi-awake and somewhat lonely did to him: blood in the wrong parts, would be a great way to ‘be friends’.

“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, he added, “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. “As long as they don’t go heavy handed on the bruises.” Fag between his lips, he used his right hand to swiftly lift his t-shirt, showing off the fading arrangement of, blue-greens and yellows. “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’s 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 minutes?”

“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 took 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 relishing the kindness that was both completely innocent and heartfelt—without the trace of an idea of 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. Some of them were kind, but no one thought of them as killers anymore. Especially 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 just looking at the scenery, 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, blowing 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 of 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 leant in 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 later I was 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 suggestion, 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 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 lowered his voice as if being too loud would make the past even more unbearable. “I thought so. I was flat out making it back to the embassy, but we couldn’t find any trace of you afterwards, and I wasn’t able to get out of the compound.” He finished his fag, and lit 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. “If you killed them, you killed men who were trained...” along the same lines as I was.

“If they lived, I wouldn’t be alive.” Dan looked at the cigarette in his hand. “They deserved what they got. If I’d had the 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 always wondered 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."

"Might have been my superior. Might have been somebody wondering... I have no idea. I was careful. Maybe they were expecting someone else in that room, or were spying on you as the head of security. They never told me..." Of course not. Keep the interrogated guessing.

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? Glad the father told the story? Thankful for The Bitch that she kept up her 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 else 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 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 gaze 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 other things. 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 afgantsy got involved, or the 'peace activists'."

"You are not a war criminal, Vadim. You're just fucking gay; that's hardly a crime." But 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 that 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 only 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 this. 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. As much as we disagree on politics, I owe him respect. And there were good things, too. He taught me a lot. It’s family, Dan. The money doesn’t matter.”

“Fucking bullshit!” Dan’s fist slammed onto the table, causing some of the patrons to glance over. “A man fucks a woman.” Or vice versa? Not going 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 ice there. He stared at his hand, flat on the table now.

"Her parents. She fooled everybody." Vadim sighed. "I just hope it didn't catch up with her. But she should be safe."

Dan couldn't go on. Not this subject. Too close, and far too personal. He looked up and shook his head, 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 the 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 lay close by. The other two massage beds were unoccupied. 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, nodding with understanding smiles when confronted with the bruises. He tried hard not to look at Vadim, but the temptation was too great. Eventually, while they worked on him with skilful hands and warmed oils, his head fell to one side and his eyes drooped to half-mast, unable to stop himself then. The body, just as he remembered it, yet different from the thin, pale man who had come out of the car at the Finnish border. No, not thinking about that night. If he did, he wanted to carve the loss into Vadim's flesh as he'd done before. A decade ago.

Vadim relaxed almost immediately. It was very different from the massages he had known. The small girl used her whole body to work on him, moving him around. At one point she used her feet, standing on him. He groaned when

something in his lower back moved into place, a locked vertebrae, most likely, or something around his hip bone. After that, he was hers.

They were a lot gentler with Dan's bruises, 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 and snored 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 he had had enough. His attention span clearly overstretched after the third temple and the umpteenth sculpture of smiling gold. When they got back, Dan opted for an afternoon on the beach, sipping more of those sweet cocktails, lying on a deck chair and soaking up the sun while covering up the worst of his scars. Vadim went out into the ocean once more, for a swim.

That night for dinner, Dan made an effort after his shower, and dressed in something better than shorts and flip flops. He raided the pile of clothes, pulling out a pair of khaki jeans, more or less blindly, then searched for a top, deciding on a sand coloured shirt, finally putting on the Chucks. He stopped for a moment to check in the mirror before heading out to the buffet area to meet Vadim. He even removed his shades once he 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 be, 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 smirked at the reddened skin, remembering all those times Vadim had complained about the sun back in Afghanistan. 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 you actually ended up here? I mean, how

did they put you back together? You look like you used to look now, not the pale skeleton from over half a year ago.”

Vadim put the fork down and reached for the water, drinking a huge glassful while 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. 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...apologise. 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, and wiped 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’m sorry, Vadim. I did not...could not understand.”

Vadim turned his head 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 shouldn’t have run off like that. But I just couldn’t feel.”

Dan dropped his gaze when Vadim looked away, and stared at Vadim’s hand, which lay curled into a loose fist on the table. His own so close, palm

flattened. All he wanted to do was reach out across those few inches and touch. But he couldn't, not yet. He knew what would happen if he did. He'd never let go again.

"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, but Vadim seemed reluctant, no, *ashamed* to meet his gaze, on the verge of turning away again.

"I don't remember screaming 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'. "Okay." 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'll...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. "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. "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. 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're 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 dropped their forks and knives, and conversation in their immediate surroundings stopped. Vadim was too stunned to do or think anything.

Dan even forgot his shades when he stormed off, fuming with frustrated rage.

* * *

Dan roamed along the beach in the moonlight until he had calmed down enough to gather a coherent thought. He couldn't understand how Vadim just couldn't get it. No matter what he said, the other man would only hear 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 as if he was speaking in an alien language, and no matter how hard Dan tried, it would only ever be translated 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 didn't 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 vacation hell, or at least take 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 off clusters of beautiful ‘girls’, who, no matter how male they were beneath, didn’t 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 clarity, let alone a solution.

* * *

Vadim sat on the veranda—not his own, but Dan’s. Simply because he couldn’t really observe Dan’s bungalow from his own. 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 sentences went right through him; 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 sat there, shorts, shirt, swimming trunks underneath just in case he needed to escape into the water. What he liked about the ocean was the fact that 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 Dan stopped dead, seeing a shadow sitting on 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 only it was that easy.

“Aye.” Blowing smoke into the air, Dan saw the smile and gazed into those eyes. 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.” Dan fell silent, smoking, until he finally offered 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, faltered, and finally asked, “What did he teach you?”

“That sex can be fun. Just that: fun. No more, no less. Just plain old fun with someone who doesn’t own you, 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. 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 on self-destruction? Didn’t like thought either. “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 say.

"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 aren't?—yourself. So I guess that's okay then."

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 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, feeling helpless nausea where once he would have felt rage.

Dan stared at Vadim, cigarette forgotten between his lips. "You really want to die, don't 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." Despite the stillness of the night, Dan's quiet voice hardly cut through the sound of the surf. "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 to; I do." He 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, although 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 how could he 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? This fucking helplessness is killing me." And that was the crux of the matter, 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."

"Okay." Dan nodded, clinging to this like 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, making him inhale sharply. "Anything, Vadim, do you understand? I'd do anything."

Dan so close, and out of reach, but eager, and so near. Vadim nodded, throat tight, wanted to touch him again, but knew it wasn't welcome. "I have the number in the bungalow. I'll bring it over." He didn't move, couldn't, just stood there, not increasing 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, expanding his chest. First willing, purposeful touch in what seemed forever. Couldn't beg, wouldn't...didn't want to ask for more time, or grant more time. They'd had mind-blowing 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. How could a simple touch make him sweat so much? Vadim opened his eyes, saw Dan, the intensity in his eyes that didn't permit any maybe or perhaps. Do or die.

"I asked you, on the roof..." For Dan, inhaling seemed painfully difficult right now. "If I touch you, will you never leave me again? Because I won't leave. 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 like searing agony, stabbing through his mind and heart.

Vadim reached out to 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, better, fiercer than he was given credit for. Fucking SAS. Made to excel. He smiled against Dan's lips, the tenderness nearly breaking him.

"Can't believe you're 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 mouth; 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. He leaned into the kiss, hands on Dan's shoulders, arm, running down to his flanks, pulling him closer.

Dan wanted to cry out, scream and yell, 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. Mine.' 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 inside him.

Vadim moaned, pressing against Dan; 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. 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 him open to bury himself within skin and flesh, until their hearts beat in sync,

inseparable. The sounds he made were full of distress. It was all too much, wanting everything at once. Could never get enough.

Vadim slid his hand between their bodies, pulling at the buttons of Dan's shirt, damn near ripping a few off. He only broke the kiss for a moment to concentrate on one button that seemed especially stubborn, then kissed Dan's neck, the side of his throat. Slipping the thing down over Dan's shoulders, while he 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 in the right 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 important," murmured Vadim. He straightened again, met Dan in another fierce kiss, pressing him closer, 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, wanting to feel Dan's skin against his own, and lifted 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. Opening Dan's belt as they went, 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 they'd made it inside. Wasn't paying attention to sight or sound, just the sensations of skin against skin, and Vadim's hands on his body; his own clutching at flesh and muscle. The trousers

slid down his hips once they'd been opened. 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 helped Dan with it, opened his shorts and pulled them down along with the swimming trunks he wore underneath. No swimming tonight. He knelt next to the bed, pulling the shorts over Dan's shoes as he propped himself up with his good hand so he could watch. Then Vadim opened the laces and took off the shoes, just dropping them beside the bed. As Dan collapsed backwards, Vadim kissed Dan's knee, moving up to his thigh.

Stretched out, Dan was too tempting to resist, Vadim slid 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, trying to dig into the bared flesh, as if they could become one so he could feel Vadim forever. Trying to hump their groins together, like a goddamned teenager, ready to come at the lightest touch. His hand roamed, wanted to use 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 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, Vadim stayed on top of him, savouring the sucking kisses against his throat. Fuck, how much he wanted to feel Dan, be around him, inside him, taking his breath, everything. If only he'd stay, if only *they* could stay together, wake up together 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 than way, felt Vadim was truly there, not just his torturing imagination. "Alive..." he 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, needy 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 thinking. He was nothing but a body: hands, skin, and most of all cock, engulfed and enveloped by heat and scent, just for Vadim. Forever Vadim, nothing but Vadim. 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 him. He came against Vadim, 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 come 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. Coming hard, every muscle in his body taut and shuddering, pressed in deeper, stronger, then, slowly, relaxing. Wanting nothing but to fall asleep on top of Dan.

Dan said nothing, just couldn't. Only holding. His arms wrapped around Vadim, breathing hard. Wasn't enough. 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", he 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 his way through all the shit, never compromising. "Till death do us part, as they say." Only too likely in their career.

Dan saw that smile; a smile he'd never seen before. Something shifted deep 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 could."

"Damn." Dan tightened his hold and rolled both of them onto their sides, lying on his good side. "And there 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.

Dan grinned widely; 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."

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 them." 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 rolled over onto 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 want to leave, either, not now, not ever.

Deciding against the full bath, or the Jacuzzi outside, Vadim got up, and padded towards the bathroom, followed by Dan. A quick shower would do it. Vadim checked the water temperature. 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 him 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 stepping closer to brush against him. "...I missed you. I wanted you. You don't know 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 can 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. He only reluctantly broke the touch to reach for more shower gel.

Washing Dan's legs, and back up, cock and balls, licking his lips as he did. Trying to keep the interrogator out of his head, but this time, the man lingered. "For fuck's sake," he muttered silently, exasperated.

"Hm?" Dan was jerked out of his silent enjoyment, thought he'd heard 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. "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, 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’ll 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 mattered?

Vadim laughed, and then proceeded to towel him down. Some orders were easier followed than others.

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.

* * *

Lying stretched out on the bed, naked Dan asleep, almost wrapped around him.

Vadim took the beer bottle and pulled it slowly from Dan’s hand, put it down on the floor, 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 being complete.

1991 Chapter 29—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 to 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.

“Mmm...” 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.

"Hmmmm...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 garrote and using...hands would be ah...a start.”

“Does a neck cloth count as a garrote, 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. “Mmm...,” 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 lose, 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 do. “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 hardiest 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 forwarded, 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 30—Rank and File

September 1991, Dubai

Dan's mood had been at its best since they'd 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 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 feeling of understated luxury.

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.

He could have reached for the earphones, or the magazine, or watched 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 to get back into the desert."

"No." Dan turned his head. He left the earphones on, the music quiet enough to understand every word. "It's just that I missed Maggie. Despite her goddamned interfering." Flashing a toothy grin, he reached across the empty seat, taking Vadim's hand in his. Just like that.

Vadim closed his hand around Dan's fingers and felt impossibly awkward when the stewardess walked past. She must have seen. "You were...you are friends. We owe her a lot." She never failed to intimidate him. He didn't know how, or why; maybe because she was a different kind of killer.

"Strange but true. She's the only friend—real friend—I ever had. Did I tell you she sent me to New Zealand at her own expense?" Dan caressed Vadim's hand with his thumb, while holding on tight. It felt good, that hand.

"No, you didn't." Friends with that woman—it explained her continued protectiveness and even why she had given him a chance.

Honoured to meet the man Dan loves.

“Aye, after I’d trashed my room in the embassy, 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. “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 Vadim’s hand. “It’s not a working farm anymore, but the land is still there 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 at 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. Felt like he had to justify, explain, or better yet, be invisible.

“Besides, do you really think Maggie would have helped if she hadn’t finally understood why you reacted the way you did, more than I managed to grasp anyway? 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.

“I don’t like people knowing me better than I do myself,” said Vadim. Felt found out, caught, and outguessed. Like playing chess with his father. Always a humiliation.

“Welcome to my world, Russkie.” Dan winked at Vadim. 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 lost my touch.” Yes, my famous touch with treating people.

“Aye, that’s me. Rough tough squaddie with the intellectual depth of a shallow baby bath and the educational background of a hedgerow. Complicated? Yeah, right.” Dan laughed.

Vadim laughed, too. “Sorry, but that just about nails it.” He grew 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, not bothering to lower his voice, “I take it as a fairly interestingly worded ‘I love you, Dan, because you are simply goddamned motherfucking perfect’.”

Vadim’s eyes quickly flicked towards the aisle and the other seats, but he hoped the business guy was too busy catching up on his sleep. “No, true, you’re not half bad, Mad Dog.”

“I get by.” Emptying the plastic cup, Dan filled it with the remains from the can. “You’ll like her when you get to know her better, 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 that trouble? She was in Dubai, as far as I know, when you called the embassy. So, 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 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 and emptied the last of his beer. “You’ll be fine, trust me. She must respect you or she would have never expected you to get through selection. And respect, Vadim, is 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. A long, serious, honest talk with her 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.”

“I’ll never forget the second time I saw you. 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.

“With a hippie reporter? Not very professional.” Glancing out of the window, Vadim could see desert, and found he already missed the lushness of Thailand. This was Dan territory, definitely not 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. Covering his back. It was perfectly natural. More natural than the dark red of their passports, emblazoned with the arms of the United Kingdom and declaring they were both British citizens.

Outside customs, there was a driver with a sign that read “McFadyen & company”. Not Krasnorada, which was 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 was as plush and air conditioned as all the vehicles Dan had been used to while in Maggie’s employ, 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 his thigh, respecting the country's habits no matter how much he wanted to touch and taste his Russkie in public.

Vadim was relieved about his discretion, because Dan too close meant it would be harder to get into the role he'd have to play; he needed to get his strength back, bolster himself so he wasn't as brittle as he felt most of the time and especially when it involved people who 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 anything 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. If only he could remember how he'd dealt with civilians before, how to make small talk, how to pretend everything was fine. Well. He'd have to trust his wits.

They drove no more than half an hour before they reached the high walls with the 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 garden right in the middle of the desert. Dan just didn't fit into this scenery. Unless he wore one of his killer suits. He smiled, suddenly. "Let's face the dragoness, then."

"Aye, there she is." Dan flashed a grin at Vadim before turning back to glance up at the building. Maggie was waiting on the porch, hands clasped, wearing her inevitable lightweight pastel coloured twin set.

A servant opened the car door. Dan couldn't help but smile brightly when he stepped outside, 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 he was tempted to hug the petite lady, even though he towered over her, but at the last moment he paused, took her hand and planted an old fashioned and entirely uncharacteristic kiss on the back of it. She laughed.

"And it's good to see you too, Dan. All relaxed and tanned, almost in one piece, and happy."

He finally let go of her hand. "You don't look a day older, Ma'am. As elegant as ever."

Chuckling, she shook her head. Not a hair was stirred by 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 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, shook his head and she smiled. “Dan doesn’t look very bored to me. On the contrary, I don’t think I have ever seen him quite so upbeat.” Dan made 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 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 possible.

“Dubai is certainly an interesting place—if less intriguing than our hostess.” Politicians and chess players. All he could do 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’d never 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, waiting until they were out of earshot. “One thing, Dan. If I say something wrong, let me know, yes?”

“Of course, but what do you mean?” Dan disentangled the shades from his shaggy hair. “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.” He smiled as they were let into a vast room with a king sized bed. Easily big enough for two tall men who would not enjoy twin beds.

“It’s just...difficult. I want...this to work.” Vadim set the bag down and gave the room a long, searching look, checking for escape routes, windows, cover. Only then taking in the generous space, muted colours, all very classy. ‘Posh’ the Brits called that.

Dan grunted exasperatedly. “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.”

“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 turned to leave. “Besides, I rather like your hands on my body.”

Vadim glanced at the door as it 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 move it, Russkie. Get me naked.” Grinning from ear to ear, Dan stood with his arms outstretched, waiting for his ‘personal service’ to rid him of shirt, trousers and canvas shoes, and soap him up in the marble-tiled bathroom.

Vadim slipped out of his shoes on the way to Dan and began to undress him. Shirt off, unable to resist, he placed a kiss between Dan’s pecs, while his hands went for the belt and buttons. Only 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 them.

The water was at 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 jetted out 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 that 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," Dan said dryly. 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. Their old comrade, lust, and their bodies knowing each other perfectly well.

When Dan came back up his plaster had become rather damp, but he was grinning like a cat that had got the milk, and the cream on top. "Feeling any more mellow? Hm?"

"...aye." Some kind of tension busting.

Dan kissed Vadim's jaw line, tracking along the shoulder, before stepping out of the spray into the steamy room. "If you ask me, that was just what the doctor ordered. I am sure Maggie won't mind waiting a few minutes."

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 the big towel, drying him quickly, then opened the door. "Sit on the bed." He grabbed another white warm towel and slung it across his hips, allowing his body and skin to dry naturally. 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 knelt down to suck him off, too, enjoying how quickly Dan responded. It was true, they probably had time. 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 come, lying back, legs still open, arms stretched out wide, simply breathing with closed eyes while shivering luxuriously in the cool air.

“Want to sleep now,” he mumbled, listening to his heartbeat while it gradually returned to normal.

Vadim rolled his neck, caressing Dan’s legs. “Five minutes rest, soldier.” He returned to the bathroom to have a drink of water, several handfuls of it, and towelled 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 say. Lying crucified on the bed, he was still flatlining when a knock sounded on the door. A voice called out, saying they had water for the gentlemen. Dan managed to flick the towel back over his groin before he called out, “Come in.” Water bottles were delivered and the member of staff vanished before Dan even stirred.

In the bathroom, Vadim 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. He took care of those patches of fucked-up skin, then got dressed.

Back in the bedroom, he unpacked Dan’s bag, and chose some clothes for him. “Come. We should get dressed and presentable.”

“Damn,” Dan muttered, managing to open one eye. “Do I have to?” But of course he did. He sat up, stretching slowly while scratching the scars across his abs. “What’s 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 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 way Vadim didn’t raise his brows at him, and it took away 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. Do I meet with your approval?"

How on earth Dan managed to make the freshly ironed clothes—by room service in Thailand—look simultaneously rumpled, scruffy and sexy as hell was a mystery to Vadim.

He stared for a few moments, then shook his head. "How did she manage to work 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 had suits made for me. I think she kept them here. Nowhere to store them in camp." Dan fished for his fags and lighter.

"So, you'd rather be 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."

"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. Loved it. If I ever get to spend my old age on the farm, I'll have it equipped with lots of cool stuff 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 out into the gleaming sunlight.

"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 on the other chair, finally remembering 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. She shook her head, giving permission. The table was cleared and a trolley with tea, coffee, water, fresh lemonade, and a selection of finely cut, triangular sandwiches, as well as small cakes arrived.

"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, already pouring his favourite cup of black coffee over three lumps of sugar.

"Coffee, please." Vadim noticed he was gripping the armrests, and forced himself to relax. No sniper. No landmine. Nothing. He felt calmer 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 ease with which Dan handled the situation. "Thank you, Ma'am." He received his coffee, but didn't drink just yet.

"Please, help yourself to sandwiches or cake." She nodded at Vadim, after passing him the cup. "Milk, cream and sugar are on the tray." She smiled. "I don't think I have to guess too hard 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. Dan and his simple pleasures.

"Well, Mr Krasnorada, now that Dan is out of action for at least the five minutes it will take him to clear out all of the tarts, would you be inclined to indulge my curiosity? How have *you* been faring since the rescue of the American helicopter crew and our own 'cheeky Brit'?"

Dan shook 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 or 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’s was scheduled at the same time, so I booked the place in Thailand.”

“I am glad to hear that.” She sipped some tea. “When I heard from Dan 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 chewed without saying a word.

“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 was trying to put him at ease by asking simple questions. “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 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 took another sip of her tea and held the cup for a moment at face level. She said nothing for a while, before placing the china cup back onto the saucer and leaning slightly forward. “Mr Krasnorada,” her voice even more gentle.

Dan sat straighter, more alert immediately, 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 that 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. Vadim looked stricken, eyes wide and almost unfocused, staring straight through her, then slowly he shut his eyes for a moment and frowned before staring at her again.

Vadim gathered 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. I should have asked for expert advice, or at least followed the advice I gave Dan on the night, to grant you space and time; not to exert any pressure at all, least of all the one of expectation. But I did not, and instead made you meet the people who had worked on ensuring your freedom. 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. Dan was lost, completely, but from the expression on Vadim’s face he knew who and what she was alluding to. “I should be apologising to you; 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 out her hand. “I am grateful for the opportunity to ask for your forgiveness for what turned out to be a very foolish and selfish notion. 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 have been able to feel again? Somehow, Vadim doubted that.

Her hand. Vadim took it, and it seemed inappropriate to remain seated, 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 understood she did regret, genuinely, the things that had made her such an imposing figure—somebody whose orders he had followed like a whipped dog. “...still, I owe you this new life, and while I...have not exactly been a model prospective citizen, the UK will never have to blame me for anything.” The Embassy building was part of his 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 get up to while I was gone?” But he didn’t expect an answer, and he didn’t receive one.

“I’m glad, Mr Krasnorada, I really am, and I’m certain you are and will be an asset to our country. Thank you for accepting my apology. It gives me great pleasure to see both of you together again, 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 for the best in the long run.”

“I’ve got Vadim, back.” Dan smiled, took his hand and pressed it hard. “That’s all I need and wanted, and on top of that we’re getting shot at from the same side now. Seems like luxury to me.”

Vadim laughed, returning the pressure and resuming his seat. “Plus you stopped collaborating with the bastard towelhea...irregulars.” Vadim pressed his lips together. Not merc lingo, even though it was a reflex. “We’re an unlikely pair, but so be it,” he murmured and glanced sideways at Dan. “Stranger things have happened.”

Dan stared at Vadim, wide-eyed, when the words registered. He swallowed hard. The price he had paid had been worth it. “Lions may die, but friendship doesn’t,” he murmured.

Vadim leaned closer to whisper in 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. "Please, I don't wish to make any claims on your time. I understand you will be very busy with duties when you return to camp."

Vadim felt like he was finally finding his feet, strangely liking this prim and proper lady, now the burden of fear had been lifted off his shoulders. 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. Her laughter sounded so young and he'd rarely heard it outside of their private conversations. He wanted another tart, so he had to let go of Vadim's hand. His awkwardness drew the attention of the Baroness.

"How is your wrist, Dan?"

"Fine." Quickly swallowing a bite, he nodded.

"I'm glad to hear that, but I've arranged nevertheless for you to see my personal doctor. Judging from the state of the plaster the sooner the better."

Vadim grinned to himself and reached for some of the sandwiches; he'd been getting hungry just 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 while you're here. There are plenty of yours still in the wardrobe."

"You wouldn't...."

"Try me, Dan." Her Excellency winked at Vadim in an almost conspiratorial manner while Dan huffed something unintelligible, before hoovering up the last of his tart.

"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.

“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.”

The Baroness 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 getting 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; it had something to do with James Bond, but I’m not sure I quite remember. Can you, Dan?” Vadim gave Dan a mocking smile, remembering how he’d been stretched out and ‘taken prisoner’ in Kabul.

Dan remembered too well; how he’d had to explain the stains on his smoking jacket in a very creative fashion. He quickly covered his groin with a strategically placed elbow. “Could the fifth reason have anything to do with a problem speaking English, or is that not correct anymore, since you have learned to use the article?” If he was to suffer, Vadim should as well.

“Something like that.” 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? He’s mistreating and taking the mickey out of me.” Remembering not to use swear words, at least for a while.

Tears of laughter gleamed at the edge of her acutely intelligent eyes, there was something else as well. Relief, warmth.

“Well,” she smiled at both, “because you love him.”

“Listen to her. She knows her stuff.” Vadim gave a wink, and sided 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 Vilde stood up from the table, readjusting the pearls that had 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 his way around. Oh, and if you would like to take a swim, please feel free.” She smiled, nodding to both. “I’m afraid I have an appointment, but I’m 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, but Vadim decided to blow what was left of his pay cheque. 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. But he enjoyed trying things on too much and buying them if he liked them, not heeding Dan’s groans and general anguish.

Dan had dragged him to Dubai, he better cope with it.

That evening, it was dinner with Her Ladyship in the smallest of circles, as if she still felt guilty about that other dinner. Vadim appreciated that more than he cared to admit. He wasn’t ready to be too close with anybody but Dan—or other people he considered safe, especially after a long, tiring day. 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 lay on 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 half asleep when he felt Dan’s lips on his neck and throat, only half waking when the familiar hand went all over his body, tonelessly groaning as Dan fucked him again, gentle but intense, and made him come while he was still inside.

Dan slept spooning him from behind, the good arm wrapped around, his hand on his abs. Vadim found himself instinctively leaning back, completely at peace.

* * *

Sleep had dragged Dan under until a movement stirred him. His body was jerked by an outside force, and a sound began to penetrate his sleeping mind. Not fully awake, Dan merely moved closer, snuggling into Vadim's back, tightening his embrace. He drifted back into sleep when the body in his arms stopped moving and went rigid.

Restriction. Trapped. Sudden fear, overpowering sleep. Couldn't move a muscle. Darkness. Isolation. Not one conscious thought, but all pervading dread. Vadim 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. He tried to stretch out and tensed, violently, every muscle in his body vibrating with the effort to shed sleep and its hold. A noise came from somewhere, somewhere close. At first he didn't realise his mouth was open, and it was his own throat choking on the sound.

A low, deep sound, more groan than scream, sleep deafened, sleep dulled, his elbow was suddenly released, felt the constraints move and shift. There, almost free. Memories returned—madness, insanity, pain, but above all, fear. Fear so acute it made his heart race and his blood freeze. He woke with a scream and pushed against whatever was there behind him..

Dan woke up, disorientated in the dark. Wild thrashing: arms, legs, someone pushing him away, forcefully, terrified groans turning into something entirely inhuman. What the fuck? Instincts kicked in. He threw himself off the bed to get out of the way of the flailing limbs, before he registered what was happening.

Hitting the floor hard, awareness gradually returned 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 fumbled for the light, his hand shaking.

Vadim tossed the covers away, couldn't stand anything close, couldn't be touched, was conscious enough to fall silent. He 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. He was lost, like somebody had transported him in his sleep and left him. He couldn't make any sense out of it. He needed to stand, needed to be off the bed.

Light flooded the room when Dan finally managed to find the switch and scrambled to his feet. He stared wide eyed at Vadim, breathing hard. "What the fuck happened?"

Vadim stood, 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 approached him. Placing his good hand on Vadim's arm, trying to calm him.

Vadim was 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 make sense, wanted to open the windows.

"What the hell happened! Talk to me." Wrapping his other arm around the broad, shaking shoulders, Dan didn't understand what Vadim was trying to do. The skin under his hand was pale, cold and clammy. Dan could feel Vadim's heart racing.

Every muscle inside Vadim clenched at the touch, could absolutely not stand being restricted, feeling anything on his 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, but he did take one step back, let go of Vadim. Felt tension, sweat, desperation, the scent of...fear. "What the fuck is going on with you!"

"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, who would 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 intent, Dan took another step back. "I won't touch you. It's okay. Won't even come close. I'm sorry, Vadim. Won't touch you. Okay?" 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...okay.” Vadim stared at the window, 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.

“Okay.” Dan kept his hands where they were. Nothing was okay, 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 an eye on Dan and the other on the window. The acute panic had blunted; shame began replacing the dread. Regret. “I don’t know. I can’t remember. Just...can’t remember.” He wiped his chest, came away with what felt like a handful of sweat.

Dan had no idea how to handle this, had to rely 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 stepped back, until he could sit on the edge of the bed.

Vadim looked at the window, reached for it, but his hands shook badly, because he was rattled. Wasn’t sure he’d understood the explanation. Buttons. He stepped back. “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 do remember, if anything?”

“I don’t remember things. 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. Seemed he screamed in Russian. Well, that at least made sense.

“You look cold. Do you want to take a shower or something, maybe? 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.”

“Okay.” Dan nodded, things were even less okay than before, but he needed time to make sense of everything, most of all this helplessness, which he

didn't know how to deal with. So he sat quietly as the minutes ticked by. Finally, he couldn't bear it anymore. He wandered over to the tray with the kettle and prepared a brew. Busying himself as he would have done in the Afghan mountains.

Suddenly exhausted, Vadim managed to sit down, placed his hands on his thighs and watched Dan. Tea. Brilliant. Just like the doctor. Nothing hot tea couldn't make better. Nightmare fading. The fear remained an acute memory, but would be gone by 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. He poured a couple of cups and handed one over.

Vadim took the tea, mainly to hold it. Comforting.

"Can I sit next to you? I won't touch. Promise." So utterly out of his depth, Dan felt like a right idiot.

Vadim gave a tired smile. "It's okay. I'm calming down." He reached 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. Even touching his lover hurt. Another thing Konstantinov had broken. The realization went deep, and Vadim was surprised how much that did actually hurt. Dan meekly staying away, and him wanting Dan to remain 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 it when this 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 of spending 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 one long nightmare and nothing else.

"I will." Dan smiled, but inside utterly serious. Sipping his tea, he stared at the drawn blinds that were bathed in the golden-warm light of the table lamp. Sensing the body beside him but not touching, not daring to, he 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'. That was nearly as bad as 'love conquers all' or the equally ridiculous 'love heals all wounds'. 'Love' by itself couldn't. He knew that now and accepted the fact. In the end, they were just two naked men, sitting close, unable to touch.

How he fucking hated the past that night.

* * *

Vadim had eventually calmed down and gone back to sleep, even rolling over and wrapping himself around Dan who just lay there at first, sleep proving elusive. Late the next morning Dan reluctantly took off to see the Baroness' doctor, warning that afterwards he would be going into the city centre on a solo shopping spree. Nothing like Vadim's earlier one. This would be all 'manly man's' shopping instead of painful agony.

A couple of hours after Dan left, Vadim heard the sound of footsteps approaching along the poolside.

He lifted a corner of the wet towel cooling his face. The heat seemed more intense than Thailand, even though he was lying in the shade wearing only his swimming trunks, another towel draped over his groin, having just minutes ago climbed out of the pool. He looked to the side, and, recognizing the feet, dropped the towel to the ground and sat up. "Ma'am."

She smiled at him. "Mr Krasnorada, I was wondering if you would be so kind as to partake in some refreshments with me? I realise I'm a poor substitute for Dan's charming presence, but I can offer cold lemonade and fruit to combat this heat."

"Most certainly. Before I fall asleep and bake to death." Vadim stood, shaking his heat-dazed head, then tied the towel around his hips, for modesty's

sake, hoping she wouldn't notice his back. Or at least didn't speak Russian. Not exactly a view for polite society.

"Excellent." She smiled and clasped her hands before retracing her steps beside the pool. Situated comfortably in the shade with fans blowing a gently cooling breeze, the same table as yesterday was laid out ready: freshly pressed lemonade in a jug frosted with condensation, bottles of mineral water, a pot of tea, fruit cut into bite size pieces, 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 actually saw them with his own eyes. "Water will do, thanks." He wasn't sure whether he should serve the drinks and decided to let things happen.

She filled a glass and handed it over. "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 don't keep you from any important work?"

"Not at all," she replied, sipping on her juice, "I was hoping you had time for a 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 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. "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."

She chuckled, while elegantly making her way through the sandwich. "You struck me as a man, who, unlike Dan, has a love of literature and, perhaps, the other fine arts."

“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. 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.

“I guess that’s because I think in English these days.” 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’re 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. Each and every one 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 was a shame considering 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. "Or can you truly imagine Dan sitting and reading 'Love's Labour Lost', 'Paradise Lost' or 'Sons and Lovers'?"

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, the Baroness leaned forward once more, this time to look at Vadim, with that same warm smile on her face. "You really do love him, don't you?" she 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 too comfortable. "Dan changed me in ways that stripped away the man 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 fixed on him. 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 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 sounded toneless, 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." He frowned. "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, 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'm sorry," she said after a pause, in 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."

Vadim 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. "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 after a slight pause, "except once. And even then, Mr Krasnorada, I believe you showed strength. Walking away was—what I thought at first—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." Nodding to herself as she gathered her thoughts. "And yet you healed enough to have the strength to face your demons—and you were the one who sought contact with me. More so, you succeeded in what was clearly not 'just' a physical challenge, but most of all a mental one." 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. And here you are."

It was all true, and how lucky he had been in the end. "No. It... took a while before we even spoke to each other without 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." 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 an atheist. Probably the only thing I share with my father." It felt 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 turned to see who she was pointing to. "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.

Dan greeted the Baroness, who smiled fondly at him. A glint of sunlight caught on something he was wearing around his neck as Dan sat down in the empty chair between them. "Left anything for me? Especially now that I seem to have become a god?"

"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 too." He leaned closer to the Baroness, grinning as he pushed up his

shades so he could look at her properly. “That doctor of yours, Ma’am, 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 didn’t even try to argue. She merely chuckled lightly. “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 surprised but smiled before 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 sketched a bow and smiled, glancing sideways at Dan. “It’s a rare pleasure 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 p.m. tonight.” She nodded to both of them. “Until then.” With that, she left, her heels clacking along the stone-tiled ground.

“You bastard,” Dan said the moment she was out of earshot and grinned.

Vadim raised his hands. “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 bloody well know what cutlery to use and when. You think I’m an oaf, but I’m at least I’m 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.”

“There’s much to be said for simplicity.” Leaning closer, Vadim moved the chair so he could be close enough to feel Dan’s heat, placed his hand on Dan’s chest, and 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 fetched the bag and handed 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 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?” 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 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." Grinning again, as he dropped the Vaseline into Vadim's lap. "Remember the cave where you brought me back from the dead?"

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, 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, yet. Remember, light dinner? At 1830 hours?"

"Shit. True." Cancellation was impossible. So, again, it would be a shower, rest, getting dressed, and then the rest of the night with Dan. 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?" About to bolt, he suddenly stood up from the chair, nearly knocking the china dishes off the petite table.

Vadim quickly steadied the table and stood, grabbing the bag. "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 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. "Okay. In that case, what are we going to do until dinner? I'm as 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 this 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 met Dan’s gaze. “Ever since the hamam, I love how your skin looks when wet. I like the smell of it, 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 gently, tentatively, like a first-time lover. He leaned in, a chaste touch of lips on lips. If it was witnessed by others, Dan didn’t care. “Best wrap up my plaster cast then.”

Vadim squeezed his shoulder. “Let’s head upstairs.”

It was hard not to jump each other’s bones once they were in the room, but as hard as Dan tried to make Vadim forget his resolution, the more Vadim remembered it.

They never made it into the pool; the large tub in their private bathroom was 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 to wolf down some food as quickly as he could 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.

Vadim caught himself smiling. If he hadn’t known better, he’d have thought Dan was nervous. Dan certainly didn’t drink quite that fiercely, normally. Vadim laid a solid foundation for himself, though, eating with a good appetite, and only drinking enough wine to be on the mellow side. Chatting about this and that, as if part of his mind wasn’t occupied by the image of Dan. Dan on the bed, spread out.

This was probably what a real honeymoon felt like—the whole world just focused on two people, them, and nobody else. Vadim tried his best not to be rude and masked the extent of his focus on Dan. Spreading out the anticipation, but also genuinely enjoying the company.

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 were no tomorrow, but his alcohol consumption caused even the Baroness to raise a brow with an amused smile.

Dan began shifting in his seat, fingers toying restlessly with the stem of the glass, drawn into his own thoughts. Thoughts he didn't know what to do with, and couldn't explain to himself why they'd become so important that 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, dessert 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. He stood, 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, are you going to carry me over the threshold of our room?" Baring his teeth in a broad grin.

Vadim 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 to his feet, where he swayed, before he had himself back under control. "Am not a lightweight," he murmured. "Just...damn. Booze seemed like a bloody good idea."

Vadim shook his head and manoeuvred Dan up the stairs, with plenty of patience, interrupted only by 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. The bottle ended on the floor, in dangerous proximity to his feet. Legs open, elbows on the bed behind him for support, looking up. “I’m so fucking tired of these nice clothes.” He shook his mop of dark hair and grinned up at Vadim.

“Are you?” Vadim leaned down to move the bottle out of reach, supporting himself on one knee. “Tired of the shoes, too?” Unlacing them, and removing them one by one. He pulled the socks off and slid his hands up the backs of Dan’s legs towards his calves. “Hmmm. I think I’ll let you off. You’ve been cooperative all day.”

“What do you mean?” Dan smiled drunkenly. Lifting his legs, just a bit, to allow further access, at the same time sliding backwards, until he almost lay on the bed, peering at Vadim. “Cooperative in what?”

Vadim slid his hands further up, towards Dan’s belt and button, opening his trousers and when Dan lifted his hips, pulling them down slowly, with ease and consideration. “Wearing nice clothes...behaving well...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 okay for once, which makes you sound like...my daddy?” The toothy grin crept back into his face, 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 Dan’s shoulders, 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. 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 don’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. “Prob?” The 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 at the 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. Pulling one leg up on the bed, knee bent, he let himself fall back completely, closing his eyes. “I could do with some seduction, Russkie,” he murmured. “You know, that seduction thing?”

Vadim 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 his chest. “Not sure I’m any good at that,” he murmured softly, his 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.

“Mmm...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. “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.

Returning the kiss, Vadim rolled on top and kept his weight on his knees.

"I feel like a fucking virgin." Dan broke the kiss at last, face flushed, eyes not quite focused. The alcohol was mellowing everything: sight, sound and most of all barriers. "Just a damn lot more willing."

"I can tell." Vadim reached in the bag 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. "But I want to..." 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.

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 for Darren in that flat in London all those years ago. 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 two digits, 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."

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 into 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 in me?" Vadim watched Dan open 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 accept.

“In 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, probing further. Wanting it. Asking for more, as his hips lifted on their own, trying to get them 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 as much these days, didn’t seem quite as 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 in further.

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. Trying to find leverage, he held his knees up with his 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 his arm slightly to get deeper—this was the line of knuckles, the fingers and the thumb, but he hardly got anywhere like that, so he pulled back again and began to work Dan some more, feeling himself sweat with the concentration.

Unaware of the time, the way minutes were turning into an hour, Dan’s lips 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, he didn’t try to stroke himself, didn’t want to. 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.

At some point, the resistance just softened, and Vadim was amazed how easily 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 hand a few times, just to see what effect it had on Dan.

Incoherent sounds that had no meaning, except for lust. Dan truly had lost and then found himself. Didn't know where he was, nor with whom, nor even who he was. Didn't matter. Names? Who cared. Just the way his body had separated from his mind; and the way his lust stretched endlessly across the hours, well into the night.

His body was covered in 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.

Vadim smiled, felt strange, looking at Dan's blanched, 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 dipped his hand into more Vaseline and reached for Dan's cock, just stroking the underside, careful not to do too much, not quite sure what Dan felt and what might actually 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 rolled from side to side, while panting through parted lips.

Chest heaving, sweat gathering between his abs, tears 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 screamed, overwhelmed. Too much, all too much, and all too good. Finally crashing, and crashing hard. Barely conscious.

Vadim remembered 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, reached for a towel to wipe his hand and the Vaseline off Dan, and stood up, his back creaking from the awkward position and the added weight.

He walked around the bed, then lay down 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, nor through the night. Sleeping, dreamless, never letting go of Vadim. One, at last.